

Obama Should Apologize

The facts are in: NATO forces mistakenly killed Pakistani soldiers. It's time to swallow American pride and say we're sorry.

BY C. CHRISTINE FAIR | DECEMBER 22, 2011

ISLAMABAD – In the wee hours of Nov. 27, U.S.-NATO and Afghan forces based in Afghanistan's Kunar province [engaged](#) a Pakistani military outpost in Pakistan's tribal agency of Momand. Little information is publically available -- or likely to be -- about what happened or how. What is clear is that after several NATO airstrikes, 24 Pakistani soldiers were dead and many more injured. The episode, and the U.S. response, battered the ever-strained U.S.-Pakistan relationship. Pakistan immediately [cut off ground routes for logistical support](#) of the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan, and insisted that the United States vacate [Shamsi](#), one of the airfields from which the U.S. launched drone attacks.



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In quick succession, Pakistan convened a [parliamentary commission](#) to determine whether and how Pakistan will remain engaged with the United States. Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs recalled all of its ambassadors to hold a [high-level strategic discussion](#) about how Pakistan should refashion its relations with the United States. Their recommendations will be considered by the same parliamentary commission. Pakistanis, whether civilian or military, whether in the government or on the street, want out of this relationship and deeply believe that Americans do not value Pakistani lives. They may not be wrong.

Pakistani military officials quickly [denounced the attack as deliberate](#), unprovoked U.S. aggression and demanded both an immediate apology and a renegotiation of military and intelligence cooperation. That Pakistani officials made such pronouncements in the complete absence of information about the attack cast aspersions on their motives. The move appeared to be another effort to wriggle free from

Washington's poisonous embrace, abandon military operations against anti-Pakistan militants, and pursue an independent Afghan policy.

While rejecting the Pakistani military's account, NATO and U.S. officials declined to officially speculate about the details of the event -- much less offer an apology -- until a full investigation was complete. The investigation is now complete. [The report has been issued](#), and the Pentagon released a [statement](#) on Thursday saying only that "U.S. forces, given what information they had available to them at the time, acted in self defense and with appropriate force after being fired upon." There was, the statement said, "no intentional effort to target persons or places known to be part of the Pakistani military, or to deliberately provide inaccurate location information to Pakistani officials." Instead, "inadequate coordination by U.S. and Pakistani military officers... resulted in a misunderstanding about the true location of Pakistani military units." The statement expressed regret, but neither President Barack Obama nor Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has issued a forthright apology. Unfortunately, neither is likely to do so given the toxic atmosphere in Washington and the looming presidential campaign.

The U.S. ambassador to Pakistan, Cameron Munter, [urged Obama to apologize](#), but he was quickly [cut down](#). Munter has sought to mitigate Pakistanis' anger by saying in Urdu "[humay bahut afsos hai](#)" ("We are very sorry"). On Monday, he joined several interfaith leaders in offering a prayer at Islamabad's Faisal Mosque for the Pakistani soldiers killed on Nov. 27, offering, "[We share in this grief, and we share in this sorrow](#)." The author's contacts here in Islamabad and in Washington lament that instead of heeding the sagacious advice of the ambassador, who understands the raw sentiments of Pakistanis, some within the U.S. government dismiss Munter as "having gone native."

While the Pentagon report apportions blame to both sides, an astute reader can only conclude that the most heinous mistakes were *not* made by Pakistan. The report claims that NATO and Afghan troops came under fire from Pakistani positions. (Official Pakistani sources refute this.) Believing they were under attack by insurgents, the NATO and Afghan troops called for suppressive air fire. The report concedes that, contrary to established standard operating procedures, NATO *did not* inform Pakistan that the operation on the border was taking place. This supports early U.S. claims that NATO-Afghan forces came under fire. After all, how could the Pakistani soldiers know that the forces moving near their area of operations were "allied forces"? (Americans dismiss this and say Pakistan should have known better. After all, the insurgents do not have helicopter gunships.) While one can get caught up in the details of who fired first and why, NATO's failure to follow established procedures is indefensible.

But this is not the most egregious mistake. The worst -- and fatal error -- was the fact that the Americans provided the Pakistani army with incorrect coordinates for the designated targets of AC-130 gunships and attack helicopters. In the early days of the incident, there were several claims and counterclaims about whether the coordinates were given, whether they were correct, and whether the Pakistan army had cleared the coordinates before the attack. However, the report makes evident that Pakistan's clearance of the coordinates or lack thereof is immaterial: The strikes would still have killed those innocent soldiers because the coordinates were simply wrong.

The [details of the report](#), and its efforts to apportion blame across all sides, will not satisfy Pakistanis, who feel they have suffered too much and [received too little](#) from this partnership over the last 10 years. They want nothing more than an apology from Obama. Despite the report's tedious efforts to parse culpability, it is obvious that most of the onus falls on the United States and NATO. So why does the United States steadfastly refuse to do the right thing and issue a clear apology to Pakistan and its citizenry in and out of uniform?

Like Pakistanis, American officials and citizens alike are war weary and angry. As the endgame in Afghanistan approaches, Americans are now -- or should be -- confronting the [vacuity of our Afghan policy](#). Vice President Joe Biden, who has taken a lot of [heat](#) for saying, "the Taliban, per se, is not our enemy," was right: We invaded Afghanistan to destroy al Qaeda. The Taliban were not the [immediate objects of our intervention](#). (For this reason, Biden advocated for a robust [counterterrorism strategy and advised against a counterinsurgency policy](#) that implied a war on the Taliban and affiliated fighters rather than on al Qaeda.) Once the United States decided to make the Taliban the enemy -- for the simple reason that the Taliban and affiliated fighters are killing American and allied troops whom they see as occupying Afghanistan -- it also made Pakistan an enemy as well.

For much of the last decade, the [Pakistanis have supported the insurgents](#) that are killing U.S. and allied troops and civilians, even while benefiting from American assistance and military reimbursements for assisting the U.S. war in Afghanistan. Just as Pakistanis are deeply aggrieved that U.S. forces killed 24 of their soldiers, Americans are increasingly outraged that thousands of troops have been killed or maimed in Afghanistan at the hands of Pakistan's proxies. Many have died or suffered injuries from IEDs manufactured with products made in Pakistan. Pakistan has made little effort to denature or add tracers to ammonium nitrate used in such IEDs and claims it is impossible to stop the "smuggling." There is also copious evidence that Pakistan's spy service actively facilitates the insurgents. The two countries are fighting a peculiar proxy war, and the United States and its citizenry are only now appreciating the reality of this grotesque situation.

American anger over this duplicity is justified. Pakistan's ruling generals have taken U.S. funds with one hand and funneled them to their murderous proxies in Afghanistan with the other. But who got us into this situation? Ultimately it is the fault of the U.S. government, which chose to wage a war that was not winnable, whether with the allies it has or the allies it could cultivate. Pakistan is the only viable logistical route for the war in Afghanistan. How could the United States think it could defeat Pakistan's proxies in Afghanistan while depending on Pakistan to fight that very war? It is a maddening fact to any realist that while Washington found a way to funnel \$20 billion (and climbing) into Pakistan despite its history of supporting terrorism and nuclear proliferation, it could never find a way to move logistics through Iran's deep sea port in Chabahar, even though Iran initially supported the war in Afghanistan. Washington grimaces at the suggestion of working with Afghanistan's western neighbor even though Tehran's record on both terrorism and nuclear proliferation is but a shadow of Pakistan's.

And the absurdity doesn't stop there. In the most twisted of realities, some of Pakistan's most anti-American trucking barons have [enriched themselves](#) by facilitating the logistical supply for the war with the hope of keeping the Americans in the Afghan killing fields as long as possible. After all, any dedicated

insurgent seeking to end the war would have had better luck blowing up trucks piled up at either the Chaman or Torkham border crossings. Yet loss due to pilferage or destruction never exceeded [5 percent](#) all of cargo. Why? Thanks to the Pashtun trucking mafia, the various Taliban organizations and petty officials along the routes make a killing from U.S. military's logistical needs. Five percent (or less) is an optimal level of loss that keeps everyone rolling in cash.

But neither the United States nor Pakistan will benefit from a continued and escalating standoff. America needs Pakistan to conclude its Afghanistan misadventure. This requires Pakistan both to stop encouraging its militant proxies' violent endeavors and to productively assert its influence to achieve a negotiated settlement that is palatable to most in the country. Washington also wants to keep an eye on Islamabad's quickly expanding nuclear arsenal and terrorist assets such as the Lashkar-e-Taiba -- the group that carried out the Mumbai attacks -- and other international menaces. Finally, the United States wants Pakistan somehow to be at peace with itself and its neighbors.

As for Pakistan, it's an economic disaster case. Pakistanis have long endured incomprehensible electricity outages. Now, they lack inadequate gas to cook or heat their homes. Public transportation has been strangled by shortages in compressed natural gas. Water is in acute scarcity. Pakistan's manufacturing sector is struggling to remain competitive under these adverse conditions. Although Pakistan [has told the IMF to take a hike](#), most informed Pakistanis concede that it will again have to approach the IMF sooner rather than later. As Pakistan knows well, [the United States is a key actor in that institution](#). In short, Pakistan and the United States must forge a sustainable way of working together because the strategic and regional interests of both depend on it.

The United States must swiftly act to rectify this mess first by apologizing. Second, the U.S. military must hold to account those officers who are responsible for this tragedy. Not only should the appropriate personnel be demoted or ousted per the severity of their negligence, but prosecution may also be merited.

Americans will howl in protest, noting years of Pakistani perfidy. They may rightly counter that no senior Pakistani military or intelligence officials lost their jobs when Osama bin Laden was found hanging out in Abbottabad, a military garrison town not far from Islamabad. Nor did any general's head roll when "rogue" scientist A.Q. Khan was caught in various nuclear bartering imbroglios; no Pakistani general that has overthrown a government has been charged with treason despite the fact that Pakistan's constitution calls for such punishment. But the United States is not Pakistan. The United States claims to promote democracy, accountability, justice, law and order, and human rights. Now is the time to prove it. Pakistanis need to know that their lives matter as much as those of others.

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