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Ex-White House Official Podesta Calls Karzai 'Erratic'

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STEVE INSKEEP, HOST:

People advising President Obama's administration on Afghanistan include John Podesta. Years ago, he was President Clinton's chief of staff. These days, he's chair of the Center for American Progress and part of an effort to offer independent views on Afghanistan to the administration. Last week, he was in that country just before the many delegates to that assembly of elders approved the U.S. presence in the country, after which President Karzai put off signing the deal, anyway.

JOHN PODESTA: Karzai has really gone from maddeningly unpredictable to dangerously erratic.

INSKEEP: That's quite an evolution. What's driving that, as far as you can tell?

PODESTA: It's very hard to tell. I think that if you talk to Afghan leaders, they clearly see this Bilateral Security Agreement as a necessary component of the security of the Afghan people. And people speculate all the time about what motivates Karzai, whether it's to try to be

continually relevant, whether it's trying to extract something more from the United States and the international players. It's very, very hard to know.

INSKEEP: William Dalrymple, who wrote a history of Afghanistan, and ended up interviewing President Karzai for something like eight hours this year, was on the program the other day. And he painted a rather sympathetic portrait of this man and said all he's really trying to do is demonstrate his independence from the United States.

PODESTA: Well, I think he has a hell of a way of showing it. One of the things on my recent trip that really struck me was that the psychology in Afghanistan has really changed. People really are focused on the election. They're focused on succession. They're focused on new leadership.

You know, the candidates, whether they can deliver this or not, are really all running on a campaign to improve governance, and really to have this partnership with the United States - and, more broadly, the international community - which gives, I think, the best chance for long-term reconciliation in Afghanistan. I've given up trying to psychoanalyze the man, but I don't think he's doing his people any favors.

INSKEEP: Given that you are going to Afghanistan to learn and give advice to the Obama administration, let me ask a little bit about that advice. Would you go so far as to say that the United States really ought to have a policy that does not depend on Hamid Karzai doing anything in particular? He's an outgoing president. Just look past him and ignore anything he might do.

PODESTA: That would be my first point to people in the administration. You just - you have to get on with this. What interrupts that, really, is the need to have this bilateral security arrangement by the end of the year.

INSKEEP: Oh, because if people are going to withdraw, it takes a long time to get equipment out of Afghanistan, that sort of thing.

PODESTA: Exactly. What Karzai is doing is to interfere with that ability to plan. And in doing so, he risks the United States and our NATO allies just throwing up their hands and saying, well, we're just going to get out of there.

INSKEEP: Well, should they?

PODESTA: If this bilateral security agreement is delayed beyond the first of the year, we have to plan for that eventuality. Whether one can reverse field after the election with a new president, I think it's going to be quite difficult.

INSKEEP: I'm remembering the situation in Iraq a few years ago, when there was also a deadline for the government to sign a Status of Forces Agreement to keep the United States military in the country or sign nothing and make all the troops go home. In the end, nothing was signed. The troops went home. That was disappointing to the Obama administration. But it was also seen as perhaps something that President Obama might not have minded. He got himself out of Iraq.

PODESTA: Right.

INSKEEP: Is there some corner, do you think, of the president's mind, or of the administration, that wouldn't mind getting everybody out of Afghanistan?

PODESTA: From the United States security perspective, having a stable Afghanistan is important. What happened prior to 2001 indicates that really bad things can happen if there's not a secure Afghanistan. But I think, at some point, this has got to be done on terms that are acceptable to the United States. And if President Karzai succeeds in screwing that up, then I think we have to consider the alternative of a complete withdrawal.

INSKEEP: Do you think that the president is really willing to leave Afghanistan, let U.S. troops leave Afghanistan if they can't get an agreement by a certain point?

PODESTA: Yes. To put it succinctly, yes. As you noted, like the Iraq example, if we're going to put troops in harm's way, if we're going to force those troops to be there, putting their lives on the line without the ability to operate in support of protecting those lives, it's unacceptable, and they're going to have to come out.

INSKEEP: Let's see if you can go to the next level here. Do you think the president actually would like to have U.S. troops leave Afghanistan, on some level?

PODESTA: No. This all goes back to it's in the security interests of the United States to have a stable Afghanistan and to have that partnership with the Afghan government. It can't be at all costs. And there are certain red lines that the U.S. will not cross. If they insist on things that are unacceptable to the United States, the United States will have to pull out.

INSKEEP: John Podesta is a former White House chief of staff in the Clinton administration, now chair of the Center for American Progress and a regular visitor to Afghanistan. Thanks very much.

PODESTA: Thanks, Steve.

INSKEEP: Now, Sean Carberry mentioned that Susan Rice, the national security advisor, met with President Karzai. The White House put out a readout, as it's called, of that meeting. Normally, these are bland documents, talking about two leaders discussing mutual issues of interest. In this case, the statement says that President Karzai outlined new conditions for signing the agreement, and Ambassador Rice, in response, stressed that we have concluded negotiations.

We'll continue following this story as we learn more. It's MORNING EDITION, from NPR News. Transcript provided by NPR, Copyright NPR.