

Obama meets generals on Afghanistan as troop deal remains stalled

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The White House convened an emergency meeting on Afghanistan Tuesday as Washington's puppet president, Hamid Karzai, continued to delay signing a bilateral security agreement (BSA) that would allow over 10,000 US troops to remain in the country after the supposed withdrawal of all American combat forces at the end of this year.

Gen. Joseph Dunford, the senior US commander in Afghanistan, returned to Washington for the talks, and other top Pentagon and intelligence officials, including Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel and Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Gen. Martin Dempsey, were participants.

The meeting follows a renewed demand from the White House that Karzai sign the security agreement quickly, or face the prospect of Washington withdrawing all of its troops and cutting off all military aid to Afghanistan. The BSA sets the terms under which an estimated 10,000 US troops would continue to operate there after a United Nations mandate expires on December 31. Most crucially, it would grant immunity to all US forces for prosecution for criminal acts and war crimes committed on Afghan soil.

On Monday, White House spokesman Jay Carney repeated that Karzai's deadline for signing the BSA "is a matter of weeks, not months." This is the mantra that US officials have been repeating since November of last year, when a hand-picked Loya Jirga (grand council) endorsed the agreement.

"I think that's a way of saying this can't wait for very long because it's impossible to ask our NATO allies or US military commanders to plan on a contingency—this is a complicated piece of business and there cannot be and will not be US troops in Afghanistan beyond 2014 without a BSA," Carney added.

Tensions between Washington and its erstwhile Afghan puppet, who was installed in the presidency by the US invasion of the country more than a dozen years ago, have escalated sharply over the past three months, with Karzai insisting that he will not sign any deal unless the US forces stop night raids and bombardments against Afghan civilian homes and Washington facilitates peace talks with the Taliban.

It now emerges that Karzai had carried out his own initiative on this last score, organizing secret talks with Taliban representatives since November, as the conflicts began to escalate between the US and the Afghan president over the signing of the BSA.

"The last two months have been very positive," the *New York Times*, which broke the news about the secret talks, quoted Karzai spokesman Aimal Faizi as saying. Describing the discussions, which took place in Dubai, as "among the most serious the presidential palace has had since the war began," Faizi added, "These parties were encouraged by the president's stance on the bilateral security agreement and his speeches afterwards."

The Taliban have insisted that they will not stop fighting until all US and other foreign troops leave Afghanistan. They were, according to this account, "encouraged" by Karzai's failure to sign the agreement keeping a residual US force in the country and by the Afghan president's increasingly sharp criticisms of the American-led occupation.

These have included not only denunciations of the killing of civilians in a series of US attacks over the past few months, but also the more recent suggestion that terror attacks attributed to the Taliban were secretly being orchestrated by Washington to increase the pressure for signing the BSA. This includes a suicide bombing at a Kabul restaurant last month in which 13

foreigners, including three Americans, were killed.

Karzai told the London *Sunday Times* that he “saw no good” in the US military presence in Afghanistan. “This whole 12 years was one of constant pleading with America to treat the lives of our civilians as lives of people,” he said, adding, “In general the US-led NATO mission in terms of bringing security has not been successful.”

Referring in the interview to the Taliban as “brothers,” Karzai charged that the Americans “did not work for me, they worked against me,” and said that all US aid had done was to “create pockets of wealth and a vast countryside of deprivation and anger.”

US officials were clearly disturbed by the news of the secret talks, which raised the threat that Karzai is seeking to reach a peace agreement independently with the Taliban that would pull the rug out from under any long-term US military presence in the country, removing its central rationale.

Washington is determined to maintain its military presence in the country, where a string of bases allow it to project military power against neighboring China, Iran, South Asia and the energy-rich, ex-Soviet republics of Central Asia. The pretexts for holding on to these strategic bases are “counter-terrorism” operations against a virtually non-existent Al Qaeda presence and training Afghanistan’s security forces. The bases are in reality directed at suppressing popular opposition to foreign occupation.

Despite Karzai’s public rhetoric, both Afghan and Western officials predict that the BSA will be signed, sooner or later. Support for the deal is strong within the corrupt ruling clique in Kabul, which has enriched itself off foreign aid money and whose rule is utterly dependent upon foreign troops.

The presumed front-runner in April’s presidential election to succeed Karzai, Abdullah Abdullah, who was both the former international representative of the warlords of the Northern Alliance and the former Afghan foreign minister, said he would sign the deal immediately if elected. Abdullah, who challenged Karzai in the last fraud-ridden presidential ballot, told CNN Monday: “It’s highly risky what President Karzai is pursuing at the moment. It [is] creating a shadow over every other thing which is happening in this country, and the people are extremely worried.”

NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen

seemed to contradict Washington’s threat that if Karzai fails to sign within “weeks” the deal is off, suggesting that consummating the BSA will have to wait until after the election. “I think, realistically speaking, a new president will be the one to sign,” Rasmussen told reporters last Saturday at the Munich Security Conference. He added, “in that case we are prepared to stay after 2014.”

Meanwhile the abject failure of the hundreds of billions of dollars poured into Afghanistan during more than 12 years of occupation to fundamentally alter the profound oppression and poverty of its population was made clear in a shocking and detailed report issued last month by UNICEF on the state of the country’s women and children.

It found that fully 55 percent of Afghan children are stunted because of inadequate nutrition and chronic illness during the first two years of life. This condition entails irreversible damage to and curtailed development of the minds and bodies of the majority of an entire generation.



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