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US may abandon Pakistan supply routes

By Amir Mir
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The United States may abandon Pakistan as a major supply route to Afghanistan unless the blockade on provisions to coalition forces is ended, after Islamabad turned down a request to allow crucial food and military hardware to transit to neighboring Afghanistan unless it receives a formal apology and sees stern action taken against those responsible for the November 26 cross-border air strike that killed at least two dozen Pakistani soldiers.

Shortly after midnight on November 26, American military helicopters rocketed and strafed two lightly manned observation points, known as the Salala security posts, on the Anargai Ghakhi mountain peak in Mohmand tribal agency, about 2.5 kilometers inside Pakistani territory on the Afghan border. The check posts had been recently set up to stop Taliban militants holed up in Afghanistan from crossing the border and staging attacks in Pakistan. The Salala security posts are located in the Taliban-controlled Baizai area of Mohmand tribal agency, a well-known hotbed of militant activity that has significantly impacted security on both sides of the border. Baizai is a known transit point and safe haven for two key commanders of the Tehrik-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan (TTP) - Faqir Mohammad and Mullah Fazlullah.

The air strike, in which at least 24 soldiers were killed has plunged the frosty Pakistan-US ties into deeper crisis because it took place a day after US General John Allen met the Pakistani Army Chief General Ashfaq Pervez Kiani to discuss border control and enhanced cooperation. The Pakistan-Afghanistan border is often poorly marked and differs on various maps by up to five miles in some places. A similar incident on September 30, 2009, which killed two Pakistani troops, led to the closure of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) supply routes

through Pakistan for 10 days. NATO apologized for that incident, which it said happened when gunships mistook warning shots by the Pakistani forces for a militant attack. But retaliating angrily, Pakistan immediately suspended supply routes.

According to highly informed diplomatic sources in Islamabad, the US has already explored several alternative supply routes for the international forces stationed in Afghanistan in the wake of an increasing number of attacks on NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) convoys travelling through Pakistan, coupled with a frequent suspension of the supply routes by the Pakistani authorities. Pakistan currently receives a huge reimbursement of economic and military assistance from the United States for providing these logistical facilities to the war-torn country. The NATO/ISAF convoys travelling through Pakistan are the principal source of logistical support for coalition forces. Pakistan, being the shortest and most economical route, has been used for nearly a decade to transit almost 75% of ammunition, vehicles, foodstuff and around 50% of fuel for coalition forces fighting the Taliban militia in Afghanistan.

The November 26 attack has caused an intense diplomatic tussle between Islamabad and Washington. Besides suspending NATO supplies to Afghanistan, Pakistan has ordered the Americans to vacate Shamsi airbase in Balochistan within 15 days. Shamsi Airbase - leased out to the United Arab Emirates, which sublet it to American forces - was the major operational center for US drones. Pakistani President Asif Zardari has already turned down a request by the UAE government to extend the deadline for withdrawal of the US troops from the base. Official military delegations between the two countries have also been cancelled.

No direct apology has come either from the US or from NATO, though both have expressed regret over the "tragic, unintended" deaths of the Pakistani soldiers. A White House spokesman has issued a statement saying President Barack Obama sees the deaths of Pakistani soldiers in a NATO raid as a tragedy. A joint statement by US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who offered their condolences for the loss of life, backed an investigation into the incident and stressed the importance of the Pakistan-US partnership. On the other hand, the western media quoted senior Western and Afghan officials as saying that a small group of US and Afghan forces on patrol in Kunar province were fired on first from positions inside Pakistani territory, prompting calls for close air support which wiped out the two Pakistani mountain posts.

The Wall Street Journal, citing unnamed Afghan officials and one Western official, has caused fury in Islamabad with a report that the attack was called to shield NATO and Afghan forces targeting Taliban fighters. The fire came from remote outposts in the Mohmand region.

A spokesman for the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), General Carsten Jacobson, told CNN that "a technical situation on the ground ... caused the force to call for close air support and it is this close air support that highly likely caused the soldiers that perished on the Pakistani side." In another interview to CBS News, General Jacobson elaborated that Afghan and NATO forces were holding a joint exercise in Kunar, close to the border with Pakistan. "Air support was called in, and it is highly likely that this close air support killed Pakistani soldiers," he said. General Jacobson assured Pakistan that an investigation was under way into why close support had been called in: "We need to have the technical proof of what was said at what time

by whom to whom. Speed is not important, but we need to get the Pakistani side involved to find out what their involvement was," he said.

But the Pakistani military has maintained that the attack was intentional and unwarranted. Major General Athar Abbas, chief spokesman for the Pakistan military, said he did not believe that ISAF or Afghan forces had received fire from the Pakistani side. "I cannot rule out the possibility that this was a deliberate attack by ISAF. Let me inform you that a total of 72 Pakistani soldiers have been killed in eight cross border attacks by the Allied Forces during last three years. The latest episode has deeply impacted the progress made by the two countries on improving bilateral relations, forcing Pakistan to revisit its current terms of engagement with the United States", said the military spokesman.

In an interview with CNN, Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani warned that there would be "no more business as usual" with Washington after what his government has been describing as "unprovoked NATO attack on Pakistani territory". He went on to add that for the relations to continue there had to be "mutual respect and respect for Pakistani sovereignty" which he regretted was no longer the case. Gilani, who added that an apology this time would not be enough to satisfy his nation, has also decided to take parliament into confidence about the review of relations with the United States.

Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar has made it clear that first of all, there must be a formal apology from the US over the killings followed by a thorough investigation into the incident and stern punishment to the people responsible for it. Only then would Pakistan decide what to do, she added. A statement issued here by the Foreign Office said Khar told US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in a phone conversation: "The incident negates the progress made by the two countries on improving relations and forces Pakistan to revisit the terms of engagement with the United States." Interior Minister Rehman Malik has declared that the NATO supplies have not been suspended, but stopped permanently.

There are two routes into Afghanistan from Pakistan, one across the Khyber Pass in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province to the Afghan border town of Torkham and on to Kabul. The other goes through the Balochistan Province to the border town of Chaman and on to the southern Afghan city, and former Taliban stronghold, of Kandahar. On an average, around 300 heavy vehicles, 200 container-mounted trailers and 100 tankers set off daily from Pakistan to Afghanistan through these two supply routes to transport food and military supplies meant for coalition forces stationed in Afghanistan.

Available figures show that since January this year a total of 109 NATO convoys have been targeted by the Taliban militants, killing 52 people, most of whom were drivers of the trucks. The convoys that were targeted included fuel tankers, each of which carries about 45,000 litres of oil, as well as containers with unspecified quantities of logistic material for the 120,000-strong NATO/ISAF Forces, besides armored transport for the allied forces, which were either torched or looted by militants. Apart from tonnes of small commodities being transported everyday from Pakistan to Afghanistan, choppers and Humvees were also transshipped via this route in the past few years.

However, diplomats say that having fully realized the Pakistan-Afghan supply route was no longer safe, the high command of the allied forces has accelerated efforts to secure an agreement with some of the former Russian states to allow food and military supplies to pass through the Central Asian republics. That the Americans have been trying to secure multiple supply routes for transportation of food and military supplies to Afghanistan is already an open secret. Landlocked, mountainous, inundated by war and extreme underdevelopment, Afghanistan is surrounded by a clutch of hostile, apprehensive, barely functioning sovereignties. But the allied forces there require a phenomenal amount of supplies - from ammunition to toothbrushes, fuel, computers, night-vision goggles, concertina wire etc - at the rate of thousands of tons per day.

The main problem is that these supply trucks are civilian-operated, with no military escorts, primarily because of the Pakistani sensitivities about its sovereignty. Therefore, many of the trucks become an easy target of the militants, prompting the Americans to seek alternative supply routes from countries which can also allow security men to guard them.

According to diplomats, the Americans are now trying to secure three different alternative supply routes for Afghanistan. The first one is the northern route which starts in the Latvian port of Riga, the largest all-weather harbor on the Baltic Sea, where container ships offload their cargo onto Russian trains. The shipments roll south through Russia, then southeast around the Caspian Sea through Kazakhstan and finally south through Uzbekistan until they cross the frontier into north Afghanistan. The Russian train-lines were built to supply Russia's own war in Afghanistan in the 1980's, and these can be used by the US-led forces in their own Afghan campaign.

The second one is the southern route which transits the Caucasus, completely bypassing Russia, from Georgia. Starting from the Black Sea port, Ponti, it travels north to Azerbaijan and its port, Baku, where goods are loaded onto ferries to cross the Caspian Sea. Landfall is Kazakhstan, where the goods are carried by truck to Uzbekistan and finally Afghanistan. While shorter than the northern route, it is more expensive because of the on-and-off loading from trucks to ferries and back onto trucks. A third supply route, which is actually a spur of the northern route, bypasses Uzbekistan and proceeds from Kazakhstan via Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which has a north east border with Afghanistan. However, this route is hampered by bad road conditions in Tajikistan.

Yet there are those in the Pakistani security establishment who think that it would be hard for the Americans to induce any of the former Russian states for the NATO supplies because many of their leaders believe that the American plans to get military supplies via their countries could draw the former Soviet colony into the battle as Cambodia was dragged into the Vietnam war. But diplomats say NATO is already using some alternate supply routes after a string of disruptions caused by the Pakistani authorities. As recently as July 2011, these circles say, the balance of supplies transiting through Pakistan and the northern distribution network were weighted in Pakistan's favor, with more than half of ground-transported supplies arriving through Pakistan. But the situation has changed with the US deciding that only 25% of ground cargo should arrive via Afghanistan's eastern neighbor.

The decision to suspend transit for convoys through Pakistan was taken at a meeting of the Defence Committee of the Cabinet (DCC), the highest strategic decision-making forum where it

was also decided that all arrangements with the United States and NATO, including diplomatic, political, and military and intelligence activities, would be reviewed. More importantly, Pakistan is also contemplating to boycott the Bonn Conference on Afghanistan where thorny issues about the withdrawal of occupying forces from the war-torn country and dialogue with the Taliban are to be taken up. Pakistan's absence from the conference is going to be a major setback to US-led efforts to bring the Taliban to the dialogue table.

Pakistani analysts say Islamabad's cooperation is crucial to ongoing American successes in the region but that the fragility of bilateral ties doesn't leave much room to withstand disruptive developments such as the November 26 NATO attack. Such ugly episodes will only fuel more anti-American sentiments in Pakistan that will ultimately jeopardize longer-term US interests in the region.