

Australian prime minister commits to Afghanistan war for next ten years

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Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard yesterday declared that Australian forces, working with their US and NATO allies, would maintain operations in Afghanistan for at least the next decade. The government's commitment to the indefinite occupation of the Central Asian state marked the opening of what is to be a two-week parliamentary debate on the neo-colonial war.

Gillard stressed that the Australian military's primary assigned role—training the so-called Afghan National Army in the southern province of Oruzgan—is expected to take between two and four years, but that beyond this: “The international community will remain engaged in Afghanistan beyond 2014, and Australia will remain engaged.” Referring to the need to shift responsibility for security in Afghanistan to local proxy forces, she insisted: “This will be a graduated process, not an event or a date—there is no ‘transition day’... Transition will take some years; we will be engaged through this decade at least.”

Not once did the prime minister utter the word “withdrawal” during her 35-minute speech. Instead, Gillard discussed “international forces” being “thinned out” as Afghan forces are given responsibility for propping up the US-installed gangster regime headed by Hamid Karzai.

She added: “My firm view is that for transition to occur in an area, the ability of Afghan forces to take the lead in security in that area must be irreversible.” This is a formula for indefinite war, beyond even 2020. Short of killing all those now engaged in armed resistance to the occupation, as well as the many civilians aiding these fighters, there is no way that the US and its allies can be confident that passing command to Afghan soldiers and police will prove “irreversible”. The US-led operation is in deep crisis, with coalition casualties escalating, Taliban and other forces in control of large areas, and the majority of the Afghan population determined to eject the foreign forces.

Gillard's forecast of at least another decade of war in Afghanistan stands as a clear exposure of suggestions by US

President Barack Obama and some of his European counterparts that operations will soon be significantly wound down. Having recently returned from Europe, where she discussed Afghanistan with senior figures, including US General David Petraeus and NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the prime minister was clearly referring not just to Australia's military plans but to those of the US-led forces as a whole.

The Australian parliamentary debate is the first held since the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan. After the federal election last August resulted in a hung parliament, Gillard agreed to the Greens' request for such a discussion in order to secure the Labor-Greens alliance. The so-called debate has become the vehicle through which the minority Labor government—with the full support of the Liberal-National opposition coalition—is rehashing all of the old lies about Afghanistan and the “war on terror” as part of a conscious attempt to intimidate the majority of the Australian population who oppose the war.

Gillard's speech was a grotesque performance, delivered by an individual culpable for war crimes against the Afghan population. The address was littered with innumerable lies—at one point the prime minister even boasted of Afghan democracy, referring to recent elections that were blatantly rigged by the Karzai government—and concluded with predictably mawkish tributes and a poetry citation for serving Australian troops.

The prime minister's central argument was that Australia had “two vital national interests” in Afghanistan—to ensure the country never again became a “safe haven for terrorists” and “to stand firmly by our alliance commitment to the United States”.

On the former, Gillard repeated the central pretext for the war, that the US-led 2001 invasion was a defensive response to the September 11 terrorist attacks and that the ongoing occupation was necessary to prevent Al Qaeda from regrouping in Afghanistan. In reality, US war plans were drafted well in advance of the attacks in New York and Washington—into

which no credible investigation has yet been conducted, including into the substantial evidence that American intelligence agencies had advance knowledge of the terrorists' plans. As for the claim of a continued international terrorist threat from Afghanistan, it is sufficient to note that there are 150,000 US-led troops in Afghanistan, against what the CIA estimates are fewer than 100 Al Qaeda fighters.

Gillard's claim that the war is necessary to prevent further Australian casualties in incidents such as the 2002 Bali bombings is also based on a lie. She claimed that in this and other incidents in Indonesia, the terrorists involved "had links to Afghanistan"—but did not point out that these links dated back to the 1980s and early 1990s, when Washington was arming and supporting the Islamist opponents of the Soviet occupation, who later formed Al Qaeda.

The 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, followed by that of Iraq in 2003, was driven by US imperialism's need to control key strategic energy-rich areas of Central Asia and the Middle East. The ongoing occupation of Afghanistan, aimed at installing a stable and pliant client government in Kabul, now forms an essential component of Washington's efforts to halt its declining global hegemony against rising challengers such as China. A complementary concern is to ensure that the US and allied corporations profit from Afghanistan's substantial energy and minerals deposits.

Of course, Gillard did not mention these calculations in her speech. Nor did she include in the list of Australia's "vital interests" in Afghanistan the country's estimated \$1 trillion of untapped mineral resources—despite the fact that BHP Billiton and other Australian mining firms are among those now eyeing the country's iron ore, copper, cobalt, gold, and rare earth deposits.

On the question of the US alliance, the prime minister was emphatic. "We must stand firmly by our ally, the United States," she declared. "Australia will stand firm in our commitment to our alliance with the United States, the international community understands this, our friends and allies understand this, our enemies understand this too." Gillard also lavished praise on the counterinsurgency "surge" strategy of President Obama and General Petraeus.

Gillard's speech to parliament again raises the question of what role Washington played in the June 23-24 coup against her predecessor Kevin Rudd. The former prime minister never outlined a ten-year commitment in Afghanistan. While Rudd certainly raised the US alliance as a central reason for involvement in the war, it was not as prominently advanced as it is now under Gillard.

Afghanistan was not discussed during the August election campaign, but then immediately afterward became one of the most prominent political issues. Last month the Murdoch press published a leaked email from a soldier who suggested a recent casualty was caused by insufficient artillery and air support. This was used as the pretext for an ongoing campaign for more Australian troops and military hardware to be deployed. Then at the beginning of the month Gillard visited Afghanistan and declared that her government would deliver on any request for such resources made by senior military commanders. At the same time, sections of the media, as well as opposition leader Tony Abbott, accused the government of "stabbing in the back" three soldiers who have been charged with killing Afghan civilians. Now the parliamentary debate is providing a focal point for the drumbeat behind a heightened Australian involvement in the war.

Notwithstanding Abbott's recent accusations that Gillard has failed to "support the troops", the prime minister yesterday hailed the "deep bipartisanship" behind the war.

Abbott in turn praised Gillard's speech and issued his wholehearted support for the troops and their mission. His reply in parliament notably stressed that: "After nine years of inconclusive fighting, the risk is that the PR war will be lost at a time when the ground war is finally starting to go significantly better... Winning hearts and minds in Australia is no less important than winning them in Afghanistan if this mission is to succeed."

Up to two-thirds of the population want Australian troops withdrawn, according to opinion polls. Abbott's remarks point to what are undoubtedly grave concerns within the ruling elite that this antiwar sentiment will cut across plans for the indefinite occupation of Afghanistan.

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