

## Pakistan's Temporary Suspension of NATO Supply Lines: The Latest in a Faltering Relationship

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### 1. Introduction

On September 30<sup>th</sup>, NATO coalition helicopters carried out their fourth unauthorized strike in one week on Pakistani soil, resulting in the deaths of three members of Pakistan's border force. Pakistan, a key coalition and U.S. ally in NATO's ISAF mission in Afghanistan, hastily retaliated by cutting off NATO supply routes through Pakistan and the strategic Khyber Pass that connects Pakistan and Afghanistan. The blockade, which lasted ten days, left thousands of coalition tankers stranded with little security along the supply routes from the Pakistani port city of Karachi. Consequently, Taliban militants attacked and set fire to NATO supply trucks, leaving four dead and several wounded.

### 2. Insurgents and Insecurity

Ground transport through Pakistan is integral to NATO's mission in Afghanistan. Up to 80% of coalition supplies to Afghanistan pass through Pakistan. There are two principle supply routes that allow NATO convoys to pass through Pakistan to Afghanistan. The majority of supplies are driven north 1,200 miles (1,931 km) from the port of Karachi through Islamabad or Peshawar and then to Kabul via the Khyber Pass. The second route connects the southern Pakistani city, Quetta, with the Afghani province of Khandahar, a Taliban bastion and focus of recent NATO military offensives.

In late 2008, insurgents began targeting convoys carrying coalition supplies through Pakistan to Afghanistan, focusing specifically on the historic Khyber Pass that connects Peshawar with Jalalabad, Afghanistan. Following Pakistan's recent decision to blockade NATO supplies, militants carried out six different attacks along both the northern and southern supply routes. Despite Pakistani military offensives in recent years to secure passes and supply routes, security remains limited for coalition convoys. A Taliban spokesman recently told the AP news agency that the attacks would continue until the supplies had completely stopped and that a new wing of the group had been set up to focus specifically on the convoys.



Source: The Economist

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### 3. A Fracturing Relationship

The supply route blockade is only the latest event in a historically turbulent relationship between Pakistan and the United States. The two countries have shared a roller-coaster-like relationship since the start of the Cold War. The 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and the movement of the Pakistan military into federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) further magnified this relationship as the U.S. increased military aid to Islamabad and began to rely on Pakistan as a key ally in the War on Terror. To strengthen the bi-lateral relationship, the Bush Administration launched a “Strategic Dialogue” process with Pakistan that included high-level meetings in 2007 and 2008. The Obama Administration then revived the forum in March 2010.

The United States has often times been critical of Islamabad’s role in the fight against domestic extremist groups and has openly accused the government of creating safe havens for terrorist organizations within Pakistan’s borders. In response, Pakistani officials have clearly expressed that they will follow the course that they feel is necessary in the fight against extremists and they will not succumb to Western pressures. Moreover, when asked about the Pakistan-US relationship in the wake of the September 30<sup>th</sup> attacks, Pakistani interior minister, Rehman Malik, stated: “We will have to see whether we are allies or enemies.”

Tension between Pakistan and the West is not likely to go away anytime soon. Armed insurgencies have plagued Pakistani society and jeopardized the safety of NATO troops in bordering Afghanistan throughout the last years, leading to increased scrutiny from the West. The Obama Administration drastically increased drone attacks from five in 2007 and thirty-six in 2008, under the previous administration, to eighty-three in 2009. Furthermore, the C.I.A. carried out a record number of drone attacks inside Pakistan in September 2010. This has caused a surge of anti-American sentiment within the Pakistani population, while Pakistani officials vow to protect the country’s sovereignty.

### 4. An Uncertain Future

Pakistan’s recent blockade on NATO supplies through Pakistan and the Khyber Pass could be a sign of things to come for relations between Pakistan and the West, and the recent events shine light on the mounting security dilemma that NATO faces regarding its supply lines. While the Pakistani military has made great sacrifices in combating armed insurgents within its borders (especially in the lawless border regions), security is scarce in these regions and convoys remain vulnerable to attack by insurgents. Furthermore, several analysts have stated that Pakistani security agencies could actually be encouraging the attacks on the convoys and are well known to look the other way when attacks occur.

In late 2008, the US military began testing alternative routes to ship supplies to Afghanistan by exploring lines from Central Asia and Russia; however, they have had little success. The US and NATO continue to rely heavily on Pakistani supply routes to landlocked Afghanistan. When asked if the U.S. could drastically reroute supplies to Afghanistan, Teresita C. Schaffer, director of the South Asia program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington replied: “We have been trying for a couple of years to decrease our logistical dependence on Pakistan, and have only managed to get it to 80 percent from 90 percent. So, no, we clearly don’t have any place else to go.”

## 5. More Military Aid

On Friday, October 22, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton announced that the Obama administration would ask Congress for \$2 billion for Pakistan to buy American-made arms, ammunition and accessories from 2012 to 2016. This would replace a package that expired on Oct. 1 and complement \$7.5 billion in civilian assistance the administration has committed to Pakistan over five years, some of which has been directed towards recovery from the devastating floods. The aid will bolster Pakistani military units and increase training in the troubled frontier regions where NATO supply routes are located. However, the package comes with one important stipulation: the Obama Administration plans to cut off funds to Pakistani military units that have killed unarmed prisoners and civilians.<sup>1</sup>

This could be viewed as a blatant, and somewhat unusual, message being sent to a pivotal partner, further illustrating the growing tension between the two countries. Analysts sight that there exists a great cultural gap between Pakistani military units, especially the lightly trained Frontier Corps that have been suspected of killing unarmed detainees and civilian sympathizers and American troops. On one hand, the U.S. is encouraging Pakistan to increase military pressure on insurgent strongholds in regions like Swat Valley and South Waziristan - which were one time considered off-limit by the Pakistani government - and on the other hand, punishing Pakistani troops for human rights violations. Recent military offensives in these two regions have resulted in the killing of Taliban prisoners and the creation of makeshift prisons believed to be holding some 3,000 prisoners, as the army is often reluctant to leave justice in the hands of an unreliable (or often times absent) civilian judicial system.

## 6. Conclusion

The Obama Administration has repeatedly stressed that a secure and stable Pakistan is key to regional stability and NATO success in Afghanistan. Pakistan is fighting an internal war on several fronts (politically, economically, security) and the future of regional and global stability will depend on how the Pakistani government, with help from the international community, goes about solving these problems. With a new military aid deal in the works, the U.S. is showing that it is committed to aiding Pakistan in the fight against insurgents within its borders, strengthening regional stability and improving relations between the two countries by meeting Pakistan's military needs.

The September 30<sup>th</sup> cross-border attacks on Pakistani soil and the blockade that ensued are just the latest in a series of events that have resulted in a turbulent and fragile relationship between Pakistan and the West. That said, three things remain certain: 1) U.S and NATO forces will continue to carry out attacks on Pakistani soil in an attempt to secure border regions and supply routes, as U.S. General David Petraeus only promised to try harder not to repeat the same mistake as September 30th; 2) the Taliban and other Pakistan-based insurgent groups will continue to target NATO convoys passing through Pakistan; and 3) given the inefficiency of the Pakistani government and in an attempt to reduce regional extremist groups' influence on local populations, the

<sup>1</sup> Recent reports have emerged about extrajudicial killings, as well as an online video showing uniformed Pakistani officers killing 6 unarmed civilians. The Leahy Amendment, passed in 1997, requires the United States to cut off aid to foreign militaries that are found to have committed gross violations of human rights.

United States will continue to increase humanitarian aid and reconstruction efforts in support of civilian populations affected by the catastrophic floods. These factors could decide the course of future relations between Pakistan and the West, as well as the future of regional and global stability as a whole.

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