

Australian government announces accelerated troop withdrawal from Afghanistan

James Cogan
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Prime Minister Julia Gillard announced on Tuesday that most of Australia's 1,550 troops in Afghanistan will be withdrawn within 12 to 18 months, a year ahead of the previous December 2014 deadline. The accelerated withdrawal is in line with the international turn by the US and its allies toward scaling down their decade-long occupation of the country. Discussions took place at a NATO meeting this week in Brussels and will be elaborated at a summit in Chicago next month.

Gillard's speech justifying the revised schedule was aptly ridiculed by *Australian Financial Review* commentator Geoff Kitney as a "Panglossian analysis." Gillard hailed US President Barack Obama and the deployment of thousands of additional US troops since 2009 as making possible the handover of military operations to the Afghanistan regime. In reality, stepped-up repression has failed to suppress resistance to the occupation by the Taliban movement and other insurgent organisations. Repeated exposures of atrocities and war crimes committed by US and allied forces—ranging from the slaughter of civilians to the desecration of dead bodies—have fuelled popular hatred and guaranteed the insurgency sources of new recruits.

The decision by American imperialism to exploit the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks to justify the invasion of Afghanistan and turn it into a US client-state in Central Asia has become a debacle. The war is also deeply unpopular in every country that has troops deployed there. Two thirds of Australians oppose participation.

More fundamentally, the decade-long conflict has become a financial drain on the occupying powers and

is tying up military forces that they wish to utilise for predatory and neo-colonial operations in other parts of the world. The fact that Gillard's speech provoked no controversy in Washington testifies to the fact that it had the prior endorsement of the Obama administration.

The timetable for Australian troop withdrawals is linked to the unconditional alignment of the Gillard Labor government with the US "pivot" to maintain American dominance in the Asian region. Washington's strategy centres on using the threat of military confrontation to prevent China asserting greater geo-political influence.

Last November, Labor offered Australian territory as a key staging base for American military operations in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. A review of the Australian military defined its role as basically a junior partner to US forces and foreshadowed interventions throughout the Asia-Pacific region, on the pretext of maintaining stability or protecting human rights.

The primary concern of both the US and its allies in Afghanistan is now to ensure that the puppet regime they have installed survives after most foreign troops leave. The Obama administration is seeking negotiations with sections of the Taliban, hoping to convince a major faction of the insurgency to agree to some form of power-sharing arrangement with pro-US elements in the country.

The Australian contingent in Afghanistan has predominantly operated in the southern province of Uruzgan. Gillard claimed in her speech that the Afghan population has secured improved living standards and

democratic rights as a result of the US-led occupation. In reality, the Australian military has largely handed over Uruzgan to tribal warlord Matiuallah Khan.

Khan has been accused of murders, torture, drug smuggling and other criminal acts since his clan rose to prominence in Uruzgan after the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001. Many members of the Australian-trained Afghan Army and police units in the province are Khan loyalists. The warlord also maintains his own private militia that has assisted Australian special forces to kill or seize his opponents, as well as members of the insurgency.

Gillard made clear that the Australian government remains committed to propping up the reactionary state it helped create. She said she would sign a treaty with Afghan President Hamid Karzai in Chicago next month for ongoing financial and political support. Gillard pledged that Australian special forces would continue to fight in Afghanistan indefinitely.

The prime minister insisted that US allies must provide the finances to support the Karzai regime. She foreshadowed that at the Chicago conference the Australian government would serve as a mouthpiece for Washington, demanding that the European powers and Japan contribute the bulk of the billions of dollars a year needed to finance the Afghan security forces. “I will be arguing strongly for broad and substantial international support,” she said.

The Australian media has uncritically accepted Gillard’s purported reasons for the accelerated withdrawal. It has made no examination of why the troops were sent in the first place, nor of the relationship between the withdrawal and the US-Australia military agreements against China. The real motives of Australian involvement in the Afghan war, however, were blurted out by former Major General John Cantwell, who commanded Australian forces in Afghanistan. He told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “Four Corners” program that the “heart” of the conflict had always been “supporting an alliance with the United States.”

Australian Greens leader Christine Milne’s response

to Gillard’s announcement further exposed the Greens’ fraudulent anti-war posturing. The Greens initially supported the invasion of Afghanistan but later called for troops to be pulled out, in order to be deployed in the Asia-Pacific region. Milne welcomed Gillard’s speech, labelling the occupation as “a failure on just about every level.” Her remark echoed those in the ruling elite who now condemn the fact that the US invasion failed to install a viable puppet state. Where there has been apparent success, as in the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in Libya last year, the Greens have given their total support.

From the beginning, the Afghan war was a criminal and neo-colonial enterprise to subjugate an oppressed country and establish US military bases in the heart of Central Asia. Under successive governments, Australian imperialism has participated in inflicting death and destruction on the Afghan people for the mercenary aim of shoring up its relations with the United States. Thirty-five Australian soldiers have been killed and hundreds wounded—alongside tens of thousands of Afghans and other foreign troops—for utterly reactionary ends. The political leaders responsible should be held to account for war crimes.

The Labor government’s reorientation from Afghanistan to meet the new demands of Washington on the Australian ruling class—total support for a military confrontation with China—will lead to even greater crimes and threatens a catastrophe if not halted by the international working class.



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