

US looks for other Afghan supply routes

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More than 10,000 Pakistanis demonstrated last Wednesday in the north-western city of Peshawar to denounce the use of the country as a route to supply the US and NATO forces repressing armed resistance to the occupation of Afghanistan.

The demonstration was called by the country's main legal Islamist party, Jamaat e-Islami (JI). It was an implicit show of support for the series of attacks that militants in the Peshawar area have launched against local supply terminals that are being used as way-stations for trucks transporting vehicles and equipment from the port of Karachi, through the Khyber Pass into Afghanistan.

Militant attacks on three separate facilities on December 7 and 8 resulted in the destruction of as many as 200 trucks and their cargoes of humvees and other military hardware. As a result, the Khyber Pass was closed until December 15.

At present, up to 80 percent of US military supplies are transported via the Karachi-Khyber route. A JI official told the demonstration: "We will no longer allow arms and ammunition to pass through and reach the hands the American and NATO forces in Afghanistan. They are using the same against our brothers, sisters and children."

While the Pass has now reopened, Pakistani drivers are hesitant to risk the journey. The 3,500 truck operators who belong to the Khyber Transport Association have declared a boycott of all military cargo.

The boycott has caused the number of trucks going through the Pass to fall from up to 400 per day to just 100, despite the deployment of some 1,500 Pakistani troops to provide escorts to the Afghan border. One of the convoys that did move out of Peshawar was attacked last Wednesday with rocket-propelled grenades.

To bribe drivers to risk their lives, trucking companies are offering 15,000 rupees—about \$US190—for an eight-day round trip from Karachi to Kabul. One told the *News International*: "There is no other job in Pakistan where a driver could earn 15,000 rupees in eight days." For just one trip on the even more dangerous road to Tarin Kowt, men are being paid 35,000 rupees—double the average monthly income of most of the country's population. Trucking companies are also offering lucrative pay, by Pakistani standards, to men prepared to work as security guards protecting convoys.

The supply route is under threat due to the expansion of the Afghan insurgency in recent years and the related growth of Islamist activity inside Pakistan. Anti-colonial sentiment and ethnic Pashtun loyalties have combined with religious fervour to produce mass support for the Taliban in both countries. Young men are being attracted to Islamist militancy due to the grotesque levels of social inequality, the corruption of the ruling elites and the presence in the region of US and other foreign forces.

As far as millions of Pakistani citizens are concerned, the fight against the US-led occupation of Afghanistan is their war. The colonial-period border between the Afghanistan and Pakistan—called the Durand Line—is completely arbitrary. Afghanistan, in fact, has never officially recognised the border as it divides a Pashtun population of some 30 million people who share a common language, culture and religion.

Even after the 1947 partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan, the Pashtuns of Pakistan's Federally Administrated Tribal Areas (FATA) and North West Frontier Province (NWFP) retained their historic bonds with the Pashtun population of southern Afghanistan.

Cross-border movements and exchange expanded exponentially during the 1980-1988 war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, during which as

many as five million Afghans, or 20 percent of the population, fled to refugee camps over the border. The US, Saudi Arabian and Pakistani governments poured billions of dollars into creating a mass anti-Soviet guerrilla *mujahedin* force, based almost exclusively on Islamic fundamentalism.

After living for years in an environment saturated with Islamist propaganda, it was not surprising that former *mujahedin* fighters and Afghan youth in the Pakistani camps rallied to the Taliban in 1994 when they called for the overthrow of the corrupt warlords who took power following the Soviet withdrawal.

Thousands of Pakistani nationals fought alongside them. After the US invasion in 2001, large numbers of both Afghan and Pakistani Taliban escaped to the refuge of safe havens in the FATA and NWFP. Gradually rebuilding their forces, they are now waging a new guerrilla war across southern Afghanistan, as well as fighting the Pakistani government forces that have been ordered to prevent insurgent activity inside the country.

The Taliban have a presence in well over half of Afghanistan. Related Islamist groups hold sway over the FATA and their influence extends throughout NWFP and into the rest of Pakistan. NATO supplies have even come under attack on the docks of Karachi. The military eradication of Islamist influence and resistance to the US occupation will involve a long, costly and bloody war of attrition on both sides of the border.

Every signal from Washington indicates that the Obama administration intends to prosecute such a war, in order to secure US geo-political ambitions in Central Asia and prevent rivals such as China and Russia emerging as the dominant powers in the resource-rich region. Tens of thousands of additional troops are preparing to deploy to Afghanistan and Obama has repeatedly declared he will order strikes into Pakistan against alleged insurgent targets.

The Bush White House has already implemented this policy, conducting as many as 30 attacks on Pakistani soil since August in defiance of opposition voiced by the Pakistani government. The latest US attack took place on Monday when at least two missiles were fired from remote-operated drones in the border area of South Waziristan. Local residents and officials said that seven people had been killed, four in a village near

Wana, and another three in a neighbouring village. More than 220 people have been killed in such attacks so far this year.

The build-up of forces and likelihood of even greater US violations of Pakistani sovereignty makes the security of supply routes even more vital. The commander of US forces in Central Asia, General David Petraeus, and other US officials are drafting contingency plans. In recent weeks, pressure and possible overtures appear to have been extended to the Russian government to allow more NATO supplies to pass through the country and into Afghanistan, via the Central Asian republics.

Russian official Mikhail Margelov told journalists last week: "The experts are discussing the details. Let them do that quietly. Looking at the map we see many roads and paths going to Afghanistan but in fact they are dangerous ... The Russian corridor is the safest. That is why NATO and Russia have a common interest."

The other option is to use the Iranian port of Chahbahar. The Indian government has spent over \$1 billion to construct a multi-lane highway from the western Afghan city of Herat to the Iranian border to meet up with the road from Chahbahar. Some form of political deal with the regime in Tehran would enable the US and NATO to redirect most, if not all, the traffic that currently goes to Karachi—providing they retain control over Herat.

When asked about the prospect of improved US-Iranian relations, Russia's Margelov declared: "We are having several signals from Iran that they will welcome direct contact with the US, particularly with the new administration and if so, they are ready to be more co-operative."



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