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US wants to clip Karzai's wings

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The US is using the ethnic card to "entrap" Karzai and bring the Afghan leader to his knees

The United States' proxy war against Afghan President Hamid Karzai has taken a vicious turn, undermining the tenuous political equations in the country. Washington is displeased with Karzai's moves to accelerate reconciliation with the Taliban, while his pitch for a regional initiative and his agenda of a multi-vector foreign policy challenge US regional strategies.

The US is caricaturing Karzai as a tin-pot dictator, arguing that he is "anti-democratic" since he decided to postpone by a month the convening of a new parliament. The election commission cleared the election results and Karzai's reluctance to accept the results casts him in poor light.

However, Karzai has no choice but to order a special tribunal to review election results. Close to half of the population consists of ethnic Pashtuns and yet 75% of parliamentary seats have been "won" by non-Pashtuns. The Hazaras constitute 10% of the population, but they "won" 20% of the seats, including in Pashtun-dominated regions.

Something has gone very seriously wrong. Conceivably, the election commission did come under extraneous influence, as alleged by the attorney general. A parliament on the basis of the available results lacks political legitimacy, as Pashtuns will feel disenfranchised. Karzai rightly apprehends that Pashtun alienation, which is at the root of the insurgency, would further deepen and that can only augment Taliban's support base.

Enter the Americans. Washington waded into these ethnic politics by encouraging non-Pashtun leaders to challenge Karzai's decision to have the election results reviewed by a special tribunal. The American ambassador in Kabul, Karl Eikenberry, and his Western colleagues threatened to attend a gathering of the elected parliamentarians and recognize it as the "real" parliament. This extraordinary "trade unionism" by Western diplomats can only be seen as an orchestrated move predicated on the calculation that Karzai is damned either way. If he convenes a parliament at this juncture, the US proxies who command a majority will incrementally weaken him and can even impeach him at some suitable moment.

But if Karzai insists on greater Pashtun representation, it becomes a point of friction with the non-Pashtun groups, and the delicate web of pan-Afghan alliances that he tenaciously wove while consolidating political power over the past two to three years will unravel.

Plainly put, the US is using the ethnic card to "entrap" Karzai and bring the Afghan leader to his knees. The US is counting on the opposition candidate in the 2009 presidential election, Abdullah Abdullah, and the speaker of the outgoing parliament, Younus Qanooni, to spearhead the opposition to Karzai. The Washington establishment has also co-opted former Afghan intelligence chief Amrullah Saleh, who was sacked by Karzai last year.

Abdullah, Qanooni and Saleh belong to the Panjshiri clan and the line-up has dangerous overtones of a (Tajik) revolt against (Pashtun) Karzai. The US is also instigating sections of Hazaras whose political influence is at its historical zenith today.

Why such venom?

Besides weakening Karzai, the US hopes to deal a body blow to the Afghan leader's initiative to kick start an intra-Afghan dialogue. Karzai is banking on a pan-Afghan alliance to support his audacious plan to reconcile the Taliban, and the US is using the ethnic card to unravel Karzai's alliance system.

Why such venom toward America's own one-time protégé? Washington finds Karzai increasingly acting as an Afghan nationalist rather than as a US surrogate. What is at issue is how to secure a long-term US military presence in Afghanistan. Washington is negotiating a new Status of Forces Agreement with Kabul but Karzai is resisting the US plan to keep permanent military bases. US Vice President Joe Biden's visit to Kabul last month failed to clear the deadlock.

Meanwhile, Karzai is making sustained efforts to develop ties with Iran and Russia, including military cooperation, so as to reduce his dependence on the US by the 2014 timeline. Moscow has proposed a key role for Kabul in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Last week, Karzai visited Moscow and openly said that the Russians made better friends for the Afghan people than the Americans. This was the first official visit by an Afghan head of a state to Moscow since the departure of Soviet troops in 1989. The US reportedly tried to dissuade Karzai from undertaking the visit.

Karzai also recently deputed former Northern Alliance stalwarts Burhanuddin Rabbani (who heads the Afghan High Council for Peace in charge of reconciling with the Taliban) and Mohammad Fahim (the first vice president) to Tehran to seek Iranian support for his policies.

Most importantly, the climate of Afghan-Pakistan relations has dramatically improved and the US feels "excluded" even as Kabul and Islamabad show signs of kick-starting an intra-Afghan dialogue. The recent visit to Islamabad by Rabbani underscored a new flexibility on the part of Pakistan.

Army chief General Ashfaq Kiani received Rabbani. Biden visited Islamabad within days of Rabbani's talks with the Pakistani leadership but he drew a blank. Evidently, Islamabad and Kabul increasingly find themselves sharing a lot of common ground. Neither one favors US General David Petraeus' military strategy and both are keen to begin talks with the Taliban.

Within a week of Biden's talks in Islamabad, Pakistani Foreign Secretary Salman Bashir flew to Kabul and held more consultations, which included calls on Karzai and Rabbani. Afghan Foreign Minister Zalmay Rassoul is now scheduled to visit Islamabad on Tuesday for a follow-up.

Kabul and Islamabad are getting along better than at any time in the past decade and they don't seem to need the crutch of US mediation. By the time the US-Pakistan-Afghan trilateral forum of foreign ministers convenes in Washington on February 21, there could be a strange reversal of roles with Pakistan and Afghanistan coordinating their stance vis-a-vis the US.

Clearly, the specter of a peace initiative on the Afghan problem at a regional level has begun haunting Washington for the first time. Biden openly flirted with the idea of a long-term American military presence in Afghanistan. Middle-level US officials have shifted gear to reinforce Biden's thought process. A recent speech entitled "The Obama Administration's Priorities in South and Central Asia" by Assistant Secretary of State Robert Blake at the James A Baker III Institute for Public Policy falls into this category.

Red rag, intransigent bull

Blake underscored that Washington intends to expand its engagement with Central Asia, "this critical region", which is situated at a "critical crossroads, bordering Afghanistan, China, Russia and Iran".

What emerges from Blake's speech is that Washington and Delhi may have drawn closer on Afghanistan. Arguably, this was bound to happen. India is perhaps the only regional power that still seeks a military solution in Afghanistan. India quietly favors a long-term US military presence in Afghanistan. The US is edging toward the one-dimensional Indian view of Pakistan as the "epicenter" of global terrorism.

The US views India as a red rag to taunt the intransigent Pakistani bull and India may not mind it. Blake made a stunning claim that India is the key US partner in Afghanistan and Central Asia: These projects with India in Afghanistan mark a small but important part of a significant new global development - the emergence of a global strategic partnership between India and the US ... India's democracy, diversity and knowledge-based society make it special, a model of a tolerant pluralistic society in the region, and one that now actively seeks to work with the US and others to help solve problems on a global level ... The strength of India's economy makes it the powerhouse of South and Central Asia's growth.

He said one of the three "primary objectives" for the US in the "dynamic regional context" of South and Central Asia would be to "build a strategic partnership with India". This may seem like hyperbole, but it makes for geo-strategy.

The Americans are feeling rather lonely in the Hindu Kush and India too faces isolation, as it stands excluded, on Pakistan's insistence, from the regional forums working on the Afghan problem. Neither Washington nor Delhi feels comfortable with the Kabul-Islamabad bonhomie. Both the US and India view the Afghan endgame through the prism of their rivalry with China.

Then, there are the opaque operational factors. India wields influence with the "Panjshiri boys" who happen to be the current US proxies. Saleh figures as a key advisor to the security establishment in Washington, while Abdullah and Qanooni act as front men in Kabul. All three share a near-pathological aversion to Karzai and are viscerally opposed to any form of accommodation with Taliban. Pakistan brands Saleh as an "Indian agent". If the American ploy is to annoy the Pakistani military (and Karzai), there couldn't be a better choice than Saleh.

Any US-India axis in Afghanistan can only be tactical, but it will nonetheless be seen as high provocation by Pakistan and Iran (possibly, also by Russia and China). Pakistan will feel more justified than ever to have placed such irrevocable faith in the Taliban as its "strategic asset".

The US will eventually realize that it is skating on thin ice. There are half-a-dozen very good reasons why Pakistan remains and will continue to remain central to any durable Afghan settlement. Karzai will prove to be as tough as a nail. Thus, in many ways, the US proxy war in Kabul promises to be a defining moment.