

CURRENT OPERATIONS

HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH IN AFGHANISTAN?*

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ABSTRACT

The fight against the Taliban in Afghanistan has lasted for almost eight years now—longer than even the Second World War. The author argues that in this time, progress has been made, but that it has been made against a tide that now threatens to wash away the modest gains so bitterly made. Australian forces have been making gains in their sector, but with the Dutch contingent expected to leave sooner rather than later, the author insists that only a significantly increased Australian presence will help maintain the momentum towards success now slowly building. A surge now will give local Afghan forces the necessary breathing space within which they can be trained. If this training is conducted intelligently and thoroughly, Afghan forces may reach a standard during this time such that Australian leaders could then seriously consider handing over responsibility for security. Ultimately, this could mean success, and a real chance to ‘bring the diggers back home’.

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The Iraq experience will have a significant impact on the future campaign in Afghanistan. The hard-won knowledge and experience gained in Iraq will be a critical factor in Afghanistan and there are several lessons that could be—and should be—successfully transferred from one campaign to the other.

The first lesson from Iraq centres on unity of effort—an essential element for success in any counterinsurgency operation. Unity of effort often results from a major partner in a coalition simply taking control. The United States dominated the Iraq campaign because it had its own strategy, had by far the most troops, provided most of the financing, did most of the fighting and commanded the war through its own generals.¹ In Afghanistan, unity of effort has yet to be established, although the United States now dictates the strategy, populates the highest command positions, is paying most of the bills and will soon dominate the fighting as its troop numbers increase. Numbers of troops will only become decisive when there is unity of effort, and this is yet to occur in Afghanistan.

The second campaign lesson from Iraq is that success will never come through military means alone. The presence of an appropriately sized security force is necessary, however, before other counterinsurgency tools—such as governance, economic reconstruction, and rule of law—can be applied effectively.

The third lesson concerns the focus of military force. Military force creates the necessary security for the full range of counterinsurgency tools to be utilised. Yet, in applying this military force, the focus must remain firmly on protection of the population rather than on the enemy. This is not a static or defensive attitude and it involves aggressive operations, particularly against leadership targets. This focus was key to the success of the Iraq ‘surge’; when more US troops were inserted, the Iraqi forces increased in effectiveness, and US Special Forces had a decisive impact on al-Qaeda.²

The fourth lesson from Iraq is the US demonstration that it can sustain military operations for a long period despite casualties. No insurgent or terrorist can ever assume that the United States is a ‘pushover’, and this remains an enormous strategic advantage in the campaign in Afghanistan. As a result, coalition forces entered the Afghanistan campaign in a far better condition than when they embarked on counterinsurgency in Iraq.³

In many ways, Afghanistan presents a far more challenging scenario than Iraq. These challenges include the presence of Pakistan, which provides the Taliban with external sanctuaries and support; the complexities of the local tribal networks; a very weak and corrupt federal system; a weaker conventional military culture to nurture than in Iraq; and the lack of an easily exploited resource such as oil. In Afghanistan there is a complete absence of a middle class that understands and seeks the advantages of peace and stability—a key factor in the success of the surge in Iraq. Afghanistan harbours a different enemy with different motivations and tactics and

a different relationship with the local population. The campaign is waged by a truly disparate coalition force that is hamstrung by national agendas—a far cry from the unity of the essentially US-dominated coalition in Iraq.

For years there has been a consistent call from various commanders and commentators for the commitment of more troops to Afghanistan.⁴ In 2008, the ISAF/NATO commander (a US Army officer) stated that he needed another 34,000 troops.⁵ President Bush gave him an additional 6000 troops prior to the end of 2008 and President Obama is in the process of providing another 21,000 by the end of 2009.

The ability to accurately determine the level of security forces sufficient to deal with the type of counterinsurgencies occurring in many parts of the world, including Iraq and Afghanistan, is critical. This applies equally whether assessing the overall contribution across a particular theatre such as Afghanistan, or the contribution of a minor coalition member in an area of responsibility such as a province. Such an assessment is often predicated on the consideration of ‘troop density ratios’.

The importance of accurately quantifying the required number of security forces is linked to both the political sensitivity and the cost of providing security forces initially, and predominantly army troops. Initial deployments are often later proven to be grossly inadequate, and this inadequacy usually takes some time to be acknowledged by the contributing nation(s). This initial period is crucial as a war can be lost or the suffering of all parties significantly extended because of the time it takes to recover from a poor start.

Troop density is expressed as a ratio of security forces (including the host nation’s military and police forces as well as foreign counterinsurgents) to inhabitants. This reflects the hard learned and frequently relearned principle that a counterinsurgency strategy, of which security forces are a key part, must be focused on the population of a country rather than narrowly on defeating the insurgents themselves.

As recently as April 2009, the issue of troop density ratios was raised again at a hearing of the US Congress House Armed Services Committee by General David Petraeus, the highly experienced US commander who controls both the Iraq and the Afghanistan wars.⁶ Petraeus told the committee that he still supported the research-derived troop density ratio he had insisted on including in US counterinsurgency doctrine in 2007. According to this doctrine, most troop density ratios in successful counterinsurgencies fall within a range of 20 to 25 counterinsurgents for every 1000 residents.⁷ Twenty counterinsurgents per 1000 residents is often considered the minimum troop density required for effective counterinsurgency operations.

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While any such ratio is always surrounded by a phalanx of assumptions, Petraeus obviously believes that some lessons in numbers from Iraq are relevant to Afghanistan. He told the committee that, at the start of the counterinsurgency in Iraq in 2003, the troop density ratio was 6:1000 and it moved very little until the Iraqi Security Forces became effective during the surge in 2007.⁸ According to Petraeus, the current troop density ratio in Iraq is an astounding 28:1000, with the implication that this is among the reasons for recent signs of success in that campaign. The current ratio in Iraq seems to have been derived from a total of 618,000 members of the Iraqi Security Forces plus about 140,000 foreign troops operating in Iraq today—a number considered impossible in the first few years of the war.

General Petraeus raised the issue of the troop density ratio in the context of an inquiry into President Obama's increase of 21,000 US troops in the Afghanistan theatre, supported by the President's new strategy. By way of comparison, the committee was then told that the troop density ratio in Afghanistan in early 2009 was only 7:1000⁹ and that, by the end of 2009, when most of the US reinforcements will be in Afghanistan, the ratio will rise to a mere 9:1000.¹⁰ This means that, across Afghanistan, on the basis of these ratios, there is less than one half the number of effective troops assessed in the past as the *minimum* number necessary for success in counterinsurgency.

While calls for more troops in Afghanistan are not new, the question remains as always: how many is enough? NATO was unable to address this issue as it was never sufficiently unified in its desire to achieve a practical result in Afghanistan to seriously consider how many troops were necessary for victory. The war in Afghanistan is currently in the process of becoming a US war, and President Obama's strategy is based on defeating al-Qaeda and its extremist allies—one element of which requires an adequate number of security forces.

At the end of 2009, when the current round of reinforcements is complete, there will be approximately 90,000 foreign troops in Afghanistan, with requested increases of another 10,000 US troops in 2010. The Afghan National Army is currently 80,000 strong with a target strength of 134,000 by the end of 2011, recently brought forward from 2013. Currently, only half of the Afghan army's battalions have been assigned foreign mentors or trainers who actually fight with the Afghans. However, for those battalions that lack mentors and currently operate poorly as a result, the future is positive: almost all battalions should be mentored by the end of 2009.

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The Afghan National Police is also 80,000 strong, with a target strength of 82,000. The police are generally considered to be far less effective than the army, and the number of foreign police attached as trainers is being increased, although not to the same extent as the army.

It is difficult to assess the level of effectiveness of the Afghan security forces. One guide to effectiveness is the time it has taken to produce effective local counter-insurgents in Iraq. After seven years of enormous effort and frequent failure, and more resources than Afghanistan is ever likely to see, only 10 per cent of Iraqi army combat battalions and only 6 per cent of police battalions are capable of independent counterinsurgent operations.¹¹ Because, to some extent, Afghanistan presents more challenges than Iraq, the unavoidable conclusion is that it may take many years to form Afghan units that can take over from ISAF/NATO units. If the coalition does not learn from the Iraq experience, it may take even longer than it did in Iraq. Even if the lesson is learned perfectly, the time must be in the order of three to five years.

In Afghanistan, where the population is assessed as between 20 and 30 million, the troop density ratio may have relevance as a general guide to the number of counterinsurgents necessary to achieve some gains against the Taliban. Probably the only firm conclusion that can be drawn is that the number of effective troops in Afghanistan at present or in the foreseeable future is unlikely to be sufficient, and that decisive effects against the Taliban may not be possible across Afghanistan until the number of counterinsurgents is significantly increased.

While admittedly there are lies and statistics, these seem to be telling numbers. US commanders appear to recognise that, by the end of this year, when all the United States and a few European reinforcements are ready for operations in Afghanistan, the number of foreign troops that the West will have allocated to Afghanistan will be only one third to one half the *minimum* number required for success.

Much of this deficiency is driven by the fact that the United States remains short of troops given its commitment to Iraq, its other worldwide obligations, and the now growing demands of the Afghanistan campaign. Petraeus tacitly admitted this in the April 2009 committee hearings when he quoted the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mullens, as stating that, 'in Iraq the US does what it must, but in Afghanistan it does what it can.'¹² The logical conclusion is that, despite President Obama's rhetoric of 'disrupt, dismantle and defeat', the coalition is still very much in a holding strategy in Afghanistan—a holding strategy relying on a relatively small number of troops.

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The crux of the problem is this: it is unlikely that significant numbers of foreign troops will be provided by anyone but the United States. It is also unlikely that the United States will be able to provide more than is currently forecast (another 10,000 in 2010) until some time in 2011 when the increase in the size of the US military begins to take effect and when US troops are withdrawn from Iraq.¹³

This underlines the crucial importance of raising the right number of Afghan troops and of training them to be effective. The Iraq experience indicates that the target of 134,000 is likely to be grossly inadequate, and will need to be at least doubled. To create effective Afghan security forces requires not only mentors within the Afghan units, but the partnering of new Afghan units with highly effective foreign units that can ease them into the battlefield and prevent them being easily defeated before they have gained experience and confidence. The number of foreign mentoring teams for Afghan battalions is currently being doubled, but the number of foreign units available as partners is not being increased proportionately.

For Australians, the pertinent question is: does the troop density ratio apply to the Australian commitment of troops in Oruzgan province? The Australian experience is of particular interest. The troop density ratio in Oruzgan is currently between 6 and 10:1000, depending on assessments of the competence of local Afghan troops. Yet the Australians appear to have some grounds for confidence—a confidence resulting from 18 months of operations—which appears to be having an effect on the Taliban, an effect described by some as ‘decisive’.

In Oruzgan, there are currently 1700 Dutch troops and there will soon be 1550 Australian troops. Thus, a total of 3250 highly effective troops will be available for counterinsurgency operations in this one province.¹⁴ Yet any examination of troop density would be wise to take a conservative view of the size of the population in Oruzgan and assume it to be 500,000 rather than the more common figure of 627,000.¹⁵ This former estimate produces a troop density ratio in Oruzgan of 7:1000. With the addition of the 1000-strong US aviation battalion moving into Tarin Kowt some time this year—which may or may not be dedicated entirely to Oruzgan province—the ratio improves from 7:1000 to 9:1000. Ostensibly, this is still one half of the bare minimum ideal troop density of 20:1000. With such an apparently deficient troop density, how successful can the counterinsurgents in Oruzgan be, given the problems that exist across Afghanistan?

It is difficult to say conclusively how well the counterinsurgents are performing currently in Oruzgan because official accounts are vague at best and tend to

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concentrate on success at the lowest tactical level (which has been undeniably impressive) and more public issues such as civilian deaths. The media is tightly controlled when visiting the province given the very real concerns for their physical security, and few journalists know what to look for or what questions to ask—even fewer still can interpret the answers.

A range of discussions with US, Dutch and Australian military personnel, diplomats and academics, all with recent experience in Afghanistan, suggests that the Dutch and Australian forces, along with their Afghan comrades, are doing well in Oruzgan.¹⁶ There is a very strong belief among observers that, even though the numbers in the province are less than ideal, they can still be positive over time because of the way the force is structured and the way it is used.

At the beginning of 2009, US metrics reportedly showed that Oruzgan was the only province in the south where enemy activity had actually decreased over the previous year. This fall was in the order of 25 per cent compared to Helmand, Kandahar and Zabul, where the figures had increased significantly.

This reduction in activity relative to other provinces is apparently not a result of the Taliban's lack of interest in Oruzgan. The province has symbolic value as the birthplace of Taliban leader Mullah Omar, the home of many other leaders, and has long been a key sanctuary. The Taliban have 'fought like mongrel dogs' to maintain a dominant presence there and yet, it is claimed, they are currently well and truly on the back foot, reverting predominantly to remote methods of harassment (mainly improvised explosive devices), with their leadership located as far away as Quetta.¹⁷ Through accident or design (or, apparently, a little of each), the ADF contribution is structured and works as an effective, unified force, combining successfully with the Dutch in the fight against the Taliban.

How, then, can the Oruzgan force be performing so effectively despite its less than ideal size? The answer evidently lies in synergies between the Dutch and Australian forces and within the Australian force.¹⁸

The Australian special forces component is comparatively large and extremely capable. It concentrates on anti-leadership operations in the area where most of the population lives and where most of the Taliban activity occurs.¹⁹ In addition, the special forces conduct operations which assist the other components of the task force and the Afghan troops to do their job. The disruptive effect is reportedly 'huge'.

The engineer component of the Oruzgan force is key to this success because it is 'protected'. The engineers have their own armoured vehicles and combat element, apparently a unique capability in the south, which allow them to operate in insecure

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areas and directly assist other combat elements.²⁰ Over the last 18 months, the engineers have built combat outposts, patrol bases and forward operating bases in the heart of the Taliban area around Tarin Kowt. As a result, the Australian-mentored Afghan battalion has established a permanent presence that is proving very disruptive to the Taliban. By the end of 2009, unless military activity outside Oruzgan begins to have an impact on the province itself, one particularly positive view suggests that the Tarin Kowt area, out as far as Baluchi, could be virtually clear of all but individual Taliban fighters.

The key to Australian effectiveness lies in the composition of the task force. Resident within the force are the vital counterinsurgency abilities necessary to clear areas of Taliban using special forces, and to hold those areas with Australian-mentored Afghan troops supported by an Australian combat team. This will provide at least some protection and control of the population. The result is the creation of an environment in which governance and the economy can be built, at least in these areas.

Reports indicate that the Afghans are also playing their part. The Australians mentor the 2nd Battalion of the 4th Brigade, with the 1st Battalion mentored by the Dutch. A third manoeuvre battalion and two support battalions are soon to be formed, all apparently to be mentored by Australians who are reportedly set to take over almost the entire brigade in the next year or so. The Afghans are reputedly naturally courageous soldiers and, with good mentoring provided by the Australians, they are increasingly effective in the roles they currently fill. The Afghans appear to respect the Australian approach, particularly the determination to provide them safe bases from which to operate. They are regarded as part of the Australian force and have developed a solid rapport with Australian soldiers. For their part, the mentors 'have worked wonders'.

Australian confidence within Oruzgan is based on observed results in the areas for which they are responsible. The Australian force is small compared to other forces in Afghanistan but seems to be proportional to the Australian area of responsibility and appears to be achieving results because it is being used aggressively and with unity of command—at least within its own organisation. The US command in Afghanistan has expressed its satisfaction and reportedly sees Oruzgan as a sound structure and a model for success.²¹ With the addition of the US aviation battalion, US commanders are confident that they will be able to leave the Australians to 'get on with it'.

The British in Helmand province, which borders Oruzgan, face a different problem altogether. They have a much larger and more volatile area to control—an

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area in which the Taliban have even fought conventionally from trenches akin to those of the Western Front in the First World War. The British have only a brigade of roughly 5000 troops in the province itself and a proportionately much smaller special forces element, responsible for perhaps ten times the Australian special forces' area. Reports indicate that the British believe they too are making progress in setting up 'development zones across the central Helmand belt where ordinary Afghans can get on with their lives unimpeded by the Taliban' but admit that they are stretched and need more boots on the ground.²² Those boots are likely now to be US boots, mostly in southern Helmand.

Despite some success in Oruzgan, the Australian situation is complicated by the fact that the Dutch may leave, or at least draw down their commitment in the province. If this occurs, the ratio will move down from 7 or 9:1000 to about 4 to 5:1000 before the Afghan troops are capable of replacing the Dutch.²³

The Iraqi experience in training local troops indicates that the lack of coalition manoeuvre troops in Oruzgan will make it almost impossible to train the Afghan Army past the stage of very basic group tactics, especially as there are three manoeuvre battalions that require training. When the new Afghan forces enter the train/fight/train stage—that is, they are past their individual training and move to a real battlefield for short periods before they are returned for further group training—they must be cosseted by effective troops (referred to as 'partnering' in Iraq) to ensure that they do not fail.²⁴

While some Afghan Army units have obviously already entered this phase, the development of a true combat capability within these forces, based on developing indigenous combat leaders, rests with ensuring that they are not defeated in these initial nursery actions. If they take too many casualties at this early stage, Iraqi experience suggests that up to six months' development within that group of soldiers may be lost.²⁵

So what does all this mean? The military component of Obama's strategy in Afghanistan is based on an ability to disrupt, dismantle and defeat his opponents, and so establish some level of security. Other aspects of the strategy (diplomatic, governance, economic, information) depend on success in the security sphere before they can be applied. It would seem, however, that the current inadequate level of resources jeopardises the US's ability to implement the Obama strategy—there are simply not enough boots on the ground.

This is not unusual. Resources are frequently insufficient in the early stages of a war, and the United States must remain in a holding operation until adequate resources are provided. These resources will inevitably come from the United States

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because Europe and other allies such as Australia appear unwilling to provide them, although the United States will probably only be able to supply 10,000 more troops in 2010. Indeed, given the lead time required to create new US forces and the timetable for the withdrawal from Iraq, the United States will probably be unable to provide anything approaching the number of troops required until 2011. The United States must 'hang on' in Afghanistan until it can generate sufficient troops. This is a precarious situation that needs to be seriously managed. It would be tragic if Australian forces performed brilliantly at the tactical level in their area of responsibility until the day the war was lost, as happened in Vietnam.

The shortfall in resources (that is, troops) ultimately may be filled by Afghans, albeit not in sufficient numbers in the short term. A minimum period of three to five years is required to produce troops that are even mildly effective, and the challenge for Afghanistan is that this effort must be matched by progress in development and governance—all this in a situation with less financial investment than in Iraq.

Fortunes can—and will—fluctuate in the period of a holding operation in Afghanistan, and the casualties will certainly mount. Pakistan might solve its own insurgency problem and this would be tremendously beneficial to Afghanistan; however, realistically, Pakistani failure is just as likely. The ability of Afghanistan to influence Pakistan or vice versa will be a major factor over the next three to five years. If the West is not prepared to commit more troops to Afghanistan, then Western countries may not be able to absorb the worst of a consequent backlash from Pakistani operations, or to capitalise on positive developments in Pakistan. If the position of Western forces across Afghanistan is precarious, as it was for so long in Iraq, then potentially they may fail to either manage the bad or capitalise on the good.

The longer the Taliban has the ascendancy in Afghanistan, the longer Western soldiers will be exposed to danger and the greater the risk of a weakening collective Western resolve. And there is much that might divert the West, from the global financial crisis to instability in many other parts of the world.

Yet, because Australia has decided not to commit a substantial number of troops today, does not mean the decision cannot be reversed tomorrow. If the Dutch leave Afghanistan in 2010, and there is no US brigade to replace them, Australia may face some very hard decisions. If the increased US troop presence is successful in the east and the south, what is the likely impact on Oruzgan? Will the displaced Taliban move into Oruzgan province because Australian forces cannot control the unpopulated areas? This may make Oruzgan even more dangerous just as Australian forces are trying to train new Afghan troops in group tactics in nursery fights without sufficient troops to protect them and to shape the battlefield for their success.

Australian success appears to be due to the superior quality of the Australian task force which, although comparatively small in size, is focused on a commensurately

small area. In addition, the Australian force seems ideally suited to the tactical conditions, consisting of a large special forces element, engineers capable of operating in insecure areas to assist the main tactical plan, very well mentored Afghan forces that are being used aggressively and partnered by both the special forces and other combat units, all under the direction of an Australian tactical commander who is permitted to use them offensively. Once new Afghan forces are raised, a US aviation battalion becomes operational, and as long as the partnering relationships can be maintained, the impact on the Taliban can only be greater.

The challenges that the Australians face in the future mirror those that the ISAF/NATO force as a whole will confront. The Australian effort will come to nought unless the ISAF/NATO effort is successful and, given the current troop density across Afghanistan, this success remains doubtful. Now that new US forces are flowing into Afghanistan and, in certain areas, troop density will be sufficient to successfully affect the Taliban, the Iraq experience indicates that the first consequence may be an increase in activity in areas previously of no interest to the Taliban. The Taliban may elect to return to Oruzgan, using the province in a different way, either as an alternative to other provinces where bases, infiltration routes and influence have been lost, or in an attempt to dislocate operations elsewhere.

It is critical that the ratio of effective counterinsurgent mentoring and partnering of the Afghan forces now being raised be maintained at the level that is currently delivering success in the Australian area of Oruzgan. The Afghan Army and police will probably need to increase in number many times over before signs of success appear across Afghanistan as a whole, as was the experience in Iraq. This means that the number of foreign troops will need to double, and to remain at that level for three to five years while the Afghan Army achieves a self-sustaining level of effectiveness. Despite success at its current troop level, as the Afghan Army increases in size in Oruzgan, Australia may have to commit more combat troops for both the critical partnering role and to influence areas that have previously been quiet.

The Australian effort in Oruzgan is vulnerable to external developments, both positive and negative. The Dutch forces may leave in 2010, or may at least surrender leadership in the province. An increased level of military activity in neighbouring provinces, especially in Helmand and in Kandahar, may change the dynamics of the Taliban use of the unpopulated areas of Oruzgan. The failure of the Pakistani Army to control the incumbent Taliban may have an effect across all of Afghanistan,

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especially southern and eastern provinces such as Oruzgan. And there is always a chance that the situation in Iraq will deteriorate and the United States will be unable to withdraw troops for use in Afghanistan. Any of these developments will necessitate the provision of an increased number of effective non-US troops—troops that the Afghans simply may be unable to provide.

Alternatively, counter-Taliban activities in Pakistan may be successful and deprive Taliban forces of their bases and sanctuaries. The Dutch may not leave; more US forces may become available for use within Oruzgan. The impact of operations in bordering provinces may not affect Oruzgan, allowing Australian forces to remain effectively focused on the populated areas of the province. When success beckons, as it did in the Sons of Iraq movement in Sunni areas of Iraq, an adequate number of troops must be available to take advantage of an unforeseen opportunity which, once missed, may never recur.

Australia would appear to be in a good position to take over command in Oruzgan province if the Dutch decide to withdraw. There are many Australians currently working in the provincial headquarters, and Australia has a number of officers with recent senior experience in Afghanistan. The significant question remains as to Australia's willingness and ability to provide and sustain a significant number of additional troops, should that be necessary. The application of troop density ratios indicates that up to 10,000 counterinsurgents ultimately may be required in Oruzgan if success, even to the Iraq level, is to be achieved.

Judgment informed by Iraq experience, the quality of Australian forces and a second-hand knowledge of the geography of Oruzgan indicates that, rather than the 10,000 suggested by the troop density ratio, it might be possible to manage the province and the development of the Afghan 4th Brigade with as few as 6000 foreign troops over three to five years, the period when the Afghan Army and police will require the greatest support. The larger figure of 10,000 would then come ultimately from the Afghan Army and police themselves, as happened in Iraq, and would take many more years.

To this judgment must be added the capability of the Australian military to provide even the bulk of these troops, if worse came to worst. Evidence suggests the probable nature of this requirement, but can Australia provide all or even part? If the Dutch withdraw and there are no volunteers to replace them, then Australia might be pushed to make a greater contribution. That contribution, given the many other commitments of the ADF, might be structured as follows:

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- An infantry battalion structure supplemented by specialists (logistics and fire support) of about 700 personnel with the ability to mentor and partner the entire Afghan 4th Brigade, which will ultimately comprise three manoeuvre battalions spread across Tarin Kowt and Deh Reywud as well as a headquarters, fire support and logistic support battalions.
- An increase in the currently deployed infantry/cavalry combat team (about 150 strong) to a battalion-sized unit of about 600 strong to provide security to the critical engineer task and a disruption capability across both the east and west of Oruzgan once the Dutch have gone and if they are not replaced.
- A proportionate increase in the engineers and other support elements so that they can support the new Afghan battalions in the way that they currently support the one Australian-mentored Afghan battalion.
- An assumption of responsibility for the (currently Dutch) headquarters that conducts all operations across Oruzgan and provides the support elements of attack helicopters, fighters, tanks, artillery, logistic units and civil military teams.
- Maintenance of the special operations task group at its current level.
- Utilisation of the US aviation battalion scheduled to be established in the province by the end of 2009.

Even this skeletal structure would strain the ADF if it is unable to withdraw from Timor Leste and other commitments. Such a deployment might increase the number of Australian personnel in Oruzgan province from its current 1550 to about 3500 and, with the US aviation battalion, the total number of foreign troops could rise to between 4000 and 4500. If such an increase is not possible in the event that the Dutch leave without being replaced, the Australian Government must explain why the Australian Army is so appallingly short of capability.

It would seem prudent to assume that, as a last resort, Australia might still have to provide the bulk of additional troops in Oruzgan for a period of three to five years, to either sustain or to build on its success thus far. If current Australian operations continue the march towards peaceful reconstruction in Oruzgan province, and even if the extra ‘boots on the ground’ turn out to be American, little will be lost in prudent Australian preparation in the current climate.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 While General Petraeus was commander of operations in Iraq, he had the advantage of being the designer, the builder and the driver. Once past the early stage of his tenure, no one doubted that there was unity of command. Petraeus is now Commander, US Central Command, with control over operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan.
- 2 During the 2007 surge, US Special Forces were under the command of General Stan McChrystal, recently appointed commander in Afghanistan to replace General McKiernan. This suggests that such effective counterinsurgency technique as intelligence-led precision bombing may still be used, despite the negative publicity this technique attracts.
- 3 I always differentiate between the invasion of Iraq, which I do not try to defend, and the subsequent counter-insurgency, which I do defend. My view is that the only action that would have made the invasion morally worse would have been a precipitate withdrawal once the counterinsurgency and sectarian violence was in full swing.
- 4 Paddy Ashdown, the former leader of Britain's Liberal Democrat Party and the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina between 2002 and 2006, was quoted by Hamish MacDonald in 'Ashdown throws down the gauntlet', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 19–20 January 2008, as commenting that 'we are putting into Afghanistan one twenty-fifth the number of troops and one fiftieth the amount of resources per head of pop that we put into Kosovo'.
- 5 Some reports have the request from the Afghanistan Commander (Commander ISAF/NATO, General McKiernan) at 30,000, but Commander Central Command (General Petraeus) has recently put the requested total at 34,000. While there is no sense that this is the total number of troops that the United States will commit to this war, there is a strong sense that this is the total number currently available. President Obama has stated clearly that there will be an 'on-going process for re-evaluation', and that he will consider additional requests for troops. Reported by the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy in the House Armed Services Committee hearing on 'The New Strategy', <http://cspan.org> 2 April 2009.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 *The US Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2007, Para 1-67.
- 8 See also *On Point II – Transition to the New Campaign*, Combat Studies Institute Press, US Army Combined Arms Centre, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, p. 171.
- 9 The ratios were not explained. Witnesses at the hearings informed the committee that the CIA has questioned the current estimates of the Afghan population, which has generally been assumed to be 30 million, suggesting that it could be somewhere between 20 and 25 million. A ratio of 7:1000 for an Afghan population of even

20 million implies a current effective force in Afghanistan of 140,000. This could be a combination of the 62,000 foreign troops, with the balance being either elements of the Afghan army and police assessed as effective, or an assumption about the inflow of troops currently in progress.

- 10 The 9:1000 figure was not explained but is probably the increase in foreign troops to 90,000, plus an increase in Afghan security forces over the same period.
- 11 Steven Lee Myers, 'Concerns Mount on Preparedness of Iraq's Forces', *The New York Times*, 8 May 2009. Myers quotes a Pentagon report. After seven years of enormous effort and great financial expenditure, only seventeen of 175 Iraqi Army combat battalions and only two of 34 police battalions can conduct independent operations. 'Independent operations' is the highest level of assessment—battalions are likely to have some effectiveness at lower levels.
- 12 Some indication of this is the presence in Iraq of fourteen of the then available fifty brigades that the US Army and Marines can field. The rule of thumb that was used when there were twenty brigades in Iraq (following the first 'surge' at the end of 2004) was that a total of twenty brigades deployed on operations was the maximum that the US military could sustain, and even this required an extension in deployment periods to 12 months in duration. When even more troops were required for the second 'surge' at the end of 2006, the deployment period was again raised—from 12 months to 15 months—with less time between deployments.
- 13 The assumption is always that the gains made in Iraq can be sustained. See Thomas Ricks, 'Understanding the Surge in Iraq and What's Ahead', Foreign Policy Research Institute, <<http://www.fpri.org/enotes/200905.ricks.understandingsurgeiraq.html>>, May 2009.
- 14 Jason H Campbell and Jeremy Shapiro, *Afghanistan Index. Tracking Variables of Reconstruction and Security in Post-9/11 Afghanistan*, Brookings Institute, Washington DC, 24 March 2009.
- 15 The population of Oruzgan was listed as 627,000 in 2006 in Wikipedia. Assume that it is 500,000 with effective Dutch and Australian troops around 3200 in number. With the inclusion of a proposed US aviation battalion of no more than 1000 personnel, the troop density becomes (generously) 4200 within a population of 500,000.
- 16 Throughout the many conversations, there were only two dissenting voices. Neither denied that tactically the Australian forces, in particular, are dominating the Taliban they encounter, but both maintained (in the words of one well-informed journalist) that 'we are fighting the same clever fights in the same places against the same people, we kill a few of them, they kill a few of us and we both kill civilians.'
- 17 For a description of the intensity of the fighting, see Tony Hyland, 'Dutch soldier's story reveals our army's secrets', *Brisbanetimes.com.au*, <<http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/national/dutch-soldiers-story-reveals-our-armys-secrets-20090614-c6yy.html>>, 14 June 2009.

- 18 The Dutch currently look after the Deh Reywud area and western Oruzgan and are described as 'pretty effective', allowing the Australians to focus totally on the east of the province.
- 19 This is the Tarin Kowt-Chora-Chernatu triangle.
- 20 Other engineer units in the south apparently are located centrally and spend most of their time maintaining the roads to facilitate the critical movement of supplies, rather than more directly assisting local counterinsurgency operations.
- 21 Matt Brown, 'Interview with Brigadier John Caligari, the Australian National Commander in Afghanistan', *AM*, ABC Radio, Radio Program, 27 April 2009. Caligari said that the head of the international force was very pleased with the way the Australians were mentoring and hoped to see 'results' in two to three years. He added that Australians were considered the best at mentoring in Afghanistan, although others might regard them as too aggressive. He reinforced the Australian pattern of operation: to patrol and so establish a persistent presence, a method based on experience in Malaya, Borneo and Vietnam.
- 22 James Blitz, 'Brown Urged to Back Afghan Troop Boost', *Financial Times*, 6 April 2009.
- 23 In Jonathan Pearlman, 'Faulkner wants limited Afghan role', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 June 2009, it states that the Dutch Minister for Defence, in a conversation with his Australian counterpart, reportedly commented that: 'The Australians have clearly stated they do not want to take our role.' This is likely to be an accurate report. It is understandable that the Australian Government does not want to take a larger role in any conflict and such a statement at this stage serves to maintain pressure on the Dutch to continue their troop commitment in Oruzgan. In reality it still does not preclude a greater Australian participation in the future in Oruzgan if the Dutch do ultimately withdraw and the United States cannot provide troops.
- 24 The training of local troops in the midst of a war comprises individual or basic training, usually within protected bases, followed by several episodes of group combat training where the local troops are organised into groups of perhaps fifty, with foreign trainers present and often taking leadership positions. Local troops are initially trained in safe areas and then introduced to a simple battlefield (but against a real enemy) for combat experience (especially for leaders) and then returned to safe areas to confirm and progress the training. This last phase is referred to as 'train/fight/train'.
- 25 In Iraq, it was necessary to train units by taking them into combat early, but it was essential that they crawl or walk before they try to run. The technique employed was to pick a relatively soft target, to use other effective units to shape the battlefield by protecting the unit in training until it was set for its simple combat task, and then let the training unit be blooded. If the unit took too many casualties, then often its members would simply desert.

THE AUTHOR

Major General Andrew James 'Jim' Molan, AO, DSC, joined the Army in 1968 and retired in 2008. Major General Molan has served with a number of Infantry battalions, including 6RAR as Commanding Officer. He has lived in Indonesia for five years, first as the Army Attache and then as the Defence Attache during the fall of Suharto and the Interfet period, for which he was made an Officer of the Order of Australia. He has commanded both 1 Brigade and 1 Division, and was the commander of the Australian Defence College. Major General Molan deployed to Iraq in 2004 to serve for a year as Chief of Operations of the Coalition forces. For command and leadership in action he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross by the Australian Government and the Legion of Merit by the United States Government. His book *Running the War in Iraq* is a bestseller and is in its second printing. In July 2009, he was awarded '2009 Australian Thinker of the Year'.
