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America and Afghanistan

## Changing the guard in Kabul?

America is debating whether to stick by Hamid Karzai. The stakes are high

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THE Afghan guard of honour, in green uniform and white gloves, formed an orderly line at Kabul's presidential palace, Arg-e-Shahi, as snowflakes drifted down through the smog onto their gold braid. It would be some hours before they welcomed Ban Ki-moon, the UN secretary-general. But beforehand the guards had to line up for a different sort of inspection: passing through a metal detector; being frisked; and placing their rifles through an X-ray machine to make sure they were unloaded. One can never be too safe when it comes to the security of Hamid Karzai, the target of many an assassination attempt during his seven years as president.

EPA



Karzai and his well-frisked guard of honour

American policy in Afghanistan, resting on the idea of bolstering Mr. Karzai's government, has been one bullet away from disaster. But as the Taliban surge back with every year of fighting—this week insurgents killed at least 20 people in attacks on three government buildings in Kabul—the Americans are starting to think that the real problem may be Mr. Karzai himself.

The Afghan president had enjoyed cosy fortnightly video conferences with President George Bush. Under Barack Obama, these have ended. Indeed, Mr Obama's team has been critical of Mr. Karzai. As chairman of the Senate's foreign-relations committee, Joe Biden, now vice-president, walked out last year from a dinner given by Mr. Karzai, fuming at his host's evasions about opium-fuelled corruption. Hillary Clinton, secretary of state, has referred to Afghanistan as a "narco-state".

Mr Karzai has taken to scrutinising foreign news reports to identify his detractors. He has become strident about the killing of civilians by foreign troops. During Mr Ban's visit he said that the Americans were putting pressure on him to keep quiet "but that is not possible". At a graduation ceremony for the first batch of Afghan military cadets last month, he demanded that America give him planes and tanks, "otherwise we will get them from the other place"—ie, Russia. Asked at a security conference in Munich last weekend whether the Americans wanted to dump him, Mr Karzai told a German newspaper: "The Afghans determine who leads Afghanistan...We are not a colony."

The stirrings of anti-Western sentiment worry NATO commanders as they prepare for a big effort to push back the Taliban, with the expected arrival of 15,000-30,000 American troops this year. Mr Biden is said to have warned Mr. Karzai privately last month to "knock it off". In public, though, NATO puts on a brave face. "I compare it to a marriage," says Brigadier-General Richard Blanchette, spokesman for the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), echoing similar comments by Mr Karzai. "After seven years you may hear the couple speaking in loud voices but the exchange is not necessarily negative."

Perhaps so. But Richard Holbrooke, America's special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, was visiting the region this week to decide whether to seek a divorce. Before his appointment he had pointed to "massive, officially sanctioned corruption" as one of the country's biggest problems. As a diplomat, though, he may be more cautious about unseating Mr. Karzai. Mr Holbrooke told the Munich conference that resolving the problem of Afghanistan would be "much tougher than Iraq". Moreover it had to be tackled not just in Afghanistan but together with the worsening turmoil across the border in Pakistan; the policy must deal with "AfPak", he says. He will no doubt have to consider even wider regional implications, including relations with Iran. Moreover, Kyrgyzstan has announced its intention to close the American base at Manas, apparently under pressure from Moscow (which in turn promises to allow NATO's non-arms supplies to pass through Russian territory, and is even considering offering its own military aircraft to help resupply NATO forces).

## **Under review**

No decisions will be taken at least until NATO's summit in April. President Obama has ordered a policy review, to be conducted by Bruce Riedel, a former CIA officer. He will draw in part on three studies—by the White House, the Pentagon and officers at

US Central Command—ordered by the outgoing Bush administration. One thing seems certain, however. Mr Obama looks just as determined as Mr Bush to keep up the drone and guided-rocket strikes against suspected al-Qaeda targets in Pakistan's tribal belt. "I am not going to allow al-Qaeda or Osama bin Laden to operate with impunity, planning attacks on the US homeland," he said this week.

The question for America is the degree to which fighting al-Qaeda requires an ever-growing garrison and wholesale state-building in Afghanistan—and whether Mr Karzai is a help or a hindrance. If America were minded to unseat him, it would probably have no better opportunity than the looming constitutional crisis. Afghanistan's election commission has delayed presidential elections until August, by when more American and Afghan troops should be available, and the fighting season should have peaked. But Mr Karzai's term expires in May and the constitution makes no provision for a postponed ballot. The president clearly intends to stay in office and stand for re-election, but parliament long ago turned hostile. The speaker of the lower house,



Younus Qanuni, insists that Mr. Karzai should step down in May. Ramzan Bashardost, a maverick former minister of planning who has been holding court in a tent outside parliament, says that if Mr. Karzai stays on it would be tantamount to a coup d'état.

Some Western diplomats think opposition leaders are unlikely to press too hard to unseat Mr Karzai because they are not ready for elections. They would not agree who should take over, even in the interim. And Mr. Karzai's removal would probably force the resignation of the defence and interior ministers, and of the intelligence chief, creating a vacuum ahead of what is likely to be an intense fighting season.

Kai Eide, the UN's representative in Afghanistan, says he is "very worried" by the furore, and thinks Afghan and Western governments should tone down their rhetoric: "Afghanistan cannot afford a more tense relationship with its main troop-contributing countries, and cannot afford a constitutional crisis; it certainly cannot afford both at the same time."

## The trouble with Karzai

Charismatic and conciliatory, Mr Karzai was once the darling of the West. Under him progress has been made, not least in extending basic health services and education and in creating a well-liked Afghan army. But as the fighting has intensified and spread—insurgent attacks were up by a third and civilian casualties increased by 40% last year over 2007—opinion of Mr Karzai has darkened. He is now seen as indecisive and a poor administrator, using his "pocketful of mobile telephones" to deal with endless petitioners rather than running a proper government. He now has a

more able team of ministers, notably those dealing with security. But his presidential staff is still deemed incompetent.

Afghan leaders mainly blame Pakistan for the insurgency. But many believe it is being fuelled by a sense of injustice, the exclusion of some tribes from power and by corruption. An American commander says that instead of seeking "to serve and to protect", the Afghan police works "to exploit and to extort". Babrak Shinwari, an independent (ex-communist) member of parliament, describes Mr. Karzai as weak. "Security is getting worse day by day," he says. "If the president is not changed we will have a big war in Afghanistan, like we had in Russian times."

In many eyes, Mr. Karzai's greatest shortcoming is his failure to assert his authority over his younger half-brother, Ahmed Wali, whose grip on the tribal politics of Kandahar has antagonised many. Diplomats speak of "towering rows" between the two. But Mr Karzai cannot win an election without the help of his brother's network among the southern Pushtun tribes.

Gauging opinion is particularly inexact in Afghanistan. Yet some broad trends are apparent from two opinion polls, one published in October by the Asia Foundation, an American NGO, and one this month by three broadcasters, including the BBC. Both surveys found that the number of people who thought Afghanistan was going in the "right direction" had dropped over recent years while those who thought the opposite had grown; optimists and pessimists were roughly even. Of those who said things were going badly, about half cited growing insecurity and violence, followed by corruption and poverty.

The broadcasters' poll also found that support for Mr Karzai has been falling, although 52% still thought he was doing a good or even excellent job (some analysts say his true support is much lower). The standing of Western forces was also in decline (just 33% thought they were doing a good or excellent job) although the Taliban and foreign jihadists were highly unpopular. The real vote may depend less on personal choices than on the wishes of local strongmen. If Mr Karzai runs as incumbent, he is thought to have enough money, patronage and tribal alliances to win once again. "He can only win if he cheats, and he can only cheat if he is in office," claims an Afghan businessman.

Strangely, given Mr Karzai's declining popularity, few prominent rivals have yet announced their intention to run. And in truth, it is hard to think of a candidate who is obviously more appealing than Mr Karzai. The conventional wisdom is that Afghanistan needs to be led by a Pushtun with credibility among the southern tribes (Mr Karzai's Popalzai are linked to royalty) and, ideally, acceptable to Pakistan.

Reuters

Mr Qanuni, who came second in the last presidential ballot, and the former foreign minister, Abdullah Abdullah, are regarded as able. But the former is a Tajik and the latter, although claiming some Pushtun roots, is closely associated with the Tajiks. Other names that are often mentioned include Ashraf Ghani and Ali Jalali, both Pushtuns living in America who once served under Mr Karzai, as finance and interior ministers respectively. But many believe that Afghan exiles, no matter how able as technocrats, lack credibility; Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader, calls them "dog-washers". Such misgivings would be even more true of a man the subject of much intriguing speculation: Zalmay Khalilzad, a former American ambassador to Afghanistan, Iraq and the United Nations, who is said to have put out feelers about running. Would any of these have what it takes to play the tribal game and, as a businessman puts it, "kiss bearded guys who have never brushed their teeth"?



**Show me the way to go home**

One who certainly could is Gul Agha Sherzai, a former warlord and governor of Kandahar, a successful governor of Nangarhar, now largely free of opium poppy. When Mr. Obama visited Afghanistan last year, Mr Sherzai was the first Afghan leader he met. But the governor would be a brave choice. Diplomats describe him as a controversial figure, and speak of many (unproven) lurid stories about him.

## **Nature abhors**

Some would like to see a grand multi-ethnic coalition take on Mr Karzai. One idea that is gaining ground is to change the constitutional balance by, say, creating a prime minister who would share authority with the president. This might offer an elegant way of stripping Mr Karzai of power while honouring him as a "father of the nation", and reassuring him about his family's safety and the interests of the Popolzai.

Such a move, however, would require prolonged bargaining and a further postponement of the elections. This could allow other problems to be tackled, not least the devolution of some central-government powers to the provinces, which at present cannot raise funds or set spending priorities. It might also allow Mr Holbrooke to negotiate a new regional compact which, if successful, might help stabilise Afghanistan. A new dispensation may also help entice at least some Taliban commanders over to the government's side.

But the risks are obvious. The time-consuming effort to reach a more ambitious political settlement could create a bigger and more dangerous vacuum, with even less certainty that it will be filled by anything more acceptable than Mr. Karzai.