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Time to change the rules of Karzai's great game

By Greg Mills

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The campaign in Afghanistan has for nearly a decade failed to appreciate the importance of Afghan politics. As the country waits for parliamentary elections this weekend, this problem now threatens to undo such limited pro-gress as has been made by US president Barack Obama's troop increase.

The military is not at fault; far from it. From the outset, the notion that political control could be exerted countrywide by a new government in Kabul was naive. It was similar folly to believe that Afghanistan's system of patronage politics, run along tribal lines, would change. In fact, the Taliban's removal emboldened the activities of local warlords – now politely termed “power-brokers”.

Hamid Karzai, Afghan president, has been a virtuoso, playing the capitals of Nato like a violin – rising and falling in shrill volume, always one tune ahead of the west. “Karzai has seen 13 International Security Assistance Force commanders, five UN special representatives, and five US ambassadors come and go,” says one foreigner who has lived in Afghanistan since 2002. “He has seen it all before. He can sit around and dictate things on his timescale.”

Mr Karzai spends his energy playing to domestic galleries, and blaming the west and Pakistan for his country's plight. He has largely avoided scrutiny of both his family's finances and his record on the real stuff of development – jobs, health, education and

agriculture. His allies, including his brother Ahmed Wali Karzai, meanwhile, make a small fortune dealing with the western military.

Gushing foreign aid, politicised governance and a violent insurgency have cemented Afghanistan's culture of impunity. The banking crisis is only the latest example. This month Kabul Bank, the nation's largest private bank with more than a million customers and \$1bn in deposits, faced a run on its reserves. This came after revelations that its bosses, as well as another of the president's brothers, Mahmoud Karzai, had benefited from the purchase of \$160m worth of Dubai property.

Curbing the activities of such power-brokers, while also using the stability they and their private militias offer, is now the problem at the heart of establishing a new governance regime – one in which Afghans can go about their lives free from the threat of violence. How to play the government and the power-brokers better will be the decisive question of this campaign. Better politics, not an Iraqi-style surge, is the only way to win.

This will involve forcing the power-brokers to accept new responsibilities in exchange for recognition – even if this means elevating them to official positions where there is greater scrutiny. A functioning tax system is part and parcel of creating a national development regime and holding the wealthy to account. New rules to check on tax payments, along with broad-based ownership and procurement rules, would also help to keep tabs on those profiting from Isaf contracts.

Playing this great game better than their Afghan hosts demands better understanding on the part of western politicians, the sort of knowledge not garnered by two-day fact-finding trips and episodic summits. Greater unity of effort between western capitals is also required for the brinkmanship needed to push Mr Karzai. In future, continued western assistance, and the ongoing cost in lives and material, should come with clear political strings attached. For starters, Mr Karzai should be told to stop publicly criticising the strategy of the nations supporting him. Isaf logistic contracts to his supporters (worth over \$2bn) should be one pressure point, along with other elements of the \$90bn-worth of annual development and military assistance. Isaf members also must guard against parochial national “ownership” of bits of the battle space. It is time the UK, for example, left Helmand and took on another job, such as Kandahar.

Troop surges, diplomacy and development are all means to allow a new stable environment to take root. But like other counter-insurgency operations, Afghanistan is a political, not a military, campaign. Both western and Afghan leaders need to be held to account on this score. And the west must use the image, reputation and honour of its Afghan partners to cajole and shame them into playing a more constructive role.