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## To Partition or Not to Partition?

| [More](#) <sup>[1]</sup>

| February 25, 2011

| [Ted Galen Carpenter](#) <sup>[2]</sup>



The [recent referendum](#) <sup>[3]</sup> in southern Sudan endorsing the secession of that region will produce a newly independent country. And it appears that the central government in Khartoum will peacefully accept <sup>[4]</sup> the loss of more than a third of its territory—something that it violently opposed over the past several decades.

The outcome in southern Sudan suggests that, contrary to the long-standing bias of current governments in the international system, partition can sometimes be a solution—perhaps the only solution—to irreconcilable differences between ethnic or religious groups within a country. Admittedly, one can point to cases in which the strategy has not worked well, for example Britain's decision to divide its South Asian colony between the newly independent states of predominantly Hindu India and predominantly Muslim Pakistan. A few cases have even produced disastrous results (the division of Palestine being the premier example). But it is

equally possible to cite examples in which the results have been positive, and were certainly better than the alternative. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia's "velvet divorce" are clear instances of that outcome.

As I suggest [here](#) [5], chronically dysfunctional Bosnia-Herzegovina ought to be considered a prime candidate for partition. Despite the utter failure of that artificial entity to forge anything even faintly resembling national cohesion—much less a competent government and functioning economy—in the more than 15 years since the Dayton Accords ended a violent civil war, U.S. and European leaders [still](#) [6] [insist](#) [7] on keeping Bosnia intact, even if it must remain indefinitely on life support from international agencies. That is an appallingly short-sighted strategy.

Western policy makers grasp at ever more fragile straws to make their case that Bosnia will eventually turn out to be a success story. The favorite recent [panacea](#) [8] is that once Bosnia joins the European Union, the petty ethnic quarrels among the country's Serb, Croat, and Muslim communities will become irrelevant. Not only does that assumption underestimate the depth of the continuing ethnic hatreds, it is wildly optimistic about the probability of the EU admitting Bosnia anytime soon.

There is more and more grumbling within the major EU states about some of the existing smaller and weaker members. That is especially true in Germany, which has had to shoulder primary responsibility for the financial bailouts of some of those members. The EU already has to deal with such members states as Greece, Portugal, and Ireland that have severe economic problems. It already has one member (Cyprus) that has a huge, unresolved territorial issue (with Turkish troops occupying the northern 37 percent of the country) and another member (Spain) with two simmering secessionist issues. EU governments are likely to be very reluctant about acquiring Bosnia as a member when the country has both political and economic defects that are intractable.

Both the United States and the EU should accept the [manifest](#) [9] [desire](#) [10] of the Serb minority (some one-third of Bosnia's population, and one that inhabits a reasonably compact territory) to secede and either form an independent country or merge with Serbia. The United States and its NATO allies have tried to dictate policy in Bosnia for far too long. Their meddling has produced a festering, unsustainable situation. They need to change course and approve a political transition based on partition. Their sole goal should be to orchestrate that process to maximize the probability that it will be peaceful.

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[2] <http://nationalinterest.org/profile/ted-galen-carpenter>

[3] <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2011/02/24/109395/how-southern-sudans-ticking-time.html>

[4] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/sudan/8024539/Khartoum-will-accept-outcome-of-referendum-on-spilt-of-Sudan.html>

[5] [http://www.cato.org/pub\\_display.php?pub\\_id=12800](http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=12800)

[6] <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/category,POLICY,EP,,4a0440a92,0.html>

[7] <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2010/07/145102.htm>

[8] <http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2009/May/20090520142500eaifas0.4400446.html>

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[9] <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2007/11/21/uk-serbia-bosnia-kosovo-idUKL2115325220071121>

[10] <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/10/05/us-bosnia-election-idUSTRE6940TK20101005>