

NATO's Dangerous Wager with Karzai

The New York Review of Books- Blog, 22/11/2010

By Ahmed Rashid

At the close of its summit meeting in Lisbon on Saturday, NATO announced it had reached an agreement with the Afghan government to continue combat operations in Afghanistan for years to come. But it is far from clear that these plans—which postpone a transfer of responsibility for security to Afghan forces until 2014—will find much support in Kabul. Afghan president Hamid Karzai is a changed man. His worldview now is decidedly anti-Western. When I spoke with him earlier this month at the presidential palace in Kabul, Karzai told me that the US has been unable to bring peace to Afghanistan or to secure cooperation from Pakistan, which continues to give sanctuary to the Taliban. He rejects the barrage of US criticism at his government on issues like corruption and poor administration and says the original sin of all these faults lies with the Americans.

Lasting nearly two hours, my off-the-record conversation with Karzai was vigorous, and at times I strongly pushed back, reminding him of his past commitments and his professed support for such ideals such as transparent democracy—ideals that he had stressed in numerous earlier interviews with me and others. But this time he rejected every argument. By the end of our talk, it was quite clear to me that his views on global events, on the future course of NATO's military surge in southern Afghanistan, and on nation building efforts throughout his country have undergone a sea change. His single overriding aim now is making peace with the Taliban and ending the war—and he is convinced it will help resolve all the other problems he faces, such as corruption, bad governance, and the lack of an administration.

Karzai's new outlook is the most dramatic political shift he has undergone in the twenty-six years that I have known him. Although it is partly fueled by conspiracy theories, it is also based on nine years of ever growing frustration with the West.

He no longer supports the war on terrorism as defined by Washington and says that the current military surge in the south by the United States and its NATO allies is unhelpful because it relies on body counts of dead Taliban as a measure of progress against the insurgency, which to many would be a throwback to Vietnam and a contradiction of Petraeus's new counterinsurgency theory to win over the people. In particular he wants an immediate end to the night raids conducted by US Special Operations forces—a demand that has put him in direct conflict with US commander General David Petraeus. According to Karzai, these raids—which in the last three months have killed or captured 368 mid-level Taliban leaders and killed 968 foot soldiers—are counterproductive because they antagonize the civilian population. Indeed, no one knows how many civilians are included in the casualty figures, which are provided by the US military.

At the NATO summit, President Obama dismissed Karzai's concerns about night raids, according to press accounts. "If we're ponying up billions of dollars to ensure that President Karzai can continue to build and develop his country," Obama said, "then he's got to also pay attention to our concerns as well."

Karzai also maintains that there is a political alternative to NATO: much more of the onus could be placed on countries in the region—especially Iran and Pakistan—to end the war and help reach a settlement with the Taliban. Senior Western and Afghan officials in Kabul say Iran has stepped up its

support to the Taliban in western Afghanistan in recent months, possibly as a bargaining chip for future talks on a peace settlement. For its part, Pakistan, where the entire leadership of the Taliban is based, wants a leading part in any talks that NATO or Karzai may have with the Taliban. Yet Karzai told me that in the last six months neither Iran nor Pakistan has provided any substantive support to facilitate peacemaking.

Karzai is desperately tired and angry at the mixed and multiple messages he has received for the past nine years, first from Washington, and now from NATO. He still is irked by the fact that President Bush refused to provide anything close to adequate resources or troops for securing Afghanistan for four years after 2001.

More recently, President Obama has vacillated between bolstering the surge and offering firm dates for the start of a withdrawal. At the NATO summit, Obama dropped his July 2011 date for the start of a US troop withdrawal, adopting instead a “transition” to Afghan forces without a formal US troop withdrawal. The full transition and drawdown of NATO troops will now not happen until 2014, and even that, NATO officials say, may not mean an end to combat operations, with allied forces remaining in a “supporting role.”

Not surprisingly, the Afghans are totally confused. The skepticism in the White House and the CIA about whether Petraeus’s surge is actually working is also a message that reaches Karzai and adds to his own suspicions about what the Americans are up to.

With his weakened position, the war escalating across the country, and Western forces wanting to leave, Karzai still wants to appear presidential and reassert Afghan sovereignty. This is exactly what the communist President Najibullah did as Soviet troops began to leave Afghanistan in 1989—only to find himself in the middle of a civil war.

Karzai may want to imitate Najibullah, but he has none of the earlier president’s base of power, and Karzai’s reassertion of Afghan sovereignty can now only come through an end to the war and a settlement with the Taliban. But he is giving contradictory signals to Afghans by acting as both the government in charge and a one-man opposition who often bemoans the deaths of Taliban at the hands of coalition forces—but not of his own soldiers, who are fighting alongside NATO.

Most of his ministers do not endorse Karzai’s new hostility to the Western forces and continue to work well with NATO. However the extensive corruption charges that swirl about the Karzai family and his ministers continue to put them at odds with the international community.

Karzai and the US will not part ways but there is clearly a fundamental and growing tension between them that does not augur well for either the US or Afghanistan.

Ahmed Rashid’s book, Taliban, was updated and reissued recently on the 10th anniversary of its publication. His latest book is Descent into Chaos - The US and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia.