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Cables Offer Shifting Portrait of Karzai

By Helene Cooper and Carlotta Gall

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Oman's foreign minister says that he is "losing confidence" in him. A British diplomat says Britain feels "deep frustration" with him, while an Australian official complains that he "ignores reality." A diplomat from the United Arab Emirates says Afghanistan would be better off without him. NATO's secretary general speculates that he has a split personality.

The portrait of President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan that emerges from a cache of confidential American diplomatic cables obtained by WikiLeaks and made available to a number of news organizations reflects his trajectory from the eager leader anointed by the West to an embattled politician who often baffles, disappoints or infuriates his official allies.

American and foreign diplomats have tried to keep their complaints about Mr. Karzai private. But now, thanks to the cables, there is a more official chronicling — brutally candid views of Mr. Karzai recorded by State Department officials after high-level meetings, detailing the steady deterioration in his reputation in the nine years since he took office.

For the Obama administration, the disclosure of the cables — dating from 2004 to 2009 — could exacerbate an already fraught relationship, one that began as lukewarm, turned

frigid and is back to lukewarm, mostly because the administration sees no alternative to working with Mr. Karzai.

Lt. Gen. Karl W. Eikenberry, the retired Army officer who became the American ambassador to Afghanistan in April 2009, was blunt about his criticisms in a July 2009 cable. "It remains to be seen whether Karzai can or will refrain from this 'blame America' tactic he uses to deflect criticism of his administration," he wrote. "Indeed, his inability to grasp the most rudimentary principles of state-building and his deep seated insecurity as a leader combine to make any admission of fault unlikely, in turn confounding our best efforts to find in Karzai a responsible partner."

Mr. Karzai's plunge in global opinion, as documented in the cables, almost directly mirrors the fortunes of the United States and its NATO allies in Afghanistan. The leader described early on is an optimistic, proactive figure, filled with helpful suggestions and gratitude for the Western alliance that liberated his country from the Taliban.

"Karzai was upbeat," said one cable from the American Embassy in Kabul in February 2006. "Karzai repeated several times that he was much more confident about the current security situation than he was at this time last year, and characterized himself as a 'relatively happy man.'" Mr. Karzai, the cable continued, emphasized that NATO needed to "complete the win" that is "ours for the taking this year."

He also knew how to schmooze. In early cables, Mr. Karzai comes off as dashing, smooth and cosmopolitan, ready to flatter American officials with bon mots about country music and Starbucks coffee.

A Nov. 24, 2005, cable, in which Mr. Karzai is described as offering a rosy assessment of the war, also recounts how he chatted with visiting members of Congress from Washington.

"President Karzai was gracious and made frequent reference to his fondness for the U.S.," the cable said. "Karzai recounted how much he had enjoyed partaking of turkey and celebrating Thanksgiving." The message continued, "The Congressmen and President Karzai closed the meeting with some banter about exporting pomegranates to the U.S. and making them part of the traditional Thanksgiving feast."

Even General Eikenberry, who in 2007 was leaving his post as the commander in Afghanistan, had glowing things to say about the early Karzai. "President Karzai is a more confident commander in chief and chief executive," he is described as telling Pervez Musharraf, then Pakistan's leader, who is known to have loathed Mr. Karzai, in a January 2007 cable from the American Embassy in Islamabad. General Eikenberry said Mr. Karzai had replaced "corrupt poor-performing officials."

"Reconstruction assistance is taking root in districts throughout the country," he added.

But a different man emerges in the later cables. To be certain, Mr. Karzai was presiding over a country riven by tribal tensions, a growing insurgency, warring politicians and a populace increasingly suspicious of the American troops on their soil. Still, his American and NATO critics perhaps were reflecting both disappointment in the progress of the war against the Taliban and indignation that the man they put in charge was no longer toeing the line.

One British diplomat said as much, as reported in an October 2008 cable from the American Embassy in London, which gave a readout of meetings between Pentagon officials and their British counterparts. According to the cable, John Day, then the policy director of the British Defense Ministry, told Eric Edelman, a Pentagon official, that his government felt “deep frustration” with Mr. Karzai, adding that “I remind people that we — the international community — selected him.”

By 2009, General Eikenberry, the newly appointed American ambassador to Afghanistan, also had clearly soured on the Afghan leader. In a cable in July of that year, he said Mr. Karzai was “often agitated, accusing the U.S. of working against him.” The American diplomat matter-of-factly portrayed his weekly visits with Mr. Karzai as tiresome battles to keep the Afghan leader from going off on wild tangents.

“When Karzai drifted towards a reiteration of his anti-U.S. conspiracy theories on several occasions, I was able to refocus the conversation on how the U.S. and Afghanistan governments can work together in the near and medium term to achieve combined success,” General Eikenberry wrote at one point. (A few months later, he wrote his now famous leaked confidential cable complaining that Mr. Karzai was not an “adequate strategic partner” for the United States in Afghanistan.)

Meanwhile, James B. Steinberg, Mr. Obama’s deputy secretary of state, characterized Mr. Karzai as “indecisive and unprepared” during a meeting with the British ambassador to Washington, according to a February 2009 cable. And Mr. Edelman, a top Pentagon policy official in the Bush administration, told a group of NATO officials in 2008 that Mr. Karzai was “eager to divert attention to Pakistan as a source of all of Afghanistan’s problems.”

Mr. Karzai first burst onto the international stage in the style of Che Guevara, slipping over the Afghan border from Pakistan in 2001 as United States forces pounded the Taliban, before being installed by the West. President George W. Bush invited him to his first State of the Union speech after Sept. 11, 2001, where Mr. Karzai sat in the audience as a symbol of heroes who emerged from the terrorist attacks.

But just a few years later, the Bush administration and NATO countries in Afghanistan were grappling with the problems of Mr. Karzai that are now widely known — his personal insecurity and lack of trust in the United States, his falling popularity at home, his failure to combat the booming narcotics trade and corruption, and his seeming inability to run an effective government.

His relationship with the United States, the cables show, has been one of constant support and reassurance from the United States that it would remain in Afghanistan even after its troops withdrew, but also relentless pressure on President Karzai to follow an American agenda, whether on relations with Pakistan, counternarcotics or corruption. The friction points include his half brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, whom, the cables show, Western officials suspect of benefiting from drug trafficking, charges Ahmed Wali Karzai denies.

There are no cables available from 2010, as Mr. Karzai's relationship with the West has become even more strained: in a speech this spring, he threatened to join the Taliban.

To the diplomats who deal with him, Mr. Karzai is a querulous ally at best, the cables make clear. In one June 2008 cable, American Embassy staff members in Brussels dutifully recorded — and sent back to Washington — musings from Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, then NATO's secretary general, about whether there were two Mr. Karzais.

“SecGen wondered aloud which Karzai would show up for the Afghan Donors Conference in Paris — the erratic Pashtun politician or the rational national leader,” the cable said.