

Flying the flag, not the coop

Raoul Heinrichs
The Canberra Times
18 July 2010
P. 9

When the Rudd government wanted out of Iraq in 2008, it compensated by focusing on Afghanistan. In a fit of political opportunism, Afghanistan became the 'good war'.

Today, there's nothing good about it.

To begin with, the war has lost its purpose. According to Prime Minister Julia Gillard, the aim is "to prevent Afghanistan again becoming a safe-haven and training ground for terrorists..." But this no longer makes sense. As CIA Director Leon Panetta testified last week, al Qaeda has set up shop next door, in Pakistan, where its operations are being hatched more or less out of harm's way.

Two recent terrorist plots – the attempted bombing of an American aircraft on Christmas Day and, in May, an attempt to bomb New York's Times Square – originated not in Afghanistan, but in Yemen and Pakistan respectively.

Indeed, even if there is a reason to fight in Afghanistan, the situation has deteriorated so badly that the war is now beyond saving. The Canadians and Dutch are heading for the exit. America's own withdrawal is due to begin in July 2011. And the Taliban, with Pakistani support, is exacting a heavier toll than ever, conscious that it can win by just hanging on for one more year.

If Afghanistan was Vietnam, we would be well into the 1970s. The war isn't just unwinnable. It's lost.

Australia has a comparatively small contingent of forces in Afghanistan, yet it's been fighting almost continually since 2001. Australian troops have killed scores of Taliban fighters and captured many more. Strategically, they've helped Canberra maintain an unprecedented level of intimacy in its alliance relations with Washington.

Yet all of this has come with a gruesome price-tag. Seventeen Australians are dead. Many more have been wounded and maimed, some horrendously. The grim spectacle of military funerals in recent weeks is a sad reminder of the burden that a small few continue to accept on behalf of so many. It also brings into focus the realities of our role in Afghanistan.

For Australia, this isn't about terrorism, despite our leaders' pronouncements. If it was, we'd be doing more. In fact, Australia's approach to counter-terrorism, with its focus on border security, intelligence gathering and tactful regional diplomacy, is one of the few success stories of the War on Terror. It is this, not fighting abroad, which has substantially downgraded the terrorist threat to Australians.

Nor should we kid ourselves that we're in Afghanistan for humanitarian reasons. Our steely debates over a handful of Afghan asylum seekers, and in particular over the most suitable place in the Pacific to dump them, clearly puts paid to that notion.

That leaves the US alliance as the sole reason for being there. Many people remain reluctant to acknowledge this. There's something disquieting about the thought of putting Australian lives on the line for a war in which we have no direct interest, simply to boost our credentials as a loyal ally. Yet that's exactly what we do.

But something's gone wrong. Alliance management is meant to be cheap and easy. It involves weighing the benefits of a healthy US alliance and tailoring low-cost, low-risk military contributions which lend just enough political support to keep our ally happy. When the cost

gets too high, when Australians are being killed in increasing numbers, you know we're not doing it right.

The challenge Gillard now faces is twofold: She needs to reshape our deployment in Afghanistan to prevent further Australian casualties, and do so without jeopardising the alliance.

This is not as hard as it sounds. John Howard was fervently committed to the alliance, yet he shaped Australia's five year deployment to Iraq in just such a way. Not a single Australian was killed in action in Iraq, despite the horrifically violent nature of that war. This was not just good luck. It was because there were sharp limits on the tasks Australians were allowed to perform.

And so it should be with Afghanistan. It's time for Australian troops to be withdrawn from combat duties. The sharp end of our deployment, the 300 or so Special Operations soldiers, need to be taken out of the line of fire and sent home for a well-earned rest. The bulk should stay on, but under a more restricted mandate, operating from inside the comparative safety of their base. Training the Afghan National Army is important, but that doesn't mean patrolling dangerous roads with them or defusing roadside bombs. Leave that to the Afghans – it's their country after all.

Australia's military role in Afghanistan has always been a symbolic one. It's an expression of our political support for the US, and that's what Washington really expects from us. 'Flying the flag' need not be deadly.

Raoul Heinrichs is a Research Associate at the Lowy Institute for International Policy.