

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

<http://atimes.com/2015/07/afghan-power-play-it-was-never-really-about-karzai-its-about-ghani/>

Afghan power play: It was never really about Karzai, it's about Ghani

BY M.K. BHADRAKUMAR

JULY 27, 2015 IN

Western media reports alleging that former Afghan President Hamid Karzai is conspiring to usurp power in Kabul do not make sense. Karzai's sophisticated intellect and vast experience in statecraft will tell him that without American backing, he cannot hope to survive in power.

Karzai's comeback to power is impossible without American support. Now, why would America support him?

Karzai was not even on talking terms with President Barack Obama when his presidency ended. Karzai deliberately stalled on the US-Afghan security pact, which was intended to give legal underpinning for the establishment of American military bases in Afghanistan.

He wanted all US military operations on Afghan soil to be brought under Kabul's supervision. Karzai and Iraq's Nouri al-Maliki are chips of the same block.



President Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, centre, speaks during the Eid al-Adha prayer ceremony at the presidential palace as former President Hamid Karzai looks on

Besides, any usurper in Kabul will not enjoy international legitimacy and Karzai is intensely conscious of his standing in the international community. He is a national figure – even a historical figure – and why would he diminish himself as a factional leader in a fragmented country?

Above all, being a staunch nationalist, Karzai cannot compromise on Afghanistan's unity and integrity, whereas, he'd know that an illegitimate set-up in Kabul will only the open door to large-scale external interference.

All this, therefore, raises the question as to who stands to gain from the orchestrated media campaign against Karzai. The heart of the matter is that the real target of this US media campaign is not Karzai himself – it is actually President Ashraf Ghani.

The western media campaign aims at rattling Ghani, making him feel insecure, and reminding him constantly that without American protection he cannot survive in power for even a single day in Kabul.

The point is, Ghani is quintessentially an American creation. He polled only 3% votes in the 2009 presidential election and yet he managed to win the 2014 election because Washington wanted this former World Bank official to succeed Karzai, estimating that lacking any form of political base himself, he would be utterly dependent on the US support. Without US prodding, Pakistan wouldn't have delivered Pashtun votes in such large numbers to Ghani.

But then, the US will still not take chances with Ghani. If the Karzai saga taught Washington anything, it is that the Afghans are a fiercely independent and proud people and they do not like being mentored – and worse still, to be seen as the lackey of a foreign power.

Having said that, the US' main agenda in Afghanistan continues to be the establishment of long-term military presence in that country. The new Cold War with Russia, the acceleration of China's Belt and Road initiatives in Central Asia, the growing Sino-Russian entente in Eurasia, Iran's rise, the potential threat to North Caucasus and Xinjiang ("soft underbelly" of Russia and China) posed by the forces of radical Islam – all these make Afghanistan a crucial theatre in the US' regional strategies.

On the contrary, Ghani's policies to press ahead with Afghan reconciliation by seeking the cooperation of Pakistan have incrementally brought about a certain "marginalization" of the US lately, especially with China and Pakistan working in tandem to foster peace talks. The Chinese president Xi Jinping staked his prestige by calling for an "early settlement" in Afghanistan.

If these trends accelerate, the US should be happy about it. But in reality, Washington is worried like hell, since the Taliban has made the vacation of American military occupation the main precondition for peace in Afghanistan and it is a fair guess that both Beijing and Islamabad would also like to see the back of the last American soldier in the Hindu Kush.

Interestingly, Islamabad claimed recently that Pakistan and China are willing to be the “guarantors” of any Afghan settlement. The assumption so far has been that without US’ financial assistance, Afghan economy won’t be able to survive. But that is also not the case anymore, since China looms large as a potentially much bigger benefactor for Afghanistan if only peace gets established in that country, creating a climate for launching the multi-billion dollar Silk Road projects. China has pledged \$46 billion investment in Pakistan to build an Economic Corridor.

Again, the integration of Afghanistan into China’s Belt and Road strategy seriously threatens the US’ regional influence insofar as it would create an altogether new power dynamic in the region bringing together China, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Russia on a single platform on issues of regional security and stability. In sum, the US’ celebrated “pivot” to Asia has come under serious challenge in Central Asia.

Clearly, Ghani increasingly found himself between the rock and a hard place. He felt uncomfortable about Karzai’s intentions and it created acute insecurity in his mind. Most certainly, he needs American protection.

Yet, his political survival is also dependent on bringing peace to the country and kick starting development-oriented governance for which he needs to reconcile with the Taliban.

However, the reconciliation with Taliban is wholly dependent on Pakistan’s willingness to cooperate.

Enter China. Ghani’s counts on China not only to influence Pakistan to moderate its policies but also to invest in the Afghan economy. China has become an irreplaceable partner for Ghani.

Against the backdrop of these profound contradictions playing out in Ghani’s calculus, it should come as no surprise that he got an important visitor from Washington last Sunday – Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey.

The doughty general brought with him a master plan outlining a joint US-Afghan strategy to counter the Islamic State’s rise in Afghanistan. The Pentagon readout said Dempsey and Ghani discussed “the possibility of forming a network to oppose the trans-regional threat posed by the Islamic State.”

Succinctly put, Dempsey has told Ghani that Afghanistan should be transformed as a regional hub to potentially allow for the forward deployment of US counter-terrorism forces in the region and also provide a base to strengthen regional partners who may be in the lead fighting terrorism.

In Dempsey’s words, “They (Afghans) are a credible and willing partner in (counter-terrorism) and could be one of the keys to addressing the IS in all of South Asia”.

Of course, Dempsey has also let it be known that the fight against terrorism will be a lengthy struggle that could last a generation.

Dempsey told the media later that the IS poses “a persistent threat that has to be addressed at a sustainable level of effort over a period of time”. Indeed, he was in a jolly mood after meeting Ghani. This is how Dempsey summarized Ghani’s response: “His (Ghani’s) view is, ‘Hey, look, I’m (Ghani) a willing partner in an area where you may not have willing partners’”.

Meanwhile, on Sunday again, General John Campbell, the top US commander in Afghanistan, explained to the media that from being “nascent” in Afghanistan, the IS has become “operationally emergent.”

Unsurprisingly, Obama lost no time to personally follow up Dempsey’s successful mission to Kabul. Obama held a rare video conference with Ghani on Wednesday to discuss the fight against IS.

The US is thrilled that the long-term American military presence in Afghanistan is not in jeopardy so long as Ghani remains in power in Kabul. On his part, Ghani can draw comfort from the knowledge that he can count on the US to back him to the hilt even if half a dozen Karzais were to gang up against him in the Kabul bazaar.

The “known unknown,” however, remains. How will the Taliban take the Dempsey mission?

The US may have effectively put a spoke in the wheel of the nascent peace talks that Pakistan and China have been desperately fostering. Dempsey who never bothered to hide his contempt toward the Pakistani military and the ISI for their doublespeak during the Afghan war, is walking away laughing, just weeks ahead of his retirement.

He left Ghani in no doubt whatsoever that the vacation of the US occupation is a non-negotiable issue. Ghani got the point alright – thanks to Karzai.