Time has come to accept the de facto partition of Afghanistan

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As the Afghanistan war approaches its 10th anniversary, it is a reminder that this is the longest foreign war in American history. The U.S. war effort is clearly faltering, to the extent that Afghan President Hamid Karzai has started exploring the possibility of cutting his own deal with the Taliban.

If defeat is beginning to stare the U.S. in the face, it is largely because of President Barack Obama's botched strategy. Obama has designed his twin troop surges not to militarily rout the Afghan Taliban but to strike a political deal with the enemy from a position of strength. But as CIA director Leon Panetta admitted recently about the Taliban, "We have seen no evidence that they are truly interested in reconciliation."

Why would the Taliban be interested in negotiating a deal with the Americans when Obama publicly declared, just weeks after coming to office, that he was interested in a military exit from Afghanistan? The Taliban and their sponsors, the Pakistan military, simply want to wait out the Americans.

Unable to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table, the Obama administration is searching for credible options to fend off defeat. While the U.S. has no cost-free option, its least bad option, according to Robert Blackwill, is to accept the de facto partition of Afghanistan. Blackwill, who served as U.S. ambassador to India, deputy national security advisor for strategic planning and presidential envoy to Iraq in the George W. Bush administration, says in an article that de facto partition offers the only alternative to strategic defeat. That option means that the U.S. will end ground operations in Afghanistan but use air power and its special forces to attack Taliban strongholds in Afghanistan's Pashtun-dominated south and east while ensuring that the

non-Pashtun northern and western Afghan regions retain their present de facto autonomy.

Blackwill has picked up the de facto partition idea from M.J. Akbar, who has been advocating it for a while. This idea meshes with the thesis this writer has been propounding that the way to contain the scourge of international terrorism is to stop treating as sacrosanct the existing political borders of Afghanistan and Pakistan. There is continuing reluctance in the international policy discourse to face up to a central reality: The political border between these two problem countries has now ceased to exist in practice.

The so-called Durand Line, in any event, was an artificial, British-colonial invention that left the large Pashtun community divided into two. Set up in 1893 as the border between British-led India and Afghanistan, the Durand Line had been despised and rejected by Afghanistan for long as a colonial imposition.

Today, that line exists only in maps. On the ground, it has little political, ethnic and economic relevance, even as the Afghanistan-Pakistan region has become a magnet for the world's jihadists. A de facto Pashtunistan, long sought by Pashtuns, now exists on the ruins of an ongoing Islamist militancy but without any political authority in charge.

The disappearance of the Af-Pak political border seems irreversible. While the writ of the Pakistani state no longer extends to nearly half of that country (much of Baluchistan, large parts of the North-West Frontier Province and the whole of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas), ever-larger swaths of Afghanistan are outside the control of the government in Kabul. The Pakistani army has lost increasing ground to insurgents in the western regions not because it is weaker than the armed extremists and insurgents but because an ethnic, tribal and militant backlash has resulted in the state withering away in the Pashtun and Baluch lands. Forced to cede control, the jihadist-infiltrated Pakistani military and its infamous Inter-Services Intelligence agency have chosen to support proxy militant groups, in addition to the Taliban.

The international reluctance to come to terms with the new reality is because of the fundamental, far-reaching issues such acceptance would throw open. It is simpler to just keep up the pretense of wanting to stabilize Pakistan and Afghanistan within their existing political frontiers.

Take U.S. policy. As if determined to hide from this reality, Washington is now pursuing, at least outwardly, a military approach toward Afghanistan through a troop "surge" and a political strategy toward Pakistan centered on the tripling of non-military aid. The plain fact is that the entire war effort has been focused on

the wrong side of the Durand Line. A forward-looking Af-Pak policy demands consistency in approach toward these two interlinked countries and recognition of the 2,640-kilometer Durand Line's disappearance. The ethnic genie cannot be put back in the bottle.

To arrest further deterioration in the Afghan war, the U.S. military needs to focus less on al-Qaeda — a badly splintered and weakened organization whose leadership operates out of mountain caves — and more on an increasingly resurgent Taliban that operates openly and has sanctuaries and a command-and-control structure in Pakistan.

The Obama administration complains that a weak, corrupt government in Kabul is driving Afghans into the Taliban's clutches. So, it has sought to do business directly with provincial governors and tribal leaders and seek their help to set up local, Iraq-style militias to assist the U.S. forces. Yet in Pakistan it is doing the opposite: propping up a shaky, inept central government while pampering the military establishment that is working to undermine the civilians in power. Despite the generous U.S. aid, the 2010 Failed States Index ranks Pakistan as the 10th most failed state on Earth.

Let's be clear: Pakistan and Afghanistan, two artificially created states with no roots in history that have searched endlessly for a national identity, constitute the most dangerous region on earth. They have emerged as the global epicenter of transnational terrorism and narcotics trade. Additionally, Pakistan is where state-nurtured terrorism and state-reared nuclear smuggling uniquely intersect.

Yet, as if the forces of terror can be boxed in, the U.S. is now scaling back its objective to regionally contain rather than defeat terrorism — a strategy that promises to keep the Af-Pak problem as a festering threat to global security.

Given that this region has become ungovernable and borderless, it seems pointless to treat the existing political frontiers of Afghanistan and Pakistan as sacrosanct when the Af-Pak fusion term itself implies the two are no longer separate entities. The time has come to start debating what kind of a new political order in the Hindu-Kush region could create stable, moderate, governable and ethnically more harmonious states. Accepting the de facto partition of Afghanistan can serve as a first step in that direction.

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