

Obama-Karzai talks at White House

US military faces “hard fighting” in Afghanistan war

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Afghan President Hamid Karzai’s visit to Washington this week, culminating in a May 12 meeting and joint press appearance with Barack Obama at the White House, was an exercise in public relations and image building, which required denying or covering up the mounting tensions between Washington and its puppet in Kabul.

The basic premise of the visit—that Karzai represents a sovereign government and meets with Obama and other top US officials on the basis of equality—is a fraud. A former middle-ranking diplomat for the Taliban regime, Karzai was handpicked for the presidency by the Bush administration, and retained in office by the Obama administration for lack of any viable alternative. He is regarded with contempt and hostility by virtually all top US officials in Washington.

After Karzai aides engaged in blatant electoral fraud to gain his second term in office in last September’s presidential election, relations between Washington and Kabul seemed to hit bottom. But with Obama’s decision in December to mount a massive escalation of US troop strength in the course of this year, with an additional 30,000 combat forces, the US has been compelled to reinforce its commitment to propping up Karzai and his henchmen.

The major events of the Washington visit have been stage-managed to soothe tensions and reassure the Afghan president of US backing and esteem. These include a full day at the State Department with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, an evening dinner at the home of Vice President Joseph Biden, Wednesday’s ceremonies at the White House, and a visit by Karzai to Walter Reed Army Medical Center, where he commiserated with a handful of American soldiers maimed in the course of the war.

No less than 20 cabinet ministers and senior aides accompanied Karzai on the trip, prompting one press

commentator to observe that Karzai had brought every top official who wasn’t barred from entry into the United States as a suspected drug trafficker or war criminal.

Given the length of the visit, a full five days, there was doubtless time for some of these officials to make discreet cash deposits in their US bank accounts, or put down payments on choice real estate so they have somewhere to hide out if forced to flee their own country by the growing anti-American insurgency.

It was notable that at a joint press briefing with Karzai at the State Department, Secretary Clinton listed among his accomplishments the fact that Kabul now has its own American Chamber of Commerce, a declaration that underscored the semi-colonial character of the US-backed regime.

Clinton expressed regret that the press did not report such achievements, leading Karzai to respond, “Perhaps we should do a better job of talking to the media, or—if I may say—of managing the media.”

This seemed to be the watchword for President Obama as well, since his “joint press conference” with Karzai, described as a diplomatic honor awarded only the most important visitors, consisted of a grand total of four questions, two each by US and Afghan reporters. One of the “Afghan” questions for Karzai came from the Afghanistan correspondent of Voice of America—in effect, one employee of the US government questioning another, while their commander-in-chief looked on.

The substance of Obama-Karzai press briefing came in two comments. In his opening statement, President Obama declared that US troops would face “hard fighting over the next several months,” when thousands of Army soldiers and Marines are expected to launch a major offensive against Kandahar, Afghanistan’s second-largest city and the Taliban’s main urban stronghold.

Later, in response to a question by CNN reporter Suzanne Malveaux, Obama reiterated the long-term character of the US military role in Afghanistan. Malveaux asked him “how close we are to winning this war in Afghanistan, and whether or not you’ll be able to meet your goal of pulling out the majority of U.S. troops by July of 2011.”

Malveaux’s question misstated administration policy, according to which July 2011 is the deadline for pulling out at least a few US troops, not the majority, and Obama was quick to reiterate this fact.

He replied: “First of all, let’s be clear about what July 2011 represents. What I have said is that having put in more troops over the last several months in order to break the momentum of the Taliban, that beginning in 2011, July, we will start bringing those troops down and turning over more and more responsibility to Afghan security forces that we are building up.”

In other words, US troop strength in Afghanistan, now building towards a total of 100,000, could remain at or near that level more or less indefinitely, depending on the course of the war and the stability of the Karzai regime.

Obama and Karzai agreed on a calendar of actions for the next several months, beginning with the Kandahar offensive, expected to begin in a matter of weeks, then a “peace jirga” aimed at wooing low-ranking insurgents to reconcile with the government, followed by a July conference of major imperialist powers participating in the military and financial effort to prop up Kabul, and then parliamentary elections in September.

The elections in particular are fraught with danger, given Karzai’s record of blatant vote-rigging in last year’s presidential ballot. The majority of the current parliament is held by Karzai’s political opponents, including the former Northern Alliance, based in the Tajik minority, and other minority ethnic groups. Any effort by Karzai to rig the parliamentary elections to insure control by his own loyalists could produce a new outbreak of civil war in those provinces that have been comparatively untouched by the Taliban-led insurgency, which is based in the Pashtun-speaking region.

While Obama downplayed the friction between the Karzai government and his own, calling press reports “simply overstated,” there was further evidence of the ongoing tensions.

At the first press briefing held after Karzai’s arrival in Washington, the US ambassador to Afghanistan, retired general Karl Eikenberry, was asked about his previous criticism of the Afghan president, including a diplomatic

cable last fall which blasted Karzai’s regime as corrupt and unreliable.

“President Karzai is the elected president of Afghanistan,” Eikenberry replied. “Afghanistan is a close friend and ally, and of course I highly respect President Karzai in that capacity.” At this point, White House press secretary Robert Gibbs jumped in to prevent any follow-up.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported Wednesday that Karzai was “pressing the Obama administration to designate Afghanistan as a significant US ally and to draft a new security agreement.” The official designation of Afghanistan as a “major non-NATO ally” would put the regime on the same footing as Japan, South Korea, Australia, Pakistan and Israel, and is considered highly unlikely for a government that cannot even pay its own troops.

The *Times* noted that Karzai and Defense Minister Abdul Rahim Wardak were concerned that the government would be unable to sustain the cost of the Afghan army in the event of a US draw down of forces. In other words, they are concerned that the US financial spigot, from which all the top Afghan officials have drunk deeply, may ultimately be turned off.

Meanwhile a report by the International Crisis Group, reported by McClatchy News on Tuesday, found that the Afghan National Army was “riddled with corruption, ethnic friction and rivalries among its highest leaders.” The report warns that these problems “could risk the army’s disintegration after the withdrawal of international forces.”



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