KARZAI, TALIBAN BEGIN ANGLING FOR AFGHANISTAN DOMINANCE, CONFIRMING FAILURE OF US MISSION

The Ides of March has not been kind to the US mission in Afghanistan. Despite Barack Obama and David Cameron putting their best spin on the situation yesterday and claiming that NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan will not be accelerated by the recent atrocities perpetrated by US forces, Afghan President Hamid Karzai and the Taliban both took moves today indicating that they are now angling for dominance in an Afghanistan that is soon to be rid of occupation by western troops. These moves by Karzai and the Taliban appear to me to be signalling that they independently have come to the conclusion that the COIN strategy of "training" Afghan security forces to take over by 2014 as NATO forces are drawn down is no longer viable.

Karzai's move is to call for western troops to withdraw from their smaller operating outposts in villages back onto large bases. From the Washington Post:

> Afghan President Hamid Karzai demanded Thursday that the United States pull back from combat outposts and confine its troops to military bases, an apparent response to Sunday's shooting rampage by a U.S. staff sergeant.
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> /snip/
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> Foreign troops in Afghanistan must withdraw from village outposts and return to large NATO bases, the president's statement said. Karzai also said he wants Afghan troops to assume

> primary responsibility for security nationwide by the end of next year, ahead of the time frame U.S. commanders have endorsed.

The Post then goes on to play into the hands of the Taliban (see below) by painting Karzai as powerless to affect US actions in Afghanistan:

> Karzai does not have the authority to enforce a pullback of foreign troops, however. And the United States has rebuffed previous demands that it halt night raids, ban private security companies and immediately transfer control of prisons to the Afghan government.

Virtually simultaneously with Karzai's demand for withdrawal from villages, the Taliban announced that they have ended their preliminary talks with the US that many hoped would lead to a negotiated end to hostilities in Afghanistan. From Reuters:

> U.S. and Taliban negotiators were believed to have had preliminary contacts aimed at establishing an office for the Taliban in the Gulf state of Qatar to launch peace negotiations.
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> "The Islamic Emirate has decided to suspend all talks with Americans taking place in Qatar from (Thursday) onwards until the Americans clarify their stance on the issues concerned and until they show willingness in carrying out their promises instead of wasting time," the group said in a statement.

In a clear signal that the Taliban believe US influence in Afghanistan is about to end and that they are in a struggle with Karzai's government for future control of the country, they attacked Karzai as a US puppet. Returning to the Post article:

> The Taliban also took issue with Karzai's suggestion that his administration was playing a role in the talks. The statement said Karzai "cannot even make a single political decision without the prior consent of the Americans." It called negotiating with Karzai's government "pointless."

Writing at The Agonist, Steve Hynd sums up the impact of Karzai's demand on US strategy in Afghanistan:

> No NATO troops out in the countryside means no security for reconstruction teams and NGOs, which will largely halt work. It means the ANA and Afghan police, notoriously inefficient and corrupt, will be the only security Afghans have unless they turn to the taliban to provide it – and they will. If Karzai sticks to his statement – and this time he just might – it means that COIN as a strategy in Afghanistan is a very definitely a dead parrot.

It has been clear that Obama wanted to use the May NATO summit in Chicago as the backdrop for another "victory" announcement in the same way that he wanted to use the State of the Union speech to announce his victory in settlement of foreclosure fraud. The actual victory announcement on the fraud settlement was delayed and the deal itself turned out to be a mess so atrocious the government delayed releasing details for a month. I expect a very furious six weeks of work by Obama's spinmeisters to try to come up with a new strategy that will somehow justify declaring victory in Afghanistan and withdrawing much sooner than the current plan, rather than the previously planned victory announcement that would have made more false claims on progress in training Afghan security forces and in defeating the Taliban. That is, unless Obama decides to nail the parrot back onto its perch and claim that it is merely

“pining for the fjords“.