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## Karzai ain't walking into the sunset

By M K Bhadrakumar

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Afghan President Hamid Karzai took a big step last Sunday to fulfill his part of the deal with the United States to conclude a strategic pact that would provide for long-term American military presence in the region. And as quid pro quo he would expect to get an extended lease of political life beyond 2014 when his second and final term as president is due to end.

Karzai has proved a smart politician. He raised the pitch of rhetoric as an Afghan nationalist and insisted he wouldn't sign a pact unless the American forces ceased all "night raids" on Afghan homes (which is a very explosive issue for Afghan men). The American side played ball and didn't relent. A public spat continued through months and the more the American side kept refusing, the more Karzai's image as a nationalist got burnished.

He finally scored a resounding win when the Americans decided that it was about time he won.

On Sunday, a memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed in Kabul that governs "night raids" in Afghanistan. Afghan Defense Minister Abdul Rahim Wardak and the commander of the US forces in Afghanistan, General John Allen, signed the MoU, around which a lot of hype has been created. "This is a landmark day in rule of law," Allen said, claiming that Afghans are now "in the lead on two of the most important issues: capturing the terrorists and ensuring they remain behind bars."

Wardak matched the rhetoric: "From today onwards Afghan Special Operations Unit, which is

comprised of Afghan National Army, Afghan National Police and National Directorate of Security personnel, will lead all special operations across the country with the full respect for Afghan sovereignty, Afghan laws and the Afghan constitution."

Clearly, the main objective of the MoU lies elsewhere. The MoU makes possible hitting the deadline of signing the bigger US-Afghan strategic pact before a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit in Chicago in May. Wardak duly acknowledged this when he said, "Inking this agreement is a positive step towards finalizing the Strategic Partnership Agreement between the two countries."

### **No change on the ground**

Allen concurred. "Today we are one important step closer to our shared goal of a secure and sovereign Afghanistan. Together we will realize this vision," he said. The Afghan government and the US forces had also signed another MoU in Kabul in early March on the handing over of a main US detention center or Bagram prison to the control of the Afghan side after six months, which too was an issue that agitated the Afghan public.

"In conjunction with the Detentions MoU we signed last month, today's MOU gives tangible expression to the vision of the Afghan *loya jirga* [grand assembly] and to the will of the Afghan people," Allen said.

In sum, we are expected to believe that the Americans blinked and Karzai won hands down. The US administration went out of the way to let it be known that although a superpower, it was bending before Karzai.

A report in the Wall Street Journal on March 20 quoted US military officials as saying that the Pentagon saw the night raids as essential to its Afghan strategy and that 2,500 raids had been carried out last year. The Washington Post explained that the MoU made little difference on the ground:

Washington says that the foreigner-dominated raids that Karzai so frequently condemns are already a rarity. More than 97 percent of night operations are combined operations involving Afghan forces and almost 40 percent of night operations are now Afghan-led. However, it's unclear whether Afghan forces have so far had much authority even in operations that are nominally "Afghan-led". Sometimes this designation means only that an Afghan soldier is first through the door, or that officials have rubber stamped a mission just as it starts.

The definition of a "special operation" is left vague ... it leaves open the possibility of other types of unilateral US operations that don't involve going into homes. CIA conducts operations in Afghanistan outside of the military's purview, and it's not clear whether they would be affected. Indeed, an MoU falls short of a full-fledged agreement, and in diplomatic terms, it is a mere articulation of mutual intentions. Sunday's agreement is largely symbolic and it would make little difference at the operational level.

### **'Aha, how do I react?'**

According to Pentagon spokesman Captain John Kirby, what the MoU has done is to codify the

way the night raids have been conducted: "This is not about [giving Afghan officials] a veto at all." He explained that the US forces will enjoy the leeway to conduct night raids even without obtaining permission from the Afghan authorities if it is deemed that "quick-reaction" is warranted.

So, what is all the brouhaha about? The Stars and Stripes quoted Rick Nelson, a senior expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. He said the US "always reserves the ability to act unilaterally. The rhetoric may not line up with that, however, because we have the need for an agreement [read strategic pact on military bases] beyond 2014."

Washington is already looking past the MoU. Marc Grossman, US special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan said on Tuesday that the pact will signal to the Afghans and the regional powers that "there is going to be an American presence in Afghanistan for some time to come."

He taunted, "So, Afghans, the Taliban, the region, including Iran, will then say, 'Aha, well now, how do I react to that?'" The uncharacteristic tone of triumphalism on the part of Grossman, a low-profile diplomat, reflects the rising confidence in Washington that the strategic pact leading to the establishment of the US bases in Afghanistan is a done thing now.

How Karzai delivers on the dotted line is his problem, but Washington has developed a sneaking admiration for his capacity as a wheeler-dealer. Grossman has proved to be more effective than his illustrious predecessor, Richard Holbrooke, in reading the complicated mind of Karzai.

But the trust deficit continues; it dates back to the 2009 presidential election when Karzai suspected that the late Holbrooke stabbed him in the back. Karzai has come a long way and knows that an unwritten understanding in politics is worthless.

Therefore, he has lost no time to bring to the center stage the key element of his package deal with Washington. On Thursday, he raised the prospect of an early presidential election in Afghanistan in 2013 even before his current term ends in May 2014. His rationale is that he doesn't want the holding of a national election in Afghanistan in 2014 at the same time that North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces would be leaving Afghanistan, as that would be a "heavy agenda".

### **'Our' puppet**

Significantly, Karzai chose a joint press conference with the visiting NATO secretary general Anders Fogh Rasmussen in Kabul on Thursday to pose the big issue: "Can we bring either the [NATO] transition and the return of international forces to 2013 ... or should we allow the transition process to complete itself in 2014, but bring the presidential election one year earlier to 2013? This is a question that I have had."

All indications are that the US and NATO would like the election being brought forward to 2013. What lies ahead is going to be political theater of the highest grade. Under the constitution, Karzai will be expected to get a two-thirds approval from the fractious Afghan parliament for shifting the date of the presidential election, and an endorsement by a *loya jirga*. It is a tough call.

An interesting question arises: Did Karzai complete his second term as president or not? The constitution forbids him from contesting for a third term. But what if the second term is deemed "unfinished"? This is precisely the sort of gray zone that Karzai would relish to interpret.

It is the sort of tantalizing poser that Afghan elders and the tribal leaders burdened by notions of honor and justice and fair play would be hard-pressed to overlook. There could be the obdurate political opposition crying murder at the thought of Karzai tiptoeing toward a third term in office. But then, he knows how to finesse them. Karzai is a grandmaster of coalition-building.

The US wouldn't mind all this happening. For one thing, it keeps the Afghans busy while Washington secures the establishment of the military bases. Besides, the US is way past the point of caring. There is a willingness to accept that Afghanistan has its native habits of public governance and it is futile to expect them to change even if Karzai were to walk into the sunset.

Karzai proved to be a predictable puppet - unlike that other tricky customer in Mesopotamia. It all comes back to Richard Nixon's famous words: Karzai is "our" puppet. Who else could have mounted the high horse of Afghan nationalism to manipulate a national consensus on the establishment of US military bases so soon after the American troops urinated on Afghans, burned their Korans and killed their women and children?