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Karzai Steps Up Attacks on NATO, Boxing In the West

By **ALISSA J. RUBIN**

KABUL, Afghanistan — As President **Hamid Karzai** made more antagonistic statements over the weekend toward the **NATO** countries fighting on behalf of his government, the West was taking stock of just how little maneuvering room it has.

There are no good options on the horizon, many analysts say, for reining in Mr. Karzai or for penalizing him, without potentially damaging Western interests. The reluctant conclusion of diplomats and Afghan analysts is that for now, they are stuck with him.

Many fear the relationship is only likely to become worse, as Mr. Karzai draws closer to allies like Iran and China, whose interests are often at odds with those of the West, and sounds sympathetic enough to the **Taliban** that he could spur their efforts, helping their recruitment and further destabilizing the country.

“The political situation is continuing to deteriorate; Karzai is flailing around,” said a Western diplomat in Kabul with long experience in the region. “At the moment we are propping up an unstable political structure, and I haven’t seen any remotely plausible plan for building consensus.”

The tensions between the West and Mr. Karzai **flared up publicly** last Thursday, when Mr. Karzai accused the West and the **United Nations** of perpetrating fraud in the August presidential election and described the Western military coalition as coming close to being seen as invaders who would give the insurgency legitimacy as “a national resistance.”

Despite a **conciliatory phone call** to Secretary of State **Hillary Rodham Clinton** on Friday, his comments over the weekend only expanded the discord.

On Saturday, Mr. Karzai met with about 60 members of Parliament, mostly his supporters, and berated them for having rejected his proposed new election law. Among other things, the

proposal would have given him the power to appoint all the members of the [Electoral Complaints Commission](#), who are currently appointed by the United Nations, the Afghan Supreme Court and the [Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission](#). The Electoral Complaints Commission, which reviews allegations of voting fraud and irregularities, documented the fraud that deprived Mr. Karzai of an outright victory in the presidential election.

At the meeting, Mr. Karzai stepped up his anti-Western statements, according to a Parliament member who attended but spoke on condition of anonymity.

“If you and the international community pressure me more, I swear that I am going to join the Taliban,” Mr. Karzai said, according to the Parliament member.

A spokesman for Mr. Karzai, Waheed Omar, could not be reached for comment on Sunday.

In a [speech in Kandahar](#) on Sunday, Mr. Karzai promised local tribal elders that coalition military operations planned for the area this summer would not proceed without their approval.

“I know you are worried about this operation,” he said, adding: “There will be no operation until you are happy.”

Given his tone in the last few days, it was unclear whether he was literally extending the elders veto power over the offensive, or merely trying to quell their fears and bring them on board.

Interviews with diplomats, Afghan analysts and ordinary Afghans suggest that the United States and other Western countries have three options: threaten to withdraw troops or actually withdraw them; use diplomacy, which so far has had little result; and find ways to expand citizen participation in the government, which now has hardly any elected positions at the provincial and district levels.

Threatening to withdraw, which [Stephen Biddle](#), a senior fellow at the [Council on Foreign Relations](#), called the “nuclear deterrent” option, would put the United States and other Western countries in the position of potentially having to make good on the promise, risking their strategic interest in a stable [Afghanistan](#). Few experts think the country would remain peaceful without a significant foreign force here. Moreover, withdrawal could open the way for the country to again become a terrorist haven.

Some Western critics of Mr. Karzai believe that the West has no choice but to threaten to leave.

“There is no point in having troops in a mission that cannot be accomplished,” said [Peter W. Galbraith](#), former United Nations deputy special representative for Afghanistan, who was

dismissed after a dispute with his superiors over how to handle widespread electoral fraud and what senior U.N. officials later said was his advocacy of Mr. Karzai's removal. "The mission might be important, but if it can't be achieved, there is no point in sending these troops into battle. Part of the problem is that counterinsurgency requires a credible local partner."

Diplomacy has so far failed to achieve substantial changes, although some analysts, like Mr. Biddle, who opposes the so-called nuclear option, believe that the West should demand concessions before spending any more money on development projects like digging wells and building schools.

"We do millions of things in Afghanistan, and any of those things can become a source of leverage," he said. "Far too much of what we do in Afghanistan we just do without asking for anything explicit in return."

That approach can backfire, some argue, hurting those the West most wants to help.

Greater power sharing, while promising, faces structural obstacles. Under the Constitution, provincial governors, local judges, district governors and most other offices are appointive rather than elective. In some areas, Afghan and American programs have begun to involve communities in local budgeting, but progress is slow and it would probably take several years to expand it to higher levels of government.

"There are no better angels about to descend on Afghanistan," said [Alex Thier](#), a senior Afghan analyst at the United States Institute of Peace. "Unless some drastic action is taken, Mr. Karzai is the president of Afghanistan, and he was just elected for another five years."

That prospect leaves some Afghans uneasy. In interviews with more than a dozen people around the country, there was apprehension and dismay over Mr. Karzai's clash with the international community, and the specter of renewed chaos it could lead to.

"Karzai delivered this speech based on his own difficulties with the foreigners," said Gulab Mangal, a tribal leader in the Musa Khel area of Khost Province.

"When the international community criticized his brother, he started to raise these problems," he said, [referring to Ahmed Wali Karzai](#), a prominent figure in southern Afghanistan. "It shows the relation between Karzai and the international community is deteriorating day by day, and that should not be allowed to happen."

Mehram Ali, a man from Wardak Province who was shopping in Kabul over the weekend, voiced a similar qualm. "We need the international community to keep supporting us and our government," he said.

“In this recent situation we do need foreign soldiers to help us in bringing peace and stability for our country, and if the foreigners leave us, then the people of Afghanistan will face adversity from every direction, and Afghanistan will return to what it was like 10 years ago when we had the Taliban government.”

Reporting was contributed by Richard A. Opiel Jr., Abdul Waheed Wafa and Sharifullah Sahak from Kabul, and Taimoor Shah from Kandahar.