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A Bitter Bargain After US Apologizes, Pakistan Reopens Supply Routes

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This week, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton finally uttered the magical words to persuade Pakistan to reopen the ground supply routes to Afghanistan: "I'm sorry." With these words, the clock has been reset to the morning of November 25, 2011. Washington is celebrating this move for now. However, sooner or later, this breakthrough will lead to the next break down.

On November 25, 2011, US forces waged a two-hour attack against Pakistani military outpost in Salala in Pakistan's Mohmand Agency. Twenty-four Pakistani soldiers died. Washington steadfastly refused to apologize even though it was mostly at fault. Americans retorted that the tragedy happened because of Pakistan's long-standing support for Afghan insurgents attacking US and allied troops in Afghanistan. This precluded US forces from following standing operating procedures established to prevent such mishaps.

For many Americans, the Pakistanis got what they had long deserved. This decreased any appetite for contrition. Americans are exhausted with Pakistan's continued support for insurgent elements in Afghanistan such as the Haqqani Network, the Afghan Taliban and groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba, all of which are responsible for killing thousands of US, NATO and Afghan troops and many more civilians. A few months prior to Salala, Osama bin Laden had been killed in a unilateral US military raid in Abbottabad, a short distance from the Pakistan Military Academy, the equivalent of the US Army's West Point. Pakistan has shown no interest in discerning who helped bin Laden remain in Pakistan undetected for years where he built a massive family with many wives and numerous children. Instead, Pakistan has focused singularly upon a hapless physician who helped bring down bin Laden.

For many Americans, it is Pakistan that owes some apologies. After all, even after taking more than \$22 billion in US taxpayers' money since 9/11, Pakistan seems to be more intent on helping our enemies than helping us to defeat them.

The US position outraged Pakistan's military and civilian leadership and fueled ever more anti-American sentiment among Pakistan's polity. Many Pakistanis outright discount the claims that their government supports militants. Other Pakistanis concede that their government does so, but rationalize it on various grounds that are incomprehensible to most Americans. For example, many Pakistanis blame the [deaths](#) of 35,000 Pakistanis since 9/11 on the American war in Afghanistan. Some even believe that Americans are behind the deaths, perhaps working with Indian or even Israeli intelligence agencies. Few Pakistanis will admit that the so-called Pakistan Taliban are derived from the very Islamist terror groups that its state has long supported and used in India and Afghanistan. Many do not even know to hold their own government to account for the appalling bloodshed.

To coerce an apology from Washington, Pakistan closed down the ground supply routes to Afghanistan. The Americans had prepared for this eventuality by establishing a northern route through Central Asia. The route was politically fraught, logistically more challenging than the Pakistani alternative and more expensive. What the Americans could not ship through the north, they flew in over Pakistani air space. All told, this new route [cost](#) the Americans about \$100 million per month over and beyond the previous arrangement, according to which they paid a meager \$250 for each sea container that moved from Pakistan's port in Karachi through Pakistani territory and into Afghanistan either through Chaman in Balochistan or Torkham at the Khyber Pass.

Many feared that while this alternate route worked to get supplies into Afghanistan, it could not sustain the traffic and operations tempo needed to get the massive amounts of war material out of Afghanistan as the United States and NATO draw down their military footprints. Consequently, the US government hoped that Pakistan would reopen the ground routes.

After numerous discussions between Pakistan's Army Chief Ashfaq Parvez Kayani and NATO Chief US General John Allen, the script for this political drama was drafted: Secretary Clinton, at long last, would niggardly utter the parsimonious apology and the supply routes would reopen. This is not the bargain it appears to be principally because it resolves none of the problems that precipitated the crisis in the first place.

First, the apology should never have been linked to the ground routes' status. Rather, it should have been tied to serious and consequential discussion of Pakistan's continued support for the various militant elements in Afghanistan that the United States seeks to defeat. Without progress on this issue, any degree of long-term success in Afghanistan is impossible and spent life and treasure will be squandered. Once the US military presence declines, the Afghan forces' capabilities will inevitably suffer. Pakistan's proxies will increase their activities flush with cash from Pakistan's intelligence agencies as it did in the 1990s. Pakistan will do as it has always done: support Islamist elements in Afghanistan in effort to constrain the Indians. Should the west stop paying Kabul's bills, this will happen sooner than later.

Second, the agreement on the ground logistical routes should have gone forward only if Pakistan agreed to end support for insurgent elements. Critics of this position will say that Afghanistan's future can only be solved with Pakistan at the table. Unfortunately, so far, Pakistan has only tried to chop up the table and use it for firewood.

The United States would have been better served to continue excluding Pakistan in light of its continued commitment to fighting a proxy war with the Americans in Afghanistan. After all, if Pakistan remains dedicated to an Afghanistan that the Americans and Afghans oppose, the Americans need to learn to sustain an Afghan presence without Pakistan indefinitely. Moreover, the higher cost of moving supplies via the alternative routes could have been compensated by denying Pakistan arrearage of Coalition Support Funds that range between \$1.3 and \$3 billion-- depending upon whose math you trust -- and foregoing other assistance.

Only by reducing its dependence upon Pakistan can the United States muster the political will to compel Pakistan to abandon Islamist militancy as tools of foreign policy. While this deal may save Washington money in the short term, it will pay grievously in the long term as Afghanistan again reverts to being Pakistan's terror field.

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