

May 19, 2011

THIN ICE

Rory Crump

President Obama doesn't really "know" Pakistan well enough to grant them a courtesy call before launching a unilateral strike in their own backyard. Although never officially spiking the ball on Asif Ali Zardari's head, Obama intimated to 60 Minutes he refused to compromise our best shot at Bin Laden by spilling the beans to the Pakistani government.

If we can't give Pakistan fair warning the FBI's most vilified fugitive is about to be erased by the world's greatest warriors – in their military town – then how can we trust them with \$3 billion of our tax dollars. Most of that money is tagged for terrorism. And if Bin Laden lounged around his comfortable digs in Abbottabad for too many years shielded from justice, then where is this money going?

With Pakistan's parliament and Team USA now engaged in a ceremonial hockey fight – with John Kerry playing our goon – let's reconsider whether Pakistan's ice is too weak to skate on.

Foreign aid packages are a curious mix of economic, social, humanitarian, and military variables. They represent a sliver of our budget, and end up in needy shelters like China and Russia. We give and the world hates us back – a paradox the government lives with in the name of foreign policy.

The U.S. has sent Pakistan over \$20 billion since 9/11 – enough time to get to "know" them. In theory, the money glues together a fragile government while hiding Pakistan's nuclear arsenal from bloodthirsty radicals. More telling, it's an expensive toll for funneling supplies to our troops in Afghanistan. The aid also pays for the CIA's hunting lease on fertile Al Qaeda grounds.

Even drawing a distinct line between military aid and goodwill pledges muddles

our interests. We sent Pakistan \$190 million for flood victims when administration axed federal disaster assistance for Texas after wildfires destroyed more than 2.2 million acres and 400 homes.

Pakistan's situation gets murkier when patriotic lobbyists rush to their defense. Locke Lord, led by former Jimmy Carter trustee Mark Siegel, is busy painting a romantic picture of Pakistan to Capitol Hill. He claims the public has it all wrong and Asif Ali Zardari's civilian government never got the memos. Pakistan is Locke Lord's biggest client.

Following the money in Pakistan is a fool's errand. Their president has been imprisoned twice and exiled for various forms of corruption. The former president, Pervez Musharraf, ditched his own country for swinging London. And the ISI, Pakistan's notorious spy branch, still sleeps with the terrorist enemy. How secure do Pakistani citizens feel? Abbottabad's finest slept through the thunder and lightning of the Seal invasion. From 2006 - 2008, Pakistan went from being "the next Asian Tiger" to S&P junk status, finally begging the IMF to bail them out of a debt crisis. Even the U.S. didn't want a part of that deal. Warren Buffett wouldn't consider Pakistan a business run on sound fundamentals. And you don't have to be Jimmy Buffett to realize this whole thing is screwy.

Pakistan's follies are only equaled by their performance. The country still stinks of terrorism, as cowboy tribal regions are still flush with Taliban presence and violence. Convoys packing NATO supplies over the border to Afghanistan are either raided or delayed on a regular basis. The entire world including the locals considers the word "Pakistan" synonymous with "corruption."

Despite their shady reputation and bankrupt behavior, Pakistan remains defiant, claiming Bin Laden fell through the cracks due to insufficient funds. "The United States spent much more money in Iraq than it did in Afghanistan," Husain Haqqani, Pakistan's U.S. ambassador, said in a television interview. "And then it spent much more in Afghanistan than it did in Pakistan. So were there cracks through which things fell through? Absolutely."

Unfortunately, this is not a case of gambler's fallacy – just another few billion and we'll hit the Bin Laden jackpot. It cuts much deeper. This twisted logic runs rampant through our laundry list of foreign aid recipients.

If money can't buy us love, gratitude, or cooperation, then does it – at a bare

minimum - influence the decision making of the 149 countries on the U.S. payroll? Beginning in 2000, U.N. members receiving U.S. aid have voted against the United States in the U.N. General Assembly almost 95% of the time. Subprime mortgages deliver higher yields.

Seal Team 6 took the door prize and vanished. And if hunting terrorists is now a mature business with an ugly ROI, maybe we should vanish, too. Expand alternative supply routes to Afghanistan. Play hardball with the Pakistani G-Men. Maybe keep the money, or further invest in an emerging market like Brazil. They have great surf, Carnival, and wonderful dancers.

How many evildoers have Pakistan unknowingly or unwillingly left on the table? Finding out from Bin Laden's collection of wives, hard drives, and VHS tapes will be disturbing.

Hillary Clinton insists we Americans - raised on Sizzler and Captain Kangaroo - don't understand the nuances of our relationship with Pakistan. It's complicated. This intelligence gaffe was an oversight and they are worth it.

It's time for Pakistan to open the kimono and tell us, without hedging, who is running the show and guarding the nukes. Send a message to other questionable regimes taking and not giving. What do you think Mr. President? He can't say, he doesn't really "know" them.