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NATO's Third Alternative in Afghanistan

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The majority of Afghans, Americans, and Europeans believe that it is time for NATO and American troops to leave Afghanistan. This treacherous road had been traveled long enough to know that it leads to nowhere. The decade-long unrestrained military operations have failed to achieve even a modicum of political stability. Instead, they have practically **bankrupted** the American economy and have devastated the Afghans.

Then there are those who argue that a 'premature' troop withdrawal is tantamount to a **certain civil war**. Many experts on Afghanistan concede this point, as there is every indication of such **dark clouds looming** in the far horizon.

The two mutually conflicting points of view can be incorporated into a viable third alternative that demands factoring in the internal dynamics of Afghan politics.

No foreign solution can resolve this conflict unless and until we understand the real causes of instability. The oversight in the arming and training of the Afghan national armed forces without demanding that they be ethnically balanced is in itself a contributing factor of the instability and a recipe for disaster. Under these circumstances the hand over that President Obama is suggesting will not be a transition from war to peace, but a transition from war to a 'civil' war.

The **American taxpayer** is asked to arm and train the Afghan national army that is not a national

army at all. These are armies of former guerrilla fighters of the Northern Alliance and the veterans of the post-Soviet era civil war who owe their allegiance to their regional fiefdom commanders rather than the 'national' commander-in-chief. They suffer from lack of cohesion and discipline and most importantly they lack [ethnic balance](#) that is crucial in the ethnically diverse society of Afghanistan. Transferring security to such armed forces in the midst of an ongoing conflict is a case of gross negligence.

By 'Afghanizing' the conflict before any stability is achieved, the U.S. will be further empowering the warlords. The rupturing of the [ethnic fault lines](#) will guarantee a very bloody civil war. When Afghanistan plunges into such inevitability, neither Americans nor Europeans would have the appetite for another intervention -- whether out of a sense of responsibility or sympathy. The decade-long investments would, in essence, replace a post-Soviet civil war with a post-American civil war in Afghanistan.

U.S. policy in Afghanistan has been a militaristic one from the start. The very fact that the NATO summit was convened to solve the crisis implies that, as in the past, a military solution is being sought for a political problem -- like fixing a watch with a hammer.

This is why an implementation of the third alternative is critical. Any further arming and training must be made contingent upon ethnically balancing the Afghan armed forces proportionately -- from the top brass of the officer corps down to the private level. The achievement of ethnic equilibrium will create a sense of belonging, contribute to camaraderie and cohesion, and prevent the victimization of the disenfranchised and the defenseless in the event of an instigated civil war.

Now that the NATO summit has decided to transfer power to the Afghans, it is very important that the Afghan armed forces reflect the country's ethnic diversity and become as representative as the democracy they intend to protect.

When ethnically balanced, an even smaller size armed force can be more effective for Afghanistan's stability than the currently projected 352,000. If implemented, this policy will be more economical, saving both lives and money. It will encourage peace and reconciliation if genuinely pursued, and will speed up the American and NATO troop withdrawal.

The cynic in me whispers, "If it makes this much sense, they probably won't do it." Shush! Shhh.