

Kabul's rift with the US widens

By M K Bhadrakumar

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NEW DELHI - The floodgates have opened in the simmering tussle between the international community represented in Afghanistan and the Kabul government headed by President Hamid Karzai. The rift may be reaching a point of no return. There may be no way out for either side unless better sense prevails very soon.

On Tuesday, Karzai utilized the opening of the Afghan parliament's winter session in Kabul to criticize the United States-led coalition for its conduct of the war, its manner of bypassing his government as if it was inconsequential as a source of Afghan authority, its patronage of "warlords", the corruption and waste in its aid programs and its condoning of drug trafficking.

Karzai has good reasons to suspect that the Pentagon is urging that the war cannot be effectively fought as long as he remains at the helm of affairs in Kabul. The Pakistani military also has viewed with suspicion Karzai's close ties with New Delhi as well as his blunt criticism of Pakistan for its covert support and sponsorship of the Taliban.

With Afghan presidential elections due later in the year, Washington might have concluded that Karzai must be stopped from gaining a fresh mandate for another five-year term. At the same time, it suits US interests to create a new power equation in Kabul at the present juncture that would ensure that the new war strategy taking shape by April would be carried out by a solidly united team

involving the coalition and the Afghan government.

Kabul appeals to UN

Significantly, amid the heightened political tensions, Indian Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee paid a hurried visit to Kabul for a few hours on Wednesday evening. Karzai, who has kept close ties with India, visited New Delhi less than 10 days ago.

The factors that prompted the urgent consultations in Kabul between Karzai and Mukherjee remain a matter of speculation. The Indian side has been reticent about Mukherjee's visit, although it cannot escape notice that the intense India-Afghan dialogue at the top political level is taking place against the backdrop of heightened tensions between India and Pakistan. New Delhi, no doubt, will be firmly against any US thinking regarding a "regime change" in Kabul. But the question is what New Delhi can substantially do to prevent it if Washington is bent on one.

Meanwhile, Karzai is making it clear to Washington that he will be no easy walkover. In an extraordinary statement last Wednesday at a specially convened United Nations Security Council debate on the "Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflicts", Afghan ambassador Zahir Tanin expressed "grave concern" over the killings of civilians by the US-led coalition forces in Afghanistan and called for drawing up a "workable framework" to address the issue in "a spirit of open dialogue and cooperation".

Zahir put forth three specific measures in terms of which the US should: one, avoid taking recourse to air strikes as part of its anti-Taliban operations; two, conduct operations only in consultation with the Afghan government; and, three, operate with "cultural sensitivity", that is, "in conducting searches and arrests, avoid heavy handed tactics and operate with respect and minimal force. And where civilian casualties do occur, there should be apologies and accountability".

In real terms, what Kabul has done is raise with the UN its differences with the coalition forces which ostensibly operate under a UN Security Council mandate. Washington and Brussels would have preferred that such sensitive issues were not even brought before the UN Security Council, which may now demand accountability if it chooses.

Prior to the UN Security Council debate, Karzai had reportedly dispatched to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) headquarters in Brussels a draft agreement which stipulates that Kabul should have control over the alliance's deployments in Afghanistan. Apart from detailing the ground rules of operation for NATO troops, the draft agreement demands that any additional deployments of NATO troops and their location should have clearance from Kabul. It specifically forbids the US-led forces from conducting searches of Afghan homes.

Without doubt, Washington is now left with no option but to factor Karzai's opposition to the "surge" strategy. Karzai has demanded in particular that it is on Afghanistan's porous border with Pakistan that any additional troops should be deployed, whereas the US intention is to spread out the forces in the provinces

within Afghanistan which have come under the shadow of the Taliban.

European dissent

Ironically, Karzai's case may have received a boost from an unexpected quarter, thanks to the stance taken by Paris and Berlin. France and Germany have publicly broken ranks with the US's so-called "surge" strategy in Afghanistan. They have carefully chosen the week of Barrack Obama's inauguration as US president to put their cards on the table. It is becoming all but clear that any call by Obama for an increase in NATO troop levels will largely fall on deaf ears in the major European capitals unless he brings to bear his considerable personal charisma on the European leadership.

French Defense Minister Herve Morin said in an interview on Wednesday that France had no intentions of dispatching additional troops to Afghanistan to supplement its 2,600-strong contingent. "As far as France is concerned, we have made the necessary efforts and there is no question, for now, of considering extra reinforcements," he said.

Germany's ruling Christian Democratic Party presented a package of proposals this week to the Bundestag calling for a new "political strategy" to end the conflict in Afghanistan. It calls for constituting a "contact group" on Afghanistan comprising the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus the European Union, Iran and Pakistan, which will be mandated by the UN to work out a settlement.

The German proposal essentially recommends an alternate political route to US military strategy. According to a Deutsche Welle report, German Chancellor Angela Merkel indicated on Tuesday that Obama might draw a blank

if he pressed Berlin to send more troops to Afghanistan. Also, the German proposal on the "contact group" will pose a serious dilemma for the US.

That proposal appears at first glance to be a resuscitation of the move by former French president Jacques Chirac at the NATO summit in Riga, Latvia, in November 2006, which took the US by surprise. Former US secretary of state Condoleezza Rice had a tough time in Riga battling the French idea, which appeared exceptionally reasonable. True, Washington eventually did succeed in emasculating Chirac's dangerous initiative that could have loosened the US's monopoly on conflict resolution in the Hindu Kush and even brought in the Russians as a major player.

Karzai's calculus

All things taken into account, therefore, Karzai has made some smart calculations. First, he knows he is on the right side of Afghan public opinion, which could, in turn, only brighten his prospects at the presidential elections, which he intends to contest. Second, he is leading a highly emotive issue over the Afghan nation's perceived honor and traditions which will resonate in the Pashtun heartlands and help create a nationalistic fervor that he could tap into.

Third, Karzai will be seizing the political initiative from his Afghan detractors by co-opting their agenda as his own. Fourth, Karzai rightly senses that the US's "surge" strategy is bound to intensify the war and will run up huge losses in human lives. The prudent course for him politically is not to identify with the strategy.

Finally, Karzai is, in a manner of speaking, calling for Obama's attention. Like any close observers of the bureaucratic

alignments in Washington, Karzai would be aware that the Pentagon is in many ways attempting to shepherd Obama into its own pre-determined war agenda in Afghanistan.

Ideally, Karzai would have liked if Obama consulted him, though he doesn't expect the affability or the elaborate courtesies and personal charm with which former US president George W Bush invariably received him and ostentatiously heard him out in the White House at all times.

Being a consummate politician who has kept a close tab on the Washington scene over the past seven years, Karzai is well aware of the vested interests that have been spawned in Washington. After all, there is enormous money in the war. And there is a real danger that Obama may not easily get to know the stench in the trenches of the "war on terror" in Afghanistan unless someone cries out loudly and draws his attention to it.

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