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To Understand Kabul, Look First to Bonn

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It took the Obama administration most of the President's first year in office to settle on a strategy for Afghanistan. Whether the delay was due to meticulousness or intensiveness probably doesn't matter. The policy is likely to fail anyway. The reason will be the failure to change the policies put in place during the so-called 'Bonn Process.'

In October 2001, the U.S.-led international community assembled a group of Afghans in Bonn, Germany to form a government that would be flown to Kabul to replace the Taliban once the latter had been driven out of the capital. The idea was laudable. Rapidly filling the power vacuum after the Taliban's departure was crucial to avoid chaos. Representing the United States at the Bonn Conference, Afghan-American diplomat Zalmay Khalilzad steered the conference toward appointing his close friend, Hamid Karzai, President of Afghanistan. Subsequently, Karzai and Khalilzad guided the crafting of an archaic constitution and had it approved by the so-called Loya Jirga, or great assembly, a medieval and inherently undemocratic institution.

Warlords returned to Kabul for a piece of the action. Attempts at democratization came to a complete halt. Chaos and lawlessness took hold. Corruption became endemic. Most of the billions earmarked for economic reconstruction never reached its destination. Poppy cultivation grew from zero in 2001 to 90% of global production. The Obama administration's first strategy (developed under the direction of Bruce Riedel, a senior political analyst at the Brookings Institution) should have proposed the resignation of President Karzai at the end of his tenure on May 20, 2009. Then, a transitional government could have been formed with the task of

rewriting the defective constitution, introducing a civil and commercial code that would reflect the legal and ethical norms of the 21st Century, and clean up the government, eliminating the power of warlords over the bureaucracy. Only then, the transitional government should prepare the ground for elections.

Instead, Mr. Riedel based his strategy on the premise that immediate elections would produce a legitimate government that could partner with Washington in implementing the three-pronged 'political, economic and military' approach. How anyone could be convinced that the U.S. and its allies could oversee 7,000 polling stations scattered over a 250,000-square-mile country, 70% of which was under insurgent control, is quite inconceivable.

Mr. Riedel belatedly agrees that the Karzai regime is not a reliable partner for Washington to work with. Answering a question at Jamestown Foundation on December 9, he said the Karzai government 'looks illegitimate' to him. Afghanistan's fraudulent August 20, 2009 election forced the Obama administration to rethink its strategy. Speaking at the Brookings Institution on December 15, 2009, Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, called this second round of deliberations the 'most methodical revue of policy' of his career. Remarkably, after all the time devoted to a new plan, President Obama's advisers made the same strategic mistake. Instead of forcing the now disgraced Afghan president to retire and then assist the Afghans to form a transitional government, Ambassador Holbrooke pushed for a runoff election. The runoff never happened. But the process helped Hamid Karzai to gain yet another term.

Washington officials would like the public in the U.S. to believe that Mr. Karzai has been talked to in earnest, and he would form a government that would take into account of the interests of both his own nation and the international community. Let's look at a few of President Karzai's ministerial nominations. In the first list he submitted to the Afghan parliament for approval, Ismail Khan had been reappointed minister of energy and water, the department he had been running since 2004. Khan was among the seventeen ministers'out of a total of twenty-four'the parliament rejected. In the new list of ministerial appointees submitted on January 9th, Minister Khan is not mentioned but will continue at the post as caretaker minister'one way of avoiding parliamentary approval and keeping Khan in the government.

It is difficult to understand what Minister Khan has done since 2004. What we do know is that today, six years into his management of the energy sector, the vast majority of Kabul's residents have no electricity during the day and nighttime service is spotty at best. But when it comes to payoffs, Ismail Khan is quite famous for his efficacy. He broke all the rules of a competitive bidding to deny the winner the contract for the supply over thirty large generator sets and award it to an Iranian company of his choice. After several years, only a few generators have been delivered, reportedly all used machines that Iran had purchased some twenty years ago for its own uses. As far back as 2003, The New York Times reported that Ismail Khan was making US\$ 400 million a year off charges on goods transiting his territory.

One January 9th, Mr. Karzai submitted his second list of ministerial nominations to parliament for approval. Let us look at two of the nominees: Salmay Rasul, nominated to become minister of foreign affairs, and Zarar Mohammad Moqbel, nominated to head the Ministry of Counter

Narcotics.

Mr. Rasul, the nominee for the important Ministry of Foreign Affairs, claims to be a physician. A cursory investigation placed him for a brief time in Saudi Arabia where he worked in a hospital, apparently as a medical technician not as a licensed medical doctor. The inquiry also placed him in the U.S. in the early 1990s where he tried but failed to pass the required examination to practice medicine in America.

What is clear, however, is that he was close to Qayoum Karzai, President Karzai's elder brother. In the 2001 Bonn conference and with the support of Zalmay Khalilzad and the Karzai brothers, he was made head of the presidential security council with a ministerial rank. He has held that post for eight years, a time in which the world has witnessed the almost total collapse of security in Afghanistan.

Mr. Moqbel, the nominee for the Ministry of Counter Narcotics, is a warlord who several years ago was made minister of the interior but was forced out of that position in view of the high degree of corruption and incompetence within that ministry.

Seen from President Karzai's perspective, these appointments should not be surprising. He likes to work with warlords and his close friends regardless of their ethics and abilities. The past eight years can testify to that. He probably feels akin to them and shares their values. But what does Ambassador Richard Holbrooke think about the situation? On December 15, 2009, Michael Gordon of The New York Times asked him at a function at the Council of Foreign Relations as to how he would ensure that President Karzai became a reliable partner in the fight against corruption and lawlessness. The Ambassador suggested that the U.S. would work directly with his ministers.

If so, how will he work with Ismail Khan' Projects under Khan's oversight include a failing one-billion-dollar electrification program funded by USAID. Another unsuccessful endeavor, financed by the World Bank, is the rehabilitation of Naghlu, Afghanistan's largest hydroelectric power plant. No matter how Messrs. Riedel and Holbrooke are trying to spin their colossal and possibly tragic blunder, the fact remains that the U.S. is still partnering with an Afghan leader who is in the pockets of warlords who, by nature and history, could not care less for the rule of law and certainly wouldn't give a damn for what is important to America. Ambassador Holbrooke himself says that no matter how successful the U.S. military proves itself in Afghanistan, the U.S. would fail if the political and economic parts of the strategy don't work. It is difficult to imagine how this strategy could be successfully implemented with President Karzai and his supporters running Afghanistan.

Messrs. Riedel and Holbrooke seem to have based their decision on their concern for legality. In the context of Afghanistan, that argument is irrelevant. First, there was nothing legal about the August 20, 2009 election. Afghanistan's constitution required the election to be held latest in April 2009. Only by manipulating the law, the election was delayed. Second, the U.S. pays the bills and with its allies controls virtually every facet of Afghanistan's national life. Whether we like it or not, the U.S. and its allies are the law in that country. Any other claim is self-delusional. In a recent interview with the German daily, S'ddeutsche Zeitung, Ambassador Holbrooke

observed that in Afghanistan the U.S. was 'starting from scratch.' The Ambassador should begin by dismantling the deeply flawed system that the 'Bonn Process' has imposed on that country.