

Australian elite troops prepared for decade-long operations in Afghanistan

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The *Sydney Morning Herald* last week reported that the Australian government is preparing to adjust its role in the US-led colonial occupation of Afghanistan. Australia's 1,500 ground troops will reportedly be reduced by "up to two-thirds", beginning in the middle of next year and completed by the end of 2013. At the same time, elite SAS and commando forces will be shifted from Oruzgan province to bases in Kabul and Kandahar.

Canberra's preparations for handing over responsibility for security in Oruzgan province to trained proxies in the Afghan National Army form part of the Obama administration's planned "transition." Washington is attempting to reduce troop numbers in Afghanistan in order to free up its forces for operations elsewhere, including East Asia and the Pacific, while at the same time maintaining control over the resource-rich and strategically vital state. Permanent US bases have been established, and efforts are being stepped up to train reliable Afghan police and military forces capable of suppressing all resistance to the occupation.

There will be no letup in the relentless violence that has been inflicted on the Afghan people since the 2001 invasion. For the Australian forces, ground troops will be rotated out of the country while the SAS is assigned an even more active role. These elite forces are highly valued by American commanders, having functioned for several years as brutal death squads, hunting down and assassinating individuals identified as opponents of the occupation.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported: "Special forces—the SAS and commandos—would be stationed at Kabul and Kandahar and operate as a 'force of last resort' in cases where the Afghan soldiers urgently required back-up. Both these areas are now hot-spots for terrorist attacks, as extremists, some with the suspected support of Pakistan's intelligence service, shift their focus from the outlying provinces to stage more high-profile attacks."

Defence Minister Stephen Smith confirmed the report. While emphasising that no final decision had been made, he said the government was looking to "leave special forces behind in some role" in Kandahar or Kabul.

The SAS will remain in Afghanistan alongside their American and NATO counterparts on an indefinite basis. Prime Minister Julia Gillard visited Afghanistan on November 6, posing alongside Australian troops in their Tarin Kowt garrison in Oruzgan province, before holding discussions with Afghan President Hamid Karzai. Addressing assembled Afghan officials in Kabul, Gillard declared: "We do intend to stay engaged here with you, in a spirit of friendship, for the long term."

Gillard was more specific about the planned timeline a few days earlier, before she left Australia for the G20 meeting in Europe. "I have said, as prime minister of Australia, to my nation that our deployment in Afghanistan will transition on a conditions basis," she declared. "People would be aware that President Karzai has spoken about 2014 as the transition time for Afghanistan, but I've said to the people of Australia we will stay engaged in Afghanistan in some form to the end of this decade at least."

Gillard first announced the plan to maintain Australia's role in Afghanistan until at least 2020 shortly after she came to office through the Labor Party coup against Kevin Rudd. With WikiLeaks' publication of US diplomatic cables, it is now known that the war was one of several issues on which Rudd drew the ire of the Obama administration. Rudd privately resisted repeated suggestions from US military commanders and administration officials that more Australian soldiers be deployed. Rudd's defence minister John Faulkner also publicly discussed a two- to four-year timetable for withdrawing troops.

Immediately upon becoming prime minister, Gillard made

clear her opposition to the withdrawal, stressing her enthusiasm for the US alliance and the war in Afghanistan. She arranged a phone conversation with Obama less than 24 hours after taking office, and later posed with the US ambassador to Australia. Her announcement of a decade-long military operation in Afghanistan was made in the course of a parliamentary debate on the war that was instigated by the Greens.

The Labor government is maintaining its commitment to the Afghanistan war, backed by the opposition Liberal-National coalition, in blatant defiance of overwhelming public opposition. An opinion poll published November 4 found that 72 percent of the population want an immediate withdrawal of the troops.

The entire political establishment is complicit in the criminal war. The two major parties more or less openly acknowledge that public opinion will not be permitted to influence the conduct of Australian military operations, in Central Asia or anywhere else. The Greens appeal to antiwar sentiment, but their suggestion that Australian troops be withdrawn is centrally directed towards stepping up Australian imperialism's operations in East Timor and the South Pacific. Moreover, the Greens' tactical differences with the Labor Party on Afghanistan have had no impact on the de facto ruling coalition arrangement between the two parties.

Australia's military operations in Afghanistan are mired in crisis. Gillard's visit to the country this month came eight days after three Australian soldiers were killed and another seven wounded in Kandahar province by a member of the Afghan National Army (ANA) that they were training. (See: "Afghan army trainee kills three Australian soldiers")

Another such incident occurred on November 8, two days after Gillard's trip. Three Australian troops were seriously wounded by an Afghan trainee soldier. Describing the attack as "the most audacious so far" by an Afghan "rogue soldier", the *West Australian* reported: "An Afghan soldier manning a lookout position at the remote patrol base Nasir in the Charnestan Valley machine-gunned a group of Australian soldiers inside the camp. He also used a grenade launcher slung under his rifle to cause maximum damage. Three Diggers were wounded, and the attacker fled."

The article described officials in Canberra and Oruzgan province as being "shocked" and expressing their "absolute bewilderment", while military investigators are "wondering whether all three attacks are the result of simple 'brain

snaps'—that a mentally unstable soldier took a dislike to Australians for some reason and reached for a gun."

In reality, there is nothing surprising or inexplicable about such incidents. Australian and other foreign forces in Afghanistan are despised by local people, who have endured ten years of continual air strikes, shootings, night-time house raids, crop destruction, arbitrary arrest and torture. The actions of "rogue" Afghan soldiers—regardless of whether they are carried out as part of a planned operation by Taliban or other infiltrators—reflect this overwhelming opposition to the occupation.

The increasing frequency of these attacks is fuelling doubts in military and foreign policy circles about the viability of handing over responsibility for security to the Afghan forces in the next two years as planned.

Each incident fuels the tendency that is evident in every colonial-style war—for the occupying forces to view every local person as an enemy. After the latest machinegun and grenade attack, Australian troops in forward operating bases were placed on high alert and instructed to wear body armour at all times. Afghan troops at the base where the attack occurred were stripped of their weapons and confined to barracks. Another 200 Afghan soldiers, from the same unit as the soldier who killed three Australians on October 29, have reportedly been given their weapons back to patrol, but have to surrender them when they return to base.

Gillard admitted that the "rogue" soldier attacks "do corrode trust", while again emphasising that "as distressing as these incidents are, as dreadful as these incidents are, our mission in Afghanistan does need to continue."



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