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## Karzai connives to remain relevant

By Ahmad Shayeq Bakhshi

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The recent uptick in President Hamid Karzai's belligerence against the United States is probably best understood with reference to the trajectory of his political evolution, or perhaps regression, over the past 13 years.

Karzai was catapulted to power out of obscurity in late 2001 and initially relied on strong support from the United States and its allies, representatives of the then "Northern Alliance" (NA) and a coterie of Afghan-American expatriates, including US envoy Zalmay Khalilzad and a few others who subsequently occupied important positions in his government.

Karzai's main political agenda from 2002-2005 largely revolved around his ambition to reduce the power of his major NA colleagues, particularly the first vice president and defense minister Mohammad Qasim Fahim, interior minister Mohammad Younus Qanooni and foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah. During that first period in power, he remained very friendly towards all other immediate supporters as well as Pakistan, for their support was crucial to outflank NA heavyweights and also win the presidential elections in 2004.

By 2005 - and after he had arguably won the elections with thinly concealed support from the US, UN, the Afghan-American expatriate team and Pervez Musharraf's government in Pakistan - Karzai cast aside Abdullah, the last remnant of the NA trio in government. The removal of Abdullah as foreign minister was particularly humiliating as it came unexpectedly while he was

on an official visit to the United States, and more importantly even after Abdullah had acquiesced to recall two dozen middle-ranking Afghan diplomats from coveted diplomatic postings because of their alleged affiliations with the NA.

With the benefit of experience gained from appreciating the weaknesses of his political rivals as they worked closely together, Karzai appointed a new foreign minister, Rangin Dadfar Spanta, with characteristic guile. In order to mollify Abdullah's restive loyalists in the Foreign Ministry, Karzai sent out his new vice president, Ahmad Zia Massoud - brother of the late NA leader Ahmad Shah Massoud - to introduce the new foreign minister.

Karzai's choice of Massoud as vice president had already favored him over Fahim and Qanooni, but Massoud's role in the introduction of the new foreign minister more fatefully cemented his rivalries with Abdullah. No wonder that Abdullah stepped in to ruin Massoud's chances of a presidential candidacy first in 2009 and again for the 2014 election.

Having done away with major NA figures in the government, Karzai started criticizing Pakistan's controversial support of the Taliban. More ominously, though, he reverted to the traditional Afghan policy of irredentism against Pakistan; a policy that had remained largely absent for the better part of two decades. The Afghan government revived the annual commemoration of the Pashtunistan Day and resumed old rhetoric about the plight of the tribal Pashtuns in Pakistan. Since then, Afghan-Pakistan relations have been conducted in fits and starts, closely trailing Karzai's highly unpredictable mood-swings.

The first serious sign of Karzai's troubles with the "international community" emerged in 2007 when, in a highly defiant and symbolic move, he ordered the expulsion of Michael Semple, an Irishman and acting head of the European Union mission, and Mervyn Patterson, a British UN employee in Afghanistan. The Afghan government accused the two of liaising with the Taliban directly in violation of Afghanistan's national sovereignty, even though it had long become the standard staple of the government and Western coalition's rhetoric to find a "political solution" to the conflict in Afghanistan.

The Afghan government never provided an official explanation about the exact nature of contacts Semple and Patterson had had with the Taliban, but independent media reported that Semple had established suspicious and questionable ties with Mansoor Dadullah, the brother and successor of slain Taliban leader Mullah Dadullah, who had won the distinction of being one of the most brutal Taliban commanders in Afghanistan.

Karzai's rejection of British politician Paddy Ashdown, the former international High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, as head of the UN mission in Afghanistan in early 2008 represented another high-profile act of defiance, allegedly renegeing on a prior understanding that British and American officials as well as the UN secretary general had deemed all but done.

Since then, almost every act of Afghan braggadocio and swagger directed against Western allies has been presented as an assertion of the country's national sovereignty, never mind the

government's own and repeated violations of the constitution and parliamentary decisions as the main institutional embodiments of the very notion of a democratic system.

As Karzai's relations with leading Western allies strained and the culture of blame on issues and failures became the defining attribute, so did his ties with his prominent Afghan-American friends and their affiliates.

By 2009 and in the lead-up to the second presidential election, Finance Minister Anwar-ul-Haq Ahady, former interior minister Ali Ahmad Jalali, former finance minister Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai and US envoy Khalilzad were all sending out messages that they would be running for president, but in the end only Ahmadzai contested the controversial poll, coming fourth with under 3% of the national vote as Karzai scooped up more than 49%.

More importantly, though, Karzai's strongest vote-winning allies in the election were some of the very people he and his expatriate affiliates had relentlessly demonized as "warlords" in previous years. Two of these so-called warlords - Mohammad Mohaqeq and Abdul Rashid Dostum - had challenged Karzai in 2004 elections.

Now that Karzai's second term is coming to an end, and it will be his final one in accordance with the Afghan constitution, one can envisage him being less than enthused by the prospect of a return to obscurity and possibly even the chance that he and his family will be asked to account for the enormous wealth they have amassed during his 13 years in office.

Having exhausted the trust and goodwill of his powerful Western allies and played various Afghan figures and factions to his own advantage, now he appears to be making a pitch to remain relevant and possibly even indispensable when out of office. He has ordered the construction of his "retirement" residence next to the presidential palace and made no secret of his wish to be able to offer "advice" to the next president. But a conniving politician as always, he cannot simply take chances on the goodwill of the future president to go along with the highly unusual practice of accommodating an ex-president next to the incumbent and take his counsel on national issues.

Conceivably, this is where the induced controversy over the conclusion of the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) kicks in. By refusing to sign the BSA even after it was finalized by his own handpicked negotiating team and endorsed by a *Jirga*, or gathering of tribal elders, which his office convened, Karzai is presumably counting on the support of Iran as the self-declared anti-US regional power and the goodwill of the Taliban as the main "insurgent" faction in Afghanistan for him to remain relevant and exercise influence beyond office.

In early December, even as US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel was on a visit to Afghanistan, Karzai met Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in Tehran without offering an explanation as to why the rushed trip was so important. The controversial release of hundreds of Taliban prisoners and possible collaboration with Taliban supporters to distort the facts of a recent joint Afghan-International Security Assistance Force operation in Parwan province seem to provide additional complements to Karzai's ingratiating act towards the Taliban.

Should Karzai succeed in winning their goodwill and possibly even support - highly unlikely

though it seems - he will have assumed a new mantle as the arbiter of peace between the establishment in Kabul and the Taliban. He seems unfazed by what sort of Afghanistan may ultimately emerge out of what appears to be a highly personalized gamble, but for one he can probably count on Iran's goodwill to take him in or keep him afloat in Afghanistan.