

# The Atlantic



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## The Afghanistan-Shaped Hole in the Presidential Campaigns

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*With the war so unpopular and the U.S. facing such unappealing options, it's little wonder neither candidate has discussed it much. Does that mean we're stuck with the status quo?*



A girl covers herself during a dust storm in Kabul. (Reuters)

This week marks two watershed events in the war in Afghanistan: **suspending** the police training mission and firing **hundreds** of Afghan soldiers for having ties to the insurgency. Both speak to the increasingly struggling U.S.-led war effort there. And yet the two presidential campaigns are **barely discussing** one of the toughest foreign policy issues facing the U.S. today. That's hardly surprising in political terms, but in actual policy terms it seems to have left the U.S. in a state of cautious status quo.

The next 28 months of the war in Afghanistan, between now and the planned drawdown, will be defined in part by the process of handing over security responsibility from ISAF (the U.S.-led International Security Assistance Force) troops to Afghan soldiers and police. Without a successful transition to Afghan control, the strategy is likely to fall apart, leaving the country without security.

Obama's Afghanistan campaign, which began with a 2009 "surge" of **tens of thousands** of troops, has faced a number of setbacks, as **cataloged** in *Washington Post* reporter Rajiv Chandrasekaran's recent book. Troops went to some of the most troubled provinces, such as Helmand, with big goals and a hope that they might reproduce the counterinsurgency results in Iraq of a few years earlier. But violence increased, though it has **tapered off** this year as troops began to withdraw.

Proponents of the 2007 surge in Iraq argue that it **provided political space** for the Iraqi government to reconcile disputes and garner some public trust, but this does not appear to have happened in Afghanistan. Official corruption remains pervasive, and public trust appears low.

Obama's goals for the U.S.-led effort in Afghanistan are significant: he wants the country free of al Qaeda, the Taliban out of power, and the Afghan security services able to handle the country's internal security on their own. Those are great goals but lofty ones that, by definition, are not so much permanently achieved as they are managed day-to-day. Perhaps that's why the mission to train Afghan security forces, which will continue once combat operations officially end in 2014, is scheduled to continue until 2024. That would make for 23 years of constant U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan. That's modest compared to the tens of thousands of U.S. troops stationed in Japan, South Korea, and Germany since the 1940s, but a reminder of the scope of the Afghanistan undertaking.

As an example of the challenge in building self-sustaining Afghan security, see Jalalabad, a city in the country's east and the capital of Nangarhar Province. Last January, the U.S. transferred security responsibility for the city to Afghan **control**. On Tuesday, a suicide bomber **struck a funeral**, killing 25 civilians and injuring several provincial officials. One attack doesn't prove that U.S. strategy is failing of course, but Jalalabad is, unfortunately, not the only example. Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand, was **transferred** over to Afghan control from the British military last year. A **string of bombs** since then suggests that security has not been achieved.

Still, you'd be hard pressed to find either presidential campaign saying much of substance about the war. Mitt Romney **didn't mention it** during his lengthy speech accepting his nomination at the Republican National Convention, and the Obama campaign seems to have largely driven home his plan to draw down the number of troops. In his speech to the Democratic National Convention last night, Obama seemed to talk about the war almost as if it were resolved. "We've blunted the Taliban's momentum in Afghanistan and in 2014, our longest war will be over," he said. "My opponent said that it was tragic to end the war in Iraq. And he won't tell us how he'll end the war in Afghanistan. Well, I have, and I will." Vice President Joe Biden and Senator Jon Kerry hit similar notes. "He promised to end the war in Afghanistan responsibly, and he is, and our heroes there are coming home," Kerry said.

By November, there will be about 68,000 troops remaining in Afghanistan, costing a bit less than \$70 billion a year to support. Neither presidential campaign has seemed interested, at this point, in taking a

bold stand on Afghanistan or in pushing a different strategy. The Romney campaign has criticized the pace and publicity of the current transition strategy, but less so its merits or effectiveness.

The stakes are significant. If the training mission continues to collapse and the Afghan forces are not able to take over from ISAF on schedule, the U.S.-led international military force will face a stark, uncomfortable choice: either to maintain or even expand its mission despite its unpopularity at home, or watching the country decline into even deeper violence. Some Afghans themselves seem to think the latter is more likely; in part of the north and west of the country, old Northern Alliance commanders are reconstituting their pre-2001 militias. Some units of the Afghan Local Police have at times, in effect, [become militias](#) for local strongmen.

It's easy to see why the campaigns are not eager to bring up the war, and not just because things are going so poorly and there are no obvious solutions. Americans seem to want out of the war. A March [poll](#) found that 60 percent of Americans thought the war has not been worth it; 54 percent supported withdrawing immediately and abandoning the effort to train Afghan security forces. There's little political gain for either side in highlighting the unpopular war, especially since neither seems to have a solution to this difficult, daunting conflict.

That's too bad, because the problems that the U.S. faces in Afghanistan aren't going away. If the ISAF withdraws without first building up a reliable and effective Afghan force -- and by [most accounts](#) it does not currently have one -- Afghanistan risks resuming the disastrous violence that plagued the country during the '90s. That might not necessarily result in a return of the Taliban to power and of al Qaeda safe havens -- with both groups so much weaker today than they were in the 1990s, it probably would not. But it would create enormous insecurity and chaos, which other terror groups could exploit much as the Taliban did in the late 1990s, and would bring misery to the civilians inevitably caught in the middle.

Afghanistan is not an easy problem to solve. And it's possible that the Obama administration's current policy might be the least bad option. But it's also possible that there's a better policy out there, one that might make Afghanistan's potential collapse less likely, or at least less potentially disastrous. But with Republicans and Democrats so wary of discussing the war and how to deal with it, there's little public or political pressure to find it.