

Gillard has to pull the pin on Afghanistan, now

Raoul Heinrichs
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As the Australian death-toll in Afghanistan mounts and other countries head for the door, Prime Minister Julia Gillard is in Washington this week commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Australia-US alliance. It's an important alliance milestone. But no commemoration of the past would be complete without a contemplation of the future. In particular, what to do about Afghanistan?

Gillard has a golden opportunity to seize the initiative on this issue by preparing the Obama administration for an accelerated draw-down of Australian forces. This might well be the defining foreign policy challenge of her prime-ministership.

Australia is one of the largest non-NATO contributors to the war in Afghanistan and has had an almost continual presence in the conflict since 2001.

Our soldiers have fought bravely in perilous situations. Some are responsible for bringing Taliban commanders to justice. Others have helped build the Afghan nation with trade skills and training. They have acquitted themselves with honour and distinction, and they have allowed the Australian government to demonstrate its status as a loyal and steadfast ally to the United States.

They should now come home.

Despite our best efforts, and those of our allies, the situation on the ground has changed. The war is no longer winnable. This is not due to incompetence, weakness or lack-of-heart, but rather because of the profound asymmetry of the conflict. Whereas the Taliban can win just by surviving, by holding on, a coalition victory requires the fulfilment of a dizzying array of tasks, including building-up Afghan security forces, clamping down on corruption, and administering large swathes of territory without alienating the Afghan population.

Any one of these tasks is a formidable undertaking. Taken together, and in the face of continued resistance, they've proven insurmountable. Indeed, even if coalition objectives could be achieved in Afghanistan, the presence of al Qaeda and Taliban forces next-door in Pakistan - largely out of range - has in any case doomed the whole exercise to futility.

Other countries have been quicker to recognise this than we have. The Dutch have gone. Canada will be out by the middle of the year. Germany begins its withdrawal in December. And Poland and Lithuania have committed to leaving in 2012.

Even President Obama has outlined a tentative time-frame for America's own withdrawal, beginning in July this year. To help things along, he's also initiated talks with senior Taliban leaders aimed at exploring a political settlement to end the war.

Of course, the fight will continue for some time yet, with each side seeking to translate its military fortunes into leverage at the negotiating table. But make no mistake: the Taliban have the upper-hand, and it's now a matter of time before a deal is cut, whether formally or not, that cedes to them vast amounts of power and territory. In fact, the withdrawal last month of US forces from the Pech Valley, an area once described as critical to the war effort, suggests this process may already be underway.

In light of all this bad news, what should Gillard do?

For one thing, she should carry with her in Washington the sobering recognition that with no hope of success, the struggle for Afghanistan is not worthy of any more Australian lives. As such, she'll need to negotiate a compressed time-frame for Australia's withdrawal and a new set of rules that minimise the risks to Australian personnel on the ground.

The combat element of Australia's contingent should be taken out of the line of fire immediately and sent home for a well-earned break. The bulk of Australia's forces, those involved in training the Afghan army, could stay on a fraction longer, perhaps for another year or so, but only with much tighter restrictions on the kinds of activities they perform. That would mean no patrolling dangerous roads, no defusing roadside bombs and training Afghan forces only from inside the base.

For Gillard, all of this will require enormous courage, leadership and diplomatic skill. Even slight adjustments to Australia's role will elicit cries that she risks ruining the alliance. She should pay no attention. In fact, as China rises and begins to challenge American dominance in Asia, Australia is becoming more, not less, relevant to the US. The last thing Washington needs is a dispute with one of its most devoted Asian allies. This gives Gillard considerable leverage to reshape the Afghanistan deployment in ways that better reflect our interests.

In the now infamous Rolling Stone article that brought down General Stanley McChrystal, another senior US military officer, General Bill Mayville, noted that whatever happens in Afghanistan, "it's not going to look like a win, smell like a win or taste like a win. This is going to end in an argument." The time for Australia to have that argument is now.

Raoul Heinrichs is a Sir Arthur Tange Scholar at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre, ANU, and a Research Associate at the Lowy Institute for International Policy.