

Is Washington Planning Regime Change in Kabul?

by Ramtanu Maitra

The duly-elected Afghan President Hamid Karzai, widely considered to be a “puppet” of the Bush Administration since the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in the Winter of 2001, is now under serious attack from Washington, as well as two of Washington’s best colonial friends in Afghanistan—Britain and the Netherlands. The level of attack indicates that Washington may opt to dump its old friend, blaming Karzai for the insurmountable problems created by the foreign occupation of his country.

Last August, Karzai told journalists, at a joint news conference with Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende of the Netherlands, who was visiting his troops in the Uruzgan province in southern Afghanistan, that he had serious differences with some partners of the U.S.-led coalition in Afghanistan over the conduct of military operations.

“For some time, some circles of the Western media have started special propaganda against me and the Afghan government,” he said. There is no record of Balkenende refuting these statements—an implicit endorsement of the “run-and-kill” tactics that British, Dutch, and Australian military are applying in the Helmand, Kandahar, and Uruzgan provinces, where they are located.

A number of reports by non-governmental organizations have been released recently in the United States and Britain on the unstable security situation of Afghanistan, and the general conclusion drawn by these reports indicates that Afghanistan is already a failing state, and if “measures” are not undertaken immediately, it could very well turn out to be a “failed state.” Surprise, surprise!

But would regime change in Kabul spring Afghanistan back into a stable state? No one believes that, but for the mindless “losers,” regime change is always a “solution.”

During the Cold War, the Bolsheviks of the Soviet Union had an economic policy, which, without the use of physical repression of the population, would have collapsed the state in no time. In order to maintain the state, the Bolsheviks were involved in regime changes throughout Eastern Europe, and elsewhere. The outcome is there for everyone to see.

U.S. Neocons Adopt Bolshevik Methods

Now, the Bolsheviks have passed the baton to Vice President Dick Cheney and his neocon cohorts, who have come to realize that one way to obfuscate reality is by abusing the targeted leader, and removing him or her, using military force, or otherwise. They did this in Iraq, and reality slapped them back in the face.

They are trying to do that in Pakistan, but Islamabad is also a good friend of China. Hence, it has turned out to be a difficult task. But, Kabul is a different story. The United States made Hamid Karzai, who was until then, an unknown, lightweight Pushtun, President of Afghanistan, and to break him will be easy, some in Washington believe.

At the same time, it is important to recognize reality: Because of the nature of its terrain, Afghan attitudes toward foreigners, their adherence to Pukhtunwali (the Pushtun code of life based upon ideals of bravery, honor, especially defending a woman’s honor, loyalty, and hospitality), Afghanistan, over the years, has chewed up many strategists and spat them out. It is not going to be any different this time around.

But Washington’s eagerness to put the spotlight on Afghanistan now is yet another ruse to avoid looking at a more disturbing reality. On the one hand, this coming Spring in Af-

ghanistan may see the emergence of a stronger anti-foreigner alliance of Afghan militants, who may make life a tad more difficult for U.S. and NATO troops. More importantly, Washington does not want people to look at another black hole: the fast receding U.S. economy—a problem much larger in dimension, and an event of much larger consequences, than a failing Afghanistan.

The attacks against President Karzai—a weak figure, who has stuck it out since the Winter of 2001, against a myriad of odds, surviving a number of assassination attempts—have centered on the corruption of his regime, nepotism, his failure to control the opium explosion, etc.

Since it is widely acknowledged that Karzai cannot do anything much without a directive from Washington, and its colonial friends in London and The Hague, such criticism is tantamount to self-criticism. Nonetheless, it was highly disturbing to Kabul when U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice issued a statement last May saying a U.S.-sponsored crackdown on the world's largest narcotics industry had not been very effective, partly because Karzai "has been unwilling to assert strong leadership."

Taking issue with that report, Karzai said, "Instead of blaming Afghanistan, the international community must now come and fulfill its own objective to the Afghan people, and they must not spend money on projects that they cannot deliver properly in Afghanistan, and on creation of forces that are not effective."

Why Is Karzai Disliked Now?

It is no secret that President Karzai took upon himself a task which was fraught with the danger of failure. A Pushtun himself, Karzai came to power in Kabul with the help of foreign occupiers, the United States, and non-Pushtun fighters representing the Afghans of Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara ethnic origin. The objective of the military campaign was to eliminate the Taliban regime, which was comprised entirely of Pushtuns. Although a small section of the Pushtuns are part of the Taliban militia, all Taliban were Pushtuns. Because of these layers of contradictions, one basic objective of the Karzai government was not to allow the foreigners to equate Taliban with the Pushtun community as a whole. Failure to do that, Karzai reckoned, would also entail his own political demise. He knows he would never be accepted by the non-



W02 Fiona Stapley, ISAF Chief Photographer
Afghan President Hamid Karzai (right) is lashing out against the attacks on his government from Washington and London. Here, he is shown in October 2006 with British Gen. David Richards and American Lt. Gen. Karl Elkenberry.

Pushtuns as their leader.

It was a very difficult task, particularly since the Taliban militants, for obvious reasons, operated from within the Pushtun-dominated south, southeast, and east of Afghanistan. Many other Pushtuns later joined the war against the foreigners from within the Pakistani territories bordering Afghanistan. In order to eliminate these Taliban militants sheltered in villages virtually inaccessible by armored trucks, over the years, the U.S. Air Force has indulged in airstrikes, sometimes leveling the villages. These attacks were often directed by wrong intelligence. These airstrikes, which killed many innocents, including women and children, became the rallying cry for the Pushtun community against the foreign invaders.

The civilian casualty issue is one of a number of issues that have darkened the image of the U.S. and NATO forces in the eyes of Afghan civilians. In early May 2007, following the reported deaths of about 50 civilians in the fighting between U.S.-led troops and "suspected" militants in western Afghanistan, Karzai had summoned foreign military commanders to tell them that his people's patience was wearing thin. What was even more disturbing was the fact that the U.S.-led coalition of occupying forces tried to cover up the incident by claiming it had no reports of any civilian casualties, and had taken "every precaution to prevent injury to innocent Afghan civilians."

The civilian deaths are not only unacceptable to the Afghans, but give credence to the view of some who say that

Western forces do not care about Afghan lives when attacking the Taliban fighters. While the non-Muslim occupying forces have identified Muslims in general as the enemy, Afghans see the Western forces, as well as those from the earlier Soviet occupation, as children of old colonialist powers whose aims were to occupy foreign lands and set up empires.

In addition to Karzai's occasional expression of anger at the killing of Afghan civilians by the U.S. and NATO troops, the Afghan President got the U.S. neocons' goat when he made clear that Iran is not only not interfering in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, but is of genuine help.

"We will never forget Iran's goodwill in accepting our refugees in the past 20 years and Iran's cooperation with Afghanistan in the past four years. Afghanistan hopes to strengthen further trade and economic ties between the two countries," Karzai said on one occasion. Iranian exports to Afghanistan have risen from several million dollars in 2002 years ago to \$500 million now.

In December 2005, when Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki visited Kabul, the Afghan President, referring to the relations between Afghanistan and its neighbor as very close, said, "Afghanistan wishes further progress and development of Iran, and will not let anyone drive a wedge between the two Muslim neighbors."

In 2007, when President Karzai met with President Bush, Karzai, who was expected to act as a "puppet" of the Bush Administration, made the "mistake" of actually speaking his mind. In a CNN interview broadcast then, he said that terrorism in Afghanistan is getting worse, that the hunt for al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden is at a standstill and, then, he described Iran as a positive player—"a helper and a solution"—in the region.

'Viceroy' Ashdown and the British Perfidy

Late last month, President Karzai, speaking on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum at Davos, lashed out against both the United States and Britain—Washington's colonial partner-in-crime—when he told a group of journalists

that, "there was one part of the country where we suffered after the arrival of the British forces," referring to Helmand province.

"Both the American and the British forces guaranteed to me they knew what they were doing, and I made the mistake of listening to them." He said the mistake was allowing the U.S. and the U.K. to replace the province's sitting governor. "And when they came in, the Taliban came."

That little kernel of truth did not go down well at 10 Downing Street, where the spokesman for British Prime Minister Gordon Brown denied the charge, blustering about losses British have suffered against the Taliban.

In addition, the British news daily, the *Independent*, ran an exposé on British troops in Helmand, who, with the help of two MI6 agents, were negotiating with, and bribing a section of Taliban militants, to join hands with the British. Officials from the United States and European members of NATO have told the *Daily Telegraph* that Britain is increasingly at odds with its coalition partners over its policy of making arbitrary peace deals with the Taliban.

Diplomats in Kabul and Islamabad say Britain's "go it alone policies" are threatening military preparations for a major Taliban offensive expected next month. The story has created uneasiness in the British Parliament, since Brown had promised that Britain would never negotiate with the Taliban, who are killing "our boys."

While the British were more open about their activities because of the "special relationship" with Washington, the Dutch, the other colonial nation operating in Afghanistan, have built a *qala*—a traditional Pushtun home with mud walls and a large reception room where guests are greeted in the local fashion, with tea, nuts, and dried fruit. Since August, the Dutch have carried out more than 400 patrols. They have lost one soldier, who committed suicide, and suffered four injuries in combat. Civilian casualties have also been very low, the governor said. This was achieved by "befriending" the Taliban, who are carrying out assassination attempts against Karzai, the U.S. troops, and other NATO forces, without letting Kabul know about it.

Karzai's outburst against Britain's treacherous role in Helmand province followed his crossing of swords with both Washington and London over the appointment of "Viceroy" Paddy Ashdown, a British Liberal, who loves to use "Lord"—a feudal honorarium—before his name.

Ashdown had been lobbying for the creation of a coordinating job in Afghanistan, and his bid for the Afghan post had the full support of the British Prime Minister.

But, *Asia Times* has reported that Karzai anticipated that Ashdown, true to his reputation in the Balkans, would function like a colonial viceroy. Karzai knows that the Western agencies and organizations operating in Afghanistan lack coordination. But a "unified command" under Ashdown would create a counterpoint in Kabul to Karzai's own authority. Karzai didn't want that to happen.

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