

Australian PM's visit to Afghanistan paves way for military escalation

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Australian Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard has utilised her first overseas trip as head of government—to Afghanistan and Europe—to promote the neo-colonial occupation of Afghanistan and raise the prospect of additional Australian soldiers and resources being deployed. The discussions have underscored one of Gillard's central preoccupations since taking over from Kevin Rudd following the Labor Party coup last June—demonstrating her government's unambiguous support of the war in Afghanistan and commitment to the US alliance.

The prime minister's visit to the Central Asian state last Sunday was unannounced for security reasons—again pointing to the failure of the US-led forces to suppress escalating resistance to the occupation. She spent several hours at the US-Australian military base at Tarin Kowt in Oruzgan province, meeting with Australian commanders and troops, before holding separate meetings with the US commander in Afghanistan, General David Petraeus, and Afghan President Hamid Karzai in Kabul.

According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*: "Some [Australian] soldiers speaking privately said that while they were delighted at the medical evacuation provided by the US which has replaced the Dutch [in Oruzgan province], they said they needed more troops and Australian helicopters to help them cover their expanded area of operations. One soldier, named Chris, approached Ms Gillard with these concerns."

This incident had all the hallmarks of an orchestrated set piece, designed to ensure that the issue of troop numbers took centre stage during Gillard's visit. Sections of the media, on behalf of elements within the military and foreign policy establishment, have been pressing the issue on the pretext that more forces are required to "support the troops". An email written by an infantry battalion soldier and leaked to the Murdoch press on September 21 alleged that a recent casualty was caused by inadequate mortar, artillery and air support. This triggered an ongoing media campaign—to which the Gillard government has eagerly accommodated.

In Afghanistan, the prime minister told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that the current deployment of 1,550 soldiers was not a "cap". Responding to the demand raised earlier by opposition defence spokesperson David Johnston for another 360 troops

backed by tanks and other extra weaponry, Gillard stressed that the military leadership had advised that at this stage, the current numbers were sufficient and that there was no need for tanks.

Speaking in Brussels on Sunday, she elaborated: "Having defined the mission, then we have taken the advice of the Chief of the Defence Force Angus Houston about what personnel and what equipment is required to acquit the mission. The fact that we have deployed the right number of people with the right equipment to acquit the mission was confirmed to me by the Chief of the Defence Force. It was also confirmed to me by commanders on the ground like Colonel Jim Creighton, like General [John] Cantwell, that we have the appropriate force size for our mission."

This extraordinary position, which points to the growing political influence of the Australian military, provides the government with a convenient pretext if it decides to send more troops or materiel. While Gillard maintains that the current commitment is "about right," should Angus Houston and his colleagues give the word—or be instructed to give the word—the Labor government will immediately move to escalate the Australian military presence in Oruzgan province on the basis of doing what is required to "acquit the mission". Pressure from Washington and from within the Australian military command for such a move will no doubt intensify as the situation confronting the US-led forces continues to deteriorate.

Gillard used her international trip to also emphasise the indefinite duration of the occupation. Appearing on the ABC's "7.30 Report" program on Tuesday, Gillard was asked if she was concerned that discussion of a staged withdrawal would "encourage" the Taliban. "I am concerned that we need to be very clear about the message here," she replied, before stressing that there would be no withdrawal even when certain "benchmarks" like training the Afghan proxy army are met. "Security will transition over time to the leadership of the Afghan National Army when it's appropriate to do so. Transition will be a process. There will not be a transition day when forces like our own say, 'OK, the job is done,' and start marching out of Afghanistan... [When] the leadership of providing security can go to local forces, there will need to be some overwatch capacity from nations like Australia, working as part of the international forces there."

As throughout Iraq, in Afghanistan this “overwatch capacity” will involve the maintenance of permanent US military bases. Moreover, substantial foreign forces will remain poised to resume full combat operations whenever deemed necessary to secure the strategic and economic interests of Washington and its allies. In Iraq, about 50,000 US soldiers have remained, despite the official end of hostilities.

After leaving Afghanistan, Gillard met with NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen in Brussels. In a subsequent joint press conference, she boasted that Australia had “the biggest commitment of any non-NATO nation” in Afghanistan and had “increased our commitment by 40 percent within the last 12 months”. The war was also raised in discussions that Gillard had with several heads of government who had convened in Belgium on Monday and Tuesday for the biennial Asia-Europe Meeting.

At the same time, acting Prime Minister Wayne Swan reinforced Gillard’s pro-war message by ruling out any reduction in planned military spending increases over the next two decades. “Our troops will get all the support that they need on the ground in Afghanistan,” he declared on Monday, in response to a finance department briefing paper suggesting possible military cutbacks. (See: “Finance Department ‘razor gang’ commits to savage spending cuts”)

The government’s readiness to increase Australia’s involvement in the US-led war in Afghanistan flies in the face of public opinion. Surveys have demonstrated that up to two-thirds of the population want the troops withdrawn—which is precisely why the major parties and the media agreed not to discuss the war during the recent federal election campaign.

Widespread antiwar sentiment among ordinary people finds no expression within the political establishment. This includes the Greens. They are critical of the Australian troop presence in Afghanistan—but support the occupation itself, so long as it is conducted by US and NATO forces. The Greens want Australian forces redeployed to neo-colonial operations closer to home, in East Timor and Solomon Islands. Moreover, their nominal opposition to the Afghanistan war has not prevented them from keeping Labor in office as a minority government and issuing a blanket guarantee to vote for the government’s budgets over the next three years, including those provisions funding Australia’s predatory military operations.

The Greens’ stance dovetails that of elements within the ruling elite that are becoming increasingly concerned over the implications of the crisis confronting US forces in Afghanistan.

Former Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser has criticised the opposition’s call for more Australian troops to be dispatched, declaring that the war resembled that in Vietnam and other “past failures in which we have supported the US militarily”. Similarly, senior Liberal backbench parliamentarian Mal Washer has

described Afghanistan as a “war of confusion” and described Australia’s stated mission of training a section of the Afghan army as “pointless because there’s no stable government to hand over to”.

The *Australian*’s editor-at-large Paul Kelly contributed an article on Wednesday titled “Gillard must clearly make case for Afghan war”. Urging a renewed commitment to the US-led occupation and the US alliance as a whole, the Murdoch commentator insisted: “It is time for Labor to accept full political responsibility for the Afghanistan commitment, with the Prime Minister making a comprehensive strategic statement to the house [of parliament].”

Suggestions that the Gillard government has too narrowly defined the Australian mission in Oruzgan province and ought to be openly engaged in activities beyond training the Afghan army are likely to form a significant part of the upcoming parliamentary debate on the war. The Greens insisted on the debate during negotiations for their alliance with the minority Labor government. It is now clear that the parliamentary discussion will be a vehicle for the renewed promotion of the US alliance as well as all the pretexts used to justify the filthy war—above all the lie that it is aimed at countering Al Qaeda terrorism—paving the way for a possible increased Australian troop presence.

An editorial in the *Australian* yesterday, “No bickering over Afghanistan”, urged the major parties to close ranks. It called on the Liberals to cease implying that the government was not “committed to the troops” because it has not yet agreed to its demand that more be deployed, and urged Labor to end its criticisms of Liberal leader Tony Abbott over his statement that he declined Gillard’s invitation to visit Afghanistan with her because he feared being jetlagged for the British Conservatives’ party conference that he attended.

“Bipartisan support for the war is essential if the electorate is to accept the inevitability of more casualties in the campaign,” the newspaper concluded.

Unsurprisingly, the *Australian* said nothing about additional Afghan civilian casualties—but ordinary people in the impoverished country will bear the brunt of the Labor government’s continued involvement in the criminal war.



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