

Can President Karzai Undo U.S.-U.K.-Saudi Afghan Plan?

by Ramtanu Maitra

Jan. 29—Afghan President Hamid Karzai is now replacing the Taliban as the number one enemy of the Washington-London-Riyadh nexus in Afghanistan. Here is the evidence.

On Jan. 26, Karzai inaugurated the Afghan Parliament, ending weeks of intense political pressure from the Obama Administration, in particular. Afghanistan's government was plunged into political crisis early January, when Karzai decided to delay the opening of the Assembly by a month, to give more time to the special court he had set up to investigate fraud in the Sept. 18 elections. Karzai was concerned about the lopsided election results, cleared by the election commission, that made the representation of the majority Pushtun community a minority. The Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan (FEFA), an independent Afghan poll-watching group, documented 583 instances of pre-voting electoral violations, in a scant 40 days. FEFA indicated major problems with the legitimacy of these elections.

Because of the complexity thrown up by a faulty election, former Indian Ambassador M.K. Bhadrakumar, in an article in the *Asia Times* Jan. 25, titled, "U.S. Wants To Clip Karzai's Wings," pointed out that Karzai had no choice but to order a special tribunal to review the election results. Bhadrakumar noted that close to half of the Afghan population consists of ethnic Pushtuns, and yet, 75% of parliamentary seats have been "won" by non-Pushtuns. The Hazaras constitute 10% of the population, but they "won" 20% of the seats, including those in the Pushtun-dominated regions.

But, Karzai's plan to delay convening the Parliament until the special tribunal could present its findings, came under intense attack from the Obama Administration. Several Western envoys, including U.S. Amb. Karl Eikenberry and UN envoy Staffan de Mistura, indicated they planned to attend the inauguration with or without Karzai, diplomats involved in the meet-

ing in Kabul told the media (Yaroslav Trofimov, "Afghan Parliament Plans Session, Defying Karzai," *Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 20). Doing so would recognize the new Parliament and be a blow to Karzai. "This is a litmus test for the international community," one ambassador said. "Karzai believes he can freely do what he wants, but Sunday will be a wakeup call."

The Obama Administration's nasty attitude toward the Afghan President reflects a much larger problem. Washington, despite its statements expressing commitment to sovereign nation-states and democratic process, considers Karzai as its own handmaiden. In other words, Karzai is allowed to differ with the United States on small issues, but not on larger ones. On larger issues, the diktat of Washington and London must prevail. Otherwise, as Bhadrakumar pointed out, the U.S. will use the "ethnic card" to "entrap" Karzai, and bring the Afghan leader to his knees.

The Real Reasons

Karzai had long been a target of the Obama Administration. President Obama, and his entire retinue that presides over this failed U.S. policy in Afghanistan, found the Karzai to be an obstacle to the Administration's plan on how to "resolve" the Afghan issue. The plan, orchestrated from London and Riyadh, with the hapless United States caught in a mousetrap, is to keep the almost 100,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan, battling the insurgents. The objective is to secure control of some of the areas now under control of the so-called Taliban. Meanwhile, money will be pumped in, to recruit and provide "hands-on training," often as short as six weeks, to hundreds of thousands of Afghans, and then, declare them to be well-trained Afghan National Army personnel ready to take on the insurgents. None of this is either true, or viable for any length of time.

However, once these two optimal conditions were achieved (i.e., whenever Washington declares that such



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Afghan President Hamid Karzai (left) has been a target of the Obama Administration, but he is finding friends elsewhere. During Karzai's visit to Moscow in January, he and Russian President Dmitri Medvedev (center) began taking steps to restore economic and political ties between their two countries.

a situation has been attained), the London-Riyadh plan will go into motion. This plan would ensure an undeclared partition of Afghanistan, whereby the insurgents in southern and eastern Afghanistan, the vast majority being ethnic Pushtuns, will be separated out by the U.S. and NATO troops who will provide a semi-circular ring to contain the Pushtuns. This would ensure security to the Hazaras in the West and Tajiks, Uzbeks, Nuristanis, and other ethnic groups, who are not openly against the foreign troops, "protection" from the marauding Pushtun majority. This plan has been laid out by neo-con Robert Blackwill in a number of journal articles, including one in the Council on Foreign Relations' *Foreign Affairs* magazine (Robert Blackwill, "Partition as Plan B," *Foreign Affairs*, January-February 2011), and in a speech on Sept. 12, 2010 at the British Empire's think tank, Chatham House (Royal Institute of International Affairs), in London.

Beside its blatant colonial nature, this proposal is a tacit admission that the foreign troops will be in Afghanistan for an indefinite period of time, to "protect the Hazara-Tajik-Uzbek and other minorities of Afghanistan" (who could believe such a pretext?), and may remain on guard at the threshold of the Eurasian landmass, where three major powers, Russia, China, and India, may try to extend their political, economic,

and military influence. The other interesting aspect in this proposal is that President Karzai is, in effect, a redundant force.

In fact, to the U.S.A., the U.K., and the Saudis, Karzai is worse than redundant. He is a downright nuisance. Why? To begin with, Hamid Karzai had made clear years ago, that the foreign troops must leave Afghanistan lock, stock, and barrel, a stand supported by the Afghan population. That view did not go down well with the Washington-London-Riyadh alliance.

Secondly, Karzai, being a Pushtun from Kandahar, with royal blood in his veins, does not want any form of partition of Afghanistan. For years now, he had nailed the British troops, present in thousands in the Pushtun-dominated Helmand and Kandahar provinces since 2005, for organizing Pushtuns against him. In 2007, he summarily kicked out two MI6 agents who were bribing and training some of

the insurgents to form a militia under British control. As recently as last November, the British intelligence agency MI6 was further exposed in an embarrassing controversy, after it emerged that they had taken a Pakistani shopkeeper from Quetta, whom they falsely identified as the key Taliban commander, Mullah Akhtar Mohammed Mansour, to Kabul to meet Karzai for sensitive peace negotiations. The MI6 objective was to find out, through these talks, what Karzai was planning, who has contacts within the Taliban and other insurgents, and what his game plan is to counter the Washington-London-Riyadh partition plan.

Why did MI6 take the risk of being exposed? At stake was the Washington-London-Riyadh plan to handpick Pushtun leaders to rule various Pushtun provinces. These have already been identified as "good Taliban" and they would be rewarded, and "protected," for carrying out what the U.S.-U.K.-Saudi crowd wants. Karzai, on the other hand, did not approve of these "good Taliban" leaders, since they would be dependent on the foreign troops, who would use this as an added excuse to remain entrenched in Afghanistan. Karzai has wide-ranging contact within the Pushtun community, and has specific ideas on who should be in charge and who should not be. This is a serious conflict point between the Obama Administration and

Karzai.

In addition, the Afghan President incurred the wrath of Ambassador Eikenberry, and of Washington, when he made it clear that he does not want private security firms to operate in Afghanistan. According to AFP correspondent Waheedullah Massoud, in his article, “Karzai, U.S. Ambassador at odds over private security,” on Jan. 5, Karzai told a NATO official, his first Vice President Mohammad Qaseem Fahim, his National Security Advisor, his Interior Minister, and other officials, that he was trying to dismantle the private security firms, nor does he want to add another 25,000 personnel to the firms, according to a senior official at Karzai’s palace, who declined to be named.

Karzai said the plan ran counter to the goals of strengthening Afghan forces and national institution-building, the official said. The unnamed official added that the U.S. ambassador argued that billions of dollars’ worth of development projects would not go ahead unless they were provided with security, and that private security guards were the solution.

A Larger Area of Conflict

Beyond that, Karzai has also taken some initiatives which have not been received kindly by the Obama Administration. During his visit to Moscow Jan. 21-22 (which made Ambassador Eikenberry very unhappy, ostensibly because the visit was carried out without consultations with any of his coalition partners), the Presidents of Afghanistan and Russia agreed to take steps to resurrect economic and political ties that have been almost nonexistent since the fall of the Soviet Union.

The meeting between Karzai and Russian President Dmitri Medvedev was highlighted by the signing of an agreement that could pave the way for Russia to participate in “priority economic projects”—including ones left unfinished after Soviet forces pulled out of the country in 1989, following nearly a decade of war. Kabul’s interest in increasing trade was visible in the size of Karzai’s delegation, which *Moskovskiye Novosti* correspondent Arkady Dubnov told RFE/RL’s Russian Service on Jan. 21, contained most of the Afghan government.

Trade with Russia reached \$500 million in 2010, according to Karzai, and Moscow’s technical know-how in the energy sector can help the country. The agreement said that Russian specialists will help in upgrad-

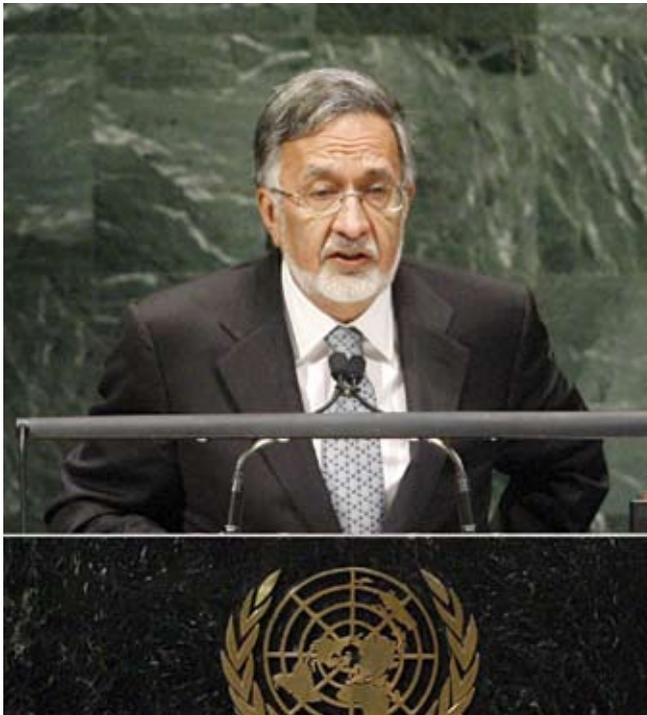
ing the Noglu hydropower plant and in building small power plants in other regions. Russia is also in talks to help rebuild the strategically important Salang Tunnel, a north-south route through the Hindu Kush Mountains; a customs terminal; and a university in Kabul. Russia has also promised to supply industrial sprayers to destroy the opium poppy.

Last December, Karzai said there were suggestions that the Taliban would open a representation office in Turkey or another impartial country “to facilitate reconciliation” in Afghanistan. Responding to a reporter’s question while attending the Pakistan-Afghanistan-Turkey Trilateral Summit in Istanbul, Karzai said Kabul would be happy if Turkey could provide such a venue, Anatolia news agency reported on Dec. 26, 2010. Turkish President Abdullah Gul said he was not aware of such suggestions, but stressed that Turkey “will do anything that would contribute to stability and security in Afghanistan,” according to the Anatolia news item.

It was the fifth such meeting since 2007, when Turkey launched the initiative to push Afghanistan and Pakistan to enhance cooperation against insurgents and improve ties poisoned by the insecurity plaguing their non-demarcated border.

Kabul has also announced that Iranian Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani will visit Afghanistan in the near future. Last November, Iran’s ISNA news agency reported on Larijani’s comment to the visiting Afghan Foreign Minister Zalmay Rassoul in Tehran, that the “growth of extremism in the region is the outcome of strategic cooperation of international powers and some of their regional allies.” The “solution to the Afghanistan crisis is closely related to regional cooperation and the transition of responsibilities to the Afghan people and popular government,” Larijani said, adding, “the policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran has been assistance to progress, economic development, and independence of Afghanistan.”

The keystone of President Karzai’s efforts to bring the regional powers in to resolve the Afghanistan crisis lies in his success in bringing Pakistan into the discussions. Karzai was always looked at with suspicion by Islamabad because of his close association with India, in particular. Pakistan’s suspicion about India’s significant investment in Afghanistan’s economic and infrastructure development, aided by support from Washington, is that India has been active in keeping Pakistan out of Afghanistan. This has also enhanced Islamabad’s



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Following a meeting in Islamabad on Jan. 27, with his Afghan counterpart Zalmay Rassoul (right), Pakistani Foreign Minister Qureshi (left) announced the formation of a new commission, “to achieve peace and security in the region.”

suspicion about Washington.

Some recent efforts by Karzai, aided by Turkey, have initiated a process aimed at improving his relations with Islamabad. To begin with, India’s strategy of preventing the Taliban from returning to the center stage of Afghan affairs had relied on America’s ability to militarily enforce stability. As a result, New Delhi toed Washington’s line in Afghanistan, underestimating Pakistan’s ability to undo what Washington and London plan to do. According to Smruti S. Pattanaikan, in her comment of Jan. 28, at India’s leading think tank, IDSA, “India in Afghanistan: Engagement without Strategy,” “The truth of the matter is that Pakistan remains central to the success of the process of reconciliation and reintegration.” In the words of Pakistan’s Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani, “Nothing will happen without us, because we are part of the solution.”

On Dec. 14, 2010, Bruce Riedel, a former CIA official, and now a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, told the *New York Times* (Elisabeth Bumiller, “Intelligence Reports Offer Dim View of Afghan War”) that there are serious limitations that America faces in Afghanistan and that “we cannot make Pakistan stop being naughty.”

The Peace Council

Karzai formed a 70-member peace council last October, for talks with the Taliban and other rival groups; however, the Taliban have rejected any talks with the council. Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said that there is no change in Taliban policy and there will be no talks with anyone unless the foreign troops leave Afghanistan.

In early January, former Afghan President and head of the peace council Burhanuddin Rabbani arrived in Islamabad and sought Pakistan’s help to persuade the Taliban to agree to a dialogue. “We want Pakistan to help us for peace, security, stability, and to encourage the Taliban to come to the negotiating table,” Rabbani told reporters in Islamabad. He said Pakistan and the Afghan peace council had agreed on the formation of a joint mini-Jirga, or council, to work for the removal of misunderstandings between the two countries, and to discuss bilateral security issues.

Subsequently, on Jan. 27 in Islamabad, Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi announced the formation of the new commission at the end of a meeting with his visiting Afghan counterpart, Zalmay Rassoul. Speaking at a joint news conference, Qureshi

reiterated that Pakistan is committed to the fight against terrorism.

Pakistan was one of the three countries that supported the Taliban government in Afghanistan until the Islamic group was ousted by U.S.-led coalition forces. The government of Afghan President Karzai wants Pakistan to use its influence over senior Taliban commanders to bring them to the negotiating table.

“We will set up a two-tiered joint commission at the foreign ministers’ level and at the level of senior officials,” Qureshi said. “And in this joint commission, we will have the Foreign Office, the military, and the intelligence jointly engaging with each other and working together to achieve peace and security in the region.” The Pakistani foreign minister said the continued high-level process of engagements has helped build a strong relationship and partnership between Islamabad and Kabul to achieve their shared objectives. He said the two sides also agreed to set up joint working groups to enhance bilateral trade, and economic and social ties.

“The most important thing is, and that has been the crux of our discussions today, that if we want progress we have to be strategically aligned. And that is exactly what we have done, and we are doing this successfully, and this will bring, in the days to come, positive results,” Qureshi said.

What To Expect Next

It is evident that President Karzai is trying to re-set the pieces on the Afghan chessboard to undermine what the Washington-London-Riyadh nexus had planned. Will he succeed? It is difficult to predict the outcome. It must be noted that Washington holds the purse strings, and the Obama Administration is not happy with Karzai.

In addition, the Afghan parliament has a large non-Pushtun majority and Washington and London would like to convince these non-Pushtuns to remove Karzai by “democratic means,” as pointed out by Bhadrakumar in his *Asia Times* article. He said the U.S. is counting on the opposition candidate in the 2009 Presidential election, Abdullah Abdullah, and the speaker of the outgoing parliament, Younus Qanooni, to spearhead the opposition to Karzai. Abdullah and Qanooni, as well as Amrullah Saleh, belong to the Panjshiri clan, and the line-up has dangerous overtones of a (Tajik) revolt against (Pushtun) Karzai.

The U.S. is also instigating sections of the Hazaras, whose political influence is at its historical zenith today. The Washington establishment has also co-opted former Afghan intelligence Chief Amrullah Saleh, who was sacked by Karzai last year.

But, that was not the end of Saleh’s role. In December, Saleh turned up in Washington, where he gave the keynote address on Dec. 9, at a high-profile, terrorism conference, sponsored by the Jamestown Foundation. He made the rounds of the Washington think tanks, and hobnobbed with big shots. What was intriguing about Saleh’s speech at the Washington conference is how well he has tuned himself in to Washington’s concerns about Karzai. Saleh mentioned his opposition to any power-sharing deal with the Taliban, and his intense skepticism about the Pakistani role in Afghanistan. And he went out of his way to praise the U.S. forces for their sacrifices on Afghanistan’s behalf. An American journalist, Christian Caryl, pointed out that it is no wonder that the man who introduced Saleh made a point of mentioning that his fans include ex-CIA Director Gen. Michael Hayden.

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