

US STUMBLING TOWARD EXIT FROM AFGHANISTAN

Hamid Karzai continues his expert gamesmanship in his dealing with the US, forcing deadline after deadline to be abandoned in the US effort to get him to sign the Bilateral Security Agreement that would keep US troops in Afghanistan beyond the expiration of the NATO mission at the end of this year. Yesterday, Karzai followed through on his intention to release a number of prisoners who have been at the heart of one of the latest controversies when he gave final orders for the release of a number of them.

Recall that one week ago, Hypocrisy Tourists John McCain and Lindsey Graham were in Kabul to warn of the dire dangers of releasing these prisoners. Almost lost behind the headlines in this latest turn of events is that Karzai and Afghanistan have been true to their words in this process. Last week, their position was to state that the 88 prisoners were designated for release but that the US and NATO could provide any evidence that they have that would call for the prisoners to be sent to trial instead. It would appear that based on the latest evidence, 16 of those prisoners now are slated for trial and only 72 are now slated for release.

The Washington Post describes the tensions this move is generating:

The Afghan government said Thursday it will release 72 high-profile detainees, a decision that defies pleas by U.S. officials and deals a massive blow to U.S.-Afghan relations just as the two countries attempt to complete a long-term security agreement.

U.S. officials say the prisoners pose a threat to both Afghan security and American service members based here,

claiming their exoneration proves not only the dysfunction of the Afghan judiciary, but also the government's inability to cooperate on even the gravest matters.

President Hamid Karzai declared Thursday that the evidence against the 72 men – which had been collected by both the Afghan intelligence service and the U.S. military – was insufficient to warrant formal trials, according to a statement from the presidential palace.

The release, which is expected within days, was ordered after a "thorough and serious review of the prisoners," the statement said.

In an attempt to keep the detainees behind bars, U.S. officials had handed over reams of evidence against them – enough, they said they assumed, to at least justify formal trials.

So while by removing 16 prisoners from the list for release after considering the extra evidence, Afghanistan actually followed through with what they said they would do, word from the US has changed. Recall that last week, I pointed out that the US was claiming that their evidence for the disputed prisoners was enough to send them to trial "or at least to hold them pending further investigation". I noted that given the number of years at least some of these prisoners have been held, this amounted to a plea to hold the prisoners indefinitely without charge. That language is now mysteriously missing from the US bleating about the harm that will be done by releasing the prisoners.

But that is not the only substantive change from the US side. Graham and McCain were leading the dire warnings to Karzai that releasing the prisoners was likely to lead Congress to cut off the billions of dollars of aid that would otherwise flow to Afghanistan and that even the

Bilateral Security Agreement would be endangered.

We see in today's New York Times that the US has now backed off that warning as well:

American officials have said that the prisoners to be released are dangerous Taliban militants and that freeing them without trial would violate an agreement on detainees reached last year.

That detention authority deal was considered a prerequisite to the security pact, known as the bilateral security agreement, which would allow for a continued American troop presence and aid past 2014.

Still, just a week after some American officials insisted that such a prisoner release would prove that Mr. Karzai could not be trusted to honor a security deal, the initial American response on Thursday was cautious. Officials were critical of the release, but also careful to say that the move would not harm the security deal and that they were still trying to get a full accounting for the decision.

"We don't tie it to B.S.A.," one Obama administration official said, referring to the security agreement and noting that it was a "separate deal," while speaking on the condition of anonymity.

Despite that bit of desperate clinging to the prospect of a signed BSA (and even the continued bleating from Joseph Dunford that signing the agreement will bring peace and prosperity to Afghanistan), signs that the US is anticipating a full withdrawal at the end of this year are increasing. In today's Washington Post, we have a negative assessment from the primary US negotiator who is trying to convince Karzai to sign the agreement:

The lead American negotiator in talks over a long-term security agreement with Afghanistan has privately warned the Obama administration that its efforts to persuade President Hamid Karzai to sign the document on the U.S. timetable are likely to fail, according to officials.

The assessment, if borne out, could raise the chances of a hasty and messy troop withdrawal by the end of the year and would leave the administration with little time to assemble a military coalition to remain in Afghanistan after the pullout.

The assessment, transmitted in recent days in a classified cable by U.S. Ambassador James B. Cunningham, follows the administration's repeated extension of the deadline for an agreement it originally said it expected to complete early last fall. The White House said this week that the document must be signed within "weeks, not months."

Further, Jeff Stein informs us that the recent leak of the NIE on Afghanistan was actually a sign that those within the Obama administration who favor a complete withdrawal from Afghanistan may be gaining the upper hand:

And now the Pentagon's former top expert on Afghanistan is charging that the most recent gloomy intelligence report on the future of that nation was cooked up and leaked by administration officials trying to lay the groundwork for a quicker exit from the war there.

If true, that would be a new twist in the funhouse world of Washington leaks. Usually, when anonymous officials leak a secret report saying a U.S. military campaign is on the verge of disaster, it's designed to spur support for more troops, planes, time and money.

But David S. Sedney, a veteran senior national security official who headed the Pentagon's office for Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia until resigning in May, says the recent leak of a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on Afghanistan was tailored to jibe with polls that show two out of three Americans think the war is not worth fighting. And it is polls, he says, that drive foreign policy decisions by the president's closest aides.

Instead of making a case for staying the course, Sedney says, the NIE, details of which were leaked to *The Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times* in late December, was designed to prove that nothing can be done to save Afghanistan from the Taliban. "I know enough about the NIE processing and what went into it that when I read the leak – and it has been confirmed to my satisfaction since then – that this was a leak by people in the White House who support the zero option" – a near complete withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Afghanistan, Sedney said in an interview with *Newsweek*.

With Karzai triangulating toward the zero option from inside Afghanistan and key Obama administration figures pushing for it as well, the long nightmare of US involvement in Afghanistan may finally end in 2014. Those who want permanent war, however, are very powerful and still have a number of months plead their case to keep the massive amounts of money flowing through defense contractors and Congressional campaign funds.