

US defense secretary's Afghanistan trip a debacle

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President Barack Obama's newly confirmed defense secretary, Chuck Hagel, confronted suicide bombings, an "insider" attack and vitriolic criticism from the US-backed puppet, President Hamid Karzai, during his weekend visit to Afghanistan.

The planned centerpiece of the trip, a joint press conference with Karzai at the presidential palace, was called off on Sunday with US officials claiming it was because of a security threat. Their Afghan counterparts denied that there was any such danger.

Whether the US defense secretary was considered unsafe in the most heavily guarded building in Kabul, or Washington felt it was impossible to share a platform with a man it has kept in power for nearly a dozen years, the cancellation of the event clearly points to a deep-going crisis in the Obama administration's transition toward a smaller, permanent military presence in Afghanistan.

Within hours of Hagel's landing in Afghanistan two suicide bombings killed nearly 20 Afghans. One was just outside the Ministry of Defense in Kabul, where 10 people died.

In a response that blindsided Washington, Karzai used a televised speech ostensibly called to mark Women's Day to lash out at the US and suggest that the bombings were part of a broader conspiracy to cast his own government as powerless in the face of a Taliban offensive without the continued presence of US-led occupation troops.

"In reality, the bombs that went off yesterday under the name of the Taliban were a service to the foreigners," Karzai said.

"Those bombs that went off in Kabul and Khost were not a show of force to America," he continued. "They were in service of America. It was in the service of the 2014 slogan to warn us if they [US troops] are not here,

then Taliban will come. In fact those bombs, set off yesterday in the name of the Taliban, were in the service of Americans to keep foreigners longer in Afghanistan."

The Afghan president, who was installed by the US occupation in 2001, went on to charge that US officials are meeting with Taliban representatives "every day" in Qatar.

The remarks drew a sharp response from the top US commander in Afghanistan, Gen. Joseph Dunford. "We have fought too hard over the past 12 years, we have shed too much blood over the last 12 years, to ever think that violence or instability would be to our advantage," he said.

Hagel was somewhat more diplomatic. "I told the president that it was not true," the new Pentagon chief told the media. "The fact is any prospect for peace or political settlements—that has to be led by the Afghans." Suggesting that Karzai's remarks were aimed at constituencies within Afghanistan, Hagel added, "I was a politician once, so I can understand the kind of pressures" he faces.

The "pressures" Karzai is facing are indeed intense. Both he and the corrupt clique around him are growing increasingly anxious about their ability to survive, both politically and physically, the drawdown of US troops, whose number has fallen from over 100,000 to 66,000.

This force is supposed to be cut in half by next year and reduced further by the end of 2014 to a residual force that the US wants to keep permanently deployed in Afghanistan. Last week, Gen. James Mattis, the chief of the Pentagon's Central Command, told a hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee that this force should include 20,000 troops, 13,600 of them Americans and the rest from other NATO countries.

While the US media generally treated Karzai's

comments as “bizarre” and another example of his “erratic” nature, the views he expressed are far from unique in Afghanistan. Indeed, in an editorial published Sunday, the same day as Karzai’s speech, the Afghan daily *Sarnawesht* charged that the actions of US-led occupation troops “not only do not weaken but they in fact strengthen insurgents.” It added that the US “repeatedly violates the Afghan government’s decisions and is treating Afghanistan as an occupied country.” The result, the editorial said, was to weaken the Afghan regime and cause Afghans to regard it “as a puppet and slave government,” and the insurgency as legitimate.

The paper referred to two prominent cases in which Washington has ridden roughshod over the Karzai regime’s demand for respect of Afghan sovereignty. The first is the long-delayed transfer of full control of the infamous US-run Bagram prison.

On Saturday, coinciding with Hagel’s visit, the US commander, General Dunford, announced that there would be no transfer because of the Karzai regime’s refusal to grant the US military the right to veto the release of any detainee as well as continued unrestricted access to the detainees.

Karzai had vowed to release any prisoners who were not charged with crimes. The US military has held hundreds of such individuals for years on suspicion of supporting the insurgency, without ever charging much less trying them.

The other issue was Karzai’s demand that US Special Operations troops be withdrawn from Wardak province, where his government charged that they had engaged in “torturing and even murdering innocent people” and had been involved in the forced disappearance of civilians.

Two weeks later, the special forces troops were still there, as was made evident in a so-called “green on blue” or “insider” attack Monday that claimed the lives of at least two American troops and three Afghan soldiers at a special operations base in Jalrez in Wardak, where an Afghan soldier turned a mounted machine-gun on his ostensible allies.

The Karzai regime functions as a US pawn, whom Washington would be willing to dispose of in its bid to maintain a permanent presence in Afghanistan, assert its hegemony over the oil-rich region of Central Asia, and maintain a forward operating base against

neighboring China. Karzai knows that the US is maneuvering with both the Pakistani military and the Taliban to that end.

Moreover, while the wars of the past decade and the continuing “global war on terrorism” have been waged in the name of defeating Al Qaeda as well as its alleged allies like the Taliban, it is abundantly clear that US imperialism is prepared to make use of these forces, as it has in both Libya and Syria, where Islamist fighters have functioned as proxy forces in US-led interventions for regime change.

Meanwhile, in a separate incident that is emblematic of the methods that have generated growing popular hatred of the more than 12-year-old occupation, US troops shot and killed two civilians in a truck after it came near their convoy. A third man was wounded. The victims were apparently employees of a company that provides repairs and service to police vehicles.

A spokesman for the US occupation forces said that after the vehicle came too close to the American convoy and its driver failed to heed instructions, the soldiers took “appropriate measures to protect themselves.”



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