



## *Logistical Vulnerabilities and the Afghanistan War*

### **The Pakistan Fuel Connection**

By ROBERT BRYCE

When it comes to America's relationship with Pakistan, remember one thing: it's all about the fuel.

The Bush Administration's muted reaction to the new dictatorial rule of Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf can be traced to the American military's logistics problems in Afghanistan. Without the cooperation of Musharraf's government, the 24,000 U.S. troops who are stationed in Afghanistan would likely run out of fuel within a matter of days.

The U.S. military is now burning about 575,000 gallons of fuel per day in Afghanistan. And about 80 percent of that fuel is coming from refineries in Pakistan. Without the support of Musharraf and the Pakistani military, U.S. forces in Afghanistan would have only one fuel supply, and it would be coming via a precarious logistics line that extends more than 1,000 miles from northern Afghanistan all the way to refineries in Baku, Azerbaijan and Turkmenbashi, Turkmenistan.

The U.S. military's fuel vulnerabilities in Afghanistan were made clear last year during a conference sponsored by the Defense Energy Support Center, the agency that purchases and manages the delivery of fuel for the Defense Department. During a briefing on the fuel operations in Pakistan and Afghanistan, Army Colonel Dan Jennings, who was overseeing fuel delivery for Afghanistan and southern Iraq, told a group of about 75 people that "Fuel support for Afghanistan operations is what keeps me up at night."

Standing in front of a Power Point map of Afghanistan, Jennings said the agency was hauling hundreds of thousands of gallons of jet fuel per day to America's main bases in Afghanistan. Some 700 tanker trucks were being used to deliver the fuel and some of the trucks were taking a month or more to make a round trip delivery from their starting points in Pakistan. According to Jennings, on some occasions, the U.S. military had as much as 4.7 million gallons of motor fuel in transit between Pakistan and Afghanistan. In addition to the sheer volume of fuel, Jennings and his team were dealing with pilferage, accidents, trucker strikes and cultural barriers. "We've had trucks show up as much as 90 days after they were initially loaded," Jennings said.

Despite the problems, Jennings was relentlessly upbeat particularly about the opportunities in the fuel supply business in Pakistan and Afghanistan. "There will be a military requirement in this area for a long time to come," he declared. "Things are changing in this region. This is the land of opportunity."

Perhaps, but Jennings was also careful to point out that the logistics line that carries fuel from Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan into Afghanistan is somewhat precarious. The fuel from the refinery in Baku is loaded on rail cars, put on barges that then traverse the Caspian Sea. When they land in Turkmenistan, they follow a circuitous rail route through Uzbekistan before they arrive at the Afghan border where the fuel is then transferred to trucks.

The long supply lines to the Caspian Sea underscore the importance of the Pakistani fuel. By mid-2006, the total fuel storage capacity for forces operating out of the air bases at Kabul

and Bagram was less than 3 million gallons. Although a contractor working for the U.S. military is now building an additional 3 million gallons of storage capacity at Bagram Air Base, if the flow of fuel from Pakistan is completely cut off, American forces could be running on fumes within a fortnight.

Greg Wilcox, a retired Army officer who has written extensively on military tactics and operations, says that if the fuel from Pakistan gets cut off, the U.S. would have to try flying fuel into its bases in Afghanistan and that, he believes, would be "mission impossible." Wilcox told me that when it comes to the Pakistan, "We don't have any choice. We got kicked out of Uzbekistan so we don't have any bases there. We can't survive in that region without Musharraf. We are tied to him whether we like it or not."

In short, don't expect any tough rhetoric from the Bush administration when it comes to Pakistan. Thousands of American lives depend on the continued flow of fuel from that country

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