

ISAS Brief

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Afghanistan – The Endless Challenge

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Developments in Afghanistan, leading into the New Year point to the increasing distrust between Afghan President Hamid Karzai and the United States. The latest rift relates to Kabul's plan to release 88 high-profile detainees, held at Bagram; and this has particularly incensed the Americans. Their release, according to the two Republican Senators, who recently visited Kabul, would have a "negative impact" on US-Afghan relations. The Afghans have reneged on their commitment to release the detainees only if they were to be found innocent by the court, claims the US. Mr Karzai has instead constituted a three-man Afghan Review Board to assess the charges against the detainees. Following an official protest by General Joseph Dunford, Commander of International Security Assistance Force, the Afghan President has held their release in abeyance pending the review of their cases.

Long considered a symbol of American occupation, control of the Bagram prison reverted to Afghanistan in March 2013 after a public standoff between the two sides. Mr Karzai had depicted it as a part of the efforts to regain national sovereignty.

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Of the 3,000 prisoners Bagram housed at handover, the Afghans have released 560 based on the findings of the Board. Some of those released have gone back to fight the Americans. While the US blames the Afghans for releasing militants with blood on their hands, Abdul Shakoor Dadras, a member of the Board, says there is no real evidence against the freed men.

A reported admission by an unnamed Afghan official, who is in favour of a quick Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with the US, that these prisoners “turn into war heroes once they go back to their villages”, underscores the depth of Afghan resistance to the presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan.

The dispute casts a shadow over the signing of BSA between Afghanistan and the United States, under which it is proposed that between 8,000 and 10,000 US military personnel will stay back in Afghanistan until 2024 whereas the bulk will be withdrawn by the end of 2014.

After bargaining hard on the terms of the BSA for months, Mr Karzai delayed signing it, ostensibly for seeking approval from the *Loya Jirga* (Council of Elders). Even as the *Jirga* approved the draft agreement in November 2013, Mr Karzai stunned the world by refusing to sign it till new conditions were met. The BSA, he said, would only be signed by the new Afghan administration expected after the April 2014 elections. Mr Karzai is prevented from contesting elections because of term limits.

Afghanistan’s 30-million people are deeply divided over the signing of the BSA. Members of the Afghan elite, the warlords and all those who benefit from the US largesse feel that a continued US presence will be beneficial for Afghanistan. Others, however, are convinced that US presence would exacerbate resistance, leading to further trouble. Neighbouring states are sceptical of the prospect of continued American presence in their midst. The Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has already declared his opposition to the idea.

A total US withdrawal from Afghanistan will nonetheless mean the end of development assistance to that country from the Western powers as well as international donor agencies.

In this bickering over the BSA, the coming Afghan presidential election has assumed added importance for the two sides. By pursuing populist policies Mr Karzai seeks to raise his

image, and influence the outcome of the election by backing his favoured candidate. He knows, as much as others, that a broad-based acceptance of the outcome amongst Pashtuns, Uzbeks, Tajiks and Hazaras is critical for stability in Afghanistan, without which no amount of American presence can guarantee security.

To preserve his legacy and the fractured systems his regime has created, Mr Karzai feels he must bolster the chances of his favoured candidate through populism. There is no substitute for holding elections that are seen to be free and fair. Charges of ballot rigging, which Mr Karzai admitted during the last election, will mean bigger chaos this time.

Peaceful elections are also dependent upon a negotiated peace deal with the Taliban who have vowed to resist any foreign presence. That is why he has asked the US to facilitate talks between the Afghan government and the resistance groups. The absence of an understanding with the resistance groups spells trouble when other power-brokers and warlords rearm, weakening the state institutions further.

The growing distrust between Mr Karzai and the US administration complicates matters. The US does not like him but has no choice for now. Following his refusal to sign the BSA the US threats of cut-off of financial and military assistance have had no effect on him. In fact it is the Americans who have backed off, after threatening to exercise ‘zero option’ – total withdrawal of forces – if the BSA were not signed by the end of 2013.

Mr Karzai knows that once he signs the BSA his utility for the US is gone. His ability to influence the elections, protect his family and his legacy would also be reduced. Hoping to establish his nationalist credentials, he has ratcheted anti-US rhetoric. In a recent interview with *Le Monde*, asked if the US was behaving like a colonial power, he replied, “absolutely”. “They threaten us, ‘we will no longer pay your salaries; we will drive you into civil war’”, he added.

When in New Delhi, Mr Karzai accused the US of “saying one thing and doing another”, adding bluntly, “I don’t trust them”. Such remarks make Washington believe that Mr Karzai is now a part of the problem.

Mr Karzai is playing a potentially dangerous game. He knows the US is desperate to stay back. Therefore, he wants to extract maximum concessions. Such a posture, he seems to have concluded, will enable him to influence the elections in favour of his preferred candidate.

While there is little enthusiasm and military appetite left in Washington to continue with the war, the American plans to leave a substantial force behind provides enough reason for the conflict to continue. By moving away from the initial goal of ejecting Al-Qaeda and, in addition, by attempting to reorder the tradition-ridden Afghan society, the US has engendered the Afghan resistance.

The American public support for the war in Afghanistan has waned. A recent Washington Post-ABC News Poll reveals that 66 per cent of the Americans feel that Afghanistan is not worth fighting for. Most Americans believe that the US did the wrong thing by involving itself in Afghanistan.

With just three months remaining for the Afghan presidential elections, it is unlikely that Mr Karzai will back off. Even though the US insists on an early conclusion of BSA, the Americans seem reconciled to wait.

Afghanistan therefore, faces critical few months ahead during which each side hopes to test the other. Peace in Afghanistan amongst its own people is a precursor to peace in the region.

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