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Why Karzai Is Pushing Back Against the U.S.

By Tony Karon
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To some it may look as if President Hamid Karzai has a death wish. The Afghan leader has lately begun sticking it to the U.S. and its Western allies — the only force protecting him from a surging Taliban, which hanged the last foreign-backed president when it reached Kabul in 1996. Having infuriated the Obama Administration by continuing to drag his feet on corruption — and then cozying up to Iran and China when Washington turned up the heat — Karzai ratcheted up the rhetoric last week. He accused the U.S. of trying to dominate his country; blamed the West for last year's electoral fraud (which his campaign had been accused of masterminding); and made comments that verged on sanctifying the Taliban insurgency as a "national resistance" against foreign invaders. The New York Times reported Sunday that Karzai had even threatened, during a meeting with Afghan parliamentarians, to join the Taliban himself if the West continued to pressure him.

But bizarre as his behavior may seem, there may be a method in Karzai's madness. For one thing, he has begun denouncing the Western powers in his country because he knows he can — Karzai would have been cut adrift some time ago if there were any other viable alternative on whom the U.S. could pin its strategy. The wily president knows that the presence of foreign forces in his country is deeply unpopular, particularly when civilians are killed in the course of NATO military operations. Karzai, moreover, is humiliated and shown to be powerless when his protestations over such operations are ignored by his Western patrons. So, while he may have been installed by a U.S.-led invasion, if Karzai is

to survive the departure of Western forces, he will have to reinvent himself as a national leader with an independent power base. He's obviously determined not to go the way of Najibullah, the former Soviet-backed leader executed by the Taliban seven years after the Red Army withdrew. So, from Karzai's point of view, he's pushing back against the U.S. not only because he can, but also because he must if he is to survive politically.

It's worth remembering that Karzai was essentially parachuted into the country in the course of the U.S. invasion, tapped to lead a new post-Taliban government that would be founded largely on the Northern Alliance — the coalition of ethnic Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara former mujahedeen warlords that had always fought the Taliban. A chieftain in the Popalzai tribe, Karzai was a prominent leader in Afghanistan's largest ethnic group, the Pashtun, which is also the social base of the Taliban. Still, his power base was limited, and creating an effective government forced him to cut deals with all manner of unsavory characters. The CIA, it should be remembered, was doing the same thing: The hundreds of millions of dollars in suitcases that the agency took into Afghanistan in the early days of the invasion was not aimed at funding women's literacy projects; its purpose was to buy off the local warlords who control every valley, recognizing the fact that power changes hands in Afghanistan when those warlords switch their allegiances. Karzai probably considers the U.S. political leadership naive for believing that a pro-Western government there can survive without paying off a lot of very unsavory characters.

Karzai knows, also, that the U.S. commitment in his country is finite, and the need to survive after the Americans leave makes him more inclined to rely on such established hard men as Uzbek warlord General Rashid Dostum and Tajik strongman General Mohammed Fahim — even if that means turning a blind eye to their own transgressions. He is also keen to take charge of negotiating a political settlement with the Taliban on his own timetable, and with less of a role for Pakistan than Washington might be ready to concede to Islamabad. Just as U.S. influence in Iraq declined precipitously once its intention to withdraw became clear, so is Karzai's own game plan premised on getting along without the U.S., even though he'll do his best to keep it there as long as possible. That means going through the motions of satisfying U.S. demands on corruption and reform, without actually alienating the hard men on whose support he may depend once the Americans leave.

It's a common mistake for great powers to assume that those who they engage as proxies to fight their battles or run their satrapies share the same agenda as their patrons, just because their interests coincide at a given moment. But not all of Karzai's enemies in the region are America's enemies; and not all of America's allies are Karzai's allies. Nowhere is this more true than in the case of Pakistan, original patron of the Taliban which has also been going through the motions of indulging American concerns, while continuing to enable the Afghan Taliban insurgency and identifying Karzai as an adversary because of his regime's close ties with India.

Like Pakistan over the past eight years, Karzai has been biding his time, positioning himself for the battles and power shifts that will come when the Americans leave, his

goal — like Islamabad's — being to protect his own power. And the arrival in Washington of the Obama Administration last year signaled the onset of the endgame. Driven by a desire to conclude America's fiscally burdensome wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and alarmed by the downward security spiral in Afghanistan, the Obama Administration put Karzai on notice that failure to tackle the corruption that was deemed to be fueling the insurgency would jeopardize his ties with Washington. And in the weeks leading up to last August's election, U.S. officials in Afghanistan were widely perceived to be backing rival candidates. Karzai has also noted that such key U.S. officials as Af-Pak Special Envoy Richard Holbrooke have spoken frankly about giving Pakistan a greater role in shaping the political outcome in Afghanistan.

It should come as no surprise, then, that in the end game, Karzai has revealed an agenda quite distinct from that of Washington — just as Pakistan has done. The premise of the U.S. policy, after all — just like that of the Pakistanis, Karzai, the Taliban and every other player in the game — is that sooner or later, the Americans will leave. And it's that reality, now more than ever, that is shaping everyone's game.