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Pakistan, Russia and the Threat to the Afghan War

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November 30, 2011By George Friedman Days after the Pakistanis closed their borders to the passage of fuel and supplies for the NATO-led war effort in Afghanistan, for very different reasons the Russians threatened to close the alternative Russia-controlled Northern Distribution Network (NDN). The dual threats are significant even if they don't materialize. If both routes are cut, supplying Western forces operating in Afghanistan becomes impossible. Simply raising the possibility of cutting supply lines forces NATO and the United States to recalculate their position in Afghanistan.

The possibility of insufficient lines of supply puts NATO's current course in Afghanistan in even more jeopardy. It also could make Western troops more vulnerable by possibly requiring significant alterations to operations in a supply-constrained scenario. While the supply lines in Pakistan most likely will reopen eventually and the NDN likely will remain open, the gap between likely and certain is vast.

The Pakistani Outpost Attack

The Pakistani decision to close the border crossings at Torkham near the Khyber Pass and Chaman followed a U.S. attack on a Pakistani position inside Pakistan's tribal areas near the Afghan border that killed some two-dozen Pakistani soldiers. The Pakistanis have been increasingly opposed to U.S. operations inside Pakistani territory. This most recent incident took an unprecedented toll, and triggered an extreme response. The precise circumstances of the attack are unclear, with details few, contradictory and disputed. The Pakistanis have insisted it

was an unprovoked attack and a violation of their sovereign territory. In response, Islamabad closed the border to NATO; ordered the United States out of Shamsi air base in Balochistan, used by the CIA; and is reviewing military and intelligence cooperation with the United States and NATO.

The proximate reason for the reaction is obvious; the ultimate reason for the suspension also is relatively simple. The Pakistani government believes NATO, and the United States in particular, will fail to bring the war in Afghanistan to a successful conclusion. It follows that the United States and other NATO countries at some point will withdraw.

Some in Afghanistan have claimed that the United States has been defeated, but that is not the case. The United States may have failed to win the war, but it has not been defeated in the sense of being compelled to leave by superior force. It could remain there indefinitely, particular as the American public is not overly hostile to the war and is not generating substantial pressure to end operations. Nevertheless, if the war cannot be brought to some sort of conclusion, at some point Washington's calculations or public pressure, or both, will shift and the United States and its allies will leave Afghanistan.

Given that eventual outcome, Pakistan must prepare to deal with the consequences. It has no qualms about the Taliban running Afghanistan and it certainly does not intend to continue to prosecute the United States' war against the Taliban once its forces depart. To do so would intensify Taliban attacks on the Pakistani state, and could trigger an even more intense civil war in Pakistan. The Pakistanis have no interest in such an outcome even were the United States to remain in Afghanistan forever. Instead, given that a U.S. victory is implausible and its withdrawal inevitable and that Pakistan's western border is with Afghanistan, Islamabad will have to live with — and possibly manage — the consequences of the re-emergence of a Taliban-dominated government.

Under these circumstances, it makes little sense for Pakistan to collaborate excessively with the United States, as this increases Pakistan's domestic dangers and imperils its relationship with the Taliban. Pakistan was prepared to cooperate with the United States and NATO while the United States was in an aggressive and unpredictable phase. The Pakistanis could not risk more aggressive U.S. attacks on Pakistani territory at that point, and feared a U.S.-Indian entente. But the United States, while not leaving Afghanistan, has lost its appetite for a wider war and lacks the resources for one. It is therefore in Pakistan's interest to reduce its collaboration with the United States in preparation for what it sees as the inevitable outcome. This will strengthen Pakistan's relations with the Afghan Taliban and minimize the threat of internal Pakistani conflict.

Despite apologies by U.S. and NATO commanders, the Nov. 26 incident provided the Pakistanis the opportunity — and in their mind the necessity — of an exceptional response. The suspension of the supply line without any commitment to reopening it and the closure of the U.S. air base from which unmanned aerial vehicle operations were carried out (though Pakistani airspace reportedly remains open to operations) was useful to Pakistan. It allowed Islamabad to reposition itself as hostile to the United States because of American actions. It also allowed Islamabad to appear less pro-American, a powerful domestic political issue.

Pakistan has closed supply lines as a punitive measure before. Torkham was closed for 10 straight days in October 2010 in response to a U.S. airstrike that killed several Pakistani soldiers, and trucks at the southern Chaman crossing were "administratively delayed," according to the Pakistanis. This time, however, Pakistan is signaling that matters are more serious. Uncertainty over these supply lines is what drove the United States to expend considerable political capital to arrange the alternative NDN.

The NDN Alternative and BMD

This alternative depends on Russia. It transits Russian territory and airspace and much of the former Soviet sphere, stretching as far as the Baltic Sea — at great additional expense compared to the Pakistani supply route. This alternative is viable, as it would allow sufficient supplies to flow to support NATO operations. Indeed, over recent months it has become the primary line of supply, and reliance upon it is set to expand. At present, 48 percent of NATO supplies still go through Pakistan; 52 percent of NATO supplies come through NDN (non-lethal); 60 percent of all fuel comes through the NDN; and by the end of the year, the objective is for 75 percent of all non-lethal supplies to transit the NDN.

Separating the United States yields a different breakdown: Only 30 percent of U.S. supplies traverse Pakistan; 30 percent of U.S. supplies come in by air (some of it linked to the Karakoram-Torkham route, probably including the bulk of lethal weapons); and 40 percent of U.S. supplies come in from the NDN land route. Therefore, Dmitri Rogozin's threat that Russia might suspend these supply lines threatens the viability of all Western operations in Afghanistan. Rogozin, the Russian envoy to NATO, has been known to make extreme statements. But when he makes those statements, he makes them with the full knowledge and authorization of the Russian leadership. Though he is used to making statements that the leadership might want to back away from, it is not unusual for him to signal new directions in Russian policy. This means the U.S. and NATO militaries responsible for sustaining operations in Afghanistan cannot afford to dismiss the threat. No matter how small the probability, it places more than 100,000 U.S. and allied troops in a vulnerable position.

For the Russians, the issue is the development and deployment of U.S. ballistic missile defenses in Europe. The Russians oppose the deployment, arguing it represents a threat to the Russian nuclear deterrent and therefore threatens the nuclear balance. This was certainly the reason the Soviets opposed the initial Strategic Defense Initiative in the 1980s. Carrying it forward to the 2010s, however, and the reasoning appears faulty. First, there is no nuclear balance at the moment, as there is no political foundation for nuclear war. Second, the U.S.-European BMD scheme is not designed to stop a massive launch of nuclear missiles such as the Russians could execute, but only the threat posed by a very small number of missiles such as might be launched from Iran. Finally, it is not clear that the system would work very well, though it has certainly proven far more capable than the turn-of-the-century predecessor systems.

Nevertheless, the Russians vehemently opposed the system, threatening to deploy Iskander short-range ballistic missiles and even tactical nuclear weapons in Kaliningrad and other locations in response. The Russian concern is obviously real, but it is difficult to believe it is the nuclear

balance they are concerned about. Rather, it is the geopolitical implications of placing BMD infrastructure in Central Europe.

Opposition to a Second Containment

Elements of the weapons, particularly radars and interceptors, are being deployed around the periphery of Russia — in Poland, Romania, Turkey and Israel. From the Russian point of view, the deployment of radars and other systems is a precursor to the deployment of other military capabilities. They are extremely valuable installations that must be protected. Troops therefore will be deployed along with air defenses, and so on. In other words, the deployment of the BMD infrastructure itself may have no practical impact on the Russians, but the indirect consequences would be to set the stage for more expansive military deployments. The Russians must assume this could entail a return to containment, the principle employed by the United States during the Cold War to limit Soviet power.

The Russians see the inclusion of other military forces at the locations of the interceptor and radar deployment as creating a belt of nations designed to contain Russia. Given the uncertain future of Europe and the increasing relative power of Russia in the region, the United States has an interest in making certain any disruption in Europe doesn't give the Russians opportunities to extend their political influence. While the extent to which American planners chose the sites with the containment of Russia in mind isn't clear, from the Russian point of view the motive doesn't matter. Planning is done based on capability, not intent. Whatever the U.S. intent, the move opens the door for containment if and when U.S. policy planners notice the opportunity.

The Russians have threatened actions for years, and in the past few weeks they have become increasingly vocal on the subject of BMD and on threats. Rogozin obviously was ordered to seize on the vulnerability created by the Pakistani move and introduced the now-indispensable NDN as a point where the Russians could bring pressure, knowing it is the one move the United States cannot tolerate at the moment. Whether they intend to shut down the supply line is questionable. Doing so would cause a huge breach with the United States, and to this point the Russians have been relatively cautious in challenging fundamental U.S. interests. Moreover, the Russians are worried about any instability in Afghanistan that might threaten their sphere of influence in Central Asia. However, the Russians are serious about not permitting a new containment line to be created, and therefore may be shifting their own calculations.

It is a rule of war that secure strategic supply lines are the basis of warfare. If you cannot be certain of supplying your troops, it is necessary to redeploy to more favorable positions. The loss of supply lines at some point creates a vulnerability that in military history leads to the annihilation of forces. It is something that can be risked when major strategic interests require it, but it is a dangerous maneuver. The Russians are raising the possibility that U.S. forces could be isolated in Afghanistan. Supply lines into the landlocked country never have been under U.S. or NATO control. All supplies must come in through third countries (less than a third of American supplies come by air, and those mostly through Russian airspace), and their willingness to permit transit is the foundation of U.S. strategy.

The United States and NATO have been exposed as waging a war that depended on the willingness of first Pakistan and now increasingly Russia to permit the movement of supplies through their respective territories. Were they both to suspend that privilege, the United States would face the choice of going to war to seize supply lines — something well beyond U.S. conventional capacity at this time — or to concede the war. Anytime a force depends on the cooperation of parties not under its control to sustain its force, it is in danger.

The issue is not whether the threats are carried out. The issue is whether the strategic interest the United States has in Afghanistan justifies the risk that the Russians may not be bluffing and the Pakistanis will become even less reliable in allowing passage. In the event of strategic necessity, such risks can be taken. But the lower the strategic necessity, the less risk is tolerable. This does not change the strategic reality in Afghanistan. It simply makes that reality much clearer and the threats to that reality more serious. Washington, of course, hopes the Pakistanis will reconsider and that the Russians are simply blowing off steam. Hope, however, is not a strategy.