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McChrystal Strategy Shifts to Raids – and Wali Karzai

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May 24, 2010

Gen. Stanley McChrystal's team once talked openly about the need to remove Ahmed Wali Karzai, Afghan President Hamid Karzai's brother and the most powerful man in Kandahar, from power.

Last October, as reports of Wali Karzai's role in the opium trade were circulating, McChrystal's intelligence chief Gen. Michael T. Flynn said, "If we are going to conduct a population-centric strategy in Afghanistan, and we are perceived as backing thugs, then we are just undermining ourselves."

"The only way to clean up Chicago," Flynn declared, "is to get rid of Capone." The parallel between the legendary crime boss and Wali Karzai could hardly have been clearer.

But by the end of March, Dexter Filkins was reporting in the *New York Times* that U.S. officials had decided that Wali Karzai "will be allowed to stay in place."

That complete reversal on Karzai was the result of a decision by the U.S. military to de-emphasize the much-touted promise of governance reform in the Kandahar operation and focus instead on Special Operations Forces (SOF) raids targeted against suspected Taliban leaders living in Kandahar City – operations for which McChrystal needs intelligence being provided by Karzai.

McChrystal's shift in emphasis toward the targeted raids against the Taliban was undoubtedly accelerated by the message from the Barack Obama administration in March that he had to demonstrate progress in his counterinsurgency strategy by the end of December 2010 rather than the mid-2011 deadline for beginning the withdrawal of U.S. troops.

That earlier deadline, first reported by the *Washington Post* March 31, was confirmed this month by U.S. Gen. Frederick Hodge, the director of operations for all of southern Afghanistan. "Our mission is to show irreversible momentum by the end of 2010 – that's the clock I'm using," Hodge told the *Times* of London.

The Pentagon's report on the last six months of the war, written in late March and early April, reflected that shift from governance reform to night raids. It failed to mention McChrystal's "population-centric" strategy as a factor in putting pressure on the Taliban but touted the "removal" of many "lower-level" Taliban commanders, mainly by "special operations forces."

After a few weeks of watching the results of the Marjah operation, the officials of McChrystal's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) NATO command conceded that the Afghan government had taken too long to put representatives of relevant ministries into the two key districts of Helmand province. They doubted that it would do any better in Kandahar, as the *Times* reported May 11.

Washington Post columnist David Ignatius, who frequently registers the latest thinking of the military leadership, wrote a column April 1 clearly reflecting the downgrading of governance reform in the McChrystal war plan for Kandahar and the new emphasis on targeting the Taliban.

"Shaking up the power structure might put the United States on the side of the Pashtun man in the street," wrote Ignatius, "but it would open up a power vacuum that could be exploited by the Taliban."

For U.S. commanders, Ignatius revealed, "There isn't time for risky experiments in Kandahar."

What Ignatius didn't say is that McChrystal had already ordered a major intensification of SOF raids in Kandahar city and that those raids are dependent primarily on intelligence supplied by organizations controlled by Wali Karzai.

In an interview with the *Times* published May 7, Karzai boasted that he alone has supplied "the majority of intelligence in this region", adding, "I'm passing tons of information to them."

A former NATO official had confirmed that reality a few weeks earlier. "Most of our intelligence comes directly or indirectly from him," said the official, according to *Time* magazine on March 19.

Neither the ISAF commanders nor U.S. SOF commanders have well-developed intelligence networks of their own in Kandahar.

Karzai has dominated the flow of intelligence to NATO forces by gaining control over both the police and official Afghan intelligence agency in the province, according to a new study of the power structure in Kandahar.

The study, published last month by the pro-war Institute for the Study of War, shows how Karzai completed his consolidation of political control over the national police in Kandahar after using the Karzai private militia used by the CIA, the Kandahar Strike Force, to kill the province police chief and the chief of criminal investigation, who had been independent of his influence, in a June 2009 gunfight.

Even more important, Karzai controls the Kandahar branch of the National Directorate of Security (NDS), which combines the intelligence and secret police agencies, as the study reveals. NDS has by far the largest network of informants in the province and has long taken the lead in carrying out the raids against the Taliban in Kandahar City, because of the ineffectiveness of the national police.

In an e-mail to IPS, a spokesman for McChrystal, Lt. Col. Tadd Sholtis, acknowledged that the command accepts intelligence from Karzai, and said it would be “foolish” to refuse it.

Sholtis said he could not comment on how much weight the ISAF command put on intelligence from Karzai but asserted that the command has “multiple methods and sources for collecting intelligence” in the province, and that, “We evaluate all human sources with respect to self-interest or bias.”

ISAF can presumably draw on Afghan army intelligence in the province, but its assets are believed to be minimal compared with that of the NDS. The command also uses information from drone reconnaissance aircraft to supplement what it gets from Karzai-controlled networks.

Reliance on drones for targeting, however, leads to constant mistakes by U.S. troops. Carlotta Gall reported in the *New York Times* March 26 that drone strikes had killed farmers digging ditches and bringing goods home from market on three different occasions in recent weeks.

The ISAF command’s dependence on Karzai for intelligence allows him to use U.S. power against his political enemies. *Time*’s Tim McGirk reported March 19 that critics in Kandahar said Karzai had threatened to call down NATO air strikes or night raids by U.S. SOF units on any tribal elders who defied him.

Karzai is widely believed to have used raids by security forces under his control to target a number of tribal opponents, according to the Institute’s study. Karzai is deeply engaged

in intervening in tribal politics across the province, creating new alliances and making new enemies, the analysis said.

The reaffirmation of ties between the U.S. and Karzai ensures that the whole military effort in the province is locked into Karzai's political strategy for maintaining his grip on power. But McChrystal, the former commander of the Joint Special Operations Command in Iraq and Afghanistan, has made it clear he is ready to sacrifice the possibility for political change in order to be able to do what he does best.