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US-Pak ties: worse to awful

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I was visiting Pakistan's ambassador to the United States when the phone on his desk rang. "The hot line," he said. "Sorry I have to take this call."

As he listened, his face grew darker and darker. Finally, he banged down the phone and exploded: "Another US drone attack that killed a score of our people. We were never warned the attack was coming. We are supposed to be US allies!"

This strongly pro-American ambassador was wrong. While the US hails Pakistan as a key non-NATO ally, the US treats it like a militarily occupied country. The government in Islamabad is left to observe increasing drone attacks and CIA ground operation with deepening embarrassment and helplessness.

Average Pakistanis have no doubt about what's happening. Most believe their nation was more or less occupied by the US after the 2001 attacks on the US.

The Pakistani leader who allowed this to happen, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, has admitted that the US put a gun to his head and demanded he allow the US to use Pakistan's army, air bases, ports, intelligence service, logistics, and air space – or face war. Musharraf quickly caved in to the US ultimatum, something a tough predecessor, Gen. Ziaul Haq, would have surely rejected. As US drone attacks intensify in Pakistan's tribal belt and inside Afghanistan, the government of President Asif Ali Zardari, which was engineered into power by Washington and sustained by

US dollars, keeps imploring the US to halt the attacks that are enraging Pakistanis. Senior Pakistani diplomats have been warning that the drone strikes that have so far killed 2,500-3,000, mostly civilians, are fuelling extremist groups in Pakistan and humiliating its armed forces. No one in Washington is listening. Islamabad attempted to show some independence by halting US-NATO truck convoys from Karachi to Afghanistan for seven months after a deadly US air attack last November that killed 25 Pakistani soldiers.

But the blockade was recently lifted after \$1 billion of American aid to Islamabad was unfrozen. The dollars are flowing again – many of them right back out into Swiss, Dubai or Singapore bank accounts.

Anti-American feelings in Pakistan have been soaring. Some polls show over 90 per cent of respondents expressing hatred or anger against the US. These public sentiments have been worsened by more loose talk by Republicans in Washington about seizing Pakistan's nuclear weapons, making Pakistan's province of Balochistan a separate state, or putting Pakistan on America's terrorist list. There are even rumbles from the far right and pro-Israel neo-cons about attacking Pakistan. America's failing war in Afghanistan is being blamed on the Pakistan-backed Haqqani group, which is also ironical since during my days in Afghanistan in the 1980's, Haqqani was a favourite of CIA.

Meanwhile, the truck craziness has reared its head again. Supply trucks for US and NATO forces are backed up at Pakistani border crossing points because supposedly because of security threats. Trucking supplies into northern Afghanistan via the Black Sea, Russia, and Central Asia has been costing the US \$100 million monthly at a time when 44 million Americans live below the poverty level. Flying supplies and munitions from the US to Afghanistan costs 10 times more than ground transport.

On top of this, Taleban and its allies are annoyed that the truck convoys have stopped. Why? Because they were being paid off millions more of baksheesh by the US to let the convoys pass. Talks this past week in Washington between CIA chief David Petraeus and Pakistan's new intelligence director, Lt. Gen. Zaheer ul-Islam were said to be cordial but not discernably productive. Nor were talks between top Pakistani and US generals. Diplomats seem to have dropped out of the picture.