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The 'Ugly American' in Kabul

By M K Bhadrakumar

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A war in which the general doesn't know his enemy is a war lost. The manner in which the Barack Obama administration is handling its equations with Afghan President Hamid Karzai suggests Karzai is the US president's enemy number one in the Hindu Kush, not the insurgents.

The number of dogfights between US special representative Richard Holbrooke and the Afghan government is now legion. The tussles are watched in regional capitals with amusement as Holbrooke tirelessly wages his war with Karzai's leadership. While it is unclear whether this is part of Holbrooke's personal agenda or Obama's brief, he does carry the Obama administration's imprimatur.

Holbrooke's latest salvo was his suo moto (on his own initiative) announcement in Washington soon after returning from a visit to Kabul that the jirga, or peace council, Karzai was planning to hold on May 2-4 now stands postponed until after the Afghan leader's visit to Washington on May 10-14. Holbrooke then went on to announce that the jirga would be held on May 20.

By all indications, the Afghan government is seething with resentment over Washington's announcement. Why did Holbrooke usurp the Kabul government's prerogative to release such details? There can be two reasons. One, Holbrooke is aging fast and has a failing memory and he genuinely slipped up, which can happen when people get physically and mentally worn out. Two, he cleverly undercut Karzai to make the latter look very foolish in the Afghan bazaar.

There is not a shred of evidence that Holbrooke (who celebrates his 69th birthday this Saturday)

is becoming senile. The logical conclusion to be drawn is that Holbrooke deliberately put Karzai on the mat and decided to do a bit of grandstanding by asserting it is Washington that calls the shots in the Hindu Kush in matters of war and peace.

Does Obama really need this exasperating vanity contest? Conceivably, Obama's priority at the present moment ought to be to win the war with a measure of credibility so that the US's image as a superpower doesn't get tarnished.

In the process, Obama could emerge having fulfilled his own pledges in the 2008 presidential election to bring the "war on terror" to a successful conclusion and preventing the US from engaging in such futile and costly military adventures in the future.

The yardstick Obama needs to apply is whether Holbrooke's AfPak diplomacy is actually operating in sync with his political agenda.

In this regard, Holbrooke has clearly personalized his struggle with Karzai to an unnecessary extent. This began after a disastrous banquet in the presidential palace last year when Karzai showed him the door - the US envoy had attempted to convince the Afghan leader to walk into the sunset.

Ever since that humiliation, Holbrooke has taken it to heart that if the Afghan leader has a plan of national reconciliation, it must be rubbished and sabotaged.

Thus, the US took a contrary view of the jirga plan while European powers, which have a sense of urgency about the "Afghanization" of the war - politically and militarily - were much more favorably inclined.

Karzai's plan aims at "reintegrating" as many moderate, reconcilable elements as possible with the national political mainstream. On that basis he plans to form a broad-based coalition that steers the country towards elections in September that hold reasonable prospects of creating an elected parliament. The new government may even enjoy credibility in Afghan popular perceptions, giving a boost to the peace process.

At a minimum, the US should give Karzai a fair chance to go ahead with the plan to hold the peace council. No harm can come of it, even if Karzai's effort ultimately proves to be less than perfect. After all, if only to a minimal extent, the broadening of the national political mainstream can still only help isolate irreconcilable elements.

Looking back, a similar promising juncture in the Afghan civil war offered itself exactly 20 years ago, in May 1990, when then Afghan president Mohammad Najibullah convened a loya jirga, a grand council of tribal leaders, in Kabul. The vision then was a national reconciliation strategy that involved the communist party sharing power with the Afghan mujahideen. The loya jirga, in fact, adopted a new constitution that effectively ended the communist party's monopoly of executive power.

But the US in its obsessive desire to end the communist debacle in Kabul connived with Pakistan to decide that nothing should be done that would help Najibullah, a Soviet protege, pave the way for a national reconciliation in Afghanistan. It was a historic blunder that led to the intensification of the civil war, much bloodshed and great instability in the region that ultimately boomeranged on the US with an epochal tragedy on September 11, 2001.

Like the Bourbons, the US seems to be forgetting nothing and yet remembering nothing. To inflict a debacle on Karzai may seem an irresistible temptation, but in the process the US fails to see that another golden opportunity to polarize the Afghan opinion in favor of peace and reconciliation may once again be lost.

There are Europeans who seem support Karzai's plan, but they appear helpless. "For the EU [European Union], perhaps one of the best examples of 20th century reconciliation, we see a great meaning and importance in this process," Vygaudas Usackas, head of the EU delegation in Kabul, said recently.

"It won't be an event. It will launch a process which can lead to a peace in the country," he said. "Any reconciliation process will take time before the seeds will grow up."

The jirga stands in contrast to the manner in which the US embassy in Kabul is manipulating Afghan lawmakers to make parliament a focal point of opposition to Karzai. The theater of the absurd is being stretched too far.

A fistful of dollars can indeed take Uncle Sam very far in the Hindu Kush today. But the issue is to what end the US strategic interests are served by egging on Afghan parliamentarians who dread the dissolution of the current parliament (which has outlived its constitutional lifespan) and the election of a new legislative body?

Clearly, the bulk of Afghan parliamentarians may face serious difficulties in getting re-elected. House Speaker Yunus Qanooni may be feeling that his own political future looks uncertain. Thus, the American embassy in Kabul has a good chance to persuade the current parliament to put obstacles on Karzai's path on any conceivable issue.

But does Afghanistan need such a constitutional crisis at this point?

Karzai has agreed to a request from the United Nations for two foreigners to serve, with veto powers, in the election commission for the upcoming parliamentary polls. Karzai has also appointed a credible figure to chair the commission. These acts underscore Karzai's willingness to be reasonable and to go the extra mile to win international legitimacy for the Afghan democratic process.

These are remarkable steps towards transparency in power-sharing and constitutional rule by an embattled leader standing at the barricades.

In fairness to Karzai, Obama should give him a free hand to enhance his image among his own countrymen as an Afghan leader rather than as Holbrooke's sidekick. The upcoming meeting at

the Oval Office offers a final opportunity to steer the Afghan political process as a collaborative venture between the US and the Afghan government, while giving it the appearance that it is genuinely Afghan-led.

Holbrooke's media performance in Kabul last week was appalling and any self-respecting Afghan leader would resent such behavior from foreigners. Holbrooke unilaterally read out Karzai's visit itinerary. As a professional diplomat, he would know that Afghanistan has a fully fledged Foreign Ministry which would have liked to be seen as formally outlining the itinerary for its head of state's visit to the US capital.

American novelists William J Lederer and Eugene Burdick had a famous term for how US viceroys sometimes look in the eyes of foreigners: The Ugly American. That was a long time ago in 1950s Southeast Asia. But the image persists.

The sad part is that the image of the ugly American is diametrically opposite to the extraordinary perceptions in world opinion of Obama himself as a statesman and a humanist.

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