

How Obama Lost Karzai

The road out of Afghanistan runs through two presidents who just don't get along.

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By Ahmed Rashid

A few weeks before the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, an exiled Afghan leader I had known for nearly 20 years paid a visit to my home in Lahore. His name was Hamid Karzai, and his problem, he told me, was that he was rapidly losing faith in the West's concern for his country.

Karzai was the scion of a prominent Pashtun family in southern Afghanistan, one with a deep-rooted enmity for the Taliban regime. The Taliban, which had ruled the country since 1996, had gunned down Karzai's father in front of a mosque in the Pakistani city of Quetta two years earlier. Now the younger Karzai was clandestinely sending money and weapons across the Afghan border for an eventual uprising against the ruling regime. But he had just been served notice by Pakistan's all-powerful Inter-Services Intelligence directorate (ISI) that his visa had been revoked -- the Taliban, with its close links to the Pakistani intelligence agency, had urged the ISI to get rid of him. Karzai was making the rounds of Western embassies in Islamabad to ask whether anyone would support him if he went inside the country and raised the standard of rebellion. But nobody offered to help. Several ambassadors refused to see him.

By the time U.S. bombers pounded the last remnants of the Taliban out of Kabul just a few months later, everything had changed. Karzai had gone from pariah to president and, in the eyes of the U.S. government, from combatant in an obscure regional conflict to vital strategic partner. Yet when I met with Karzai not long ago at the presidential palace in Kabul for a lengthy conversation, one of many in the decade since our pre-9/11 meeting in Lahore, it was remarkable how much his relationship with the United States seemed to have come full circle.

Once again, Karzai now appears mistrusting of the West's long-term commitment to his country. He considers the Americans to be hopelessly fickle, represented by multiple military and civilian envoys who carry contradictory messages, work at cross-purposes, and wage their Washington turf battles in his drawing room, at his expense, while operating on short fuses and even shorter timetables. "In the time an American wants Karzai to act, the president is still cooling his cup of tea," one of his advisors complained to me.

Over the course of the last decade, the few U.S. officials whom Karzai trusted have one by one moved on, leaving the Afghan president alone with his conspiracy theories. Of late, he is convinced that the Americans want to get rid of him, even as he stubbornly refuses to reckon with the aspects of his rule that might make them wish to do so: his own administrative failures, growing corruption in the top ranks of his government and family, the rigged presidential election that won him a second term, and above all his failure to articulate a vision for the future of his country. Last fall he reportedly told top U.S. officials that of the three "main enemies" he faced -- the United States, the international community, and the Taliban -- he would side first with the Taliban.

Ironically, 2010 was supposed to be a new "year one" for the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan, when the Americans, after years of neglecting the country in favor of Iraq, finally invested the resources necessary to defeat the Taliban and rebuild the country. Instead, things got worse. Last year saw the highest death toll of U.S.-led coalition forces since the beginning of the war, increasing civilian casualties, and the spread of the Taliban insurgency, once contained in south and east Afghanistan, into the north and west as well.

At the heart of the failure, both a cause and consequence of it, is the tattered U.S. relationship with Karzai, an alliance that has cost the United States more than \$330 billion and nearly 1,400 soldiers' lives, but is now at the lowest ebb of its nearly decade-long history. U.S. President Barack Obama and his administration plainly do not trust the Afghan leader, or even much like him. Apparently convinced that cleaning up the Afghan government is more important to the country's stability than Karzai himself, U.S. authorities have mounted increasingly confrontational anti-corruption investigations of his inner circle.

From the Afghan president's perspective, Washington treats him with a mixture of insult and confusion. During Obama's December visit to U.S. troops at Bagram air base outside Kabul, bad weather prevented him from flying by helicopter to the nearby capital. Rather than wait for the weather to clear -- a matter of hours perhaps -- Obama left without seeing Karzai. It was a snub that Afghans will not forget. A few days later, Vice President Joe Biden said that U.S. forces would be out of Afghanistan by 2014 come hell or high water -- and then told Karzai in mid-January that U.S. forces would stay beyond the deadline.

Both Karzai and Obama seem to be in a dangerous state of denial about the degree to which they need each other, instead making divergent plans for how to wind down the war that can't be accomplished without the other's help. Gen. David Petraeus, the commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, thinks he can fight his way out of the present conundrum by inflicting mortal blows on the Taliban; Karzai wants to negotiate a peace agreement with them, even relying on the assistance of his old enemy Pakistan if need be. But the road out of the conflict runs through a close U.S.-Karzai relationship, whether either of them likes it or not, and today that relationship is imperiled to a degree that it never has been before.

Throughout Afghan history, an ever present concern for political and physical survival has been an extremely important part of Afghan rulers' psyches. No recent ruler has died peacefully in his bed. U.S. diplomats of an earlier generation understood the implications of this: that building trust required more than just money and guns. In a prescient 1972 report, filed months before the last Afghan king, Mohammed Zahir Shah, was deposed in a coup, U.S. Ambassador Robert Neumann wrote, "For the King and leadership group, survival is the first objective with all other goals considered secondary. The result is an excessively cautious governing style which invariably seeks to balance off external and internal forces perceived as threatening the regime's power." The same could be said of Karzai today. Handling a wary president preoccupied with keeping his own head requires a personal touch -- something that Obama, for all his renewed commitment to the fight, sorely lacks.

WHEN THE UNITED NATIONS CONVENED a meeting of Afghan factions to choose Afghanistan's post-Taliban president in Bonn, Germany, in December 2001, there was really only one man in contention. Everyone knew that the new interim head of state had to be a Pashtun; the Pashtuns are the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan and had ruled the country for 250 years. There were only two Pashtun leaders who had returned from Pakistan to take on the Taliban after 9/11, and one of them, Abdul Haq, had been captured and executed by the embattled regime two months earlier. That left Hamid Karzai.

By that time, Karzai had come to trust and depend on the Americans. When he and his band of Pashtun warriors were surrounded by the Taliban in southern Afghanistan a few days after his return to the country, the CIA had rescued him and fully backed his uprising. U.S. diplomats lobbied the world for his appointment as president, to no objections. From his first day in office, Karzai depended for security on the warlords of the Northern Alliance, who commanded vast CIA-funded militias. He had an empty treasury and no security force of his own. Appearing with President George W. Bush in the White House's Rose Garden in January 2002, Karzai declared, "Afghanistan is a good partner. It will stay a good partner."

But reality sank in quickly. Bush, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and other Western leaders pledged never to abandon Afghanistan again, but their commitments of money and manpower never matched their rhetoric. Sufficient funds to rebuild the country's infrastructure and economy did not arrive, and the U.S. and NATO military commands refused to deploy troops outside Kabul after the initial invasion, instead funding -- over Karzai's objections -- the warlords who ruled over the country's hinterlands like medieval barons. With an impending invasion of Iraq in plan, all the Bush team really wanted on the Afghan front was peace and quiet.

The shift of U.S. resources and international attention from Afghanistan led to a growing bitterness toward the West in Karzai's inner circle, a disenchantment that eventually reached the president himself. I met Karzai every few months during this period, and with each meeting his complaints grew louder: The United States, he believed, was failing to answer his demands for help in building electricity infrastructure and roads and

rehabilitating some 3 million returning refugees. He repeatedly pointed out Pakistan's clandestine continuing support of the Taliban, especially after the Taliban re-emerged as a guerrilla insurgency in 2003.

Through it all, however, Karzai remained intensely loyal to Bush, who, even if he failed to deliver, made an effort to maintain close personal ties with the Afghan leader. Karzai was also close to two international interlocutors -- Lakhdar Brahimi, head of the U.N. Kabul mission, and European Union emissary Francesc Vendrell -- and was even willing to take tough criticism from them.

Karzai was only rarely so at ease in his dealings with the U.S. officials Bush dispatched to Kabul. The first Bush-era ambassador, the astute and intellectual troubleshooter Robert Finn, tried to lay down a proper state-to-state relationship with the Afghans. But Bush and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld were already preoccupied with Iraq; Finn could secure little of the money, aid, or U.S. troops that Karzai badly wanted.

Karzai got on famously with Finn's successor, Zalmay Khalilzad, an Afghan-American who was a great charmer and schmoozer and, on account of his unique double portfolio -- he was both ambassador and Bush's special representative in Afghanistan -- enjoyed direct access to the U.S. president. Khalilzad also had the benefit of timing. He was tasked with producing U.S. achievements in the run-up to Bush's 2004 reelection bid and Karzai's own presidential election the same year. Karzai's interests and Bush's were once again briefly aligned: Both needed Afghanistan to look like a success story.

Khalilzad had fought and won the argument in the White House that Afghanistan needed more resources, and he arrived with the first serious development money allocated since the war and a driving thirst to get things done. Karzai was flattered by the attention "Zal" paid to him; Khalilzad was also the first U.S. official to side with Karzai and publicly criticize Pakistan's role in harboring the Taliban, winning further Afghan admiration -- as well as the enmity of Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf.

But when Khalilzad moved on in 2005 to take over the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, he left behind few lasting achievements. U.S. funding and attention evaporated again as election-year exigencies faded and the war in Iraq took a turn for the worse. The Americans became obsessed with "quick impact projects," which were largely aimed at satisfying local tribal power brokers and did little to kick-start Afghanistan's economy or rebuild its infrastructure. Funding for the Afghan security forces remained grossly inadequate: From 2002 to 2009, \$20 billion was spent financing them, less than is projected to be spent in 2010 and 2011 alone.

Khalilzad was followed by Ronald Neumann, an experienced diplomat whose father Robert had been the prescient ambassador to Kabul in the 1970s. But Neumann arrived at the worst possible time, as Iraq was swallowing up the bulk of U.S. resources and the U.S. Congress had begun to demand better results and more accountability from Afghanistan. Karzai found himself deluged with visiting members of Congress, all giving him different advice and orders. At the time, though he was still far from hostile to the United States, he grumbled to me that entertaining delegation after delegation was making his life miserable.

By the final years of Bush's presidency, U.S. dealings with Karzai had become a tangle of mixed messages. William Wood, Bush's ambassador in Kabul from 2007 to 2009, arrived in Afghanistan fresh from fighting the drug cartels in Colombia as the U.S. ambassador there and was under pressure to repeat the performance in Afghanistan, where opium production was booming. Wood demanded that Karzai order aerial spraying of the poppy crop in the country's turbulent south. Karzai, fearing a farmers revolt, refused and began to mistrust Wood. The ambassador was also undermined by Bush, who spoke regularly with Karzai via videoconference and refused to push the Afghan president on drugs or other embassy priorities, such as corruption. These conflicting signals from Washington set the stage for Karzai's dealings with Bush's successor, a relationship that would grow more dysfunctional even as the Taliban insurgency spread and the Afghan people's frustration with the United States grew.

FOR DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATES in the 2008 U.S. presidential election, Afghanistan was the good war: a foreign-policy cause that allowed presidential hopefuls to establish their national security bona fides while keeping themselves clear of the debacle in Iraq. Among them was Sen. Barack Obama. "I believe this has to be our central focus, the central front, on our battle against terrorism," Obama said in a July appearance on CBS's Face the Nation. "I think one of the biggest mistakes we've made strategically after 9/11 was to fail to finish the job here, focus our attention here. We got distracted by Iraq."

I met with Obama just before he took the oath of office, shortly after he had received briefings from the Bush administration and suddenly realized that the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan was far worse than he had been led to believe. Key decisions on more troops, money, and other issues had been held back throughout 2008 as Bush decided to pass them on to his successor. Obama wasn't taking the reins of a good war -- he was inheriting a foreign-policy quagmire.

Obama arrived in office with a laundry list of issues he wanted Karzai to address: nepotism and corruption in the Afghan government, lack of good governance, and the country's proliferating drug trade. But none of Obama's top White House advisors had any recent experience with Afghanistan or knew any of the players there well. Karzai felt deeply insecure as he now knew nobody in Washington, and nobody was making the effort to get to know him. Even as Obama committed far more resources to Afghanistan in his first two years in office than Bush did over eight years in two terms, the Afghan leader grew convinced that the new U.S. president was out to get him. He began to fear for his political survival.

Friction between Karzai and Obama's team first came to a head during Afghanistan's 2009 presidential election. In the lead-up to the August vote, Karzai was convinced by his advisors that Richard Holbrooke, Obama's special envoy, was trying to get rid of him by encouraging other candidates, such as Northern Alliance leader Abdullah Abdullah and former Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani, to stand against him. The presidential palace buzzed with rumors that the CIA and Britain's MI6 had lined up massive resources to unseat Karzai.

In fact, Holbrooke was leading the charge in Washington to convince the administration and Congress to commit more resources to Afghanistan and Pakistan, but his good intentions did not seem to convince Karzai. When the election results were disputed amid claims of vote-rigging, Holbrooke intervened to try to salvage the results, asking Karzai to stand for a second round of polling. But the move seemed to confirm the worst suspicions of Karzai's aides about Holbrooke. It was left to Sen. John Kerry, rather than a member of Obama's own team, to smooth over the relations. Even today, Karzai still refuses to accept that the election was flawed, and he still thinks that the Americans were trying to unseat him. Months later, Karzai's senior aides told me repeatedly that they still believed the United States wanted Karzai to lose.

The botched election -- which cost some \$150 million and two U.N. officials their careers -- and Karzai's worsening paranoia became a catalyst for the Obama administration's internal debates over its Afghanistan policy, which was subjected to a detailed review in the fall of 2009. Civilian officials, most notably Biden and Ambassador Karl Eikenberry, were unnerved by Karzai's mercurial behavior and a resurgent Taliban. They fought for scaling back the U.S. investment in a conflict that no longer seemed to have much prospect for success.

Karzai was "not an adequate strategic partner," Eikenberry wrote in a Nov. 6, 2009, cable to Washington later leaked to the New York Times, adding that the president and his advisors "assume we covet their territory for a never-ending 'war on terror' and for military bases to use against surrounding powers." Karzai and his aides, in turn, were furious that they were never asked to be full partners in Washington's policy review. Once again, they thought, the Americans were making decisions about Afghanistan without consulting the Afghans. When Obama declared in December 2009 that U.S. troops would start pulling out of Afghanistan by July 2011, Karzai -- who had not been consulted in the matter before the speech -- was shocked.

On the other side of the debate from Eikenberry was counterinsurgency guru Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan, who reportedly wanted to double down on the war with a surge of as many as 50,000 troops. Karzai's aides told me they trusted McChrystal; the general seemed to truly understand the Afghan leader, deferring to him in decision-making and treating Afghan criticism of U.S. military tactics with respect and thoughtfulness rather than rejecting it out of hand.

When I met with McChrystal in Islamabad in early 2010, I was taken aback by his understanding of the Afghan environment. That this austere former special-operations commander understood how to demonstrate his respect for Afghan dignity and sense of sovereignty while still largely getting his own way was a revelation. Early on, McChrystal persuaded Karzai to travel around the country with him in an effort to enhance both U.S. and Afghan government prestige. The enduring picture of McChrystal in Afghan eyes is of the most powerful U.S. military officer in the country humbly sitting cross-legged on a carpet at Karzai's feet while Karzai addressed tribal elders. When McChrystal was forced to resign in June over his comments about top U.S. civilian officials in a Rolling Stone article, Karzai begged the White House not to sack him.

But it is Eikenberry who remains in office, though he has never quite recovered from the leak of his cable; it has damaged not only his own standing in Kabul, but also that of the State Department. More than a year later, some of Karzai's aides still can quote verbatim from the memo.

To Karzai, the message of indifference at best -- and outright hostility at worst -- continued from the White House. Not only did the ambassador remain, but even after the Obama administration decided to dispatch a major surge of 30,000 U.S. troops to the war in late 2009, top U.S. officials made statements or visited Kabul without bothering to inform Karzai in advance. In March 2010, when national security advisor James L. Jones complained to reporters that Karzai had not done enough to improve governance "since day one" of his second term, Karzai blew a fuse, and Obama had to warn his subordinates to treat the Afghan president with respect. Last July, one of Karzai's closest advisors, Mohammed Zia Salehi, was arrested by a U.S.-led Afghan anti-corruption force on charges of corruption. Karzai, determined to spite the Americans, freed him.

Bob Woodward's unflattering portrait of the White House's internal deliberations over Afghanistan in Obama's Wars, released last fall, further damaged the already shaky foundation between Karzai and Obama. For Karzai, it was unprecedentedly naive of a sitting U.S. president to allow his cabinet's intimate deliberations to be made public (not to mention the book's claim that the CIA believed Karzai to be "manic-depressive"). By October 2010, relations were so fraught that Karzai stormed out of a meeting with Eikenberry and Petraeus over contracts with private security firms, which Karzai had abruptly announced he was canceling, again telling his shocked interlocutors that he'd be better off joining the Taliban.

When I met with Karzai in November, I asked him why he had turned against the West. He vigorously objected to the premise of my question and challenged me to recall any time in the nearly three decades we had known each other that he had ever been anti-Western. Still, he made it clear that he no longer trusted the United States, its representatives, or their advice. Petraeus's brusque, aggressive approach to the war has made Karzai nervous and angry. (The president's aides have fueled his mistrust, feeding him rumors that Petraeus is in a hurry because he aspires to the U.S. presidency and is simply using Afghanistan as a steppingstone, rumors Petraeus has repeatedly denied.) Karzai has come to believe that NATO's counterinsurgency and counterterrorism strategies are both failing. And he is now threatening to turn to Iran and Pakistan for help in mediating with the Taliban -- whose repositioning as a patriotic nationalist force he seems to take seriously -- as long as the United States refuses to do so.

The fault is not the Obama administration's alone, of course. Karzai has been belligerent, stubborn, and mercurial, at times refusing to accept logical arguments. Several European ambassadors with whom I spoke in Kabul argue that both sides deserve a share of the blame -- Karzai for sparking crisis after crisis, and the United States for letting him down again and again, allowing the situation to deteriorate as far as it has and not listening to Karzai when he has legitimate complaints, such as the excessive civilian casualties, the high-handedness of contractors, and the failure to rein in Pakistan's support for the Taliban.

But the root of this dysfunction is simpler than all that: It is the non-relationship between Obama and Karzai. The U.S. president has been striking in his refusal -- or inability -- to get on with Karzai, never working to create the personal rapport the Afghan president enjoyed with his predecessor. It is Obama, not Bush, who has committed massive resources to Afghanistan while trying to improve the tattered U.S. reputation in the Muslim world. But Karzai still considers the Bush era a golden age for his presidency, a time when Karzai could pick up the phone any time and talk to the American leader.

Despite what the Obama administration may think about the acute failings of the man, getting rid of Karzai is not an option. Afghanistan is not Vietnam circa 1972; Karzai is a twice-elected president, one whose victories were endorsed by Washington and the international community. Kabul's educated urban elite and many among Afghanistan's non-Pashtun ethnic groups may remain critical of the Karzai government, but it is still popular in large parts of the country, enjoying an approval rating of more than 70 percent in mid-2010, according to an Asia Foundation survey. Karzai's critique of U.S. military tactics and his attempts to talk to the Taliban resonate with many Afghans, in part because they reflect the facts on the ground.

In December, the Red Cross warned that security in the country was at its lowest point since the overthrow of the Taliban, with record numbers of civilians killed or displaced by fighting. Insurgent attacks jumped 66 percent from 2009 to 2010, according to the Afghanistan NGO Safety Office in Kabul, and Taliban shadow governors now operate in all but one of the country's 34 provinces. Last year 711 coalition troops were killed,

the highest total in the nine-year war, and there was a 20 percent increase in civilian casualties, mainly at Taliban hands.

As such grim statistics suggest, many of the Obama administration's criticisms are justified. Karzai has never put forth a coherent vision for his country. He has allowed corruption to eat away at the gains made by development agencies, elevated his own family, and miserably failed to build a government capable of delivering services and justice to the Afghan people. Eager to absolve himself of these failings -- of which he is perfectly well aware -- he now believes that if he could bring the war to an end with a peace agreement with the Taliban, then Afghans and the international community would forgive his past sins.

Absolution may be long in coming. In my conversations with Karzai and his aides about "reconciliation," or even just talking to the Taliban, it has been painfully obvious that the Afghan leader has no clear vision or plan. How would real negotiations, rather than the talks about talks that have occurred so far, take place? What would be on the table, what red lines would both sides lay down, and how and where would the discussions proceed? In my interviews with former Taliban, it seems they have a better idea of the agenda than the Afghan government does.

It is too late, however, for the Obama administration to bring Karzai back into the fold with more promises of troops and aid. What is needed is genuine common ground: a shared political strategy to end the war. Both sides already agree on the need to win over Taliban foot soldiers and have put forward a common plan and money to do it. But there is still no agreement on trying to engage top Taliban leaders.

Of course, talks may not be a panacea. The Taliban may already be too fragmented and divided, too ideologically driven, or too controlled by other regional powers to come together around a peace deal. But what is important for Karzai, desperate to end a war that has raged off and on for the last 30 years, is to try.

So far, the Americans don't agree. But talking to the Taliban is perhaps the only option now that can put them back on the same track as Karzai -- and that is the only road that leads out of this conflict. Besides, if there is one thing that Obama and Karzai still share, it is the knowledge that the alternatives to that scenario are too horrible to contemplate.

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