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## No more pretending in Afghanistan

By Michael Glackin  
September 21, 2012

The British foreign secretary, William Hague, insisted on Tuesday that NATO's sudden decision to suspend joint patrols with Afghan forces will have a "minimal" impact on Western actions in Afghanistan. The decision, which followed the latest so-called "green on blue" shootings – where coalition troops have been killed by Afghan soldiers or policemen – has led to cries from all quarters that NATO's Afghan policy, or "strategy" as the British government has suddenly taken to calling it, is in tatters.

The strategy, such as it is, rests on building up the Afghan army to a force of 370,000 and training the raw recruits through joint patrols with coalition forces. The idea is for the Afghans to gradually take over responsibility for security when NATO's largely American and British combat force withdraws from the Afghan conflict in 2014.

Yet how can Western forces leave Afghanistan if the replacement forces cannot be trained to take over? The reality is that this week's announcement finally kills the notion that the withdrawal of Western troops in the next two years hinges on training Afghan forces so that they can adequately fill the security vacuum.

But for once Hague is right. The decision to suspend, or "scale down," joint patrols won't affect American or British strategy one jot. And the reason for this is that the only strategy Washington and London are firmly committed to is an exit strategy. They don't care what shape the Afghan

army is in when they leave. Afghanistan will be left to the Afghans, whether their army is capable of policing the country or not.

Earlier this year a British official told me privately that the priority for Her Majesty's Government was simply to "get out before it gets worse and leave it to the Afghans." Now, by suspending joint patrols, NATO is effectively stating this publicly. And yet the United States and the United Kingdom have long been aware that the Afghan army is unequal to the task of taking responsibility for security, regardless of how many joint patrols they have organized with coalition troops.

In the limited number of operations they have led against the Taliban – which account for less than a third of all operations – the Afghans have been incapable of operating without the backup of NATO troops and air power. Speaking earlier this year, Lieutenant General Curtis Scaparrotti, an American and the second highest ranking soldier in Afghanistan from July 2011 until June 2012, conceded that only 1 percent of Afghan battalions could operate independently.

Short of an unlikely peace deal with the Taliban, the West will exit a country that is, at best, divided between the Taliban, local warlords and the moth-eaten administration of President Hamid Karzai in Kabul; or, at worst, in the throes of civil war.

Poverty and death are rife in Afghanistan, and corruption within all branches of government flourishes. As in Iraq, the great beacon of democracy that the West promised would burn bright in Afghanistan will remain unlit as the U.S. and the U.K. scramble toward the exits in the darkness.

Tuesday's announcement will at least save the lives of some coalition soldiers. The facts speak for themselves. Fifty-one NATO troops have been killed by Afghan forces so far this year – 15 in August alone. Last year there were 35 deaths from green on blue attacks. Yet in 2008, there were just two deaths from insider attacks. Many in the military believe the recruitment drive is to blame for the recent sharp increase.

The desire to build up the Afghan army to a strength of 370,000 has been crucial to providing visible cover for the withdrawal of Western troops. In the last year Afghan national security forces have grown rapidly to around 350,000, from 280,000 a year earlier. However, military insiders believe the race to increase troop numbers before 2014 has led to a sharp decline in the vetting of volunteers. This has allowed so-called rogue elements to get into uniform and kill unsuspecting NATO soldiers. It has even been claimed that one of the gunman in the latest attacks is related to a senior Taliban leader.

In the light of the suspension of joint patrols, and the deaths that led to the decision, there will of course be arguments in the United Kingdom about the continued merit of deploying troops to a war the West is determined to abandon. You can see the critics' point.

NATO troops aren't safe from their comrades in arms, the men they are fighting alongside and whom the West is relying on to fight and contain the Taliban once coalition troops leave.

Whether you believe the Taliban are coordinating these insider attacks or accept the official military line that the killings stem from personal grievances among individual Afghan soldiers is irrelevant. NATO has blown the opportunity to make Afghanistan a better place. The West has lost. And when Western countries are not even pretending to train Afghan troops, is there really any point in hanging around until 2014?