Labor steps up Australian commitment to Afghan war

James Cogan
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Prime Minister Julia Gillard announced on Wednesday that "it was likely" that additional Australian troops and paramilitary police units would be sent to Afghanistan over the next six to 12 months. To justify the expansion, she claimed that the extra forces would be needed to complete the "final phases of practical extraction and repatriation".

In her annual "prime ministerial statement" to parliament on the Afghan war, the Labor Party prime minister repeated her previous pledge that Australian special forces would be made available to fight on behalf of the pro-US government in Kabul long after the supposed formal end of the NATO-led occupation in December 2014.

Australian engineering, medical, transport and logistics units primarily operate around Tarin Kowt, the main city in the southern province of Uruzgan, and form the bulk of the 1,550-strong Australian force in Afghanistan. Under a previously announced timetable, they are slated to withdraw by the end of 2013, under the umbrella of the Obama administration's "transition" to Afghan army control.

Gillard stressed that any "additional personnel and resources" would not only assist the extraction of Australian forces. They would, she stated, assist with "nationwide transition", suggesting that Australian personnel could be deployed to fill the gaps that will be left—particularly in Kabul—as various European states pull out their troops over the next two years. Moreover, she declared that Australia, having just won a temporary seat on the UN Security Council, would be an "active participant" in planning the future of Afghanistan.

Over the next 12 months, Gillard stated, the Australian "Mentoring Task Force" would shift to an "Advisory Task Force" model, cease routine partnered operations at the Kandak (battalion) level and consolidate in Tarin Kowt. Yet she emphasised that "this shift in posture, likely to occur around the end of this year, is not the end of our combat operations in Uruzgan," adding: "Our Special Operations Task Group will continue to operate against the insurgency and our Advisory Task Force will retain a combat-ready capability."

Gillard described the situation in the occupied country in the most optimistic of terms. She hailed the "important progress toward transition", when Afghan government forces would take over security responsibilities. She lauded the pledge by the "international community"—the US and its allies—of $3.6 billion a year between 2015-2017 to fund the Afghan military and police, and thus shore up the Afghan government, while hailing the "commitment" by Afghan President Hamid Karzai to hold "credible, inclusive and transparent elections" in 2014.

As successive Australian governments have repeatedly done, Gillard insisted that the Australian involvement was essential to maintaining the military and strategic alliance with Washington. She concluded her speech by justifying the war with the claim that "we are there to deny international terrorism a safe haven" and "to stand firm with our ally the United States".

While trying to paint a rosy picture, Gillard noted the loss of seven Australian soldiers' lives in the past year, taking the total to 39 since 2001, and conceded that

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more casualties were likely, further undermining any public support for the war. “There will be difficult days ahead, setbacks in the transition process, days when our resolve will be tested,” she warned.

The true backdrop to Gillard’s speech is the failure of the US invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001—justified on the pretext of avenging the September 11 terror attacks—to turn the country into a stable American client state in resource-rich Central Asia.

During more than 11 years of military occupation, the US and allied forces have brutally sought to suppress the insurgency organised by the former Taliban regime and other opponents of the foreign takeover of the country, especially in the ethnic Pashtun populated southern regions. Thousands of Afghan fighters and civilians have been killed and wounded. Tens of thousands have been hauled off for interrogation and detention in an effort to stamp out resistance. The Obama administration’s “surge” of extra troops in 2009-2010 led to an escalation in the repression. The guerrilla war has nevertheless continued unabated and, if anything, has spread.

The Karzai government is a corrupt puppet regime that exerts little authority over most of the country and is despised by much of the population. The nearly 352,000-strong Afghan National Army and police are poorly trained and motivated, disproportionally recruited from the non-Pashtun population, plagued by ethnic tensions and desertions, and thoroughly infiltrated by the insurgency.

Gillard obliquely referred to the real state of affairs when she mentioned the growing number of “insider attacks”—where members of the Afghan security forces turn their weapons on their supposed allies. “A new threat to our mission has been emerging in Afghanistan for some time—insider attacks,” she stated. Seven Australian soldiers have been killed and 12 wounded in four separate incidents, as well as dozens of US, British and other foreign personnel, and many more Afghan soldiers and police. Gillard noted that “insider attacks have targeted Afghan troops in ever greater number than international troops.”

Washington’s lack of confidence that the Karzai regime will survive after the majority of foreign forces leave is reflected in ongoing US efforts to convince a sizeable section of the insurgency to agree to “reconciliation talks,” in which they would be offered a share of political power in Afghanistan in exchange for accepting a permanent American military presence. To date, the overtures to the Taliban and other resistance organisations have made little or no progress.

The Gillard government’s determination to “stand firm” with the US amid the debacle in Afghanistan flows directly from its unconditional alignment with the militarist US agenda around the globe and, above all, in the Asian region against China. Last November, Labor offered northern Australia as a US staging base, and the Australian armed forces as a junior partner, for American military operations in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. The basing of a US aircraft carrier battlegroup in Perth, and American drone aircraft on the Cocos Islands is under discussion.

The Liberal and National opposition parties endorsed Gillard’s speech, demonstrating the bipartisan character of the Australian alignment with the US. The prospect that additional troops would be deployed over the coming months was barely mentioned in the mass media and has not provoked any dissent from erstwhile critics of US militarism.

The dominant sections of the Australian ruling elite see no alternative at present to asserting their strategic and economic interests in the Asia-Pacific and internationally except by the closest alliance with the United States and total support for Washington’s foreign policy—even though it is producing increasing friction with China, the largest trading partner of Australian capitalism.

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