

KARZAI'S LATEST: US BEHAVING LIKE COLONIAL POWER

Since he lobbied for and then obtained loya jirga approval of the Bilateral Security Agreement but then added new conditions before he would sign it, Afghan President Hamid Karzai has exasperated military planners in NATO and the US, confounded most of the Obama administration and spawned a growth industry among pundits trying to explain his actions. Karzai's latest offering though, provides a delightful turning of the tables in which he has decided to characterize the actions of those who are pressuring him to sign the agreement. Here is how Tolo News described Karzai's most recent gem:

Amidst highly public tensions with the United States over negotiating a long-term security deal for the coming years, President Hamid Karzai has said that the U.S. is behaving like a colonial power.

In a response to a somewhat leading question from the French newspaper Le Monde in an interview published Tuesday, "Do you think the USA is behaving like a colonial power," President Karzai said:

"Absolutely. They threaten us by saying 'We will no longer pay your salaries; we will drive you into a civil war.' These are threats," Karzai said. "If you want to be our partner, we must be friends. Respect Afghan homes, don't kill their children and be a partner. So bluff or no bluff, we want respect for our commitment to the safety of Afghan lives and to peace in Afghanistan."

I would have described the question from Le Monde as highly leading rather than somewhat leading, but Karzai's response shows that he

realizes that for those in his country, the situation indeed resembles colonialism with the US as the colonial power. And the US is clearly using that colonial positioning as a very blunt instrument with which to attempt to control Afghanistan. Karzai is telling us that only a colonial power would threaten to withhold salaries and generate a civil war. He wants the US to realize that he wants a partner and not a colonial overlord. The partner would have no trouble meeting his demands of secure homes and a negotiated peace with the Taliban.

I had missed it when it came out on Thanksgiving, but this Op-Ed in the New York Times could serve as Karzai's primary example of colonial behavior by the US. It was penned by Michael O'Hanlon, who was perfectly described by Glenn Greenwald as a "really smart, serious, credible Iraq expert" who also clearly lends the same sort of intellectual firepower to his Afghanistan analysis and John Allen, the mental giant who opined that green on blue attacks in Afghanistan were caused by fasting at Ramadan (and appears to have found the perfect home for himself at Brookings with O'Hanlon after his retirement from the military). O'Hanlon and Allen open with a blast at Karzai's lack of appreciation for all that the US has done for Afghanistan:

What is going on with President Hamid Karzai? The world's only superpower, leading a coalition of some 50 nations, is willing to stay on in his country after a war that has already lasted a dozen years and cost the United States more than \$600 billion and more than 2,000 fatalities – and yet the Afghan president keeps throwing up roadblocks.

Isn't that just the height of ungratefulness? We (the world's ONLY superpower!) waged war in Karzai's country for twelve years, have offered to continue doing so and he has the gall to throw up roadblocks? Really!

But this paragraph is perhaps the height of colonial positioning by O'Hanlon and Allen:

Certainly, part of Mr. Karzai's attitude comes from the umbrage he has taken at various Americans, especially in recent years. Some United States officials did make mistakes in their handling of the complex Afghan leader, lecturing him in public too stridently about matters such as Afghan government corruption. There can be little doubt, though, that Mr. Karzai's own peevishness and ingratitude have played a large role.

The wonderful superpower US "did make mistakes", but those mistakes were in how they "handled" Karzai. And therein lies the problem, virtually in its entirety. To O'Hanlon and Allen, Karzai is merely an operative, a puppet administrator, to be "handled" by the real powers in the US. And he has the gall to be peevish and ungrateful when we make a mistake with this handling.

With all that as background, it should come as no surprise that the US now is going to allow the original deadline of the end of 2013 for Karzai to sign the BSA to expire. Military planners appear to be telling the Obama administration that a decision sometime in the spring will allow them to plan adequately for either a full withdrawal or the residual force sought in the BSA.

For a bit more reading on the issue of what Karzai really wants, I recommend this Khaama Press column written by Afghan diplomat Ahmad Shah Katawazai and this one by US-based Pakistan analyst Arif Ansar in Pakistan Today. Both get to the concept of sovereignty, which, of course, is the opposite of being a colony. From Katawazai:

President Karzai perhaps wants to be remembered as a patriot Afghan leader rather than a foreign puppet. His egoistic nature compels him to leave a

name in the history of a figure that thought and worked for the greater interest of his people, by standing against and not allowing a major power like the United States to raid their houses or reach an agreement with them without the condition of bringing peace.

And Ansar provides a very interesting parallel between the dilemma Karzai faces and the political situation in Pakistan:

Apparently, Karzai is seriously concerned about protecting the sovereignty of Afghanistan and to settle the issue of night raids, searches of Afghan homes, along with civilian casualties that have continued despite strong condemnation. In spite of the opposition, the operations have persisted and so have the casualties, even after NATO and American authorities apologized and promised on several occasions that this will not happen again. Usually there is discrepancy on what really transpired during an incident, with local Afghan officials claiming civilian casualties while NATO insisting that militants had been targeted and eliminated.

The continuation of the raids and casualties raise and reinforce the perceptions that Karzai is either a puppet or his criticism is merely meant as rhetoric. This also complicates his government's role in the reconciliation process as Taliban refuse to take to it seriously.

The above concerns are not much different than those being raised on the other side of the border in Pakistan. There, it involves the contentious issue of drone strikes and state sovereignty. The associated matter of civilian deaths caused by drone strikes in FATA has

remained controversial and has consistently strained ties between US and Pakistan.

While the government of Pakistan diplomatically condemns the strikes, it is widely believed to privately condone them. After the recent strike in which TTP chief Hakimullah Mehsud was killed, several political parties accused the US of sabotaging the nascent peace talks between TTP and Pakistan. The fissures over civilian casualties have now escalated to such an extent that Pakistan's Tehreek-e-Insaf, Jamatey Islami, and Awami Muslim League have decided to block the NATO supply lines until the drone strikes cease.

What a perfect analogy. Karzai need only look at his next door neighbor to see how disastrous it is take a public policy position that is violated on a regular basis by a "partner" that pays no attention to the concept of sovereignty. The sad reality is that this same example demonstrates to Karzai that there also is zero chance that this partner will ever change its behavior.