



Cut off at the Khyber Pass

The supply routes here have been the Achilles' heel of empires through history — now the U.S. military is finding out why.

Shahan Mufti

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PESHAWAR, Pakistan — Shakir Afridi's business is a mess these days — and that spells very bad news for America's war in Afghanistan.

Afridi is a Pakistani "transporter" and also the spokesperson for the Pakistani union of transporters — a loosely affiliated, tribal and often-undocumented group of truck owners who move trade goods inside Pakistan and across its land borders into Afghanistan. Many of these trucks supply the U.S. military inside Afghanistan.

Afridi was woken up with the news that 12 of his trucks coming in from Afghanistan were torched in the early hours of the morning on Wednesday. They stood stranded after a bridge was blown up Tuesday along the key transport route leading to the Khyber Pass, the major border crossing between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Afridi, who belongs to one of Pakistan's two major Pashtun trucking families, said he commands a fleet of 3,500 trucks and employs nearly 15,000 men who operate and maintain the vehicles. These days, 90 percent of his resources are dedicated to one contract: transporting NATO supplies from the Arabian Sea port city of Karachi 700 miles across Pakistan's western border into Afghanistan.

The supply route through the Khyber Pass is critical for U.S. forces — three-quarters of total NATO supplies to Afghanistan come through it — and the disruptions could severely undercut the U.S. military's plan for a build-up of troops in Afghanistan.

(At a briefing in Washington, retired Australian Lt. Col. David Kilcullen, a counter-terrorism adviser to Gen. David Petraeus, said, "The supply route is critical. It has been shut down about six times in the last year. That is a major disruption.")

Last month, Washington announced a plan to bring supplies through Central Asia, but the announcement this week that Kyrgyzstan would close a strategic U.S. air base raises questions about that plan.

Even as U.S. forces suffer from the Taliban's ability to shut down supply lines, Afridi said his business had been going well since the U.S. moved troops into Afghanistan in 2001. But more recently it has been falling apart.

"When we first started transporting NATO's stuff the major worry was sometimes getting attacked inside Afghanistan," Afridi told me in a bare-walled, sparsely furnished office on the outskirts of the city of Peshawar near the border with the tribal areas. "But now we're sweating just to make it to the border."

Transporters like Afridi have made a business from supplying along a route that has seen more armies pass through — and suffer defeat — than any other place on earth.

Alexander the Great suffered an arrow to his leg here and retreated with his shrinking army. After an attempt at control, the Moguls wrote the region off as unmanageable. In the 19th century, British invaders had to back their way out and negotiate a buffer zone after decades of war. The Soviets invaded in 1979 and for years were plagued by cut off supply routes. Eventually their empire fell apart after its campaign here — albeit with a little of help from covert funding from the U.S. to the Afghan resistance fighters known as Mujahideen.

This is land that throughout history has been a graveyard for empires.

And the attacks on trucks inside Pakistan to disrupt the NATO supply line may prove to be the latest example of that history.

The attacks have increased in the past six months as U.S. drones have started regularly attacking Pakistan's west. And while it's the militants who attack convoys and suspend transport through the Khyber Pass, the Pakistani government has also seen cause to close this route to NATO on a few occasions.

In September, the Pakistani government suspended the supply route to NATO after American ground troops crossed into Pakistani tribal areas for the first time and killed 20 villagers. In December, two weeks after an American drone struck inside Pakistani settled territory for the first time, nearly 250 NATO trucks were burned by militants in a rampage spread over two nights.

And security appears to be worsening along the supply line just as the U.S. prepares to send up to an additional 32,000 troops to Afghanistan this month.

Since the bridge explosion on Wednesday, the terminals used by private international cargo companies such as APL and Maersk that have contracts to transport most of NATO's supplies through Pakistan are spilling over with these large 22-wheelers, loaded with NATO military equipment destined for the troops in Afghanistan.

An estimated 300 trucks pass through Pakistan to Afghanistan every day. The U.S. Embassy said there are no weapons or ammunition that move through Pakistan, but everything from technical equipment, food, clothing and blankets comes through Pakistan and keeps NATO soldiers warm and fed.

For anti-NATO forces, stopping these supplies "is the most effective way of weakening the NATO army in Afghanistan," said Talat Masood, a retired general in Pakistan's army.

Almost two decades after the U.S. expelled the Soviet army from Afghanistan, it's the Americans who are approaching Russia for help getting in. Petraeus announced last month that the U.S. had reached agreements to open "additional logistical routes into Afghanistan" through Russia and Afghanistan's central Asian neighbors to the north.

Rahimullah Yusufzai, an expert on Afghanistan and the tribal region in Peshawar says this claim means little. "They [NATO] can cut that down to maybe 60 percent?," he said of the supplies moving through Pakistan. "That still doesn't solve anything."

"They think central Asia is safe?" Shakir Afridi scoffed at Petraeus' suggestion. "My great grandfather has been in the business, and I know," he raised a finger, "there is no other way to supply Afghanistan without Pakistan."

By some estimates the cost of shipping will triple for NATO for supplies moved through central Asia.

Things are not looking up for the United States in central Asia, regardless. The president of Kyrgyzstan announced in a televised address that the country had decide on "ending the term for the American base on the territory of Kyrgyzstan." According to press reports ISAF is now turning to Afghanistan's northern neighbor Uzbekistan, which expelled Americans from military bases in 2005.

Pakistan, says Yusufzai in Peshawar "is still the lifeline for NATO." The U.S., he says, "simply can't afford to have things go much more wrong here."