

Australian Labor government escalates military involvement in Afghanistan

James Cogan
2 May 2009

The Rudd Labor government announced on Wednesday a significant expansion of Australia's military commitment to the US-led occupation of Afghanistan. The number of Australian troops operating in the southern province of Uruzgan, alongside Dutch and American units, will be increased from 1,100 to 1,550. The decision was given immediate bipartisan support by the conservative Liberal and National opposition parties and welcomed by the US Obama administration.

The additional forces will be performing various roles. A 120-strong detachment, likely made up of infantry and armoured support, will be sent for eight months to provide security in the lead-up to and following the August Afghan presidential election. The Taliban movement, which was driven from power by the 2001 US invasion and plays a major role in the growing resistance to the occupation, has declared the election illegitimate and called for its loyalists to disrupt the ballot.

A further 100 troops—also drawn from the combat arms of the Australian military—will be added to the 70 already embedded in a 3,300-strong, Uruzgan-based Afghan government Army brigade. Australian personnel trained the Afghan unit and have been accompanying it into battle since it began combat missions. Australian Defence Minister Joel Fitzgibbon this week admitted that the quality and morale of the Afghan troops was “patchy”. In March, Australian Corporal Mathew Hopkins was shot dead when his Afghan patrol stumbled into a Taliban ambush. Ten Australian soldiers have now been killed in the impoverished country.

A 440-strong Reconstruction Task Force operating in Uruzgan will be boosted by another 70 troops, bringing its strength to 510. Forty army engineers are being sent to upgrade the airfield at the Dutch/Australian base in Tarin Kowt; 70 more troops will work in various US and NATO headquarters around Afghanistan; and 10 federal police have been assigned to train Afghan police in Uruzgan.

The current 330-strong Special Operations Task Group, which is made up of elite Special Air Service (SAS) troops and Army commandos and conducts offensive combat missions on behalf of the US military, will not be augmented. It is, however, already carrying out ever more ruthless operations. The Australian military

claims the group killed 80 Taliban during a 26-day assault last month into an area controlled by resistance forces. At other times, its members function as hit squads, capturing or assassinating alleged insurgent leaders, financiers and bomb-makers.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's decision to dispatch additional forces is a direct response to the escalation of the war by the Obama administration. Washington is increasing US troop numbers to over 60,000 in preparation for a major offensive against the Afghan resistance, in Afghanistan itself and in the border region of neighbouring Pakistan.

Since 2003, the major focus of US foreign policy has been to establish a colonial-style puppet regime in Iraq and thereby control its substantial resources. Now it is being redirected to securing American geo-political interests in resource-rich Central Asia by consolidating a US client-state and long-term military bases in Afghanistan. This is part of a strategy aimed at stemming the mounting influence of US rivals, particularly China and Russia, in the region.

Washington is exerting pressure on all its European and Pacific allies to contribute to the Afghan “surge”. Canberra has acquiesced due to its ongoing dependence on US backing. Since World War II, the US-Australia alliance (ANZUS) has underpinned the ability of Australian imperialism to assert its geo-political, military and corporate interests throughout the South Pacific and South East Asia.

Like his conservative predecessor, former Prime Minister John Howard, Rudd supports US militarism in the Middle East and Central Asia in order to guarantee that the relationship will continue. He has announced the Afghan troop escalation in the context of growing concerns that China will exploit the global economic turmoil to extend its already considerable influence over the South Pacific states—Fiji, Papua New Guinea, East Timor and the Solomon Islands—that are viewed in Canberra as Australia's strategic “backyard”.

The Labor government is acutely aware of the extent of popular opposition to Australian involvement in the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Rudd told journalists on Wednesday that he anticipated the Afghan deployment was “going to become

progressively an unpopular war”. A poll in March found that two-thirds of the population opposed any increase in the number of troops. After seven-and-a-half years of propaganda that the Afghanistan invasion was necessary to eradicate “Al Qaeda” and “terrorism”, millions of ordinary people regard the conflict in the same light as the criminal invasion of Iraq.

Rudd, nevertheless, is continuing his efforts to legitimise the war on the basis that Australian soldiers are in Afghanistan to prevent “terrorism”. He declared their role was to “deny sanctuary to terrorists who have threatened and killed Australian citizens”. He could not, however, omit mention of the real motive. Australian imperialism’s “second” interest, he declared, was its “enduring commitment to the United States under the ANZUS Treaty”.

The response to Rudd’s announcement sheds further light on the conflict developing within the ruling elite over whether the US alliance should remain the bedrock of Australian foreign policy.

Professor Hugh White, one of the country’s most prominent military analysts, bluntly criticised the troop escalation. In an April 29 interview on the ABC’s “Lateline” program, White opined that it was utterly pointless. Regardless of what Australia did, the war in Afghanistan would be lost because the United States had refused to commit sufficient forces to crush the resistance.

“If we regard success as establishing in Afghanistan a stable and effective government that can permanently deny the country to the Taliban,” White declared, “then I don’t think it is a matter of two years, or five years, or 10 years. We’re not doing an effort which is nearly big enough to achieve that result and I don’t think we will. I think this is an effort that is doomed to failure.”

White ridiculed Obama’s surge as “only” taking US troop levels to 60,000 in a country of 30 million people. He described the security situation as “really dire” and declared that the surge “did not give us a serious chance”.

The only reason Australia was involved in Afghanistan, White insisted, was to “maintain our credibility as a US ally... at the lowest level of cost and risk”. The implication was that Australia should extricate itself from the debacle, regardless of its impact on relations with Washington.

White is articulating the view of a layer who believes that the political and economic decline of the US has rendered Australian imperialism’s exclusive post war reliance on the ANZUS alliance in need of modification.

Greg Sheridan, foreign editor of the Murdoch-owned *Australian*, criticised Rudd from a different standpoint in an April 30 column. Sheridan wrote that Rudd’s “odd emphasis” on an Al Qaeda threat meant that the “real reason for the deployment—loyalty to the US alliance—has been shuffled back to No 2 in the list of public justifications”. Rudd’s references to terrorism, he declared, “reflects the growing unpopularity of the war... and the need to

provide a more Australia-centric justification for it.”

The *Australian*, and Sheridan in particular, function as the mouthpiece for a layer of the political and military establishment that views the Afghanistan commitment as vital to the US alliance. Last September, he authored a column headlined “Let the infantry do its job”, echoing a plea by army officers for more frontline troops to be sent to Afghanistan.

In December, Major General Jim Molan, the former commander of Australian forces in Iraq in 2004 and 2005, called for the government to send an infantry-based task force of 6,000 to front-line combat in Uruzgan. In a February column in the *Australian*, headlined “End the pussyfooting in Afghan war”, Molan restated this call, declaring that “a credible relationship with our key allies lies at the centre of our defence and security policy”.

Sheridan, Molan and other critics believe that both the Howard and Rudd governments have been too sensitive to public opposition. In order to lessen the risk of casualties, both governments have limited Australia’s military contributions to largely support and logistical roles, deploying only special forces troops on offensive combat operations. This, the US alliance proponents assert, is impacting on Australia’s standing in the United States.

In his April 30 column, Sheridan wrote that the “nature and composition of the Australian troop commitment reflect a lack of seriousness” and an “unwillingness to be part of the sharp end of the US effort”. A real commitment, he asserted, would require Australia to “take the leadership in Uruzgan with a force of 3,000 of its own soldiers and deploy them to defeat the Taliban”.

As for domestic opposition, it should be ignored. If sending soldiers to kill and die in far-flung conflicts is necessary to maintain a strong US alliance, then governments should have no hesitation in complying.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact