

'Khuda Hafez,' Hamid Karzai

The Farsi phrase means, "May God protect you," and is usually said at leave-taking. Ramtanu Maitra reports, and warns: Don't forget Ngo Dinh Diem!

April 7—Outside of Afghanistan, President Hamid Karzai has two formidable enemies—Pakistan and Britain. What has kept him in power and out of harm's way, during these eight-plus years of war in Afghanistan, is the protection of the United States. However, the breakout of acrimonious relations between Kabul and Washington in recent months makes one wonder how long Washington will be willing to continue providing full protection to the Afghan President. The latest news, that the White House may disinvite Karzai, who is scheduled to visit Washington next month, is an indication that Washington is no longer interested in further discussions with Kabul.

The good news, is that while every Tom, Dick, and Harriet associated with the Obama Administration, who wears the garb of an Afghan expert, blames Karzai and his "corrupt administration" for the eight-plus years of mess, the so-called "search" for an alternative leader to replace him has not yet turned up any viable candidates.

With the advent of the Obama Administration, and induction of Obama's Af-Pak envoy, Richard Holbrooke, into the Afghan theater, Karzai began to come under pressure. Although Washington never made transparent what its plans were for Afghanistan, Karzai was nonetheless pressured to accept them. As the security situation worsened, with the insurgents gaining control of more and more territory by pushing the U.S. and NATO-led troops onto their bases, and maintaining security of major towns, Washington and NATO headquarters in Brussels became increasingly reckless, killing Afghans by the hundreds, and identifying all of them as "Taliban."

Random Killing of Pushtuns, Alienation of Karzai

Those killings, however, did not go off well with Karzai, a Pushtun, and created intense mistrust of him

among the majority of his fellow Pushtuns. Kabul repeatedly spoke out against killing of the innocents, but it was to no avail. In retaliation, Washington heaped blame on Karzai, blaming his "corrupt" administration for all the ills and misfortunes. However, no one talked about why and how opium production in Afghanistan multiplied 25-fold from 2001 to 2007, under the watch of the British and U.S. troops, bringing in oodles of cash to all and sundry, including the so-called Taliban and al-Qaeda insurgents battling and winning ground rapidly against the foreign troops.

This was "business as usual" in Afghanistan throughout 2006-09. A noticeable shift began to emerge with the Jan. 28, 2010 London Conference, which was attended by high-level diplomats from almost 70 countries. What came out of that conference, was a tacit agreement among the participants, under pressure from Karzai's enemy, Britain, that called for reconciliation with some "good Taliban," with the intent of bringing them in to share power in Kabul. How that would be achieved, remained a big question mark, but, Karzai got the message. For Karzai, the options left to him at that point were: to hand over power to the "good Taliban," and leave Afghanistan to spend the rest of his life in exile; or, to fight back, and somehow gain the confidence of a majority of the Pushtun community, a small fraction of which supports the Taliban—"good" or "bad."

Following the London Conference, Karzai visited Riyadh, where he spoke to Saudi King Abdullah, a strong proponent of bringing the Taliban to power, and Islamabad, where he met the Pakistani Army chief. Gen. Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, who made no bones about the fact that the arrival of the Taliban in Kabul would provide Islamabad, once more, with an opportunity to set up Afghanistan as its "strategic depth" to counter any potential Indian plan to invade Pakistan. Karzai realized that he will have to buck the tide, and

go for the second option.

Prior to his visit to Pakistan, Karzai invited Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Kabul, on the heels of a trip there by U.S. Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates. Gates was still in Afghanistan on March 10 when the Iranian President predicted, from Tehran, that American efforts in Afghanistan would fail. Later, at a news conference with Karzai at the Presidential Palace, Ahmadinejad charged that the United States was using the excuse of fighting “terrorists that they themselves created, supported, and financed,” to maintain its occupation of Afghanistan.

This visit of Ahmedinejad did not go over well in Washington. Only two days before it, , Gates told reporters, while traveling to Kabul for his own talks with Karzai, that Iran was “playing a double game in Afghanistan.” “They want to maintain a good relationship with the Afghan government,” Gates said. “They also want to do everything they possibly can to hurt us, or for us not to be successful.” He said he believed that Iran was providing money and “some low level of support” to the Taliban in Afghanistan. Asked about those comments by Gates, Ahmadinejad responded: “What are you doing in this region? You are 12,000 kilometers away from here, your country is the other side of the world. And what are you doing here? This is a serious question.”

Karzai’s China and Iran Gambit

Karzai’s next move was to embark on his first-ever visit to China, where he found a warm reception. Chinese President Hu Jintao and the Afghan President signed three deals on March 24, which covered economic cooperation, technical training, and preferential tariffs for some Afghan exports to China. China is seen as a key player in an international coalition seeking to secure and rebuild Afghanistan, particularly after U.S. troops pull out, analysts said, adding that Beijing is striving to help boost security and revive the economy in Afghanistan. It was earlier reported that the state-owned China Metallurgical Group promised to invest a record US\$3 billion in Aynak, one of the world’s largest copper mines, south of Kabul. Afghan



U.S. Army/Spc. Michael Zuk

Afghan President Hamid Karzai doesn’t have many good options left, since the January London Conference, where a tacit agreement was reached, that the “good Taliban,” should be brought into a power-sharing arrangement in Kabul.

Foreign Minister Zalmay Rassoul told *China Daily* on March 24 that China has contributed tremendously to Afghan economic development, especially in infrastructure building.

“There are some security issues. We are trying to deal with it, and I hope the security situation will allow Chinese investment to operate without any risks,” Rassoul said. Afghanistan is heavily dependent on international aid, but its government hopes the vast reserves of minerals will provide the key to eventual financial independence, Rassoul added.

Gong Shaopeng, a professor in international politics at China Foreign Affairs University, said the major goal of the Afghan government is to revitalize the country’s economy. He said China’s step-by-step aid has helped stabilize the country and provide job opportunities. “We have helped Afghanistan rebuild facilities damaged by the war, like roads and canals,” he said.

Subsequently, Karzai antagonized his Western allies further, when he joined leaders from the region to cel-



DoD/USAF Master Sgt. Jerry Morrison

Defense Secretary Robert Gates told reporters, while traveling to Kabul for talks with Karzai, that Iran was “playing a double game in Afghanistan.” “They want to do everything they possibly can to hurt us, or for us not to be successful.” He is being interviewed on Afghan television, in this December 2009 photo.

celebrate the first festival of the International Day of Nawrooz, held in celebration of the Persian New Year in Tehran on March 27. Leaders from Iran, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Iraq, the Turkish deputy prime minister, and senior representatives from 20 other countries attended.

Thanking leaders of the regional countries for taking part in the festival, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki said that celebrations at the regional level were first observed in 2008 in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, with the participation of the foreign ministers from Afghanistan, Iran, and Tajikistan. The following year, he said, it was celebrated more gloriously

in Afghanistan’s northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif. President Karzai was among the speakers on that important day and expressed the hope that 2009 would be a year of peace, stability, and progress for Afghanistan.

On March 30, 2010, under the cover of darkness, U.S. President Barack Obama made a surprise visit to Kabul. Before he departed, also after sundown, Obama had a long talk with Karzai. While the discussion was not made public, reports indicate that Obama made clear that he was highly displeased with the Afghan President’s performance.

On the substance of this quarrel, the *Washington Post*, in its lead editorial on April 6, said that Obama has been pressuring Karzai “to crack down on the rampant corruption in his government, especially in the southern provinces where U.S. troops are trying to break the hold of the Taliban.” The White House also resisted Karzai’s attempt to exclude UN representatives from the election commission. The Afghan President’s claim of electoral interference, according to the *Post*, although perhaps prompted by that pressure, is not credible; his steps toward initiating negotiations with insurgent leaders appear premature, at best, the editorial concluded.

It is evident that it was the substance of his discussions with the U.S. President that enraged Karzai. On April 1, addressing the Independent Election Commission (IEC), Karzai lashed out against Washington’s accusations against him, that he had committed vote fraud in his reelection last October. He said: “There is no doubt that the fraud was very widespread, but this fraud was not committed by Afghans, it was committed by foreigners.... This fraud was committed by Galbraith, this fraud was committed by Morillon, and this fraud was committed by embassies.” Karzai was referring to Peter W. Galbraith, the deputy United Nations special representative to Afghanistan at the time of the election, and the person who helped reveal the fraud, and Philippe Morillon, the chief election observer for the European Union.

Karzai's Principal Enemies: Britain and Pakistan

Later in the speech, Karzai accused the Western coalition fighting against the Taliban of being on the verge of becoming invaders—a term usually used by insurgents to refer to American, British, and other NATO troops fighting in Afghanistan. “In this situation, there is a thin curtain between invasion and cooperation/assistance,” said Karzai, adding that if the perception spread that the Western forces were invaders, and the Afghan government their mercenaries, the insurgency “could become a national resistance.”

That speech, particularly the formulation that implied that the insurgency could become a national resistance, got Washington's goat. There was a hue and cry in the U.S. capital, where Obama Administration officials expressed dismay at the “outrageous” allegations by a “corrupt” Afghan administration. But Karzai was in no mood to back down.

Three days later, on April 4, Karzai, visiting his home town, Kandahar, the seat of Pushtun royalty and the birthplace of the Taliban, spoke to local parliamentarians, chastising the U.S. for “interference” in Afghanistan's politics. His statements centered chiefly on attacking the U.S. and its NATO allies, as well as parliament itself, warning that if the parliament didn't assent to his takeover of the Electoral Complaints Commission, it would give the impression that Afghanistan was dominated by the West, thereby granting legitimacy to the Taliban. Some parliamentarians present say that Karzai even threatened to join the insurgency.

President Karzai is not only fighting back, but has put himself at a great personal risk. Unless he is able to garner quick support from China, Iran, and Russia—the three major nations in the immediate vicinity not antagonistic to him—he will be the main target of a number of recognized, and not-so-well-recognized, killers gunning for him.

His principal threat comes from Britain and Pakistan. He has crossed swords, over the years, with the British. To begin with, London never liked the appointment to the Presidency of an Afghan Pushtun close to the United States and India. In 2005, Karzai spoke out against the explosion of opium production in southern Afghanistan's Helmand province, accusing the British troops stationed there of allowing the large-scale growth of opium production.

He expelled two British MI6 agents on Dec. 27, 2007, on charges that they posed a threat to national security. Afghan government officials said the decision to expel them was taken at the behest of the CIA, after the two agents were caught funding Taliban units. One of the agents, Mervyn Patterson, worked for the United Nations, while the other, Michael Semple, worked for the European Union. Both were alleged Afghan specialists who had been operating in the country for over 20 years; that means they must have been interacting, on behalf of London, with the al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders there. The London *Times* wrote that, when Patterson and Semple were arrested, they were in possession of \$150,000 cash, which was to be given to Taliban commanders in Musa Qala, in the opium-infested Helmand province.

An unnamed Afghan government official told the London *Sunday Telegraph* at the time, that “this warning”—that the men had been financing the Taliban for at least ten months—“came from the Americans, who were not happy with the support being provided to the Taliban. Washington gave the information to our intelligence services, who ordered the arrests,” the source added, “The Afghan government would never have acted alone to expel officials of such a senior level. This was the information that was given to the NDS [National Directorate of Security] by the Americans.”

In 2006, U.S. military commanders in Afghanistan had loudly protested the British decision, in a deal with local tribal leaders, to withdraw troops from Musa Qala, opening the door for a Taliban takeover of the region. Michael Semple has since been laundered, and currently holds a fellowship with the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at Harvard's Kennedy School. He is now in the seminar circuit of various American think tanks, proffering his “expertise” on issues concerning insurgency, reconciliation, and political developments in Afghanistan.

In addition to throwing out the two MI6 agents, Karzai also drew the wrath of the British Empire establishment when, in January 2008, he turned down the joint effort of Washington and London to appoint Lord Paddy Ashdown as the UN's super-envoy to Afghanistan. Ashdown, a “liberal” and a “democrat,” who wears his vainglorious feudal title on his shirtsleeves, was ready to pinch-hit for London and Washington, which had begun to look increasingly like colonial powers

trying to occupy Afghanistan and further undermine the “duly elected” President.

The second powerful threat to Karzai emanates from Pakistan. Karzai has reiterated over the years, the existence of a tacit agreement between Pakistani intelligence, the ISI, and the insurgents. He has claimed, over and over again, that the insurgents, who have committed terrorist acts inside Kabul, had the fingerprints of Pakistan’s ISI. He has also insisted, on a number of occasions, that the insurgents were not only sheltered inside Pakistan, but also protected. It is widely known that Karzai is intensely hated by a section of the Pakistani military, and by the political grouping close to both the Pakistani Taliban and Saudi Arabia.

Moreover, the Pakistani Army may conclude that Karzai, developing an independent base among a large section of the Pushtun community, may prevent the Pakistan-backed Taliban from gaining control in Kabul. Also, Karzai is close to India, and his coming to power on his own strength will necessarily allow a larger Indian presence in Afghanistan in the future. On the other hand, if Karzai can bring both China and Iran, in full force, into Afghanistan, Pakistan will have to give the elimination of Karzai a second thought.

The Elimination of Ngo Dinh Diem

It is evident that Islamabad has strong reasons to eliminate Hamid Karzai. If one jogs one’s memory, it is not difficult to fathom that the scenario developing in Afghanistan, vis-à-vis Karzai, is not much different from what occurred during the Vietnam War. On Nov. 2, 1963, South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem, who years earlier was eulogized by Washington’s policymakers and American media as the “demigod” and “savior,” was removed, and killed a day later, along with his brother, Nhu Dinh Diem, his close collaborator, by a military coup carried out by Gen. Duong Van Minh. The coup was carried out hours after Diem met with President Kennedy’s envoy, Henry Cabot Lodge, and Adm. Harry D. Felt.



U.S. National Archives

South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem was killed in a 1963 U.S.-backed coup. There are lessons to be learned here.

According to *The Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, “Washington was deeply concerned about Diem’s unpopularity and was confronted with the following choices: The choices were: (1) continue to plod along in a limited fashion with Diem—despite his and Nhu’s growing unpopularity; (2) encourage or tacitly support the overthrow of Diem, taking the risk that the GVN (Government of the Republic of Vietnam, or, South Vietnam) might crumble and/or accommodate to the VC (Viet Cong); and (3) grasp the opportunity—with the obvious risks—of the political instability in South Vietnam to disengage.

“The first option was rejected because of the belief that we [Washington—ed.] could not win with Diem-Nhu. The third was [sic] very seriously considered a policy alternative because of the assumption that an independent, non-communist SVN [South Vietnam] was too important a strategic interest to abandon—and because the situation was not sufficiently drastic to call into question so basic an assumption. The second course was chosen mainly for the reasons the first was rejected—Vietnam was thought too important; we wanted to win; and the rebellious generals seemed to offer that prospect. . . .”