

It's crunch time for the US
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Since the world 'discovered' that Afghanistan's president Hamid Karzai is a fraudster, that he had rigged the votes to secure his presidency last August, the West, especially the Americans, is suddenly bleating about the scoundrel in their midst.

Why is Washington making so much noise about him and his crooked government now? US president Barack Obama (*below*) and secretary of state Hilary Clinton have been issuing dictums that Karzai should clean up his act, rid his government of cronies and corruption, introduce real democracy and all that jazz.

Why did the US government not raise these issues before this year? After all, the Bush administration would have known that the man they were about to install as Afghanistan's 12th president on Dec 7 2004 was, well, a miserable flop.

When Karzai took the throne, it had come more than a year after then US president George W Bush landed on the *USS Lincoln* off San Diego bay. Behind him, on the ship's deck, a large red, white and blue banner proclaimed: "Mission Accomplished".

Karzai would have known then that the Americans would be in Afghanistan, which they invaded in November 2001, for the long haul. Bush's advisors had picked Karzai as their poodle to take the helm of the postwar Afghan regime.

Washington and its allies' calculations were that the war would be over within a couple of years. The ragged Taliban and al-Qaeda coalition of cold-blooded murders would be comprehensively destroyed by the West's modern weaponry.

It would not be anything like the failed Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989. And America would forever banish the ghosts of defeat in the Vietnam War.

Nothing doing. It's becoming increasingly clear that the Americans are factoring in that Afghanistan could become another Vietnam. Eight years later there's a real and growing chance the Americans will cut-and-run.

Afghanistan mirrors the fiasco in Iraq

Iraq, the other country the Americans and the Coalition of the Willing had invaded in 2003, remains a quagmire. Iraq is bedeviled, on the one hand, by intra-Muslim bloodletting between the Shiites and the Sunnis.

On the other hand another ragged group of al-Qaeda and associated Islamic terrorists groups, funded principally by the mad mullahs in Iran, is wreaking havoc and murder amongst civilian populations and infrastructure.

Afghanistan mirrors Iraq's fiasco, but a thousands times worse. And Karzai has sat on his hands, milked the Americans and their allies for billions of dollars in military and economic aid.

He nurtured cozy relationships and strategic alliances with crooked provincial governors, drug barons and warlords, just to keep his hands firmly on the throne.

Karzai (*right*) created the vast patron-client networks - for himself. He encouraged corruption throughout Afghan society. This corruption reaches the top levels of his regime.

His own office is riddled with corruption. This is common knowledge, and not once before the last couple of weeks did the Americans and its allies once blink that perhaps Karzai is his own country's worst enemy.

Abdullah Abdullah, once Karzai's foreign minister, and rival in the August presidential polls, pulled out of the second run-off elections at the most vital moment. A good move by any measure. Because the Karzai regime looks set to implode. Self-destruct.

The White House will be thinking it's beholden upon it to pump more financial and military aid into Afghanistan. That's not only to keep the barbarian murderers at bay but also to bolster the beleaguered, corrupt and incompetent Karzai regime.

The debate in recent weeks within Washington's establishment, of whether to send another 40,000 plus American troops to Afghanistan to prosecute the war against the Islamic terrorists, says a great deal about America's own growing geopolitical desperation.

America's losing left, right and centre

Here's the deal, snapped from headlines around the world (this one is from today's *The Australian* newspaper): "The top international commander in Afghanistan, Lieutenant General Stanley McChrystal, wants Washington and its allies to send as many troops as possible at a cost of US\$1 million per soldier per year to defend population centres and to accelerate the training of Afghanistan's own security forces.

"The US ambassador to Afghanistan (and, as a retired lieutenant general, godfather of the post-Taliban Afghan army), Karl Eikenberry, is arguing that without a strategy for improving the integrity and capacity of the Karzai government, no amount of military resources can make Afghanistan a stable and reliable member of international society."

Why the desperation? It's not just Karzai's incompetence and the manic corruption in his regime. America is losing the Afghan war left, right and centre. There has been no sensible and well-coordinated American military, political and economic strategy for Afghanistan. So the risks have been heightening. It's crunch time now.

But there's another equally desperate problem for the Americans: The possible implosion of Pakistan, on Afghanistan's northeastern frontier.

The greater Talibanisation of ruggedly mountainous Pakistani provinces just over the Afghan border, which are safe-havens for the Taliban and al-Qaeda, are being used as bases for the deployment of death and murder across Pakistan.

With the Pakistani military, the intelligence services and the civilian government acting as almost wholly separate entities, Pakistan's growing carnage is making America and the Coalition of the Willing more and more nervous, and more and more desperate.

It'll come down to this for Washington: Formulate a dignified exit plan for Karzai sooner rather than later and bring in his arch-enemy Abdullah Abdullah. Because the implosion of Afghanistan, nor for that matter of Pakistan, is not an option for the US's Middle Eastern and West Asian grand strategy.