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The alienation of Hamid Karzai

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It must have been the first time in the history of the United States that an incumbent president had to undertake a 26-hour plane journey abroad with repeated mid-air refueling to meet a foreign leader - all for a 30-minute pow-wow.

The staggering message that came out of US President Barack Obama's hurried mission to the presidential palace in Kabul to meet Afghan President Hamid Karzai last Sunday afternoon is that his own AfPak diplomats have let him down badly.

The US president is left with not a single functionary in his star-studded AfPak team on whom he can rely to hold meaningful interaction with the Afghanistan president. Of course, AfPak special representative Richard Holbrooke is not about to lose his job so long as he enjoys the confidence of his mentor in Washington, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

The Holbrooke factor

Why have things come to this impasse? The plain truth is that Karzai distrusts Holbrooke. He shares the widespread opinion in the capitals of the region that Holbrooke is under a Pakistani spell. On the other hand, Holbrooke's version is that Karzai is corrupt and presides over a morally decrepit and decadent regime that hangs around America's neck like an albatross.

But then, no one is asking Holbrooke since when is it that corruption became a big issue in America's South Asia policies? Billions and billions of dollars American taxpayers' dollars were funneled into the black hole that was military dictator General Zia-ul-Haq's Pakistan during the Afghan jihad.

In today's Afghan war, history is repeating itself. There is no accountability about where the money is going and it is the talk of the bazaars that vested interests control disbursement of such vast sums of money. The US Congress should perhaps begin an investigation starting with the so-called "experts" who advise the Pentagon and Holbrooke's team.

If the local grapevine is to be believed, a gravy train runs through Rawalpindi and Lahore to Kabul for civilian and military "experts" and "advisors" who are having a whale of a time.

Obama has lived in Indonesia and can figure out how gravy trains run on and on. For argument's sake, how much of the money that the international community poured into Afghanistan has indeed passed through Karzai's hands?

If the report tabled by the United Nations secretary general that was tabled in the Security Council in New York in March is to be believed, even after eight years of engagement in Afghanistan, 80% of international community assistance still bypasses the Afghan government and is not closely aligned with Kabul's priorities. Therefore, the corruption in Afghanistan needs to be viewed in perspective.

Karzai makes a serious point when he says that those who talk about corruption are obfuscating the real issues that aggravate the crisis of confidence between him and Washington. Now that Obama has plunged into the cesspool of AfPak diplomacy, he should perhaps get to the bottom of it and make it a point to try to understand why Karzai feels so alienated.

Looking back, the turning point was the critical period leading to the Afghan presidential election. Holbrooke should never have tried to exert blatant strong-arm tactics aimed at expelling Karzai from the Afghan leadership. Afghans are a proud people and will never tolerate such nonsense from a foreigner.

ISI's fear of Karzai

Karzai believes that Holbrooke and his aides were heavily influenced by Pakistani advice. Unsurprisingly, Pakistan hates Karzai and knows that as long as a Popalzai chieftain remains in power in Kabul, it cannot have its way in Afghanistan.

Karzai represents exactly the sort of Pashtun nationalism that the Punjabi-dominated military establishment in Pakistan dreads. When the ISI murdered former Afghan president Mohammad Najibullah in 1996, its calculations were precisely the same; namely, that there should be no rival fountainhead outside of its orbit of control with the potential stature to claim leadership in the Pashtun constituency.

The ISI is well aware that Karzai, in crafting his national reconciliation policy, is almost entirely emulating Najibullah. Like Najibullah, Karzai is at ease with the political ethos of observant Muslims, though himself imbued with staunchly secular beliefs. So, he cannot be pitted as alien to Afghan culture or to Islam.

Like Najibullah, he is prepared to accommodate the Islamist elements in the power structure within the framework of a broad-based government. He is also well-educated and urbane, and yet he keeps closely in touch with the tribal ethos and culture.

Karzai has direct contacts with the opposition Islamist camp and has no need of ISI intermediaries to put him in touch with the Taliban. Most importantly, like Najibullah - who was a blue-blooded Ahmedzai - Karzai too is a Pashtun aristocrat who has a place and a name in Pashtun tribal society.

In Karzai, the ISI faces a formidable opponent. The Taliban leaders will always appear to the ordinary Afghan as obscurant and medieval in comparison.

A shrewd tactician and coalition-builder like Karzai can be expected to frustrate the best-laid plans of the ISI to project power into Afghanistan. The ISI desperately tried to woo non-Pashtun ethnic groups during recent years, but Karzai frustrated these attempts and they eventually opted to rally behind him.

In short, no other Pashtun today on the Afghan political landscape has Karzai's ability to assemble such a diverse coalition comprising powerful non-Pashtun leaders such as Mohammed Fahim, Rashid Dostum and Karim Khalili (who often don't enjoy good relations amongst themselves), former Mujahideen commanders and tribal leaders, and even erstwhile communists and technocrats.

Karzai's game plan

Now, the big question for Obama is whether US interests necessarily coincide with those of the ISI. If they do not, Obama needs to ask Holbrooke for a coherent explanation as to why he used all his skill and the power of US muscle to try to oust Karzai.

Having failed to unseat Karzai, a furious media campaign has been launched to settle scores by humiliating him on the one hand and to establish that he must somehow be removed from power. Karzai's family members have been dragged into the controversy. Does the US think the Pakistani generals it deals with are lily-white?

Karzai, of course, proved to be no cakewalk for Holbrooke. He brusquely showed Holbrooke the door after a famous showdown in the presidential palace. Since then Karzai is a changed man. He is constantly on guard against American schemes aimed at trapping him.

Therefore, Obama did the right thing by deciding to deal with Karzai, warts and all, personally. In fact, he should have undertaken this mission to Kabul at least six months ago.

Karzai is a deeply disillusioned man today. The responsibility for almost all that has gone wrong in the war is placed on his doorstep. The whole world knows that the Afghan governmental machinery simply lacks the "capacity" to govern. There just aren't enough Afghans with the requisite skill to be administrators at the central or local level. There is no such thing as a state structure on the ground in Afghanistan. The people are so desperately poor that they go to any extent to eke out day-to-day living. Indeed, Karzai has to make do with what he has got, which is pitifully little.

Then, there is the acute security situation, which all but precludes effective governance. Karzai is invariably held responsible by the Afghan people for the excessive use of force by the US military and North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies during their operations that result in large-scale "collateral killings". Every time wanton killings take place, he cuts a sorry figure when it transpires that Americans coolly ignore his protestations.

To compound everything, Karzai is aghast that the ISI, which promotes the insurgency, is today far closer to the AfPak team than he could ever imagine himself to be. It is literally a situation where it's his word against the ISI's.

Thus, Karzai has turned to various groups to tap into the vast reservoir of resentment in the Afghan opinion about Pakistan's half-a-century-long interference in their country's internal affairs. In order to isolate Karzai, a campaign has been built up regarding these groups - "warlordism".

Gullible Western opinion gets carried away by the campaign over "warlordism", which militates against human rights and norms of civilized life. But no one ponders as to when is it in its entire history Afghanistan could do away with local strongmen, sodomy, tribalism or gun culture?

Besides, is "warlordism" typical of Afghanistan? Is it alien to Pakistan's feudal society? Famous books have been written about the "feudal lords" in the Punjab. According to authoritative estimates, not less than 8,000 Pakistanis have simply disappeared from the face of the earth after being nabbed by Pakistani security agencies since September 2001. Richard Falk, a renowned British journalist who is currently on a visit to Pakistan, has written harrowing accounts of what he has heard about these "disappeared".

Aren't the Taliban commanders "warlords"? The politics behind the highly selective invocation of "warlordism" in Afghanistan must be properly understood. It aims at discrediting Karzai's allies like Fahim, Dostum and Khalili, who would resist to the last minute another Taliban takeover of their country.

Taliban are fair game

The ISI's biggest worry is that some day Karzai might get through to Taliban leader Mullah Omar himself. Karzai has made no bones about it, either. As things stand, the ISI has to keep one eye over its shoulders all the time to see that outsiders do not poach in the Taliban camp. Keeping the Quetta Shura together as a single flock has always been a tough job that it is only going to get tougher.

The ISI dreads to think that all sorts of poachers are stalking the Taliban today - Iranians, Indians, Saudis, Russians, British, the Central Asians, and indeed the Americans themselves. The intelligence services of the world are no longer prepared to accept that the Taliban should remain the ISI's sole monopoly.

From the Taliban perspective, they too harbor hopes of some day breaking out of the ISI stranglehold. The ISI always had nightmarish fears that the Taliban might make overtures to Delhi for a covert relationship. Whenever it appeared that the Taliban were reaching out to the Indians (or vice versa) and that some sort of communication channel might open between the erstwhile adversaries, the ISI precipitated gruesome incidents that hardened attitudes in Delhi and the door became shut against any form of rapprochement between the Taliban and the Indians.

Such ISI operations continue even today. It is a different matter, though, that there are probably enough "hawks" within the Indian strategic community and security establishment, too, who lack the political astuteness to respond to subtle overtures from the Taliban. In fact, the Indian consulates in Jalalabad and Kandahar can provide a great window for establishing direct contact with the Taliban. The ISI may not even get to know about such contacts.

Clearly, Obama's agenda is different from the ISI's. What Obama needs to factor in is that if Karzai is allowed a free hand, he will establish dialogue with the Taliban, sooner or later bypassing the ISI.

Karzai has excellent networking with the tribal channels and with Peshawar-based Pashtun nationalists. A genuine national reconciliation becomes possible since Karzai can act as a bridge between the Taliban and the virulently anti-Taliban "warlords". On the other hand, the backing of the "warlords" ensures that Karzai does not get overwhelmed by the Taliban. This is important as the Taliban today are the single-best organized force in the country, whereas Karzai lacks muscle power on his own without the backing of the "warlords".

Quintessentially, Karzai has resorted to what can only be called the "united front" strategy, to use the Marxist-Leninist parlance. He is probably on the right course, and in any case he has no other choice because he cannot hold out indefinitely against the full weight of the Pakistani "deep state" bent on demolishing him.

When American commentators blame Karzai for his apparent hurry to have alleged trade-offs with the Taliban, including Mullah Omar, they are unfairly not taking into account his real compulsions.

Curiously, Karzai's allies, the notoriously anti-Taliban "warlords" from the non-Pashtun groups, who have everything to lose in the event of a Taliban takeover, also see that time is not on their side as war-weariness sets in and the US searches for an exit strategy.

They also apprehend that the Taliban will become irreconcilable if the US's surge in military presence fails to produce the intended results, and, therefore, they realize the urgent need for the reconciliation strategy that Karzai is probing.

In their estimation, the "Afghan-ness" of the Taliban will eventually come out once they come on board a coalition - and that will erode the ISI's stranglehold over their country.

Pashtun alienation

That is to say, Obama should realize that Karzai does not visualize the Americans as his enemy, as is often being projected naively by correspondents for the Western media . Nor is Karzai irrational in striving for reconciliation. He has no reason to torpedo Obama's policy or to "spite" the US, as interpreted recently by a Washington Post correspondent.

Karzai is an able politician with acute survival instincts, and he is not a woolly headed romantic who fancies that he can get away with strategic defiance of the US, which has staked its global prestige and that of the entire Western alliance in the war in the Hindu Kush.

Obama should distinguish that it is the ISI and the Pakistani military whom Karzai (and the "warlords") considers to be his adversaries. His frustration is that the Americans are either far too naive to comprehend what is going on or are dissimulating since they are pursuing some "hidden agenda" in relation to the geopolitics of the region.

Karzai's alienation is widely shared by the Afghan elites in both Kabul and Peshawar. A grand tribal jirga was recently held in Peshawar just ahead of the US-Pakistan strategic dialogue of March 24, and was widely attended by noted Pashtun intellectuals, tribal leaders, politicians, professionals, civil society members, women's groups and representatives of established political parties of the North-West Frontier Agency.

Obama can always ask the American consulate in Peshawar for a report on the jirga. It will prove an eye-opener. Essentially, the jirga raised the widespread grievance that the Pashtuns do not trust Pakistan's Punjabi-dominated military establishment, which was leading the strategic dialogue with the US. The jirga alleged that the Pakistani military establishment's sole agenda is to attain "strategic depth" in Afghanistan and this lies at the root of the sufferings of the Pashtuns on both sides of the Durand Line.

The jirga issued the Peshawar Declaration, a statement which cautioned Washington that the root causes of terrorism lie in the Pakistani military establishment's "strategic depth" mindset and the Arab expansionism embodied by the al-Qaeda under the garb of global Islam.

It made an impassioned plea not to leave the helpless Pashtuns of the tribal agencies and the North-West Frontier Province at the mercy of the Pakistani army and the intelligence agencies.

In the prevailing circumstances, Karzai has no option but to turn toward Tehran for understanding and support. The Iranians have a profound understanding of the Afghan chessboard and can grasp the raging storms in the mind of the Pashtuns on both sides of the Durand Line.

The Iranians empathize with the plight of the Pashtuns, whose traditional way of life and eclectic culture have been systematically vandalized during the recent decades of the jihad. The Iranians

are inclined to help Karzai, as they do not want a takeover of Afghanistan by the Wahhabi-inclined Taliban. The Iranians also have good contacts with the "warlords" and can ensure that the latter work with Karzai.

These are all good enough reasons why Karzai is keen to shore up Iranian support. But Karzai has no reason to conspire with the Iranians against the US. His first option will always be that the US reposes confidence in him and allows him to negotiate a national reconciliation.

Nor is Tehran unaware that Karzai's first preference will always be to work with the Americans. If Tehran has still opted to work with Karzai, that is because he has been an exceptionally good neighbor and, even during the period when he might have been an American "puppet", he never acted in a hostile manner against Iranian interests, instead welcoming Iran's participation in the Afghan reconstruction.

The human factor

In sum, Obama has done the right thing by inviting Karzai to go over to Washington in May to discuss all issues with him directly. In a war theater with 100,000 troops deployed, this is the right approach for a commander-in-chief to take. Even in our information age, wars cannot be fought through remote-control or video-conferencing. The human factor still counts.

In all probability, Obama will have the opportunity to form his own opinions about Karzai rather than hear from second-hand sources. Obama has a rare streak in his political personality insofar as, ultimately, he works his way out himself. He seems to sense he needs to get a correct picture of what is going on in Kabul and that is best done by seeing for himself.

Indeed, the stakes are high for Obama politically. The fact that he kept his distance from the high-profile Pakistani delegation that visited Washington last week is in itself an extraordinary statement regarding the way that his mind's antennae are probing the AfPak landscape.

Meanwhile, Holbrooke doesn't become superfluous. He claims to have developed good personal chemistry with Pakistani army chief General Pervez Kiani, which is always useful. Holbrooke should perhaps visit Islamabad and Rawalpindi more frequently.