

# Australia dispatches more troops for phoney “war on terror” in Afghanistan

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The Howard government announced on April 10 that a 300-strong unit of the Australian military’s elite Special Air Service (SAS) and army commandos will be sent to the southern Afghanistan province of Uruzgan within several weeks. Their stated mission will be combat operations against alleged supporters of Al Qaeda and the former Taliban regime who are fighting a guerilla war against the US-NATO occupation of the country.

Defence Minister Brendan Nelson told a press conference: “It’s very important that we not only engage in ‘hearts and minds’ activities ... but also that we are prepared to go out and actively rout the Taliban, and in particular the Taliban leadership.” In other words, the SAS will be hunting down and attempting to assassinate the leadership of Afghan resistance groups. Australian special forces performed a similar function for the US military during the Vietnam War. Over the course of five years, SAS hit squads were responsible for killing more than 500 alleged Viet Cong and targeting hundreds more for attack by aircraft and artillery.

The most politically revealing aspect of Howard’s decision to insert Australian troops into frontline combat in Afghanistan is that it has been supported by virtually the entire political and media establishment. The Australian population, which is overwhelmingly opposed to the war in Iraq, has been told from all quarters that the conflict in Afghanistan is a justified war against “terrorism” and “different” to Iraq.

Opposition Labor Party leader Kevin Rudd, for example, lectured journalists that the terrorist atrocities on September 11, 2001 were an attack on the continental United States and therefore, under the ANZUS treaty, Australia had “an alliance obligation” to take part in the war in Afghanistan. “Osama bin Laden is still alive and well”, Rudd added. “I think we’ve got a combined obligation to do what we can to eliminate him, eliminate Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and the Taliban remnant which continue to support him.”

Paul Kelly, the editor-at-large of the Murdoch-owned *Australian*, insisted that Australians had to “get used to the idea of the Long War” against “Islamist terrorism” and to expect “our military forces to be operating in Afghanistan for many years to come”. The *Melbourne Age*, which at times has been critical of aspects of Howard’s backing for the Bush administration’s foreign policy, editorialised on April 12: “It is good to see Mr Howard is at last honouring his commitment to ‘take a stand for democracy and to take a stand against terrorism’ in Afghanistan, and this has bipartisan support.”

Greens leader Senator Bob Brown backed the US occupation of Afghanistan, even as he voiced unease about sending the SAS when they could be needed to shore up Australia’s own colonial operations in the South Pacific. Brown declared that “it should be President Bush dispatching the extra contingent to Afghanistan, not Australia,” because the resurgence of the Taliban was due to the “Bush administration’s mistake in withdrawing from Afghanistan and invading Iraq”.

The endorsement of the Afghan war as a legitimate war, justified by the events of September 11, 2001, has spared Howard from having to explain

the glaring lies used as the pretext for Australian participation in the US-led invasion and occupation of that country.

The first lie is that the invasion of Afghanistan was to “take a stand for democracy”. The US puppet regime in Kabul is no more “democratic” than its counterpart in Baghdad. Five years after the US invasion, most of the country is in the hands of corrupt and semi-feudal warlords, opium traffickers and tribal chieftains who ignore the desperate living conditions endured by the population. In exchange for financial injections and US military support against the Taliban and other opponents, they provide a figleaf of legitimacy for Afghanistan’s transformation into an American military base.

One of the largest “reconstruction” projects carried out in the war-ravaged country has been a 3.5 kilometre, international class runway at the US-controlled Bagram airport, which is capable of landing any aircraft in the US military arsenal. With the Bush administration now escalating its confrontation with Tehran, any US attack on Iran would most likely include air strikes launched from Bagram.

The claim that the SAS will be killing “terrorists” is also patent nonsense. What is taking place in Afghanistan is an armed resistance to the US-NATO occupation of the country fuelled by widespread opposition to the murderous activities of the US military, particularly among the southern Pashtun tribes that supported the previous Taliban regime. The indiscriminate slaughter of 12 women, children and elderly men and the wounding of many others by American marines near Jalalabad last month following a roadside bombing only underscores the reasons for the hatred of US and NATO forces.

In a major report released last September, the European-based thinktank Senlis noted: “With civilians being killed on a regular basis, Afghans are angry that the majority of international aid has been spent on the military purposes rather than poverty relief. Many believe that the military missions are misguided, having lost faith in the ability of the ‘foreigners’ to bring stability to the country. A perceived lack of respect from international military troops has fuelled Afghans’ resentment towards the international community. International troops’ apparent unwillingness to study Afghan culture and co-operate with locals, has caused mass hatred of the ‘foreigners’. Some believe that the ongoing fighting in Iraq and recent clashes in Lebanon are proof that the West is attempting to recolonise the Muslim world. Many Afghans are now looking to the Taliban for leadership, declaring that they will ‘die fighting the foreigners.’”

In other words, Afghans are seeking to drive the despised invaders out of their country just as they have done in the past. The ethnic Pashtun tribes which live in Pakistan’s frontier provinces and southern Afghanistan have resisted every attempt to put them under foreign domination—whether British in the nineteenth century, Soviet in the twentieth or American in the twenty-first.

As for the “war on terror”, the US played a major role in the creation of Al Qaeda (Arabic for “The Base”)—the CIA-backed and Saudi-financed network that brought Islamic extremists from around the world to wage a

holy war against the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan. From 1979 on, successive US administrations intrigued to shatter Soviet influence over Afghanistan by encouraging, financing and arming the Islamic mujahadeen who were hailed to the world as “freedom fighters”. Until the early 1990s, Osama bin Laden was an American ally.

The US-led war in Afghanistan is no more about “fighting terrorism” than the war in Iraq, but is bound up with longstanding global strategic issues. The two conflicts are links in a chain of US aggression stretching back to collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, which Pentagon strategists assessed as a golden opportunity to establish US dominance over two key oil and gas producing regions of the globe—the Middle East and Central Asia.

In 1991, the first Bush administration launched the Gulf War against Iraq as the initial act in bringing the Middle East under US control. The war enabled the US to establish bases for the first time in the Gulf states, as well as to shatter Iraq’s army and infrastructure. The basing of US forces in Saudi Arabia were a major reason for bin Laden’s turn against the US. Throughout the next decade, economic sanctions—enforced by US military forces in the Gulf—were used to prevent any other power establishing its influence in Iraq. At the same time, the most militarist sections of the US ruling elite pushed for “regime change” in Iraq and neighbouring Iran as the means for consolidating US predominance.

Planning for a US military intervention into the second objective—Central Asia—also dates back to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Afghanistan was always a potential target. While the country possesses little in the way of resources itself, simply looking at a map makes clear why it was viewed as geo-politically significant to the US. It borders the oil and gas-rich republics of the former Soviet Union to the north; Iran to the west; China to the east; and Pakistan to the south. Its strategic location offers a potential route for pipelines from the massive Turkmenistan gas fields to the Indian subcontinent and Indian Ocean.

Following the Soviet withdrawal, Afghanistan descended into chaos as rival mujahadeen militias fought each other for power. Far from opposing the Pakistan-backed movement of disaffected Islamist students or Taliban, the US turned a blind eye, hoping that a Taliban regime would provide the stability required to establish Afghanistan as a major energy pipeline route from Central Asia. Not surprisingly, when the Islamic fundamentalist Taliban regime took Kabul in the mid-1990s, it provided a sanctuary for bin Laden and his Afghan veterans who had been driven out of Saudi Arabia and Sudan; and by now had declared a new holy war on the US and the corrupt US-backed regimes of the Middle East.

It was only in the late 1990s, after Al Qaeda bombed the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, that the Clinton administration openly turned against the Taliban regime and targeted Al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan with cruise missiles. Journalist Bob Woodward revealed in the *Washington Post* in November 2001 that covert operations aimed at preparing the way for the overthrow of the Taliban had been initiated by the Clinton administration in early 2000.

The installation of President Bush in the stolen 2000 election represented the coming to power of the most open advocates of militarism. Pakistani officials have told the BBC they were warned in July 2001 of preparations for a US intervention into Afghanistan. Planning for war with Iraq was also in motion.

A dramatic event was needed to sway American public opinion behind these war plans. The terrorist atrocities on September 11, 2001 conveniently provided the necessary *casus belli*. In a collapse of security which has never been officially explained, a handful of men, some of whom were known to US agencies, were able to hijack planes and crash them into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon. Within a month, US troops were landing in Afghanistan.

The Bush administration is not conducting a “war on terror”, but a war for global US supremacy. September 11 has become a universal

justification for a series of targets drawn up, not the basis of their support for Al Qaeda, but rather to advance the strategic and economic ambitions of Washington. The US toppled the Iraqi nationalist Saddam Hussein even though he was Al Qaeda’s sworn enemy. Iran is now looming as the third but by no means last target in the “Long War” on terrorism, even though Al Qaeda regards the theocratic Shiite regime in Tehran as Islamic heretics. Moreover, as the US prepares to attack Iran, there is a growing body of evidence that the Bush administration is actively supporting Sunni extremists inside Iran and Lebanon who are openly linked to the supposed prime target of the “war on terror”—bin Laden and Al Qaeda.

The promotion of the US occupation of Afghanistan as different to Iraq serves definite political purposes. The mass opposition around the world to the US catastrophe in Iraq has made it increasingly politically difficult for US allies to directly assist in the occupation. A division of labour has evolved, in which Britain, Canada and now Australia have directed increased combat forces to Afghanistan, claiming it is a “justified” war. The US has been able to concentrate its stretched military on escalating its repression of the Iraqi people and preparing for a confrontation with Iran.

In terms of threats to human civilisation, the danger posed by a relative handful of Islamic fundamentalists is minuscule compared to that posed by the global ambitions of the American ruling class. The Bush administration has repudiated international law and claims the right to launch “preemptive” wars against any nation it deems to be a present or future rival. The setbacks that US imperialism have suffered in Iraq have only made it more reckless in its determination to ensure it has a grip over world energy supplies, with discussions taking place on using nuclear weapons against Iranian targets. The scramble between rival capitalist states for control over natural resources and geo-political dominance is raising international tensions to a degree not seen since Nazi Germany’s rampage across Europe.

The support of the Australian Labor Party and the so-called “liberal” press for the US conquest of Afghanistan demonstrates the purely tactical and token character of the criticisms they raise of the Iraq war. For its own venal purposes, the entire Australian political establishment continues to fully back the criminal cabal in Washington and its bogus “war on terror”. US backing is crucial to Australia’s neo-colonial interventions in East Timor and the Solomon Islands, which are aimed at preventing other powers such as China establishing influence.

Whether under Howard or Labor, support for US militarism will continue and Australian troops will be sent to kill and be killed in the growing list of conflicts being fought for global domination. The working class must adopt the clear and unambiguous demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Australian and foreign forces from Afghanistan, Iraq and the South Pacific states.



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