

Why a forlorn Karzai is breaking with the West

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By Ahmed Rashid

As Nato leaders meet in Lisbon to discuss how to seek a way out of Afghanistan by 2014, they need even more urgently to decide how to seek a new partnership with Hamid Karzai, the Afghan president.

After a two-hour animated discussion with Mr Karzai in the presidential palace in Kabul it is clear that his views on global events, the US intervention in Afghanistan, the future political course for his country and Nato's role and stance have undergone a dramatic change. Indeed his new world view is the most dramatic political shift he has undergone in the 26 years that I have known him.

Mr Karzai is bitterly critical of the west and the US in particular, saying they have been unable to bring peace to Afghanistan or secure compliance from a Pakistan that gives sanctuary to the Taliban. The US wrongly blames Afghans for Washington's own past and present failures, he says, and he rejects the barrage of US criticism at his government.

In recent months senior western officials including, most prominently, Richard Holbrooke, the US special envoy for the region, and General David Petraeus, the Nato commander in Afghanistan, have engaged in heated arguments with Mr Karzai. Some have even briefed the US media that he is mentally unbalanced and on medication. However, he is as calm as ever and has clearly given his political U-turn considerable thought, even though many of his ideas depend more on conspiracy theories than facts on the ground.

What is clear is that he no longer supports the "war on terrorism" as defined by Washington, and he sees Nato's military surge in the south as unhelpful. It relies on body counts of dead Taliban, he argues, leaving Afghan cities as garrisons and the people ever more alienated.

In particular he wants an immediate end to night raids conducted by US special operations forces, which the US say have in the last three months killed or captured 368 Taliban mid-level leaders and killed 968 foot soldiers. Nobody knows how many civilians are included in these figures.

In a suggestion that alarms and infuriates western officials, he says there is a political alternative to Nato - to depend more on regional countries, especially Iran and Pakistan, to end the war and find a settlement with the Taliban. Yet neither country has delivered Mr Karzai anything substantial in the past six months to make it easier for him to make peace with the Taliban. Western and Afghan officials in Kabul say Iran has stepped up its support for the Taliban in western Afghanistan in recent months, possibly as a bargaining chip for future talks on a peace settlement. Pakistan, which houses the entire leadership of the Taliban, wishes to be at the centre of any talks Nato or Mr Karzai has with the Taliban.

The same officials said the only concession by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in the summer was to put pressure on the Jalaluddin Haqqani network not to target Kabul with suicide bombers - a promise that has been largely kept. However, the ISI has refused to free Taliban leaders who were jailed in February for holding secret talks with Mr Karzai. The US failure to rein in the ISI, says Mr Karzai, leaves him no choice but to deepen his relationship with Pakistan if he wants peace with the Taliban.

In our conversation he challenged me to remember whether in our long relationship he had ever before been anti-western. It is true that in his years in exile in Pakistan and in his early years as president he was a steadfast admirer of the west. Although his shift is partly fuelled by his advisers' paranoia, it is also based on nearly a decade of frustration with the west.

He comes across as desperately tired and angry at the mixed messages he has received for the past nine years, first from Washington and now from Nato. President George W. Bush refused to provide resources or troops for securing Afghanistan for four years after 2001. Now President Barack Obama has vacillated between “surging” and offering dates for the start of a withdrawal. This Nato summit will see Mr Obama drop his July 2011 date for the start of a US troop withdrawal. Instead there is to be a transfer of responsibility to Afghan forces, and the full transition and withdrawal will start in 2014.

Not surprisingly, the Afghans are confused. Understandably, Mr Karzai is unable to sell the west’s vacillations to his own people as a coherent policy. There is still no US or Nato central civilian authority implementing decisions on Afghan policy and delivering one clear message to Mr Karzai, although Gen Petraeus carries out that role for the military.

Meanwhile, there is deep scepticism in the White House and the Central Intelligence Agency as to whether Gen Petraeus’s surge is actually working - a message that also reaches Mr Karzai. At the same time there is a constant stream of officials from nearly 50 countries and their embassies in Kabul offering differing and even contradictory advice. The US has five ambassadors at its 1,500-strong embassy in Kabul, who are not always on the same page as the US generals. Every few days US congressmen roar in and berate Mr Karzai for corruption.

With his weakened position, the war escalating across the country and western forces wanting to leave, Mr Karzai still wants to appear presidential and reassert Afghan sovereignty. This is exactly what the communist President Mohammed Najibullah did as Soviet troops began to leave Afghanistan in 1989. Mr Najibullah built a new broad-based nationalist party and developed a patriotic agenda for his battle-tested army and loyal officer corps that defeated the then Mujahideen in several early battles.

Mr Karzai may want to imitate Mr Najibullah, but he has none of his assets and Mr Karzai, not the Americans, is most at fault for failing to build state institutions. His reassertion of Afghan sovereignty can now only come through an end to the war with the Taliban. But he is confusing Afghans by acting as both the government and a one-man opposition who often bemoans the deaths of Taliban, but not his own soldiers.

So what is the way forward in this grim cycle? Mr Karzai is mistaken to believe he can rely on just the regional countries to pull him out of his present predicament. Both Iran and Pakistan are themselves confronting political unrest, terrorist violence and prevalent anti-westernism within their armed forces. They can offer links to the Taliban but not a “road map” for peace.

We should recognise that most of his ministers do not believe in his world view and continue to work well with Nato. A president cannot be at odds with his cabinet for long. However, the corruption allegations swirling around the Karzai family and some cabinet ministers make co-ordination between them difficult and rapprochement with the US more so.

Nato’s most important task is to reassess its record in Afghanistan over the past nine years and stop blaming only Mr Karzai and the Afghans for the worsening situation. US and Nato policies must be clearer and mixed messaging must stop. If Mr Karzai and most Afghans really do want peace talks with the Taliban then that should be Nato’s focus.

Mr Karzai will not part ways with Nato but an unco-operative president as opposed to a merely unhappy one could give the Taliban just the boost they cannot quite obtain on the battlefield. Unfortunately the chances of the Lisbon summit which Mr Karzai will address on Sunday charting a new course to confront the ever more complex situation are depressingly slight.

The writer’s book, Taliban, has just been updated and reissued

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