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Making Do: Obama and His Troublesome Allies

By Tony Karon

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Pity the Obama Administration, having to behave as if Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari and Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai were reliable stewards of U.S. security interests in the world's most troubling trouble-spot. An epic suspension of disbelief is required to cast either of the men Obama welcomed at the White House on Wednesday as capable of leading a successful fight against the Taliban. Zardari's approval ratings are lower than those of the reviled former dictator President Pervez Musharraf; his army is reluctant to go to war against a section of the country's citizenry; and Pakistani public opinion remains more hostile to the U.S. than to the Taliban. Karzai, meanwhile, has long been written off by Washington as incapable of providing the kind of governance essential to winning a counterinsurgency war. Still, in response to the growing legion of skeptics on Capitol Hill, the Administration might well ask: Does anyone have a better idea?

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have exposed the limits of U.S. military power in imposing Washington's will, and the declining world economy has, if anything, further limited America's appetite for foreign entanglements. It's not as if the U.S. is in a position to take over from Karzai or Zardari, and appealing alternatives are scarce. The same can be said for the challenges Obama faces in Iraq, and in the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. On all of those fronts, Washington confronts the reality that the partners on which it is forced to rely are either deeply flawed, or at odds with U.S. strategy.

Right across the "arc of instability" that stretches from Afghanistan to the Mediterranean, the new Administration is faced with less than helpful leaders. A guide to the lemons that the U.S. must turn into lemonade:

Pakistan: Grim Options

Asif Ali Zardari, despite being democratically elected, may be politically doomed — and unable

to deliver on U.S. demands that he wage a civil war that would be unpopular even with many Pakistanis who oppose the Taliban. Lately, there's been growing speculation that the Administration may be turning its attention to cultivating opposition leader Nawaz Sharif, who is currently Pakistan's most popular politician. Widespread reports suggest that the Obama Administration hopes to persuade Zardari and Sharif to share power in a new unity government committed to fighting the Taliban. But like Zardari and his late wife, the slain former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, Sharif has a poor track record in power, and is viewed by the military as part of the same venal political class motivated primarily by self-interest. The conservative Sharif, who has previously criticized Pakistan's efforts on behalf of the U.S. war on terror — and was deemed by the U.S. to be soft on the Taliban — may indeed have more support in Pakistan right now, and also from the likes of Saudi Arabia, but it's hard to imagine him championing Washington's agenda any more effectively than Zardari has done. (See pictures of Pakistani forces battling the Taliban in Swat Valley)

Should the politicians fail to agree on a new power sharing formula, prospects increase for a military takeover. While Army Chief of Staff General Ashfaq Kiyani — the most powerful man in Pakistan, who maintains his own close relationship with the U.S. — is said to have no appetite for political power, the spiraling social and political crisis could prompt him to oust the elected government and install an administration of technocrats. There's no sign of this happening yet, but it remains the only plausible alternative to either Zardari or Sharif. And, of course, the military has not exactly been gung-ho about taking the fight to the militants on its own turf. In short, there simply is no leadership in Pakistan willing or able to do much of what Washington would like a Pakistani leadership to do. Washington has no alternative but to back one or other of the flawed options, because the alternative could prove even more disastrous to U.S. interests.

NEXT: Afghanistan

Afghanistan: Karzai, for Better or Worse...

It's been an open secret for some years now that the U.S. deems President Hamid Karzai incapable of delivering the sort of governance essential to winning the war against the Taliban. His administration is notoriously corrupt, dependent on the support of unsavory warlords — some of whom are no more inclined to allow girls to go to school than is the Taliban — and may possibly even be in league with drug traffickers. And yet, this week's news that Gul Agha Sherzai, seen by many Western diplomats as a favored challenger to Karzai, had chosen not to stand in the August election seems to confirm that Washington has little alternative but to live with Karzai. (See a multimedia view of U.S. operations in Afghanistan)

Karzai underscored his disdain for U.S. preferences this week when he named as one of his running mates General Mohammed Fahim, a notorious warlord of the Northern Alliance. Washington had hoped to break the warlords' grip on power in Afghanistan; Karzai is for cementing the status quo. By way of consolation, the talk in Washington now is of bypassing Karzai as often as possible, working through approved members of his government in the capital and in the regions. But it's a potentially messy fix. Just as in Vietnam, the U.S. in Afghanistan finds itself fighting an implacable guerrilla foe on behalf of an unpopular government. And Karzai knows, as do his enemies, that America's appetite for long-term entanglement in Afghanistan is limited. They're positioning themselves for a post-U.S. era.

NEXT: Iraq

Iraq: Our Way, or Maliki's Way

Even since the U.S. gave Iraqis the right to democratically elect their own leaders, Iraq has been governed by Shi'ite Islamist parties arguably closer to Tehran than to Washington, and reluctant to govern according to the American script. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who succeeded Ibrahim al-Jaafari in April 2006, has proven adept at outfoxing rivals and building the foundations of a strongman regime rooted in the loyalty he has cultivated in the security and intelligence services. But his electoral power base remains rooted in the Shi'ite majority, and he has largely declined to implement the U.S. benchmarks for national reconciliation deemed essential for ending the civil war by strengthening the Sunni political stake in Baghdad. The oil law governing distribution of revenues has not been passed, nor have restrictions been significantly eased on former members of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist organization (the party remains popular among Sunnis) serving in government. Most alarming, perhaps, has been Maliki's departure from the U.S. strategy of putting former Sunni insurgents on the payroll through the "Awakening" militias that drove al-Qaeda out of many communities. (See pictures of post-surge life in Baghdad)

Maliki sees many of the Awakening leaders as unreconstructed Ba'athists, and his government appears to have declined to keep paying most of the fighters once Washington handed over responsibility for the program to the Iraqi authorities. Instead, the Maliki government has been arresting key Awakening leaders and unleashing military power when those actions provoke resistance. Maliki's determination to strip the Awakening of its power to challenge the government may not be unconnected with the recent uptick in violence in Iraq, as Awakening members abandon their posts or in some cases, return to the insurgent fold. Having concluded a Status of Forces Agreement with Washington last December that will have all U.S. troops out of his country by the end of 2011, Maliki appears less willing than ever to accept Washington's political tutelage. But the way he's doing things may not be the way the U.S. would want them to be done to allow for a satisfactory outcome in Iraq.

NEXT: Israel

Israel: Little Help from Bibi

President Obama believes it is critical to wider U.S. interests across the Middle East to urgently implement a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Indeed, he believes it is vital to Israel's own interest, even as the clock runs out on the viability of such a solution. However, Israel's new prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, sees things differently. Netanyahu has until now resisted the idea of an independent Palestinian state, arguing that the Palestinians should enjoy self-governance but without full sovereignty, because that would put Israel at risk. Anyway, he argues, the Palestinians' governance, security capability and level of economic development currently make talk of statehood hypothetical. Hamas rules Gaza and threatens the West Bank, where the Palestinian Authority of President Mahmoud Abbas is increasingly weak. (See pictures of the recent Gaza war)

Netanyahu says he wants peace with the Palestinians, but he sees the immediate priority as

strengthening economic development and the security capability of the Palestinian Authority. Even that, however, is of secondary importance for the Israeli Prime Minister. Netanyahu sees the overwhelming priority of both Israel and the U.S. as Iran, and he has made stopping Tehran's nuclear program his overarching priority. Defanging Iran, his aides argue, is also the key to any progress with the Palestinians, because the Israelis claim that Hamas is nothing more than an Iranian proxy. And while the Obama Administration has begun unfurling a strategy of engagement aimed at addressing the nuclear question and other points of tension with Iran, Netanyahu has warned that time is short and that Israel will act militarily if U.S. diplomacy fails to halt uranium enrichment in Iran. (The Pentagon fears that military action will be ineffective in stopping Iran from pursuing nuclear weapons, and would trigger an even more dangerous regional war.) While Netanyahu — like Maliki, Karzai and Zardari — will likely utter the platitudes Washington expects of him, he's unlikely to actually move forward with implementing Washington's policy. And he may be counting on Israel's strong bipartisan support on Capitol Hill to minimize pressure from Obama to act against his instincts.

NEXT: The Palestinian Authority

Palestinian Authority: Just Who's in Charge?

Unlike Netanyahu, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas is fully committed to the two-state solution being championed by the Obama Administration. The problem, however, is that Abbas is plainly no longer representative of those on whose behalf he negotiates — and that means he has precious little ability to deliver on any promises he makes to the Israelis or Americans. His term of office formally expired in January, and that month's Israeli offensive in Gaza reduced his popularity to an all-time low. Were a new Palestinian election to be held today, it's doubtful that Abbas would even win the nomination of his own Fatah party, much less be able to beat a Hamas candidate at the polls. Hamas remains the majority party in the Palestinian legislature; it controls all of Gaza following a violent showdown in 2007 that saw Abbas' supporters ejected from power. Hamas may also be even more popular than Fatah in the Abbas-controlled West Bank, where free political activity is suppressed by Israeli and Palestinian security forces. (See pictures of Gaza after Israel's offensive)

The Gaza war made clear to all sides that Hamas could not be eliminated, and that everything from the urgent business of rebuilding the shattered territory to negotiating a peace deal with Israel could not be done without the organization's consent. Hence the current efforts to broker a unity government backed by both Fatah and Hamas. But as things stand, the U.S. wants that government to endorse the same principles it has demanded that Hamas embrace as a precondition for recognition: Recognize Israel, renounce violence and abide by previous agreements. No dice, says Hamas, which has its own ideas about how to achieve peace, but on terms the Israelis are unlikely to accept. With Hamas in the ascendancy and the U.S.-allied Abbas in the weaker position, the Administration will likely struggle to implement its vision at both ends of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.