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Hamid Karzai: No Ordinary Puppet

By Kelley B. Vlahos

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Hamid Karzai, he of the signature Karakul hat and brightly colored robes, we hardly knew ye.

Karzai, upon whom the Queen of England once bestowed an honorary knighthood, we barely recognize you.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai

Karzai, for whom we have overlooked the drugs, the money laundering, the election fraud, the jailing of your own women – where did you go?

Why, he is right here, just as he's always been – and now he holds the very fate of Afghanistan in his smooth, soft hands. And frankly, Washington, it's your own damn fault.

The Obama Administration inherited Afghan President Karzai from the Bush Administration, for sure. But Obama's brain trust decided early-on to ignore the rampant election rigging, corruption and hypocrisy in exchange for surging 30,000 more American soldiers (plus tens of thousands of contractors, CIA, and State Department personnel) into what has since become the failed COIN dream of then-Gen. David Petraeus (who is, conveniently, long gone from the scene).

The elaborate web of compromises forged over the last decade has left Karzai holding all the face cards: he's got a huge, American-trained military at his disposal, tons of personal wealth thanks to the US taxpayer, and the prospect of NATO protection against his enemies until he is replaced in the upcoming election and makes for Dubai where his family fortunes await.

If there is a better leader waiting in the wings, he or she has yet to show themselves – the most recent elections in 2009 were a joke — therefore, the US has always had to rely on Karzai. Even if Washington were to try to nudge him out (it's been done before), no one has been cultivated to take his place. For his part, Karzai has bought off all his rivals – a decade's worth. Now the *murghah* have come home to roost.

The Tunneler, from the movie “The Puppetmaster”

Karzai has been called a puppet. He's no puppet – unless you're thinking of The Tunneler from the *Puppetmaster* film series, a monster creation that ends up turning on his ill-fated puppeteer later in the franchise. If Karzai is a puppet, he is a naughty one indeed.

Surely he has used the United States as much as it used him. He was able to count on the military to quash his enemies and to hold the Taliban at bay (at least in Kabul, which for years seemed to be his only dominion, thus the nickname, "Mayor of Kabul").

When he needs to show his independence, Karzai calls attention to civilian casualties and accuses US Special Forces of atrocities (though he has never really asserted his authority in this front, at least not until this year, when he forced US forces out of Wardak province). Meanwhile, Karzai chose not to tamp down the riots after Pastor Terry Jones' infamous Koran burning, in fact, he even fueled them. He's accused the US of colluding with the Taliban to stay in the country. When the specter of corruption is raised – and it is often – he typically demurs, even when the notorious Kabul Bank — tied to both Karzai's family and his inner circle of friends — was accused of a \$900 million Ponzi scheme that led to suitcases of money being spirited out the country (and into, you guessed it, elaborate Dubai investments).

Furthermore, he never went after the drug lords and their poppy palaces – again, tied to his friends and former warlords – with any level of tenacity, and when billions in American cash went missing after the 2001 invasion, Karzai reportedly stymied efforts to find out what happened to it.

Attempts to befriend and work with Karzai on a personal level appear futile too. Supposedly, he had a good relationship with President George W. Bush, but then again, *everybody* who supported the war in those days were "buddies" with W. He set Karzai up with the boondoggle of a lifetime, and Karzai gave him the keys to the country. A lot of good that did anyone.

Karzai and President Bush, in 2008

As for military leaders, Karzai reportedly had a particular fondness for Gen. Stanley McChrystal, even defending him after Michael Hastings' *Rolling Stone* profile brought McChrystal down. Karzai called him the "best commander" the US had ever sent to Afghanistan, which is rich,

because McChrystal is the godfather of all those Special Forces Karzai has accused of atrocities in places like Wardak. But Stan-the-Man wasn't there to pave the road for future negotiations, he just wanted to get as many troops into the country as possible. As Hastings' wrote, "the doctrine of counterinsurgency requires a credible government, and since Karzai is not considered credible by his own people, McChrystal has worked hard to make him so."

As for Dick "the bulldozer" Holbrooke, one could say Karzai and the Graveyard of Empires dilemma drove him to heartbreak, and even an early death. Karzai apparently marginalized Holbrooke, and a fickle White House inner circle soon followed suit. The worst came when McChrystal's humiliating comments about Holbrooke surfaced in Hastings' article.

Afghanistan was one war Holbrooke couldn't end, and The Tunneler, he just burrowed in for one four more years, election fairness be damned. The Obama Administration not only acquiesced, but said nothing when Peter Galbriath, deputy head of the UN Mission in Kabul, was fired for trying to draw attention to the massive irregularities in the 2009 election.

So now Karzai is looking out for himself as his own presidency comes to an end (next spring), and he is faced with preserving his legacy and Afghan respect, and hopefully staving off a Taliban takeover of his country. Not surprisingly, he doesn't want to be the one to ask the US to stay after 2014, but he doesn't want to deliver an unequivocal "no" either, thus his latest request that the critical Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) not be signed until *after* next April's elections. The White House says no way, and even the Afghan *loya jirga*, which is made up of mostly government officials and already approved the security measure, say he is pushing it too far.

Bottom line, Karzai does this because he knows the US ain't going nowhere. From Kate Clark, at the Afghanistan Analysts Network:

The Americans, like everyone else, are trying to understand what President Karzai's game plan is. Certainly, if and when he signs the BSA, he loses the influence of a leader still negotiating the fate of his country. What he risks by holding out seems obvious – the complete withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan. Yet this threat falls on deaf ears if, as his spokesman has said, he does not believe in the reality of the 'zero option'. Instead, Karzai appears to believe that the US wants to stay in Afghanistan come 'hell or high water', as, for example, when he told a delighted BBC/RTA television audience in March 2013: "The USA has come and will not go. Therefore, ask for your demands from it with no worries."

Reportedly, the US is seriously mulling the "zero option" – a complete withdrawal of all troops by the end of next year – if Karzai does not sign the BSA by January. But as Clark points out, "The threat of a 'zero option' has also been watered down by mixed messages and the downplaying of it by some US officials" in the press. Meanwhile, military establishment mavens like Maj. Gen. Robert Scales have blowing wind all over the airwaves about the need to keep boots on the ground there.

"We must stay in Afghanistan because it will be our national interest to do so," he said in an op-ed for FOXNews.com. At the top of his list of reasons why: a possible Al Qaeda resurgence.

Then there is the "total chaos" that would occur if westerners picked up and left. Then there is our ability to launch drone strikes and other counter-terrorism efforts into neighboring Pakistan, and finally, the need to "keep an eye on Iran."

Therein lies the crux of why Karzai tools with the White House so much as though he can get away with it. Because he can. Over a year ago, national security reporter Spencer Ackerman, who was then writing for *Wired*, made some keen observations about the developing security agreement in April 2012:

To be blunt: Afghanistan is valuable to the United States because it's the most logical place from which to conduct a war in Pakistan that's primarily fought by armed drones and occasionally special operations forces. ...

Rumors have circulated for months in defense circles that the US wants to retain a few bases ... They include Bagram airfield, a huge aerial hub near Kabul; the airfields at Kandahar in the south and Jalalabad in the east, places where armed drones heading for Pakistan already take off; and perhaps a brigade-sized base called Salerno in Khost Province, just barely west of the Pakistan border and Mazar-e-Sharif, a transit and resupply hub in the north. ...

... all this gives Karzai a lot of leverage. He'll be, in essence, a landlord for the US military. And as long as the US wants to wage its shadow war in Pakistan – a war it does not seem interested in ending – he can set his rent as high as he likes.

Not to mention that if the US packs up and leaves right now it will have truly lost the war. At least in Iraq they made it look like they were handing over the keys to a strong ruler and a rising democracy (Nouri al-Maliki, another puppet? Please. Only if you're thinking about this guy).

But in Afghanistan, the "zero option" will come only with complete failure to negotiate, and then there is no mistaking the emptiness of it all. Nearly 3,500 coalition deaths, tens of thousands wounded, countless Afghans dead, maimed and victimized. And for what? The US won't even be able to count Afghanistan as one of its "lily pads," much less a strategic partner in the region. Epic Fail.

No one really thinks Karzai will let it get that far. He knows that without coalition assistance, the Afghan security forces may be swiftly overtaken by the insurgency, much like with the Soviets decided to pack up and leave wholesale in 1989. "The last time a superpower withdrew its army and subsequently cut off payments to the Afghan security forces in the face of an active insurgency, the state did not hold together," writes Clark.

So for now the game of *Murghah*, or chicken, rolls on. And despite the threats of "zero option" or even, as *The Los Angeles Times* reported over the weekend, ideas of bypassing Karzai altogether to get the BSA signed, it would seem Karzai knows what he is doing. If the US goal is to keep Afghanistan as a staging ground in Central Asia, it'll do whatever it takes.