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## The Conference that Wasn't

NATO Diplomats Tune Out the Bad News in Afghanistan

by Matthias Gebauer

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**NATO foreign ministers heard only what they wanted to hear on Tuesday in Kabul as they sought to reassure the world that withdrawal can take place in 2014. The reality, however, is quite different. And in the end, Hamid Karzai, who is already looking for ways to cement his post-NATO power, will be the beneficiary.**

The 70 international dignitaries who traveled to the Foreign Ministry in Kabul didn't have the chance to see much of Afghanistan. United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, Hillary Clinton, Guido Westerwelle and Co. were all sped the four kilometers from the airport to the ministry in motorcades of armored cars, the streets having been emptied for the occasion. The Foreign Ministry itself resembled a bunker -- aside from the dozen boys and girls holding colorful flags at the entrance. The distinguished diplomats quickly disappeared inside.

The hurried arrival with little attention paid to the city or the country surrounding it was symbolic of this conference. The expectations of the gathering, the first such conference held in Afghanistan itself, were large. But the country's grim realities were left at the

door. At the conference table, little of consequence was discussed and analysis was weak. The sole aim was to adopt a common goal.

### **DJ Plays Requests -- and Requests Only**

NATO and its allies want to pull out of Afghanistan. As such, reality had to be presented differently or completely ignored to make withdrawal in the near future appear plausible.

As such, those at the conference heard only what they wanted to hear. Both sides, the allies and the Afghans, assured each other they could achieve common goals.

The Afghans are expected to assume responsibility for security in all regions of their crisis-riddled country by 2014. This transfer of responsibility is expected to already begin in selected districts next year. That means that in 2011, heavily armed and highly trained NATO troops will begin to make way for poorly trained soldiers from the Afghan National Army (ANA). For years, the US Army has been training ANA soldiers, but in its reports, the talk is almost exclusively of problems and not successes. Most other allied countries haven't even started with their training programs yet.

But failure -- as is so often the case when it comes to NATO -- is simply not an option. One wonders why the conference was held at all.

### **Karzai Seeks Reconciliation, But the Taliban Scoff at Him**

Then there was Karzai's appearance. In a seemingly endless speech, the president promised the international community what he has already pledged a dozen times:

Yes, he will promptly crack down on corruption.

Yes, he will modernize his ramshackle government so that it will no longer be ruinous to the country with its incompetence and cronyism.

And of course he will also achieve reconciliation with the Taliban in just a few years time -- no matter that they have so far ignored his offers and scoff at a man who isn't even the most powerful person in Kabul.

If the issue of Afghanistan weren't as serious as it is, one could have laughed at Karzai's speech. So far, his government hasn't moved to concretely implement any of the things he promised in London in January. Karzai spoke of blooming landscapes, economic opportunities and respect for democracy and human rights. Instead, he succeeded in

getting re-elected through massive election fraud and he has limited civil rights as he pleases.

US President Barack Obama has announced that the US mission in Afghanistan will end soon. And the NATO states, who once committed themselves to the noble goal of "Democracy in Afghanistan," now speak of democratic features. It has now become clear to Karzai that the West will withdraw -- regardless of the situation in Afghanistan.

### **A Nebulous Exit Program for Taliban Footsoldiers**

Karzai is now looking for a way to secure his survival. That's why he is seeking to cut deals with the darker forces in the country. Several of the country's blood thirstiest warlords sat in the second row behind him at the conference table.

But Karzai did pocket one success at the conference -- in the future, 50 percent of the billions in development aid flowing from the international community will go directly to his government rather than the current 20 percent. That will give the president and his team direct control over a massive budget -- one he can use to buy power. Karzai also wants to have stricter controls on the contracting of private security firms. He cloaked that demand in the need for Afghan sovereignty, saying their "very existence undermines and threatens our combined efforts to strengthen the Afghan government." What he didn't mention, however, was a plan that could see his half brother Ahmed Wali Karzai take control of a security business in the country worth millions.

There was little apparent pressure on Karzai at the conference -- few words of warning or demands of action. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was the only one who ventured to say that the path to withdrawal will be far more difficult than many believe. "We need many more steps in the right direction," Clinton said. The remaining foreign ministers, including Germany's Guido Westerwelle, acted as if the difficult tasks facing Karzai's government had already been addressed. Speaking to a smaller group later, Westerwelle said that he had listened "very closely" to Karzai's speech.

The foreign ministers even applauded Karzai's nebulous Taliban exit program. The international community plans to initially provide some €10 million to fund the as-yet-undefined program that, at best, will lure a few hundred Taliban foot soldiers to lay down their arms in exchange for jobs. Karzai doesn't even need to bother explaining how Taliban leaders or other powerful insurgency groups are to be re-integrated into society.

Reconciliation sounds good at the end of the day, and it is an easier sell than an extended battle against the Taliban that would lead to yet more loss of life in Afghanistan.

With the announcement of its plan to withdraw, the West has finally robbed itself of the one means it still had left for applying pressure in Afghanistan. Billions in development aid has already been pledged through 2014.

For his part, Karzai is already planning for the time after that -- how he can survive politically, keep a hold on power and secure lucrative business for himself and those loyal to him. The Afghanistan that will arise in the years after will not be the one that many in the United States and Europe dreamed of.