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Chaos in Kabul continues

By Faryal Leghari

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Come May, Kabul and Washington will have to bury the hatchet deep, recently brandished by President Hamid Karzai. For the Afghan president is to visit the US and later host a follow-up conference in July to review the progress made towards achieving the objectives, outlined for his government by the US.

Some signs that Karzai is easing on his recent defiant position came when he recently visited the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) headquarters in Kabul. It was his first operational briefing and owes its significance to the fact that it propels Afghanistan as a strategic partner. It is indeed ironic that Kabul is now accorded that position, nine years after the launch of the offensive. Obviously the shift implies strategic responsibility and partnership—the new golden term. It was evident in the increased role of the Afghan security forces in the Helmand offensive.

One feels almost sorry for the US government. Not only does it have to contend with a stubborn insurgency, it is obviously struggling to work out a ‘working relationship’ with the(ir) man in Kabul. Karzai seems to have come into his own, and high time. He has displayed a bolder stance and lo and behold issued a threat towards his greatest ally, the US. The between the lines message is clear: lay off my back and I’ll continue to play, or.... That too, has not simply been left to the imagination. It has been articulated in a chilling message, I’ll cut a deal with the reviled Taleban. Of all the woes encapsulated in the jagged edged little shell of a country, this had to come Washington’s way. But why not? For his implied deal with the Tally-boys hardly amounts to the deal Washington seeks, no he means a far more sinister, sharing- the-cake deal with not even a morsel left for anyone.

Come to think of it, why would Karzai often be reprimanded in public for his lack of talents in governance and inability to rein in corruption, not react? And react he did. He came down hard accusing Western allies of orchestrating the electoral fraud to malign him. More significant was his warning shot to mind the difference between occupation and cooperation. Afghans will not be treated like puppets.

Karzai took the gauntlet knowing fully well the disadvantages his ally faces in the country. The biggest is the lack of alternatives among the political leadership. So what would be America's best bet until it can walk away after effectively weakening the Taleban? The present Kabul setup since the President has promised to clean out the closet of corruption and shoddy governance and boost the security sector.

So then where is the problem? It lies embedded in the clear mistrust both have of each other, the one that is being aired less in public. Even then it shoots its bitter bile to the surface as witnessed recently. Holbrooke needs to work much harder at diplomacy to dispel the impression that all is not well at the nerve centre. The beauty of it is that it comes when the coalition is greasing its guns and stocking its ammo for Kandahar, the insurgents' next bastion. It also juxtaposes with the speeding of efforts to open direct communication with the insurgents. Karzai is a shrewd man who knew the cost of keeping the grubby fingers of his political allies, the dubious warlords well encased in woollen mittens, green and gold. Washington wanted him to hobble a government with broad political representation, so he did. Never mind the ties with the narco syndicates with bottomless coffers. Politicking demands that you look the other way and ignore the little follies of your friends. After all that is a game the US excels in, does it not? Karzai, being a diehard follower of US imparted training should then also be allowed to flex his muscles, once a blue moon. Maybe Karzai's agenda was to emerge from the crippling shadows of Washington D.C that are apt to block his political future. It could also be that he wants to affix his own position on the strategic node intersecting the roadmap being fashioned on the drawing table.

It is the logic of expediency that shapes loyalties and dictates events in the rapidly shifting strategic paradigm playing out in the battlefields of Central Asia's graveyard. So then why the fuss about drug connections, corruption or mass murderers holding some reins? Sadly, the repercussions are too rapidly devolving for Washington to beat a hasty retreat as it has done in the past. The game is still to be played much to the chagrin of its wise, grey men. Supporting expediency at even such grand costs is not paying off, even temporarily. It is a reality Washington must face and rearrange in its policy perspective. Till then, the querulous partners must learn to live together for the stakes are too high for either to cross the line. One expects to see warmer hues if not rosier ones when looking at the outcome of the May conference.

Irrespective of how the exit plan is fashioned and on what terms, stabilisation in Afghanistan can only be achieved with full participation of its disparate political groups. This includes the insurgents. The focus should be on formulating a power sharing formula based on past successful experiences and not one imported from the West.