

JIRGA APPROVES BSA WHILE KARZAI STANDS BY PLEDGE TO DELAY SIGNING

After Sunday got off to a historic start with the announcement of an agreement between the P5+1 and Iran, the day continued to be momentous as the loya jirga in Kabul approved the Bilateral Security Agreement between the US and Afghanistan. Even though the jirga coupled its approval of the agreement with a plea to Karzai to sign it immediately (the chair of the meeting, a former Afghan president, threatened to leave the country if Karzai doesn't sign), Karzai followed through on his warning from his opening remarks of the four day meeting on Thursday and stated that he will delay signing the agreement until Afghanistan's elections are completed in April.

Formal approval of the BSA comes as a big surprise for me. I have maintained since the start of negotiations a year ago that the Afghanistan agreement would go the same route as the Iraq agreement and that our military would be forced into a complete withdrawal, primarily over the issue of criminal immunity for the troops remaining in the country. While that "zero option" remains a distinct possibility, it now would be forced by Karzai's delay in signing the agreement where immunity has now been granted.

The second big surprise for me is that I did not expect security surrounding the jirga to be a complete success. I feared at least one successful attack, especially after the site was hit with a suicide attack just a few days before the gathering began. However, a security force that apparently numbered around 25,000 strong appears to have thwarted a number of additional suicide attacks and at least one planned rocket attack.

By having the approval for the BSA in hand while refusing to sign it, Karzai has built a huge point of leverage over the final issue that threatened to derail the agreement. Unilateral counterterrorism raids by the US, especially in the form of night raids that enter the homes of Afghan citizens, were the final sticking point for Karzai. The US reluctantly agreed at the final minute to provide an assurance in the form of a letter from President Barack Obama that such raids would occur only under exceptional circumstances when the lives of US troops were at stake. Most likely because he remembers just how readily the US lies when developing agreements with Afghanistan on issues where there is disagreement, Karzai has warned the US that the very next night raid will mean that he never signs the agreement. From ToloNews:

"If there is one more raid on Afghan homes by U.S. forces, there is no BSA. The U.S. can't go into our homes from this moment onward," President Karzai said in his closing remarks at the Jirga on Sunday.

Karzai's brinksmanship has set up a very high stakes game of "chicken" played by two junkies. The US has stated that it must know by the end of this year whether the BSA will be signed now that it has been approved. Karzai has stated that he will wait until at least April for signing. Just who will blink first is anyone's guess. The US is strongly addicted to night raids. Will they be able to hold off on them, even for a month? Karzai is equally addicted to the billions of dollars the US pumps into Afghanistan's economy. Will he hold off his signature past the date at which the US has warned it will drop pursuit of the agreement and proceed with a full withdrawal—of both troops and funds? Will the US allow the decision point on the zero option to be delayed until after the April elections?