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Foreign Policy in Focus

## Behind the Afghan Fraud

By Conn Hallinan

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All frauds have a purpose, mostly to relieve the unwary of their wealth, though occasionally to launch some foreign adventure. The 1965 Tonkin Gulf hoax that escalated the Vietnam War comes to mind.

So, what was the design behind "Operation Moshtarak," or the "Battle of Marjah," in Afghanistan's Helmand Province, the largest U.S. and NATO military operation in Afghanistan since the 2003 invasion?

Marjah [was billed](#) as a "fortress," a "city of 80,000" and the Taliban's "stronghold," packed with as many as 1,000 "[hard-core fighters](#)." But as Gareth Porter of the *Inter Press Service* [revealed](#), Marjah isn't even a city, but a district of scattered villages. As the days went by — and civilian deaths passed military casualties — the number of "hard-core fighters" declined. In the end, the "battle" turned into a skirmish. "Hardly a single gun was captured by NATO forces," tribal elder and former police chief Abdul Rahman Jan [told](#) *Time*.

### Dealing with Drugs

Marjah was also billed as the linchpin of the militants' logistical and opium-smuggling network, and the area indeed has significant poppy cultivation. But [according to Julian Mercille](#) of University College Dublin, an expert on U.S. foreign policy, the Taliban get only 4 percent of the trade. Local farmers reap about 21 percent of the \$3.4 billion yearly commerce, according to Mercille, while 75 percent of the trade is captured by government officials, the police, local and

regional brokers, and traffickers. In short, our allies get the lion's share of profits from the drug trade.

In any case, the word "linchpin" soon dropped off the radar screen. It soon became obvious that Operation Moshtarak would not touch the drug trade because it [would alienate](#) local farmers, thus sabotaging the goal of winning the "hearts and minds" of residents.

In some ways, the most interesting part of the Marjah operation was a gathering that took place shortly after the "fighting" was over. President Barack Obama [called a meeting](#) March 12 in the White House to ask his senior staff and advisors if the "success" of Moshtarak would allow the United States to open negotiations with the Taliban. [According to Porter](#), Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Defense Secretary Robert Gates opposed talks until after a similar operation, aimed at Kandahar, is completed this summer.

The Kandahar offensive is [being pumped up](#) as a "blow at the Taliban's heartland" and the "fulcrum" of the Afghan war. Kandahar is where the Taliban got its start and, at 600,000 residents, is Afghanistan's second-largest city. Whether a military operation will have any more impact than the attack on Marjah is highly unlikely. As in Marjah, the Taliban will simply decamp to another area of the country or blend in with the local population.

However, the White House gathering suggests that the administration may be searching for a way out before the 2012 elections. With the economic crisis at home continuing, and the bill for the war [passing \\$200 billion](#), Afghanistan is looking more and more like a long tunnel with no light at the end.

Certainly our allies seem to have concluded that the Americans are on an exit path.

### **Talking with the Taliban**

The Hamid Karzai government and the United Nations [have opened talks](#) with some of the Taliban and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Islamic Party. Pakistan — correctly concluding it was being cut out of the peace talks — [swept up](#) 14 senior Taliban officials, including the organization's number-two man, [Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar](#).

The Pakistanis claim they're simply aiding the U.S. war effort. But the former head of the UN mission to Afghanistan, Kai Eide, [bitterly denounced](#) the arrests as nothing more than effort to derail the ongoing negotiations.

If Islamabad has a say, the Taliban will have a presence in whatever peace agreement emerges, a fact that has distressed India. Not only is it likely that India will lose much of its influence with the Karzai government — and see more than a billion dollars in aid spent for naught — but its traditional enemy, Pakistan, will almost certainly regain much of its former influence with Kabul.

The push by the United States to find a political solution is partly driven by the [rapidly eroding NATO presence](#). The Canadians are sticking by their pledge to be out by 2011, and when the

Netherlands tried to raise the possibility of Dutch troops remaining, the Dutch elected a new government. The British Labor Party, behind in the polls but catching up to the Tories, wants to rid itself of the Afghan albatross before upcoming elections.

The United States is also discovering that the Afghans play a mean game of chess.

## **Geopolitical Chessboard**

The Obama administration recently demanded that the Karzai government reinstate an independent electoral commission and end corruption — in particular, by [dumping](#) the president's larcenous half-brother Ahmed Wali Karzai, who runs Kandahar like a feudal fiefdom. Karzai [responded](#) by flying off to Tehran to embrace the Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and meet with Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Given that the United States is trying to isolate Iran in the region, Karzai's Iran visit wasn't a happy moment for those on the Potomac.

Yet Iran has influence over the Northern Alliance, which will need persuading to accept the Taliban into a coalition. Rather than isolating Iran, Karzai has made it central to the peace agreement that the United States and NATO want.

For the past five years, the United States has been wooing India as a bulwark against China. But because Washington needs Islamabad to broker a peace, the Americans [agreed to send](#) it F-16 fighter-bombers, helicopter gun ships, and reconnaissance drones. A better-armed Pakistan, however, hardly goes down well in New Delhi, particularly because the Indians see their former influence in Kabul on the wane.

As a result, India promptly went off and met with the Russians. Ever sympathetic, Moscow [offered](#) New Delhi a bargain-basement price on an aircraft carrier and threw in a passel of MIG-29s. That dealt a blow to another aim of U.S. diplomacy: keeping Russia out of South Asia.

The same week as Pakistan's foreign minister was in Washington asking for a laundry list of goodies in exchange for "helping out" in Afghanistan, Karzai jetted off to Beijing to talk about aid and investments. So much for the plan to keep China out of Central Asia.

This is beginning to look like checker-players in Washington versus the chess masters in Kabul.

## **Finessing Withdrawal**

There seems to be a developing consensus, both inside and outside Afghanistan, that the war must wind down. If this consensus becomes firmer, then the Karzai government's upcoming peace *jirga*, set for late April or early May, takes on greater importance.

While Washington appears to be divided over how, when, and with whom to negotiate, "withdrawing" doesn't mean that the United States won't leave bases behind or end its efforts to

penetrate Central Asia. The White House [recently announced](#) an agreement with Kyrgyzstan to set up a U.S. "counter-terrorism center" near the Chinese border.

The danger at this juncture is seeing the outcome as a zero-sum game: If Pakistan gains, India loses; if the United States withdraws, the Taliban win; if Iran is helpful it will encourage nuclear proliferation.

Ultimately, Afghans must decide the future of Afghanistan. What they want and how they get it isn't the business of Washington, Brussels, New Delhi, Tehran, or Islamabad. The current war, the latest endeavor in the "graveyard of empires," has claimed far more Afghan lives than those of the invaders. As U.S. Afghan commander Stanley McChrystal [told](#) *The New York Times*, "We have shot an astounding number of people."

Indeed, we have.