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NATO summit: Obama's Pakistan gamble falls flat

The White House fails to reach a deal on supply routes to Afghanistan. The summit does produce a formal agreement on the withdrawal from Afghanistan.

By David S. Cloud and Kathleen Hennessey

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When the White House sent a last-minute invitation for Asif Ali Zardari to attend the two-day NATO summit, they were taking a highly public gamble. Would sharing the spotlight with President Obama and other global leaders induce the Pakistani president to allow vital supplies to reach alliance troops fighting in Afghanistan?

But long before the summit ended Monday, the answer was clear: No deal.

Zardari's refusal to reopen the supply routes left a diplomatic blot on a summit that NATO sought to cast as the beginning of the end of the conflict in Afghanistan. The Chicago gathering did produce a formal agreement by the alliance to hand over lead responsibility for security to Afghan forces by mid-2013, and pull out nearly all U.S. and other NATO troops by the end of 2014 even if the Taliban-led insurgency remains undiminished.

U.S. officials insist ample fuel and other supplies are being delivered via much longer and more expensive land routes in Russia and other nations north of Afghanistan. But the Pentagon says reopening the land route in Pakistan will be essential to hauling vast stores of military equipment and vehicles out of Afghanistan during the withdrawal.

Obama's irritation at the impasse was clear Monday when he addressed more than 50 world leaders and publicly thanked Russia and Central Asian nations "that continue to provide critical transit" of war supplies into Afghanistan. Zardari sat only a few feet away, but Obama pointedly did not mention Pakistan.

Later at a news conference that closed the two-day summit, Obama did not try to downplay the strains in a relationship that has spiraled from crisis to crisis since U.S. Navy SEALs secretly flew into Pakistan to kill Osama bin Laden last May. Nor did Obama suggest, as his aides had done earlier, that a quick resolution was likely.

"I don't want to paper over real challenges there," Obama said. "There's no doubt that there have been tensions between [the NATO military coalition] and Pakistan, the United States and Pakistan over the last several months."

Pakistan closed the main NATO supply route after U.S. airstrikes hit two border posts Nov. 26 and killed 24 Pakistani soldiers. Islamabad has demanded an unconditional apology, and more than \$5,000 per truck, up from about \$250 in the past, to let supplies flow again. The Obama administration has refused to apologize, saying both sides committed mistakes, and it says the new truck toll is far too expensive.

The White House was careful not to let Zardari appear completely snubbed Monday, worried that could worsen tensions. Obama had ruled out a formal meeting with Zardari when it was clear no deal was forthcoming, but aides ensured that the Pakistani leader managed to bump into Obama twice Monday, once for a brief one-on-one chat and later with Afghan President Hamid Karzai. The White House quickly told the media of the encounter and tweeted a photo of the three leaders in conversation.

Obama indicated that the discussion was far from substantive, however, describing it as "very brief as we were walking into the summit."

Obama also offered a glimpse of how his thinking has evolved on the use of military force during his three years in office, reflecting on an issue that officials have said increasingly has been on his mind: the tensions that develop when U.S. troops are deployed in distant wars for years on end.

"Frankly, the large footprint that we have in Afghanistan over time can be counterproductive," Obama said. "We've been there 10 years. And I think, you know, no matter how much good we're doing and how outstanding our troops and our civilians and diplomats are doing on the ground, 10 years in a country that's very different, that's a strain. Not only on our folks, but also on that country."

Obama dismissed the notion that the U.S. may be planning for a "premature withdrawal" in Afghanistan, but he also committed to the 2014 timetable regardless of whether the Taliban-led insurgency is defeated. Signaling the shrunken ambitions for the mission, Obama said sometimes you just have to pick a time and leave.

"I don't think that there's ever going to be an optimal point where we say: 'This is all done. This is perfect. This is just the way we wanted it. And now we can wrap up all our equipment and go home,' " he said. "There's a process. And it's sometimes a messy process. Just as it was in Iraq."

Obama indicated that he was so wary of major troop commitments that he had applied clear limits for U.S. special operations and other military units battling groups affiliated with Al Qaeda in Yemen, Somalia and other places. The goal, Obama said, is to "stay focused on the counter-terrorism issue, to not overextend ourselves."

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization announced last week that it had invited Zardari to the long-planned summit. U.S. officials said they had hoped a meeting with Obama might provide an incentive for a deal on resuming supply shipments. When that strategy did not work, they tried to raise the pressure through what appeared to be a series of carefully calibrated slights.

"The invitation was an inducement to get them back into the international fold," said a senior U.S. official, speaking anonymously because of the sensitive issues. "But the Pakistanis couldn't get their own act together" in time for the summit. "The main issue, it seems, is money."

Pakistan's ambassador to the United States, Sherry Rehman, sought to downplay the dispute during an evening news conference at Chicago's Ritz Carlton Hotel.

"We are seeking to narrow differences," she said, adding, "I don't think there is a haggle going on with the price."

Farhatullah Babar, a spokesman for Zardari, said negotiations to reopen the supply route were ongoing, but "no timeline can be given."

Earlier, the Pentagon had announced that Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta had "expressed his deep appreciation" to officials from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan at a meeting Monday. NATO has trucked more than half its nonlethal supplies through those countries since the Pakistani route closed, and flown the rest in on cargo planes.

Some U.S. officials said the Obama administration's approach could backfire by humiliating Zardari, leaving him politically weaker and even less able to overcome the intense anti-U.S. feeling in Pakistan over the attack on the border posts, years of lethal CIA drone attacks on Pakistani territory and other divisive issues.

Without access to Pakistan, equipment leaving Afghanistan would have to go by cargo plane and by the northern routes, which stretch thousands of miles through Russia and Central Asia to ports on the Baltic Sea or through Georgia to the Black Sea. Many of the countries refuse to allow the U.S. to ship ammunition and other lethal equipment through their territory, forcing those supplies to go by air.

The U.S. military and NATO allies shipped about 260,000 tons of nonlethal supplies into Afghanistan last year. About 40% went through Pakistan, although that had dropped to about 30% by the fall.

Before the summit adjourned, officials said additional countries had promised in closed-door discussions to provide money for Afghanistan's army and police after 2014. The Obama administration has sought to raise about \$1.3 billion in annual contributions from allies as part of a plan to provide \$4.1 billion to Afghanistan's security forces after foreign troops withdraw.

The U.S. has promised \$2.4 billion and Afghanistan has offered \$500 million. British Prime Minister David Cameron said Australia, Denmark, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Estonia and others had made pledges Monday that added "almost" \$1 billion. He said more pledges were expected soon.