

DID OBAMA'S HANDLING OF KARZAI WHEN VISITING KABUL PUT BILATERAL SECURITY AGREEMENT AT RISK?

Demonstrating once again that electoral politics trumps all other considerations for his administration, Barack Obama mostly went along with the military's recommendation (successful US political campaigns NEVER contradict the military) on troop levels in Afghanistan after this year, announcing a force size of 9800 after the military had requested 10,000 to 12,000 troops. Even the one instance of bucking military hawks comes from an electoral standpoint, as he announced that the force size will be cut in half after a year and then taken to only a handful by the end of 2016, which magically coincides with when Obama expects to triumphantly ride off into the sunset. Republicans are upset about an announced end to the troop presence, rather than allowing "conditions on the ground", which is shorthand for letting the military do what it damn well pleases, to dictate force levels, but Obama seems to think that putting the end of our troop presence just before the next presidential election will get troops out at the one time electoral blowback will be minimized.

Obama's announcement came with a large helping of arrogance in the handling of his invitation to meet with Karzai during the surprise visit to Kabul over the weekend. Although Obama fully intended his poor treatment of Karzai, he seems to have raised the ire of many more Afghans with his actions. Will that put the Bilateral Security Agreement, on which his troop size plan depends, at risk? From Khaama Press:

President Hamid Karzai was praised by Afghans for rejecting the invitation by

President Barack Obama to meet him in Bagram air base.

A last-minute invitation was sent to President Karzai to come to Bagram air base as Obama arrived to Afghanistan on Sunday following an unannounced visit to meet with the US troops.

White House officials said, "We did offer him the opportunity to come to Bagram, but we're not surprised that it didn't work on short notice."

Obama's plan on troop levels is fully dependent on the winner of next month's presidential runoff signing the Bilateral Security Agreement that Karzai has refused to sign. Although both Abdullah and Ghani have said they will sign it, their responses to the handling of Karzai are very interesting. Returning to the same Khaama Press article:

In the meantime, Abdullah Abdullah, one of the leading candidates in Afghanistan's presidential race, said the decision by President Karzai not to go to Bagram was "respectful to the people of Afghanistan."

Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, one of the other leading candidates, told Wall Street Journal in an interview that he wasn't privy to the security discussions surrounding Mr. Obama's visit.

Some Afghans saw the episode as a deliberate snub and said the U.S. leader didn't respect diplomatic protocol.

Ghani said, "We do understand security concerns, but adhering to protocol helps cementing relationships."

Obama has set himself up for a huge problem here. It looks as though both Abdullah and Ghani are indicating that they expect to be treated with the respect due to the office of President.

Should Obama continue his cavalier attitude of simply assuming the BSA will be signed once the winner is sworn into office, he could be in for a big surprise.

On the other hand, there are still the four billion US dollars every year that come with our continued presence (and all the attendant opportunities for embezzlement), so perhaps in the end Obama can continue his arrogance without fear of consequences. With that in mind, the role of that final handful of military personnel to be left in Afghanistan after 2016 stands out. From the Washington Post article linked above:

At the end of that year, the force will shrink to the size of a regular armed forces assistance group, largely to handle military sales, under the authority of the U.S. ambassador.

Even after our troops are gone, the US will do everything it can to keep enriching military contractors.