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Foreign Policy in Focus

## Dismembering Afghanistan!

Posted By Conn Hallinan

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Wars are rarely lost in a single encounter; Defeat is almost always more complex than that. The United States and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies have lost the war in Afghanistan, but not just because they failed in the battle for Marjah or decided that discretion was the better part of valor in Kandahar. They lost the war because they should never have invaded in the first place; because they never had a goal that was achievable; because their blood and capital are finite.

The face of that defeat was everywhere this past month.

[According to the Afghanistan Rights Monitor](#), "In terms of insecurity, 2010 has been the worst year since the demise of the Taliban regime in late 2001."

A recent [U.S. government audit](#) found that despite \$27 billion spent on training, fewer than 12 percent of Afghan security forces were capable of operating on their own.

Some [58 percent of the American public](#) think the war is "a lost cause," and 60 percent think the United States should begin to withdraw in July 2011. Only Republican votes in Congress saved the Obama administration's request for [\\$33 billion to fuel the war](#) in the coming fiscal year. The war is currently hemorrhaging money at a rate of \$7 billion a month.

The British public — the United Kingdom is the second largest armed contingent in Afghanistan — [opposes the war by 72 percent](#), and other coalition forces are quickly abandoning the effort in the war-torn Central Asian nation. [Poland announced](#) it would withdraw its 2,600 troops in 2012. The Dutch will be out this August. The Canadians in 2011. The Australians, along with the rest of the NATO allies, [declined a plea](#) in July to send more combat troops.

In a sign of the dire circumstances of the war effort, twice in this past month, [Afghan soldiers](#) turned their guns on NATO soldiers.

A [poll by the International Council on Security and Development](#) reaffirms that the NATO alliance is failing to win over Afghan civilians, a cornerstone of success in the current strategy employed in Afghanistan. The poll found that in the two provinces currently at the center of the war — Helmand and Kandahar — 75 percent of Afghans believe foreigners disrespect their religion and traditions; 74 percent think working for foreign forces is wrong; 68 percent believe NATO will not protect them; and 65 percent think Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar should be part of the government.

### **The Arithmetic of Defeat**

So does one calculate the arithmetic of defeat. But "defeat" does not mean the war is over. Indeed, the moment when it becomes obvious that victory is no longer an option can be the most dangerous time in a conflict's history. The losers may double down, as the French and the United States did in Vietnam. They may lash out in a frenzy of destruction, as the United States did in Laos and Cambodia. Or they may poison the well for generations to come by dividing people on the basis of ethnicity, religion and tribe, as the British did when their empire began to disintegrate.

Faced with rising opposition at home, increased casualties on the battlefield, and growing isolation from its allies, the United States is casting about for a way to salvage the Afghan disaster, and coming up with schemes that may end up destabilizing not only Afghanistan, but much of Central and South Asia.

The most radical of these schemes is being floated by the former U.S. ambassador to India, Robert Blackwell, a neoconservative mainstay and currently a lobbyist for India. Blackwell proposes partitioning Afghanistan into two countries: an independent, Pashtun-dominated south, and a northern and western section where Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras make up the majority. [According to the scheme](#), "Pashtunistan" would be kept in line by armed drones and 30,000 to 40,000 U.S. Special Forces.

Such an independent country would almost certainly [destabilize Pakistan's Northern Frontier and Tribal areas](#), where [40 million Pashtuns](#) currently reside. Many of those

Pashtuns have never accepted the 1893 Durand Line that the British used to divide Afghanistan from what was then India.

Pashtunistan would also be a template for an independent Baluchistan, further dismembering Afghanistan — certainly something the Indian Army would be delighted with — and serve as a rallying cry for marginalized ethnic groups all over the region, including those in Kashmir, China, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Iraq, Russia, and areas in northern India.

It is not clear how much support the partition plan has, given the deep opposition of countries like Pakistan and China, but Blackwell has sprung the genie, and getting it back into the lamp will not be easy.

A second proposal — to [create an army of local militias](#) to fight the Taliban — is already underway, in spite of the disastrous experience with similar armed groups during the Soviet occupation. Those militias turned into warlord armies, which shook down local residents, protected the growing drug trade, and fought over tribal turf.

U.S. commander, [Gen. David Petraeus insists](#) that the armed groups will not be "militia," but more like police — uniformed, armed, and paid by the government of President Hamid Karzai. But given that the Kabul government has virtually no presence outside the capital, how these groups will be controlled is not obvious. Furthermore, if for some reason these militias do confront the Taliban, they will be outgunned by more experienced guerilla fighters.

A June 9 incident in Kandahar is a case in point. The Taliban attacked a local militia that had gathered to celebrate a wedding, killing 40 and wounding 87. The unit had been recruited by U.S. Special Forces, which promised weapons and ammunition. But [according to the New York Times](#), when militia commander, Mohammed Nabi Kako went to the Special Forces, the commander fobbed him off to the Karzai regime, which turned down his request — whether from fear of forming independent militias, or plain old corruption is not clear. When the Taliban attacked, the militia couldn't defend itself.

The United States has a long track record of recruiting local people to fight and then abandoning them. The Montagnards in Vietnam's highlands and the Hmong in Laos come to mind.

The model that has the most parallels with the situation in Afghanistan, however, is Guatemala, where the United States helped the military dictatorship create village militias to fight insurgents. If the militias did not fight the guerillas, the Guatemalan Army slaughtered the villagers. If the militias did fight, the villagers became targets in the long-running civil war.

Indeed, an argument can be made that the very idea of militias violates the Geneva Conventions against using civilians to fight in a war, although the United States could finesse that argument by claiming the militia members are "uniformed." What is certain is

that entire villages will be pulled into the war by making them targets for retaliation by a more experienced and better-armed Taliban.

However, the most obvious use for the militias will be to protect the vast drug trade that has made Afghanistan the source of 90 percent of the world's opium. It is a trade that corrupts not only Afghans, but the police and military of surrounding countries. Indeed, it is a poisonous chain that leads into the heart of Europe, leaving dead and maimed in its path. More than 30,000 addicts die of [heroin overdoses](#) each year in Russia alone.

Arbitrary partitions and local militias will not salvage the war for the United States and NATO. The only way out is to cut a deal with the people we are fighting. That will not be easy. The Taliban offered a reasonable peace plan in 2007, and it was turned down. Given the obvious collapse of the allied effort, why should the Taliban want to negotiate? But the Pakistanis say the deal is doable, and of all the counties in the region, Islamabad has the closest ties to the mélange of groups waging war in Afghanistan.

We have lost the war. It is time to recognize reality and start talking.