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Pakistan's Convoy Halt Forces US to Reduce Tensions

by Gareth Porter

WASHINGTON -- By continuing its halt in NATO convoys headed for Afghanistan through the Torkham border crossing into a second week, Pakistan's military leadership has brought an end to the unilateral attacks in Pakistan pushed by Gen. David Petraeus and forced Washington to make a new accommodation.

And it may make it impossible for Petraeus to make the argument in the future that the United States can succeed in Afghanistan, given the refusal of Pakistan to budge on the issue.

The halt in NATO convoys bound for Afghanistan and unhindered attacks on tanker trucks have continued despite a decision by the White House to direct U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan Anne Patterson and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Mike Mullen to apologize to the Pakistani government for the deaths of three Pakistani soldiers resulting from a U.S. helicopter raid from Afghanistan into Pakistan.

Pres. Barack Obama has clearly abandoned the tough line toward Pakistan represented by cross-border helicopter attacks and accelerated drone strikes in an effort to reduce tensions.

U.S. and Pakistani officials have been engaged at various levels to find a way out of the impasse, according to one administration official. The official said some of the tensions should dissipate in the coming days, suggesting that the U.S. is eager to avoid further troubles on the border.

The Pakistani government clearly sees the border closure and the attacks on tanker trucks as giving it powerful leverage on Washington to stop all cross-border attacks and to strictly limit the number of drone attacks and the areas in which they take place.

In his press briefing Thursday, foreign office spokesperson Abdul Basit attacked the drone strikes policy as a violation of Pakistani sovereignty and said it "does not serve the larger strategic interests, especially in the context of our efforts to win hearts and minds...."

Pakistan's leverage stems from the fact that 70 to 80 percent of the U.S.-NATO logistical supplies for the war in Afghanistan go through Pakistan. As much 80 percent of the supplies that enter Afghanistan from Pakistan go through the Torkham crossing. A second logistics route through Chaman is still open.

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty reported Friday that 6,500 NATO vehicles are backed up along the entire 1,500 km route from the port of Karachi to the Khyber Pass.

Despite the claim by the spokesperson for the U.S.-NATO command in Afghanistan, Gen. Joseph Blotz, that the closing of the border crossing poses "no danger to ongoing future ISAF operations", replacing the Pakistani routes with alternative routes through Central Asia would prohibitively time-consuming and expensive.

The crisis in U.S.-Pakistani relations was the result of a decision by the Obama administration - which press reports suggest was on the basis of a strong recommendation from Petraeus - to act much more aggressively and unilaterally if the Pakistani military did not do more to attack militant groups in North Waziristan, especially the Haqqani group, which dominates the successful insurgency in eastern Afghanistan.

Unnamed U.S. officials were reported in the Wall Street Journal Oct. 2-3 as saying that there was less concern about upsetting the Pakistanis than there had been only a few months earlier. Two days later, the Journal reported, without attribution, that Petraeus had determined that the safe havens in Pakistan were a greater threat than he had previously thought.

The Petraeus decision to push for a unilateral escalation of force thus provides an additional element for the narrative that he will have to construct to protect his personal interest in avoiding responsibility for military failure in Afghanistan.

One element of the decision was to increase drone strikes in Waziristan dramatically to an unprecedented 22 in September - more than four times the average number in the previous six months. In the past, the United States had gotten permission from the Pakistani government for specific geographic "boxes" in which drone strikes could be carried out, as revealed in "Obama's War" by Bob Woodward.

Evidently that was not done, however, before the sudden dramatic increase in drone strikes in September.

The second element was to carry out at a series of cross-border helicopter gunship attacks in Pakistan that were not cleared in advance with the Pakistani military. During the cross-border strike Sept. 30, moreover, three Pakistani army troops were killed by U.S. helicopter fire.

Petraeus and his allies in the Pentagon apparently underestimated the determination with which the Pakistani military would react. When the closure was first announced, some U.S. officials said they expected the border to reopen within 72 hours - that is, by Oct. 5 -- according to the Washington Post.

Instead, the spokesperson for the Pakistani foreign ministry, Abdul Basit, warned that the closure of the Torkham gate would continue until popular anger over the U.S. attacks inside Pakistan had subsided. Basit also virtually invited attacks on the NATO convoys by suggesting that they would be regarded as "the reaction of the Pakistani masses".

Since then there have been at least six attacks in which tankers have been torched over the past week.

The Pakistani response should have been no surprise to U.S. officials. In "Obama's War", Bob Woodward, who had unprecedented access to top officials, said U.S. intelligence "indicated the Pakistanis believed the U.S. would not jeopardize their relationship", because of its dependence on the country's agreement to allow convoys to use Pakistani logistics routes into Afghanistan.

The intelligence analysis pointed out that the Pakistanis would not even have to close the border itself, but would gain sufficient leverage simply by allowing some militants to close key bridges or overpasses.

The Pakistani military leaders had threatened to close down the supply routes in September 2008, in response to a single cross-border raid ordered by the George W. Bush administration.

The Pakistani closure of NATO's main logistics route may influence the domestic politics of the Obama administration's policy toward the war. As Woodward's book reveals, U.S. officials have long agreed privately that the war effort in Afghanistan cannot succeed without a change in Pakistani policy toward the safe havens for the Taliban.

If the result of the crisis in U.S.-Pakistani relations is a retreat by the United States, it would signal a clear end to the hope that Pakistan would change its policy on Afghanistan. That, in turn would strengthen Obama's hand in maneuvering with Petraeus over beginning a drawdown of troops in July 2011.

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