

Leaks point to US concerns over Australian role in Afghanistan

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11 December 2010

Extracts of leaked US diplomatic cables published yesterday by the *Sydney Morning Herald* show that throughout 2008 and 2009, the United States was growing increasingly concerned over former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's commitment to the war in Afghanistan.

The *Herald* reported today that the cables were obtained from WikiLeaks in November and personally handed over to journalist Philip Dorling in London by the website's editor, Australian citizen Julian Assange. Dorling noted in an article today that Assange "pays close attention to political developments in Australia and has a keen sense of the importance of encouraging more openness".

A cable sent from the US embassy in Canberra detailed a discussion that took place in October 2008 between Rudd and visiting US congressmen. On the eve of the US presidential election, in which then candidate Barack Obama had made a renewed focus on Afghanistan one of the centre-pieces of his foreign policy, Rudd conveyed serious reservations.

Rudd is paraphrased by US officials to have "concluded that the national security establishment in Australia was very pessimistic about the long term prognosis for Afghanistan". He reportedly told the Americans that the US and its major European allies had "no common strategy for winning the war or winning the peace". Afghanistan, Rudd said, "scares the hell out of me".

The Australian prime minister complained that while US, British, Canadian, Australian and Dutch troops were bearing the brunt of fighting the Taliban in southern Afghanistan, in the north-west of the country, German and French forces were "organising folk dancing festivals".

Publicly, the *Sydney Morning Herald* noted, Rudd praised both Germany and France the same month for deploying additional forces to Afghanistan. At no point did Rudd or his ministers inform the Australian population that the government considered the war a lost cause.

A second cable from June 2009 detailed the US embassy's alarm over a tense meeting between then Australian Defence Minister John Faulkner and Dutch minister Eimert van Middelkoop. At the meeting, van Middelkoop "bluntly" informed Faulkner that the Netherlands would be withdrawing all their troops from the southern province of Uruzgan by August 2010.

The plans of the Obama administration for his first so-called "surge" of thousands of additional troops to Afghanistan had already been aired in the US press as early as February 2009.

The Australian government accommodated to Obama's shift of US military emphasis from Iraq to Afghanistan by dispatching an additional

400 Australian troops in May 2009, increasing the size of its taskforce in Uruzgan to some 1,550. The Dutch contingent it fought alongside, which was responsible for operational command in the province, consisted of some 1,900 troops, including an infantry battalion, F16 jet fighters and helicopter gunships. The Australian force, by contrast, was made up of a large number of engineers and support troops, some infantry, a 320-strong special forces task group, but no air support.

The expectation in Washington was that Rudd would respond by agreeing to both take over operational command in Uruzgan and deploy the necessary additional troops, helicopters, aircraft and artillery to replace the Dutch. An article in the November 19 *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that the overall commander of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan at the time, General Stanley McChrystal, had made written requests to his Australian military counterparts to do so as early as 2008.

The US embassy in Canberra reported back to Washington that instead, Faulkner had, "in equally blunt fashion", told van Middelkoop that "Australia was not going to assume that role".

McChrystal made two further requests for additional Australian troops in the latter part of 2009. The Australian military reportedly responded by sending McChrystal contingency plans for the deployment of an entire Australian infantry brigade, consisting of some 3,000 troops with air and artillery support.

The Rudd government, however, refused to dispatch more forces and again refused to take over command in Uruzgan. It offered only to send Australian Federal Police (AFP) to help with the training of Afghan police.

The anger in Washington over Canberra's decisions is hinted at in cables sent from the US embassy in November and December 2009.

The November cable details the ongoing view of senior Australian officials that the war was pointless. Rudd's special representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Ric Smith, had told embassy staff after returning from a visit to Uruzgan that the "mission in Afghanistan and the Afghan government presence was 'a wobbly three-legged stool'."

A December cable reported that Smith "questioned what the AFP [Australian Federal police] would be able to achieve given the 'train wreck' that they had been given to work with in the Afghan National Police". Another cable recounted that the demoralised position of the AFP's International Deployment Group, Assistant Commissioner Frank Prendergast, was that "a successful police training program will take 20 years to be effective in Afghanistan".

The bluntest cable from December 2009 referred specifically to Rudd. After months of backroom discussions, including with its allies, Obama had announced at the beginning of that month that a second surge of 30,000 extra US forces would be sent to Afghanistan by the middle of 2010. Washington expected its allies, including Australia, to fall into line and also send additional troops.

Rudd did not comply and even the police deployment had not taken place.

The US embassy in Canberra wrote back to Washington: “Rudd, who is loath to increase troop levels, had hoped to offer the increased civilian effort to the US as a substitute. The Australians began preparing for the President’s announcement months in advance and the lack of progress is surprising. Coupled with Smith’s increasingly pessimistic attitude, this may be a sign of friction within the government over the proper role for civilians in Afghanistan.”

No cables dated after December 2009 have been published that detail American attitudes toward the Australian government’s commitment to the war in Afghanistan. What is known from other published sources, however, is that Rudd’s stance was viewed with considerable bitterness in the US government and military.

Australian Defence ministry sources told *Herald* journalists last month that US commanders had “regularly said they were ‘sick and tired’ of Australia not doing enough... they’d like us to do more” but “any discussion on leadership [in Uruzgan] is quickly terminated by Australian politicians”.

In December 2009, McChrystal reportedly had a “bitter exchange” with Australian military commander Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston. He told Houston that the “Rudd government’s refusal to allow Australian troops to take the fight to the Taliban was impairing the US war effort” and doing “permanent damage” to “the US perception of Australia’s military commitment”.

In the first months of 2010, the Obama administration repeatedly diplomatically snubbed the Rudd government. A planned January visit to Australia by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Defense Secretary Robert Gates was cancelled, ostensibly because of the Haiti earthquake. Obama justified cancelling visits twice, firstly on the grounds he had to remain in the US to pass health care legislation and secondly because of the BP oil spill.

The continuing pressure from Washington most likely lay behind the secret decision of the Rudd government to make Australian special forces available for combat missions in other areas of Afghanistan beside Uruzgan.

The escalation of the war as a result of the US surge, however, led to a sharp spike in fighting and deaths among occupation troops.

From June 6 to June 21, amidst a destabilisation campaign against the Rudd government by the Murdoch media and mining companies opposed to a proposed new tax, five Australian soldiers were killed—including three special forces troops who died in a helicopter crash in Kandahar province. The deaths fuelled popular opposition to the war and added to the general crisis within the Labor government, which was preoccupied by speculation of a leadership challenge against Rudd by deputy leader Julia Gillard.

On June 23, to placate mass opposition to the war and no doubt reflecting Rudd’s deep scepticism over its prospects, Defence Minister John Faulkner announced that Australian troops would begin withdrawing from Afghanistan within two to four years.

The Australian policy was in direct opposition to the stance of the Obama administration. Obama’s response to the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan was to move toward repudiating tentative withdrawal timetables by sacking McChrystal as commander and replacing him with General David Petraeus, the commander of the Iraq “surge”. Petraeus’s brief was to preside over a massive escalation of military operations and achieve so-called victory regardless of how long it took and how many lives were lost.

McChrystal was formally removed as Afghan commander on the morning of Wednesday, June 23, 2010. Several hours earlier, across the Pacific in Canberra, a cabal of Labor Party factional heads had sent Julia Gillard into Kevin Rudd’s office to announce that she was challenging him for the leadership of the party and of the Australian government.

Rudd was formally ousted in an internal Labor Party coup on the morning of June 24—the first time a Labor prime minister had ever been removed in the first term of office. In her initial speech to the Australian population, Gillard stressed her government would be totally committed to the war in Afghanistan and to the US-Australia military alliance. She has subsequently declared that Australian troops will be deployed to Afghanistan “through this decade at least”—another 10 years.

The leaks on Afghanistan combine with leaked cables earlier in the week that revealed US-Australian tensions over Rudd’s foreign policy initiatives in Asia, the intimate relations between the US embassy and the Labor factional cabal of Mark Arbib, David Feeney and Australian Workers Union chief Paul Howes, and American support for Julia Gillard. They point to an atmosphere of recriminations and back-room conspiracy against Rudd, in which US diplomats were active participants.

Taken together, the cables corroborate what the WSWS wrote on July 15:

“Faulkner’s announcement on Afghanistan would doubtless have been greeted with fury in Washington, and could well have been the final straw in its relationship with Rudd. Some key operative could simply have informed Gillard and/or her backers that it was time to act, and that if she did so, it would be with US support....

“The Obama administration had a clear interest in reversing Australia’s withdrawal timeframe... With the Netherlands and Canada already preparing to withdraw, the Rudd government’s stance could have become the starting point for a wider abandonment of the US-led occupation...

“While much still remains unknown, it is highly unlikely that Washington, the CIA and the US embassy in Canberra were not deeply involved in the anti-democratic conspiracy to depose Rudd—just as they were in the 1975 coup that brought down the Whitlam Labor government.” (See: “What was Washington’s role in the coup against Australian prime minister Rudd?”)

The author also recommends:

Australia: WikiLeaks cables reveal secret ties between Rudd coup plotters and US embassy
[9 December 2010]

WikiLeaks cables cast fresh light on coup against former Australian PM
Rudd
[8 December 2010]



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