

# U.S. Afghan Strategy Hinges On Reliable Ally In Kabul

by JACKIE NORTHAM

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President Obama is currently reviewing U.S. strategy in Afghanistan. He met Wednesday with his national security team and generals to map a way forward.

But one of the critical factors for success is a legitimate government in Afghanistan. The recent presidential election, which still hasn't been decided, raises doubts about whether there will be a reliable ally for the U.S. in Kabul.

U.S. officials and independent analysts always assumed there would be a certain amount of fraud, including ballot stuffing and intimidation, in Afghanistan's presidential elections in August.

But Alex Thier, director for Afghanistan and Pakistan at the U.S. Institute of Peace, says, "People were genuinely surprised at the scale of the fraud."

The good news, he says, is that mechanisms were in place to detect the fraud, the lion's share allegedly carried out by supporters of incumbent President Hamid Karzai. But the bad news, he adds, is that the sheer breadth of the fraud reinforced the notion that the Karzai government was corrupt, which he says has a far-reaching impact.

"I think that the gravest danger coming out of this electoral process is that we end up with an Afghan government that is not seen as legitimate by the population, and that the international forces who are effectively propping up that government are therefore also seen as illegitimate," Thier says.

Among those international forces are some 68,000 U.S. troops. And the top commander in Afghanistan, U.S. Army Gen. Stanley McChrystal, is reportedly asking for more troops — as many as 40,000 — to help implement his counterinsurgency strategy.

Brian Katulis, a senior fellow with the Center for American Progress, says the success of that strategy hinges on having a reliable government in Afghanistan.

"If we have a weak leadership in Afghanistan that doesn't have the same objectives that we do in terms of stabilizing the country, fighting corruption, advancing good governance and justice in the country, then it calls into question whether a counterinsurgency strategy is the most appropriate means to advance U.S. national security interests," says Katulis.

Some have questioned Karzai's credibility for several years. At one time, he was the darling of Washington — and held regular teleconferences with President George W. Bush.

But the relationship between Karzai and the Obama administration is on much shakier ground. There are concerns about Karzai's competency to battle corruption and the flourishing drug problem in Afghanistan, in which members of his family are allegedly involved. And there has been criticism of his decision to appoint warlords to his Cabinet.

For his part, Karzai has been sharply critical of the U.S. and NATO for airstrikes that have killed Afghan civilians.

"That was a point of contention, and a serious concern on the part of Karzai. He felt like those strikes were undermining him and leading to unnecessary civilian casualties," Katulis says.

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*- Brian Katulis, senior fellow with the Center for American Progress*

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Senior Obama administration officials now acknowledge that Karzai will likely win the election, pending the results of a partial vote recount under way.

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Analysts say the Obama administration has some leverage over the Afghan leader. It could work around Karzai or deal directly with local leaders to build up institutions. The U.S. could financially target warlords. Thier says the U.S. also could withhold aid, on which Afghanistan is heavily dependent. But, he says, the U.S. has been reluctant to do so in the past.

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"So far, whenever we have played chicken with Karzai, it's usually us who swerves. And I think we have to be serious about withholding some resources ... if things are going wrong," Thier says.

Zalmay Khalilzad, former U.S. ambassador to both Iraq and Afghanistan, thinks the U.S.-Afghan relationship and Karzai's legitimacy are still salvageable.

"But it's going to require effort by President Karzai — should he be declared the winner — in terms of reaching out to the opposition and in terms of putting together a competent government," Khalilzad says.

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"Dear Audrey G,  
News Flash, Obama was elected and duly inaugurated. Liberals are always screaming but Bush. When are you going to start treating Obama like an adult who is responsible for what he does?"

Your comment is well taken. I am not trying to defend President Obama. Like you, I believe he is responsible for what he does; however, I completely agree with him. He should not send more troops to Afghanistan unless he is satisfied that the strategy is working.

In addition, I truly believe we CANNOT win in Afghanistan only by our soldiers and technology. We need to rethink and reevaluate our foreign policy in Afghanistan and in the Middle East. In order to gain the support and confidence of Afghans and people in the Middle East, we need to stop supporting illegitimate governments like Karzai's government.

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