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## Playing Chicken in Kabul

By Rajan Menon

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As American troops withdraw from Afghanistan to fulfill President Obama's commitment to wind up the war by the end of next year, Kabul and Washington are engaged in a game of chicken as they negotiate the terms of a strategic partnership that would allow a "residual force" of U.S. military advisers and Special Operations Forces to remain beyond 2013.

Two issues are particularly contentious. Washington wants the pact to permit the continuation of "night raids," used by the U.S. military to capture or kill Taliban insurgents and Al Qaeda operatives, while Afghan president Hamid Karzai wants them stopped. While there's no love lost between Karzai and the Taliban, who denounce him as an American puppet, he knows that ordinary Afghans resent the raids. They don't much like having their doors kicked down, their premises searched, their family members roughed up, and their kids terrified by big men who brandish weapons and are obviously not late-arriving dinner guests. Then there's the risk of getting shot. The anger aroused by the raids is understandable. How tolerant would we be if foreign troops routinely stormed our homes in the dead of night? Washington has offered to let Afghan troops lead a progressively larger proportion of the raids, but that hasn't broken the deadlock.

The other dispute concerns authority over prisoners suspected of belonging to the Taliban or Al Qaeda, and the focal point is the U.S.-run Parwan Detention Facility -- named for the province in which it is located -- near Bagram airbase north of Kabul. Constructed at a cost of \$60 million and opened at the end of 2009, it replaced the makeshift jail at Bagram that the U.S. fashioned

from hangars remaining at the Soviet-built base. Within Parwan's walls are some 3,000 inmates who are being held indefinitely and without access to due process. After initially insisting that Taliban and Al Qaeda prisoners remain under its control, Washington is now offering to let Afghans assume responsibility by year's end. But Kabul opposes any delay.

Two considerations explain the American position: the first is the fear that Afghan personnel are not yet capable of preventing prisoners from escaping, the second is that detainees will be abused, creating political capital for the Taliban and Al Qaeda. While the latter concern may seem odd given that prisoners were mistreated at Bagram and that a recent Afghan inquiry commission complained that the problem persists at Parwan, the Obama administration believes conditions would deteriorate were Afghans to take over. For its part, the Karzai government is determined to end the arrangement that allows Americans to run the show and to decide when, if ever, detainees will be freed. Kabul's argument: our land, our law.

The Afghans are driving a hard bargain on both issues -- the night raids and the prisons -- for several reasons. To begin with, Karzai does not trust the United States, and he is even more leery now that he sees American troops leaving. He is particularly worried that the U.S. will take the lead role in negotiations with the Taliban and, in its eagerness to exit, cut a deal, sticking him with any adverse consequences resulting from its terms. Moreover, Karzai knows that while the United States can choose to leave Afghanistan, Afghanistan cannot choose its location, which happens to be in between Pakistan and Iran. Neither Iran nor Pakistan -- or China and Russia for that matter -- wants an agreement that enables a long-term American military presence in Afghanistan. That's because both want as free a hand as possible to shape Afghanistan's future, no matter their divergent interests, and Karzai understands that their already-considerable influence will increase once Americans forces depart. Then there's the recent spate of anti-American rallies and violence sparked by the burning of Korans taken from Parwan prisoners. In its wake, Karzai can ill afford to sign an agreement that appears to undercut Afghan sovereignty. That would hand propaganda points to the Taliban while making him even more unpopular than he is already.

The U.S. has been playing it cool in response to the Afghan government's tough stance, intimating that the Afghans are the ones who need a strategic partnership because it's their security that's at stake. The problem with this gambit is that for over a decade Afghans have heard two American presidents, the leaders of the Democratic and Republican parties, and a chorus of U.S. experts proclaim that the return of Taliban rule and Al Qaeda redoubts in Afghanistan would jeopardize American security and thus cannot be allowed. In short, Afghans know that whatever the United States is doing, and will do, in their country stems from self-interest, not benevolence or self-sacrifice.

A compromise rendered in the usual diplomatese that allows all parties to a dispute to claim victory is still possible. Yet what the haggling highlights is that Afghans and their neighbors are preparing for a post-American Afghanistan and that Washington's influence, no matter what U.S. officials assert, is diminishing rapidly. This may be the only issue on which everyone in Afghanistan and its rivalry-ridden region can agree.