

Amid rising casualties, Australian establishment debates a wider engagement in Afghanistan

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The wounding on September 2 of nine Australian special forces troops by Afghan insurgents loyal to the former Taliban regime has led to a renewed focus in the political and media establishment on Australia's involvement in the US-led occupation.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's Labor government used the news of the Australian casualties—the largest number in a combat engagement since the Vietnam War—to restate its total commitment to the Afghan war. Once again, the threadbare propaganda portraying Afghans resisting the foreign occupation of their country as “terrorists” was used as justification. On September 3, Rudd declared in parliament: “The Taliban can never again be allowed to use Afghanistan as a training ground, a hiding place or a launching pad for terrorist operations around the world”.

The Liberal Party opposition, which sent troops to take part in the initial invasion in October 2001 when it was in government, declared its full bipartisan support for Labor.

Representatives of the Greens, who had postured in last November's election as “antiwar”, used the occasion to junk their previous call for the withdrawal of Australian forces from Afghanistan. Instead, a Green Senator moved a motion in the upper house of parliament calling on the Rudd government to order Australian troops to observe a ceasefire on September 21, the United Nation's International Day of Peace. Before news of the casualties broke, Greens leader Bob Brown issued a press statement calling for more medical evacuation helicopters to be sent to Afghanistan—not for troops to be pulled out.

Since Rudd took office, the Australian task force in Afghanistan has been boosted to 1,080 troops, comprising an engineering unit with supporting infantry and armour; a 300-strong special forces unit; two Chinook helicopters and their crews; and other logistical and command personnel. The bulk of the force is deployed in the southern province of Uruzgan, as part of a Dutch-commanded “Provincial Reconstruction Team”.

The special forces element, made up of elite Special Air Service (SAS) personnel and army commandos, performs what the British military calls a “decapitation role”: hunting down and killing insurgents or locating their positions for attack by air strikes. The squad that was ambushed last week was reportedly returning from an operation to locate bomb-making factories.

Casualties, while small, are increasing. Five Australian troops have been killed during the past 11 months, compared with just one in the first six years of the war. Including the nine wounded last week, 53 Australian troops have been injured in Afghanistan.

The spike in Australian casualties parallels the experience of all the troops participating in the NATO-commanded International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Over the past year, guerrillas loyal to the former Taliban regime or to anti-occupation warlords such as Jalaluddin Haqqani and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar have intensified their offensive against US and NATO troops across southern Afghanistan. In recent months, attacks have also begun to rise in areas around the capital Kabul, as Taliban units push deeper into the country.

The growth in the insurgency reflects the immense hostility and resentment felt by millions of Afghans toward the occupying powers. The US-led forces have delivered on none of their cynical promises to “reconstruct” Afghanistan. Instead, massive and permanent air bases have been constructed, such as the one at Bagram, which give the US a military footprint in the very heart of Central Asia. The priority of the provincial reconstruction teams has been building roads and other infrastructure needed to supply the occupation forces and protect them from insurgents.

The population has been left mired in the same poverty and deprivation it has endured for decades. The indifference shown by the occupation towards the Afghan masses is exemplified by the warnings made last month by aid agency Oxfam that as many as five million people in the country

face malnutrition this winter. At particular risk are thousands of farming communities that have been ravaged over the past several years by both droughts and floods.

Anger over the terrible social conditions is amplified by the fact that the puppet government headed by Hamid Karzai, which is being propped up by the US and NATO, is riddled with corruption and factional infighting. Little of the \$15 billion that has been spent in Afghanistan on so-called aid has reached ordinary Afghans. The bulk has gone into the coffers of western contracting firms or been appropriated by the pro-occupation Afghan elite.

The US officer assuming command of ISAF, General David McKiernan, told the *Australian* this month that he had asked the Bush administration to deploy four additional combat brigades plus support elements to Afghanistan in order to suppress the burgeoning insurgency. The additional brigades would boost US troop numbers in the country to well over 60,000. NATO and non-NATO US allies like Australia are currently contributing some 37,000 troops. McKiernan, when prompted by the *Australian*, indicated that he would “welcome” extra Australian forces.

The *Australian*, the flagship of Rupert Murdoch’s News Limited, is spearheading a campaign for the Rudd government to either send more Australian troops or, at the very least, alter their role from “reconstruction” to combat.

Australian governments have been reluctant to commit ground troops into combat since the mass political opposition that developed against Australia’s participation in the Vietnam War. Australian contributions to the 1991 Iraq War and the Afghan and Iraq invasions consisted of naval assets, aircraft, logistical support and the SAS, but not regular infantry units that might have been placed on the front line.

In Afghanistan, the troops assigned to the reconstruction team operate under strict defensive caveats, preventing them from taking part in counter-insurgency operations. During the occupation of Iraq, Australian troops had similar rules of engagement, with the result that not a single one died in combat.

The *Australian* clearly believes it is well past time for the ruling elite to finally put to rest the so-called “Vietnam Syndrome” and confront the Australian people with the reality that neo-colonial wars involve soldiers dying. On September 6, the newspaper’s foreign editor Greg Sheridan authored an opinion piece entitled “Let the infantry do its job” insisting that the Rudd government “go one step further” in Afghanistan “and deploy regular infantry units”.

Sheridan pointed out that, given the Rudd government had completely embraced the justifications for the war in Afghanistan, it made “a lot of sense to use a wider section of our army to do this dangerous but vital work”. He invoked

two essays written by serving Australian officers earlier this year that denounced the refusal of successive governments to place infantry units into harm’s way. One officer, Captain Greg Colton, wrote that the policy was destroying the morale of the Australian Army.

The Labor government has begun signalling that it is prepared to fall into line. On September 9, the *Australian* reported that Defence Minister Joel Fitzgibbon had not ruled out sending infantry and “would consider it” if the military heads advised such a deployment. Fitzgibbon made the remarks during a send-off parade for Australian troops to Afghanistan, Iraq and East Timor.

The matter will come to a head over the next six to eight months. The Dutch infantry in Uruzgan are scheduled to withdraw from July 2010, and the composition of the Australian task force in the province may well be restructured to replace them. This would mean the deployment of an infantry battalion with armoured, artillery and air support.

The Labor government has already authorised a significant change in the role of Australian troops. Among those going to Afghanistan over the next weeks is a training unit that will be directly embedded in an Afghan government infantry battalion, accompanying it into frontline fighting. The head of the Australian military, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, said their mission would be “dangerous and lethal”.

The deployment of Australian troops has nothing to do with fighting the “war on terror” or helping the Afghan people. Rudd Labor is simply following in the footsteps of the previous Howard government, which supported the militarist agenda of the Bush administration in order to secure US backing for the assertion of Australia’s own neo-colonial ambitions in the South Pacific and Asia.

The musings of the *Australian*’s Sheridan indicate that sections of the political and military establishment believe the war in Afghanistan can serve another role as well: “bleeding” the country’s infantry battalions in their first real combat for more than 37 years.



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