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How to Trump a Superpower

By Tom Engelhardt

April 17, 2012

Chalk it up to the genuine strangeness of our second Afghan War. Americans, according to the latest polls, are turning against the conflict in [ever greater numbers](#), yet it's remarkable how little — beyond a [few](#) obvious, [sensational events](#) — they know about what's actually going on there in their name.

Take as an example the cost of the war and a startling development of the last four-plus months that has driven it significantly higher. Keep in mind that the Afghan War is being fought by a [fuel-guzzling](#) U.S. military in a landlocked, impoverished South Asian country with almost no resources of any sort. Just about everything it needs or wants — from fuel, ammunition, and weaponry to hamburgers and [pizzas](#) — has to be shipped in by tortuous routes over thousands of exceedingly expensive miles.

Up until last November, [more than 30%](#) of the basic supplies for the war came by ship to the Pakistani port of Karachi and were offloaded onto trucks to begin the long journey to and across the Pakistani border into Afghanistan. Late last November, however, angry Pakistani officials — as Dilip Hiro describes below — slammed that country's border crossings [shut](#) on American and NATO war supplies. Those crossings have yet to reopen and whether they will any time soon, despite [optimistic U.S. press reports](#), remains to be seen.

The result has undoubtedly been a resupply disaster for the American military, but you would never know it from the startling lack of coverage in the mainstream media here. All supplies now have to be flown in at staggering cost or shipped, also at great expense, via the [Northern](#)

[Distribution Network](#) from the Baltic or the Caspian seas through some portion of the old Soviet Union.

Soon after this happened, there were brief reports indicating that the costs of shipping some items had gone up by a [factor of six](#), depending on the route chosen. Back in 2009, it was estimated that a gallon of fuel cost [\\$400](#) or more by the time it reached the U.S. military in Afghanistan, and that was by the cheaper Pakistani route. How much is it now? \$600, \$800, \$2,400?

We don't know, largely because coverage of the Afghan war has been so patchy and evidently no reporter bothered to check for months. Only in the last week have we gotten a Pentagon estimate: a [rise](#) in shipping costs of about [2½ times](#) the Pakistani price. (And even such estimates are buried in wire service stories on other topics.) In other words, for months no reporter considered the border-closing story important enough to make it a feature piece or to follow it seriously.

In an America where financing is increasingly unavailable to [fire departments](#), [police departments](#), [schools](#), and the like, is it really of no significance what money we pour into our wars? Is no one curious about what the Pakistani decision has meant to the American taxpayer?

Think about that as you read the latest piece by Dilip Hiro, expert in South Asia and the Greater Middle East, a [TomDispatch regular](#), and the author of the just-published book [Apocalyptic Realm: Jihadists in South Asia](#). Is it really in this country's interest to get held up by our "friends" repeatedly to continue to fight a disastrous war in a country in which we're now negotiating to keep military trainers, special operations forces, and possibly others a [decade beyond](#) 2014 (another subject barely covered by our media)? Do you really want to be going through a version of this with Pakistan 10 years from now? Is your greatest desire to be supplying American military personnel with gas and hamburgers at earth-shaking prices in the second decade of a no-longer-new century? *Tom*

Taking Uncle Sam for a Ride

How Pakistan makes Washington pay for the Afghan war

by Dilip Hiro

The following ingredients should go a long way to produce a political thriller. Mr. M, a jihadist in an Asian state, has emerged as the mastermind of a terrorist attack in a neighboring country, which killed six Americans. After sifting through a vast cache of intelligence and obtaining a legal clearance, the State Department announces a \$10 million bounty for information leading to his arrest and conviction. Mr. M promptly [appears](#) at a press conference and says, "I am here. America should give that reward money to me."

A State Department spokesperson explains lamely that the reward is meant for incriminating evidence against Mr. M that would stand up in court. The prime minister of M's home state condemns foreign interference in his country's internal affairs. In the midst of this imbroglio, the

United States [decides to release](#) \$1.18 billion in aid to the cash-strapped government of the defiant prime minister to persuade him to reopen supply lines for U.S. and NATO forces bogged down in the hapless neighboring Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

Alarming, this is anything but fiction or a plot for an upcoming international sitcom. It is a brief summary of the latest development in the fraught relations between the United States and Pakistan, two countries locked into an uneasy embrace since September 12, 2001.

Mr. M. is Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, a 62-year-old former academic with a tapering, hennaed beard, and the founder of the Lashkar-e Taiba (the Army of the Pure, or LeT), widely linked to several outrageously audacious terrorist attacks in India. The LeT was formed in 1987 as the military wing of the Jammāt-ud Dawa religious organization (Society of the Islamic Call, or JuD) at the instigation of the Pakistani army's formidable intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). The JuD owes its existence to the efforts of Saeed, who founded it in 1985 following his return to his native Lahore after two years of advanced Islamic studies in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, under the guidance of that country's Grand Mufti, Shaikh Abdul Aziz bin Baz.

On its formation, the LeT joined the seven-year-old anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan, an armed insurgency directed and supervised by the ISI with funds and arms supplied by the CIA and the Saudis. Once the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, the Army of the Pure turned its attention to a recently launched anti-Indian *jihad* in Indian-administered Kashmir and beyond. The terrorist attacks attributed to it range from the devastating multiple assaults in Mumbai in November 2008, which resulted in 166 deaths, including those six Americans, to a foiled attack on the Indian Parliament in New Delhi in December 2001, and a [successful](#) January 2010 attack on the airport in Kashmir's capital Srinagar.

In January 2002, in the wake of Washington's launching of the Global War on Terror, Pakistan formally banned the LeT, but in reality did little to curb its violent cross-border activities. Saeed remains its final authority. In a confession, offered as part of a plea bargain after his arrest in October 2009 in Chicago, David Coleman Headley, a Pakistani-American operative of LeT involved in planning the Mumbai carnage, [said](#): "Hafiz Saeed had full knowledge of the Mumbai attacks and they were launched only after his approval."

In December 2008, the United Nations Security Council declared the JuD a front organization for the banned LeT. The provincial Punjab government then placed Saeed under house arrest using the Maintenance of Public Order law. But six months later, the Lahore High Court declared his confinement unconstitutional. In August 2009, Interpol issued a Red Corner Notice, essentially an international arrest warrant, against Saeed in response to Indian requests for his extradition. Saeed was again put under house arrest but in October the Lahore High Court quashed all charges against him due to lack of evidence.

It is common knowledge that Pakistani judges, fearing for their lives, generally refrain from convicting high-profile jihadists with political connections. When, in the face of compelling evidence, a judge has no option but to order the sentence enjoined by the law, he must either live under guard afterwards or leave the country. Such was the case with Judge Pervez Ali Shah who tried Mumtaz Qadri, the jihadist bodyguard who murdered Punjab's governor Salman Taseer for

backing an amendment to the indiscriminately applied blasphemy law. Soon after sentencing Qadri to capital punishment last October, Shah received several death threats and was [forced into](#) self-exile.

Aware of the failures of the Pakistani authorities to convict Saeed, U.S. agencies seemed to have checked and cross-checked the authenticity of the evidence they had collected on him before the State Department announced, on April 2, its reward for his arrest. This was nothing less than an implied declaration of Washington's lack of confidence in the executive and judicial organs of Pakistan.

Little wonder that Pakistani Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani took umbrage, describing the U.S. bounty as blatant interference in his country's domestic affairs. Actually, this is nothing new. It is an open secret that, in the ongoing tussle between Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari and his *bête noire*, army chief of staff General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, the Obama administration has always backed the civilian head of state. That, in turn, has been a significant factor in Gilani's stay in office since March 2008, longer than any other prime minister in Pakistan's history.

How to Trump a Superpower

Given such strong cards, diplomatic and legal, why then did the Obama administration commit itself to releasing more than \$1 billion to a government that has challenged its attempt to bring to justice an alleged mastermind of cross-border terrorism?

The answer lies in what happened at two Pakistani border posts 1.5 miles from the Afghan frontier in the early hours of November 26, 2011. NATO fighter aircraft and helicopters based in Afghanistan carried out a two-hour-long raid on these posts, killing 24 soldiers. Enraged, Pakistan's government shut the two border crossings through which the U.S. and NATO had until then sent a significant portion of their war supplies into Afghanistan. Its officials also forced the U.S. to [vacate](#) Shamsi air base, which was being used by the CIA as a staging area for its drone air war in Pakistan's tribal areas along the Afghan border. The drone strikes are exceedingly unpopular – one poll found [97%](#) of respondents viewed them negatively — and they are vehemently condemned by a large section of the Pakistani public and its politicians.

Furthermore, the government ordered a comprehensive review of all programs, activities, and cooperation arrangements with the U.S. and NATO. It also instructed the country's two-tier parliament to conduct a thorough review of Islamabad's relations with Washington. Having taken the moral high ground, the Pakistani government pressed its demands on the Obama administration.

An appointed Parliamentary Committee on National Security (PCNS) then deliberately moved at a snail's pace to perform the task on hand, while the Pentagon explored alternative ways of ferrying goods into Afghanistan via other countries to sustain its war there. By contrast, a vociferous campaign against the reopening of the Pakistani supply lines led by the Difa-e Pakistan Council (Defense of Pakistan), representing 40 religious and political groups, headed by Hafiz Saeed, took off. Its leaders have addressed huge rallies in major Pakistani cities. It was

quick to condemn Washington's bounty on Saeed, describing it as "a nefarious attempt" to undermine the Council's drive to protect the country's sovereignty.

Meanwhile, the loss of the daily traffic of 500 trucks' worth of food, fuel, and weapons from the Pakistani port of Karachi through the Torkham and Chaman border crossings into Afghanistan, though little publicized in U.S. media, has undermined the fighting capability of U.S. and NATO forces.

"If we can't negotiate or successfully renegotiate the reopening of ground lines of communication with Pakistan, we have to default and rely on India and the Northern Distribution Network (NDN)," [said](#) a worried Lieutenant General Frank Panter to the Readiness Subcommittee of the Armed Services Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives on March 30. "Both are expensive propositions and it increases the deployment or redeployment."

The main part of the NDN is a 3,220-mile rail network for transporting supplies between the Latvian port of Riga and the Uzbek town of Termez (connected by a bridge over the Oxus River to the Afghan settlement of Hairatan). According to the Pentagon, it [costs](#) nearly \$17,000 per container to go through the NDN compared to \$7,000 through the Pakistani border crossings.

Moreover, U.S. and NATO are allowed to transport only "non-lethal goods" through the NDN.

Other military officials have warned that the failure to reopen the Pakistani routes could [even delay](#) the schedule for withdrawing American "combat troops" from Afghanistan by 2014. That would be bad news for the Obama White House with the latest [Washington Post/NBC News poll](#) showing that, for the first time, even a majority of Republicans believe the Afghan War "has not been worth fighting." A [CBS News/New York Times](#) survey indicated that support for the war was at a record low of 23%, with 69% of respondents saying that now was the time to withdraw troops.

In the Pakistani capital, Islamabad, the PCNS finally published a list of preconditions that the U.S. must meet for the reopening of supply lines. These included an unqualified apology for the air strikes last November, an end to drone attacks, no more "hot pursuit" by U.S. or NATO troops inside Pakistan, and the taxing of supplies shipped through Pakistan. Much to the discomfiture of the Obama administration, a joint session of the National Assembly and the Senate called to debate the PCNS report took more than two weeks to reach a conclusion.

On April 12, the Parliament finally unanimously approved the demands and [added](#) that no foreign arms and ammunition should be transported through Pakistan. The Obama administration is spinning this development not as an ultimatum but as a document for launching talks between the two governments.

Even so, it has strengthened Prime Minister Gilani's hand as never before. Furthermore, he has to take into account the popular support the Saeed-led Difa-e Pakistan Council is building for keeping the Pakistani border crossings permanently closed to NATO traffic. Thus, Saeed, a jihadist with a U.S. bounty on his head, has emerged as an important factor in the complex Islamabad-Washington relationship.

Squeezing Washington: The Pattern

There is, in fact, nothing new in the way Islamabad has been squeezing Washington lately. It has a long record of getting the better of U.S. officials by identifying areas of American weakness and exploiting them successfully to further its agenda.

When the Soviet bloc posed a serious challenge to the U.S., the Pakistanis obtained what they wanted from Washington by being even more anti-Soviet than America. Afghanistan in the 1980s is the classic example. Following the Soviet military intervention there in December 1979, the Pakistani dictator General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq volunteered to join Washington's Cold War against the Kremlin — but strictly on his terms. He wanted sole control over the billions of dollars in cash and arms to be supplied by the U.S. and its ally Saudi Arabia to the Afghan Mujahedin (holy warriors) to expel the Soviets from Afghanistan. He got it.

That enabled his commanders to channel a third of the new weapons to their own arsenals for future battle against their archenemy, India. Another third were sold to private arms dealers on profitable terms. When pilfered U.S. weapons began appearing in arms bazaars of the Afghan-Pakistan border towns (as has [happened again](#) in recent years), the Pentagon decided to dispatch an audit team to Pakistan. On the eve of its arrival in April 1988, the Ojhiri arms depot complex, containing 10,000 tons of munitions, mysteriously went up in flames, with rockets, missiles, and artillery shells raining down on Islamabad, killing more than 100 people.

By playing on Ronald Reagan's view of the Soviet Union as "the Evil Empire," Zia ul-Haq also ensured that the American president would turn a blind eye on Pakistan's frantic, clandestine efforts to build an atom bomb. Even when the CIA, the National Security Agency, and the State Department determined that a nuclear weapon assembled by Pakistan had been tested at Lop Nor in China in early 1984, Reagan continued to certify to Congress that Islamabad was not pursuing a nuclear weapons program in order to abide by a law which prohibited U.S. aid to a country doing so.

Today, there are an estimated 120 nuclear bombs in the arsenal of a nation that has more Islamist jihadists per million people than any other country in the world. From October 2007 to October 2009, there were [at least four attacks](#) by extremists on Pakistani army bases known to be storing nuclear weapons.

In the post-9/11 years, Pakistan's ruler General Pervez Musharraf managed to repeat the process in the context of a new Afghan war. He promptly joined President George W. Bush in his Global War on Terror, and then went on to distinguish between "bad terrorists" with a global agenda (al-Qaeda), and "good terrorists" with a pro-Pakistani agenda (the Afghan Taliban). Musharraf's ISI then proceeded to protect and foster the Afghan Taliban, while periodically handing over al-Qaeda militants to Washington. In this way, Musharraf played on Bush's soft spot — his intense loathing of al-Qaeda — and exploited it to further Pakistan's regional agenda.

Emulating the policies of Zia ul-Haq and Musharraf, the post-Musharraf civilian government has found ways of diverting U.S. funds and equipment meant for fighting al-Qaeda and the Taliban to bolster their defenses against India. By inflating the costs of fuel, ammunition, and transport

used by Pakistan's 100,000 troops posted in the Afghan-Pakistan border region, Islamabad received more money from the Pentagon's Coalition Support Fund (CSF) than it spent. It then used the excess to buy weapons suitable for fighting India.

When the *New York Times* [revealed](#) this in December 2007, the Musharraf government dismissed its report as "nonsense." But after resigning as president and moving to London, Musharraf [told](#) Pakistan's Express News television channel in September 2009 that the funds had indeed been spent on weapons for use against India.

Now, the widely expected release of the latest round of funds from the Pentagon's CSF will raise total U.S. military aid to Islamabad since 9/11 to \$14.2 billion, two-and-a-half times the Pakistani military's annual budget.

There is a distinct, if little discussed, downside to being a superpower and acting as the self-appointed global policeman with a multitude of targets. An arrogance feeding on a feeling of invincibility and an obsession with winning every battle blind you to your own impact and even to what might be to your long-term benefit. In this situation, as your planet-wide activities become ever more diverse, frenzied, and even contradictory, you expose yourself to exploitation by lesser powers otherwise seemingly tied to your apron strings.

Pakistan, twice during America's 33-year-long involvement in Afghanistan made a frontline state, is a classic example of that. Current policymakers in Washington should take note: it's a strategy for disaster.