

Karzai and Obama: Biting the Hand That Feeds

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Global Research, April 06, 2010

6 April 2010

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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Lieutenant colonel Brian Christmas (I'm not making this up) recently threatened the village elders in Sistani, a village near Marja, with "the choice between American guns and American resources". Read: turn stoolie. The Afghan president begs to differ.

There can be no doubt that Washington is in the throws of a mental breakdown over what to do about Afghanistan. The very unenthusiastic surge now underway is a disaster on the ground, as NATO, Taliban and civilian [deaths skyrocket in Marja](#) and Kandahar, with Kunduz coming up in the brutal Afghan summer. The staunchly noncombatant Germans are supposed to spearhead the latter operation, but there is a revolution brewing at home after three of them died in a few seconds last week, and nearby their comrades gunned down five Afghan soldiers in a case of "friendly fire". To make matters worse, far worse, America's political hope, President Hamid Karzai, is doing his best to scuttle the occupiers' plans, however altruistic and noble they might be.

A petulant Karzai invited Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad to Kabul 10 March and listened approvingly as America's nemesis gave a fiery anti-American speech, condemning the US drive for control of the Middle East and Central Asia and for promoting terrorism in the region. While Karzai can be commended for the perfectly reasonable initiative — after all Iran is Afghanistan's most powerful neighbour and getting it onside in search of peace is eminently sensible — what prompted this nonetheless bizarre performance was Karzai's anger over being "uninvited" to Washington the previous week. Not that Washington was well within its rights, after Karzai decided that his election commission in future should be composed exclusively of his friends rather than any pesky UN officials.

Another new development is Karzai's sudden love for his former comrades in the Taliban, whom he betrayed in the late 1990s to take up a job as Unicol lobbyist and to parachute in with the US when it invaded Afghanistan in 2001. Apparently on his own initiative, he had recently undertaken negotiations with second-in-command Taliban leader Abdul Ghani Baradar, who the Pakistanis or Americans immediately arrested in February, much to his displeasure. Undaunted, within days of the Iranian visit, Karzai entertained representatives of the Afghan insurgent group Hezb-e Islami led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar who, in 2003, the US State Department honoured as a "Specially Designated Global Terrorist" for his work with Al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

This is a strange peace partner for Karzai considering Hekmatyar tried to assassinate him in 2008. His reputation is far worse than the run-of-the-mill Taliban; even Iran expelled him and his handful of followers in 2002, albeit under US pressure. Karzai's photo-op with Hizb-e Islami hardly constitutes a breakthrough, and most knowledgeable sources have [little hope for negotiations](#) with the real Taliban (as opposed to the megalomaniac Hekmatyar or the soft Taliban defectors now under house arrest in Kabul). Still, Karzai can only be

commended yet again for another perfectly reasonable initiative — the only way to salvage his own corrupt and incompetent regime is to bring in people who have the respect of the Afghans for what they surely see as a selfless struggle to protect Afghan culture from the invader Christmases.

But both his initiatives have infuriated his patrons in Washington, as both very much undermine the *raison d'être* of the occupiers' new surge, which is to kill anyone who dares call himself Taliban and to outlaw any admiration of the Islamic republic to the west.

Karzai has burned just about all his bridges at this point. US Ambassador Karl Eikenberry concluded privately in November that Karzai is “not an adequate strategic partner. ... His circle assume we covet their territory for a never-ending ‘war on terror’ and for military bases to use against surrounding powers.” Alas Mr Karzai, you can lead a horse like Karl to water, but you can't make him drink.

Since then things have gone from bad to worse. In January, Karzai reiterated this “theory”, complained the US opposes striking a peace deal with the Taliban, and that he is the only one who can stand up to the goddam Yankees. Again, perfectly sound arguments, though hardly music to his sponsors' ears. His silence since the surge in Marja began — except to criticise civilian deaths — is just as deafening as his loud rhetoric.

US pundits such as Thomas Friedman angrily attack him: “That is what we're getting for risking thousands of US soldiers and having spent \$200 billion already.” By ignoring the fraudulent presidential election last year and the widespread corruption, Friedman says Obama is getting what he asks for. “If Karzai behaves like this when he needs us, when we're there fighting for him, how is he going to treat our interests when we're gone?” he wails. “He is going to break our hearts.”

In a frantic attempt to bring Karzai to heel, United States President Barack Obama made an unannounced visit to Afghanistan — his first as president — a few days after his Iranian colleague's coup. He attempted to smooth over the spat with Karzai about the election commission and of course give succour to the troops, though it's unlikely that either goal was achieved. As Obama flew home, the Afghan president threw another dagger at Obama's back. Defending the presidential elections last year, he said, “There is no doubt that the fraud was very widespread, but this fraud was not committed by Afghans, it was committed by foreigners.” He pointed his finger at the American Peter Galbraith, deputy UN special representative, who exposed the real fraud and was fired for his pains, and who considered this latest outburst of Karzai an April Fools' Day joke, “underscoring how totally unreliable this guy is as an ally.”

Karzai also made the very obvious and very valid point: if Western forces are seen as invaders and the Afghan government their mercenaries, the insurgency “could become a national resistance.” Hello? Who has been supporting the Taliban for almost a decade? As NATO soldiers “mow the grass”, who are the young men who continue to sacrifice their lives for their country?

The White House called the speech “troubling” and said it was seeking clarification through the State Department, which is diplo-speak for “He's no longer our SOB.” But the State Department is in as much of a quandary as the military and Obama. Karzai must have had second thoughts about his comments and in a 25-minute phone call to Secretary of State

Hillary Clinton last week expressed surprise that his remarks are seen as critical of the US, that he really just meant to criticise Western media. Mrs Clinton soothed her troubled ward, assuring him of America's commitment to Afghanistan and bemoaned she had no control over American news coverage. As relations between the Obama administration and Karzai become more tense, Karzai has increasingly turned to Clinton, a development that can only be interpreted as a naughty boy appealing to a mother figure — hardly something to reassure Obama that he has a tough, unflinching warrior-prince who can prevail against all odds.

But this political snake pit is not all that different than the Iraqi one, where the former (and incumbent?) president Nouri Al-Maliki regularly visited and hosted delegations from Iran, and where America's darling (and incumbent?) former prime minister Ayad Allawi defected from the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein into UK exile, founded the Iraqi National Accord, and in the lead up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq earned his keep providing "intelligence" about weapons of mass destruction to MI6. Allawi has lived half of his life in the UK and his wife and children still live there. He too parachuted in with his patrons, when they began their "Shock and Awe" devastation of Baghdad in 2003, and now is refashioning himself as the grand compromiser, bridging all chasms, no matter how wide, deep and made-in-the-USA.

The big difference with Karzai, of course, is that the US occupiers in Iraq are in control of elections, with no UN or other observers, something that irks Karzai, who is no doubt as suspicious of Allawi's surprising "victory" there as the rest of us, a victory which will conveniently put paid to any more love-ins with the demon Iran.

Though a neutral observer might sympathise with Karzai's initiatives with Iran and the insurgency considering the fix he is in, it is hard to sympathise with his staunch support of his brother Ahmed Wali Karzai, chairman of the Kandahar provincial council, infamous for his involvement in the drug trade, money laundering, racketeering and electoral fraud. He even pays insurgents not to attack his business interests. As the surge reaches Kandahar, its chief landlord is now seizing land he thinks NATO may want to rent. "What's really fuelling the insurgency is groups being disenfranchised, feeling oppressed by the institutions of state and criminal syndicates," said Mark Sedwill, NATO's top civilian official in Afghanistan. But as there is no one left outside his family that Karzai can really trust, Ahmed stays.

An editorial in the New York Times goes as far as to suggest that Karzai is losing his marbles with his latest "rambling speech" full of "delusional criticism", that at times he seemed to be having a conversation with himself, saying that he needed to let go of his anger over the election, but was unable: "We have a knot in our heart; our dignity and bravery has been damaged and stepped on." Karzai apparently thinks "that American lives are being sacrificed simply to keep him in power. It's hard to think of a better way to doom Afghanistan's future, as well as his own."

Fighting words, those. Has Karzai read his Vietnam history and the fate of nationalist premier Ngo Dinh Diem, who was murdered in a coup sponsored by the CIA in 1963? Closer to his heart — and neck and other appendages — is the [gruesome fate of his predecessor Mohammad Najibullah](#). By openly criticising the occupiers and reaching out to his old friends, like Allawi he is desperately refashioning himself as the grand compromiser, hoping to strike a deal with enough of the Taliban to bring the insurgency under control. No matter how much he badmouths his patrons, he still figures it is less likely he will die at their hands than at the hands of the Taliban. Karzai is right to think that "after me the deluge",

that the US has no one else remotely credible to take over. Waiting in the wings is runner-up in last year's presidential election, the mysterious Abdullah Abdullah, a native Tajik from the Northern Alliance, unswerving foe of the Pashtun-majority Taliban, who will incite outright civil war.

Given his D- report card, there are no American officials on Karzai's side anymore and it is hard not to imagine a scenario where his American guards fail to shield him from the next assassination attempt. But he should watch out. It may not be Hekmatyar, the Taliban or the CIA that takes the next shot at him. Ahmed runs armed mercenary groups said to be behind the assassinations of provincial officials such as Sitara Achekzai and Yunus Hosseini. Fratricide is a time-honoured way to seize power.

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