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Why America Is Stuck With Karzai

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Afghan President Hamid Karzai and his ally, the United States, are hopelessly at odds, and yet they are condemned to the mutual pursuit of success in Afghanistan.

There was something arbitrary about the whole thing. Would the United States be sending 20,000 additional troops to Afghanistan? Or 30,000? 40,000? Or perhaps just an unknown number?

US President Barack Obama was not in a good mood when he embarked on a nine-day trip to Asia on Friday. He had just come from the last meeting, for the time being, of the National Security Council to discuss his administration's new Afghanistan strategy, leaving his advisors with instructions to come up with a new proposal based on the best aspects of the four current options. But Obama was mainly interested in a date: The date when the United States could withdraw its troops and turn the war in Afghanistan over to the Afghans. The president's tone, say members of his staff, was "demanding."

But Obama will have a hard time getting an answer to his question in Washington, because it depends almost entirely on the situation in Afghanistan, and on the answer to another question: Will Afghan President Hamid Karzai manage to sufficiently stabilize his country and develop his armed forces so that Afghans themselves can take up the fight against the Taliban and al-Qaida?

Placating His Allies

That is hardly likely, at least not in the short term. Instead Western officials, including the US president, his Secretary of State **Hillary Clinton**, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and German Defense Minister Karl-Theodor zu **Guttenberg**, are urging Karzai to finally start fighting corruption in his country and train reliable soldiers and police officers.

This explains why Karzai, shortly before his inauguration into his second term in office on Nov. 19, is devoting so much of his time and effort to placating his allies. He has been scheduling new crisis meetings on a daily basis. "The pressure on Karzai is horrible," says a member of his cabinet. "He feels treated like the governor of a colony in the 18th century."

The relationship between the president and the US ambassador in Kabul, Karl Eikenberry, who was on good terms with Karzai in the past, is severely strained, while Karzai's relationship with US Special Envoy Richard Holbrooke is believed to be in tatters. Even the normally affable Senator John Kerry has apparently become more demanding. "Is this the democracy that everyone holds in such great esteem?" Karzai said, referring to Washington newly supercilious tone.

Mujaheddins and Warlords

The Americans are now urging Karzai to replace incompetent members of his administration. One of them is Energy Minister Ismail Khan, a former mujaheddin commander from the city of Herat in western Afghanistan. Karzai wants to keep Khan, because of the influence he wields in the western part of the country.

Before the recent elections in Afghanistan, Karzai also made deals with a number of shady regional warlords. For instance, Uzbek General Abdul Rashid Dostum now stands to receive five cabinet ministries, six ambassadorships and four governorships in return for the hundreds of thousands of Uzbek votes he delivered to Karzai. Dostum is seen as one of the most bloodthirsty warlords of the past.

Now that Karzai has been declared the winner of the recent Afghan presidential election, his choice of Mohammed Fahim, a former warlord, as his vice president already seems set in stone. Citing allegations of drug smuggling, US Secretary of State Clinton has threatened to refuse to issue a travel visa to Fahim, a former militia leader and intelligence chief from the Panjshir Valley in northern Afghanistan. The only hope of Fahim being prevented from assuming office as Karzai's vice president is a possible war crimes indictment against him by the International Criminal Court in The Hague.

Karzai himself has never been suspected of corruption. Nevertheless, he upholds a traditional patronage system that secures his own position and guarantees influence and income for his

loyal supporters. Of course, his own family and his clan are among the beneficiaries of the system.

Ineffective Threats

There are unconfirmed reports that Karzai plans to appoint his brother Ahmed Wali, who controls the country's south in his role as the "Godfather of Kandahar," as Afghanistan's next ambassador to Dubai. There are also persistent allegations that Wali is involved in the drug trade. Karzai, however, only wants to his favorite brother abroad if there is sufficient evidence against him.

In truth, the president should not feel overly intimidated by the West's threatening gestures. The United States does spend about \$225 billion (€153 billion) a year on civilian and military aid for Kabul, and any reduction in this amount would be painful for the president. But it would also delay the timing for a US withdrawal even further.

The Americans' ultimate threat is also ineffective. If they were to withdraw immediately, not only would Afghanistan be lost, but its unstable neighbor Pakistan, a nuclear state, could descend into chaos once and for all. Even the former US ambassador in Kabul, Ronald Neumann, admits: "The argument that we will withdraw from Afghanistan if it doesn't do what we say is foolish."