

US and Pakistan end standoff over Afghan supply routes

Peter Symonds
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Under intense pressure from Washington, the Pakistani government has lifted a seven-month ban and reopened NATO supply routes through Pakistan to Afghanistan. The decision follows a limited apology on Tuesday by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton over the killing of 24 Pakistani border guards in US air strikes last November.

The stand-off was ended after weeks of behind-the-scenes negotiations over the exact terms. The Obama administration had previously refused to acknowledge any responsibility for the deaths and had cut off military aid to Pakistan.

The Pentagon claimed, without providing any evidence, that a US-Afghan special forces team operating at night near the border with Pakistan had been fired upon and called in air support. US helicopter gunships strafed two Pakistani border posts. The Pakistani military refuted this account, branding the attack as a deliberate act of aggression on two posts whose coordinates were well known to US forces.

The killings provoked public outrage in Pakistan, compounding widespread hostility over the US military's flouting of Pakistani sovereignty to carry out drone attacks on alleged insurgents inside the country. Hundreds of civilians have died as a result of the ongoing attacks. The assassination of Osama bin Laden by US Special Forces deep inside Pakistan last year further inflamed public opinion. In order to deflect this anger, the Pakistani government insisted on a US apology and threatened to raise the transit fee for NATO supplies to \$5,000 per truck.

In her phone call to Pakistani Foreign Minister Hina

Rabbani Khar on Tuesday, Clinton did not use the word "apology" or refer directly to the US airstrikes, declaring only: "Foreign Minister Khar and I acknowledged the mistakes that resulted in the loss of Pakistani military lives. We are sorry for the losses suffered by the Pakistani military." The Obama administration also agreed to release around \$1.1 billion in aid to the Pakistani military, but the transit fee remains fixed at \$250 per truck. The US is likely to give the green light for a new International Monetary Fund loan for Pakistan.

The US made these minor concessions in order to reopen land routes through Pakistan that are vital to supply the US and NATO occupation of Afghanistan and for the planned withdrawal of troops and military hardware by the end of 2014. For the past seven months, the Pentagon had to rely on northern supply routes through Russia and Central Asia that were costing an extra \$100 million a month.

Washington's decision to mend relations with Islamabad reflects concerns about being too dependent on the northern routes. While the US has agreements with Russia and several Central Asian republics to ship non-lethal materiel into Afghanistan, it is still negotiating terms for using these routes for the withdrawal. Moreover, Russian legislator Alexey Pushkov, chairman of the international affairs committee of the State Duma, warned recently that Moscow could halt NATO supplies into Afghanistan unless differences with the US were resolved over plans for a NATO missile defence shield.

The US administration also feared that the diplomatic breach with Pakistan over the supply routes could affect

broader relations with Islamabad. “Obviously [transport] cost was a factor, but more importantly was the need to get the relationship back on track so we can cooperate on a range of important issues including reconciliation and counterterrorism,” an Obama administration official told the *Wall Street Journal*.

Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari and the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP)-led government maintained the support for Washington’s neo-colonial war in Afghanistan given by former military strongman General Pervez Musharraf from 2001. Islamabad has turned a blind eye to the US drone attacks on its territory and launched major military operations to suppress anti-US insurgents in areas bordering Pakistan.

The US will undoubtedly renew its demands for the Pakistani military to take action against the Haqqani network based in North Waziristan. Last month, US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta soured negotiations over the supply routes by declaring that Washington was “reaching the limits of our patience” with Islamabad for not cracking down on Islamist militants. “It is difficult to achieve peace in Afghanistan as long as there is safe haven for terrorists in Pakistan,” he said.

As part of its wider geostrategic aims, the US was also seeking to ensure that China did not use the standoff over supply routes to strengthen its longstanding economic and military ties with Pakistan. Since coming to office, the Obama administration has escalated efforts throughout Asia to undermine Chinese influence and reinforce US diplomatic and military ties.

For its part, the Pakistani government could not afford to back down without some form of apology from Washington, no matter how limited. Anti-US sentiment in Pakistan is deepening. A survey by the Pew Research Centre released last month found that 74 percent of respondents regarded the US as an enemy, up from 69 percent last year and 64 percent three years ago.

The government is already under fire from opposition groups for caving in to Washington by reopening the supply routes. The Defence Council of Pakistan, an

alliance of Islamist organisations, has called for nationwide protests today. Opposition political parties are meeting tomorrow in Lahore to plan a protest campaign.

The government’s decision to repair its ties to Washington is bound up with its own political crisis. Last month the country’s Supreme Court ordered the removal of Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani for refusing the court’s order to reopen corruption cases in Switzerland against President Zardari. Prime Minister Raja Pervez Ashraf, who replaced Gilani, faces the same fate unless he bows to the Supreme Court’s demand.

The bitter dispute between the government and the Supreme Court reflects deep fractures within the country’s ruling elites. By reopening the NATO supply routes, Zardari and Ashraf are clearly hoping for Washington’s support to keep the PPP in office and to stave off any threat of a military coup.

However, far from easing the crisis, the resumption of US supplies through Pakistan, along with continuing murderous drone attacks, will only heighten tensions and compound political instability in Islamabad.



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