

Afghanistan: Funding Both Sides

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Delegates in Shangra-La pledge eternal war in Afghanistan, as the US creates new and very dangerous allies there

War junkies popped their champagne corks on 7 June to celebrate the 104th month of US military engagement in Afghanistan, America's longest war in history (Vietnam lasted 103 months). Presumably they toasted the five NATO soldiers killed on 6 June. Troop deaths have skyrocketed this year and NATO forces are continuing to "mow the grass", killing dozens of "Taliban" every day, and lots of civilians, though no one seems to know just how many of each or how to tell the difference. In any case, what's the point of questioning numbers provided by those doing the killing?

Washington's main ally looked like it was about to change its tune with the new Conservative-Liberal Democratic coalition in Britain. After early hints that the British might follow the Dutch and Canadians and decamp from the failed war next year, Conservative Defence Secretary Liam Fox has now backtracked. At the appropriately named Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore last week he asked himself, "Should we be there? And my answer was, unequivocally, still yes."

The "still" speaks volumes. His colleague US Defence Secretary Robert Gates, also attending the Dialogue, clearly had given him a dressing down about the lack of enthusiasm Fox showed during his visit to Afghanistan two weeks ago. Fox had asked himself then what his troops were doing in a "broken 13th-century country", and he and Foreign Secretary Hague answered — without consulting with Gates — that they should [come home as soon as possible](#). This about-face caused not even a ripple in the Western media. Russian Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov mocked his fellow Shangri-La-ers by noting that soon NATO will beat the Soviet record there of [ten years](#).

Meanwhile in Kabul, 1,600 delegates came to President Hamid Karzai's loya jirga and endorsed his plan to seek peace with the Taliban, including an amnesty and job incentives to induce Taliban fighters to give up arms. Unfazed, Taliban militants greeted the jirga by launching three rockets at the gathering though no attendees were reported killed. The delegates were far outnumbered by the 12,000 security personnel. The Taliban issued a statement saying that the jirga did not represent the Afghan people and was aimed at securing the interest of foreigners. Even Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's [Hizb-i-Islami](#) called the conference a "useless exercise".

The only outcome was that Karzai agreed to a review of all Taliban suspects being held in the country's prisons and the release of any militant arrested on doubtful evidence. Oh, and he fired Interior Minister Hanif Atmar and General Director for National Security Amrullah Saleh for not preventing an attack on the jirga. Interestingly, both men were US

favourites, and had earned a reputation for being reformists. Saleh — I'm not making this up — has been a CIA agent since the 1990s.

NATO, US and Afghan forces are proceeding with their biggest offensive yet in [Kandahar](#). Foreign troop numbers will peak at 150,000 by August and by July 2011 will gradually be withdrawn according to US President Barack Obama's plan. But whether Obama realises it or not, US generals are not planning to leave — ever — and America's longest war is poised to become America's first "everlasting war" in the words of Congressman Michael Honda.

No better evidence of this are Army building plans; in particular, the \$100 million expansion of US Special Operations headquarters in Mazar-e-Sharif in northern Afghanistan, and the 700 bases the US has built in the country. Construction on the new HQs is supposed to take a year, just when the US is supposedly to begin drawing down its forces in Afghanistan.

The latest innovations in US policy in Afghanistan to improve security are both foolish and dangerous. The lesser is the new 5,000 Afghan National Civil Order Police (ANCOP), the "cream" of the 104,000 member police force the West is paying for (an ancop gets more than double the regular cop's \$165 per month). It earned a resounding D- in [Marja](#), where more than 300 ancops were deployed following the NATO surge, and were accused in a US report of "drug use, petty corruption and a lack of commitment" including abandoning or setting up illegal checkpoints to shake down motorists. "They refused to work at night, they refused to go out on patrols and refused to stand post more than three hours," complained Staff Sergeant Joseph Wright.

The Yanks and their quislings almost started a war between themselves when US officials forced the Afghans to submit to urinalysis to weed out the dope smokers. Most of the ancops are Tajik who don't speak Pashtun, and, dressed up and paid by the invaders, are as much the enemy to the Marja residents as the Americans. No wonder the ancops don't want to patrol or work at night.

This attempt to build a western-style police force from recruits who have no use for the invaders except as milkcows pales beside the more "successful" US strategy to support private armies and warlords. They despise the Karzai government and will no doubt spawn the country's future brutal military dictator who will, as a local leader at arms length from the invader, finally bring the country to heel. He may well be one Matiullah Khan, an illiterate former highway patrol commander, now the head of a private army that guards NATO supply convoys and fights Taliban insurgents alongside American Special Forces. He effectively controls the local government in Oruzgan Province, and has local officials "removed" if they aren't up to scratch. "What should we do?" he asked the New York Times haughtily. "The officials are cowards and thieves."

Matiullahs are sprouting up "like grass", fertilised by huge cash payments from the Americans, loose cannons undermining the local governments which NATO is supposedly trying to strengthen, spreading violence and chaos when thwarted. Matiullah now completely controls the US supply route, opening the highway from Kandahar one day a week, charging \$1200 per truck and "earning" (read: extorting) \$2.5 million a month for his ragtag band of mercenaries. He even charges simple Afghans a toll for use of the public road. The Ministry of the Interior pays for 600 of his 1,500 fighters, despite the fact that the force is not under the government's control. "Matiullah is not part of the government, he is stronger than the government, and he can do anything he wants," said Essa, a tribal elder in

Tirin Kot.

Matiullah's operation is one of at least 23 private security companies working in the Kandahar area alone, which Karzai's brother Ahmed, Kandahar's official warlord, is now bringing together under his control. These mercenaries kill people who refuse to use their "security services" and one Ruhullah has even destroyed entire villages. They bribe the Taliban to allow safe passage, enlist them to do their dirty work, and, like Ahmed Karzai himself, are involved in the opium trade.

In a dispute over territory and cash, Karzai's cousin Rashid Popal, head of another such private army/ security company, Watan Risk Management and Compass Security, was caught red-handed colluding with Taliban, allowing them to attack a convoy headed for Kabul in which a Afghan driver and a soldier were killed and their truck burned. Within two weeks, and with more than 1,000 trucks backed up, Karzai allowed his dear cousin to resume his "safeguarding".

"We're funding both sides of the war," a NATO official in Kabul said. Matiullah's US paymaster General Carter said he fears that the legions of unregulated Afghan security companies have a financial interest in prolonging chaos. Well, yes. And is the Pope Catholic?

What seems to be the real US policy in the [AfPak](#) region is something along the lines of:

- *quell the Taliban in AfPak with Pakistan's help (Pakistan's defence budget will increase 17 per cent next year, funded largely by the US)

- *keep Afghanistan in a state of low-level war that justifies long term NATO presence

- *bring Pakistan and India together enough to create a sense of stability in the region under US hegemony.

Either Obama is a very smooth liar or he is being duped by his military with their new HQs and 700 bases. Maybe he's playing a new kind of "chicken" with them, gambling that they will fail spectacularly due to the creative use of US dollars by both sides in Afghanistan (and Pakistan?), and will have to throw in the towel, letting him proceed to rebuild America without their manic delusions of world conquest. That would make him a devil's advocate at best. Otherwise, he will join Karzai's "cowards and thieves" in the history books.

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