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## Karzai Cornered

By M K Bhadrakumar

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The Daily Telegraph disclosure on the advanced stage of negotiations over the strategic agreement between the United States and Afghanistan is on expected lines. Afghan President Hamid Karzai has been pushed into a corner by recent events and is bleeding from a thousand wounds inflicted from various quarters. He is left with no more stamina and is throwing in the towel as his recent muddle-headed formula to reconcile the contested parliamentary election results testifies. His salvation at a personal level lies in regaining US goodwill and he is caving in to the US pressure to sign on the dotted line agreeing to the stationing of US troops in Afghanistan on a long-term basis.

The DT says the agreement gives the timeline as 2024 but that's how these things happen. Effectively, Karzai has conceded foreign occupation of his country on a permanent basis. Karzai is capitulating after beating war drums against the foreign presence for the past few years. He is left with no option and increasingly looks like a wounded hero from a Greek tragedy.

He has proven to be an ineffectual ruler and the government is ridden with corruption and lacks credibility. The recent Taliban attacks in Kandahar have knocked out his political base. His confrontation with the Afghan opposition has brought about a constitutional crisis. Now that the US drawdown has begun, Karzai comes face to face with the stark reality that the Afghan forces are a macabre joke and cannot assume responsibilities for security even for one month. Taliban continue to ignore him and his High Council for Peace and the result is that his reconciliation process with the Taliban has reached a dead-end.

If Karzai signs an agreement on US occupation of Afghanistan, he will be entering himself and taking Afghanistan with him into a danger zone. Taliban will not recognise his deal with the US. His position, including personal safety, may become untenable as time passes. The Afghan opinion will certainly militate against the foreign military presence even if Karzai labels the American bases as Afghan bases. In fact, it is unrealistic that the US forces can share any tent with the Afghan soldiers as the latter can be easily infiltrated by the Taliban.

The US expectation that the Taliban would learn to live with the American occupation in their lust for power in Kabul is far-fetched and can only be seen as wishful thinking. Peace will continue to elude Afghanistan and Pakistan will continue to boil as long as US troops remain in the region. Barack Obama is doing a great disservice to the cause of regional peace and stability by allowing himself to be led by the Pentagon and his CIA hands.

The DT reports that the regional powers are bound to oppose the US military presence. This is only to be expected. The Russian ambassador in Kabul has already expressed strong views. Pakistan, China and Iran's opposition is well-known, too. Karzai is a keen observer of regional politics and should have factored in the regional opinion but he is putting personal interests upfront — his own political future.

The agreement with the US takes him all the way back to where he began in the winter of 2001 when out of the blue he was foisted as the head of the interim government of Afghanistan and the region had to figure out his locus standii — an American puppet. When history is written, he will stand out as a weak, malleable, indecisive figure who doesn't have a mind of his own. The contrast with Iraq's Nouri al-Maliki couldn't be sharper. The US is literally begging al-Maliki for permission to keep their troops in Iraq for just one more year.

Equally, the 'hidden agenda' of the US invasion of Afghanistan can no longer be disowned. Quite obviously, the US intends to plunge into the 'great game' in Central Asia.