

Hamid Karzai's Defiance of His Key Ally: Reasons and Motives

Arwin Rahi

April 02, 2014

In June 2012, President Barack Obama “designated Afghanistan a ‘major non-NATO ally.’”ⁱ In mid-March 2014, President Karzai surprisingly endorsed Moscow’s policy of annexing Crimea, thus, ignoring U.S. position on preserving Ukrainian territorial integrity and standing to Russian expansion.ⁱⁱ

This rhetoric was later reaffirmed by Afghan Foreign Ministry’s spokesperson.ⁱⁱⁱ However, Afghanistan wisely amended its position after casting a neutral vote in the UN General Assembly in late March regarding the status of Crimea.^{iv}

Earlier that month in an interview with the Washington Post, Karzai had said that, “Al-Qaida is more myth than reality.”^v Looking at the wider picture, despite U.S. government’s insistence on signing the Bilateral Security Agreement, Karzai has remained determined to not sign it.

Furthermore, Karzai had been very tough toward the U.S. regarding the status of formerly U.S.-controlled Bagram prison. In the end, after long negotiations the US handed over the detention center to Afghanistan last year in March.^{vi} To further American anger, the Karzai government decided to free 88 dangerous prisoners accused of terror attacks on Afghan and US troops in February.^{vii}

In addition, Karzai has remained an outspoken critic of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, especially night raids. According to military experts, night raids, alongside drones, are the most effective way of confronting the terrorists.

Also, Karzai never hesitates to condemn any coalition airstrike that has inadvertent casualties. However, his condemnation of Taliban’s terrorist attacks has been less severe, and at times there has been no condemnation at all.

Karzai’s attitude toward the U.S. was different between 2001 and 2009. He rarely took anti-American stance, especially in public. But it was after his controversial reelection that his rhetoric changed.

On April 1, 2010, speaking at Afghanistan Independent Election Commission, Karzai accused the US of having interfered in previous year’s presidential election.^{viii} He went on and warned the U.S. that the nature of insurgency might change into a nation-wide uprising against the US.^{ix}

To better understand why Karzai is doing all this, one must look at the Afghan history. A former top U.S. diplomat in Afghanistan said, Karzai is worried that history might regard him a foreign puppet, one like Shah Shuja whom the British installed to the throne of Kabul in the 1830s.^x Like

Karzai—who has been on the CIA payroll—Shah Shuja too was on the payroll of a foreign country: Britain.^{xi}

Since then, Shah Shuja's name has become synonymous with being a foreign puppet. Interestingly, both Shah Shuja and Karzai are from the same Popalzai tribe.^{xii} However, Karzai seems to have become determined to prevent himself from becoming another Shah Shuja in history. Therefore, he wants to be seen as a leader who has not been submissive to foreigners, especially the Americans.

To this end, Karzai has condemned the Gandamak and Durand agreements of 1879 and 1893 respectively, which Britain imposed on Afghanistan.^{xiii} Given this, lately Karzai has laid out his conditions for signing the BSA with the U.S.: first, an end to night raids by US troops; second, the U.S. should bring the Taliban to the negotiating table.^{xiv} The latter condition is unrealistic because the Taliban have ruled out negotiations with the Karzai government.^{xv}

No one can bring any side to the negotiating table, if they do not want to negotiate. Karzai—as an experienced negotiator—knows this very well. Nonetheless, Karzai's anti-U.S. rhetoric is not representative of will of the Afghan people who want long-term friendship with the U.S. That is why their representatives to the Loya Girga in Kabul endorsed the BSA by a majority last November.

Having had tense relations with the Karzai government, for its part, the U.S. can take several steps in relation to Afghanistan. First, since all the major candidates have announced their willingness to sign the BSA, the US should wait for the outcome of April 5 presidential election and then sign the BSA with the new president. Secondly, the U.S. should keep an eye on the Karzai government so that the latter does not rig the election.

Third, the U.S. should make sure that the results of the election are not delayed until August, especially if there is a runoff. If the next president does not come to office before August, it is likely that the BSA will not be signed, leading in turn to complete US and NATO troop withdrawal by the end of year.

Finally, under the next Afghan president the U.S. should not limit the scope of its relations with Afghanistan to one person—the president. United States' experience with Karzai indicates how one person can hijack the will of an entire nation. Instead, the U.S. should build long-term bonds with the Afghan people and try to win further hearts and minds by upholding its commitment of respecting Afghan sovereignty and staying out of internal Afghan politics.

ⁱ “Designation of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan as a Major Non-NATO Ally,” the White House, July 6, 2012, accessed March 30, 2014, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/07/06/presidential-memorandum-designation-islamic-republic-afghanistan-major-n>.

ⁱⁱ “President Karzai Meets with US Congressional Delegation,” Office of the Afghan President, March 22, 2014, accessed March 29, 2014, <http://president.gov.af/en/news/30706>.

ⁱⁱⁱ “TOLONews 6pm News 24 March 2014,” Tolonews' Youtube Channel, March 24, 2014, accessed March 30, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=exXVLaClp9w>.

^{iv} “Backing Ukraine’s territorial integrity, UN Assembly declares Crimea referendum invalid,” the U.N. News Centre, March 27, 2014, accessed March 30, 2014,

<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=47443#Uz9P7vldVww>.

^v “Interview: Karzai says 12-year Afghanistan war has left him angry at U.S. government,” the Washington Post, March 2, 2014, accessed March 31, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interview-karzai-says-12-year-afghanistan-war-has-left-him-angry-at-us-government/2014/03/02/b831671c-a21a-11e3-b865-38b254d92063_story.html.

^{vi} “U.S. military hands jail over to Afghans,” USA Today, March 25, 2013, accessed April 1, 2014, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2013/03/25/us-hands-prison-over-to-afghans/2017173/>.

^{vii} “Afghanistan frees men seen as dangerous by US,” Aljazeera English, February 13, 2014, accessed March 29, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2014/02/afghans-start-release-dangerous-inmates-201421352720597464.html>.

^{viii} “Karzai’s Speech at the Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan,” Telecast by state-run TV (known as RTA), April 1, 2014, at 09:00 p.m. Afghanistan time.

Also see: “Afghanistan: Politics, Elections, and Government Performance,” Congressional Research Service p. 6, June 2, 2010, accessed December 12, 2012, <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/145099.pdf>.

^{ix} Ibid.

^x Louis Dupree, “The Retreat of the British Army from Kabul to Jalalabad in 1842: History and Folklore,” *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 4 (1967): 53, accessed April 1, 2014, : <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3813912>.

^{xi} “Karzai Says He Was Assured C.I.A. Would Continue Delivering Bags of Cash,” the New York Times, May 3, 2013, accessed April 1, 2014 <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/05/world/asia/karzai-said-he-was-assured-of-cash-deliveries-by-cia.html>.

^{xii} Shah Shuja—a grandson of Ahmad Shah Abdali (the founder of modern day Afghanistan)—belonged to the Sadozai tribe. The Sadozais (who descend from Malik Sado) are a branch of the Popalzai tribe, see: Olaf Caroe, *The Pathans: 550 B.C.—A. D. 1957* (London: Macmillan, 1958), 259.

Karzai’s father and grandfather were chiefs of the Popalzai tribe, see:

Nick B. Mills, *Karzai: The Failing American Intervention and the Struggle for Afghanistan* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2007), 26.

^{xiii} “President Hamid Karzai’s closing speech at Loya Jirga,” Tolo News Youtube Channel, November 24, 2013, accessed March 31, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Iba8Vpkng0>.

^{xiv} Ibid.

^{xv} “Taliban will not talk peace with Karzai government, spokesman says,” the CNN, February 14, 2012, accessed June 20, 2013, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/02/14/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban/>.