

More to do in Oruzgan

Rodger Shanahan

The Age

14 June 2011

P. 11

With each death of an Australian soldier in Afghanistan the call for the withdrawal of our troops becomes louder. Opinion polls have shown that support for the war is falling among Australians. Even the conservative commentators have begun to advocate withdrawal. Much has been written since the latest group of four deaths about the futility of the war, its remoteness from Australia and hence from our core security interests, the departure of allies such as the Dutch and the Canadians and Afghanistan's own strategic vulnerabilities that make it permanently fractious and fragile. And yet little has been done to argue the case for maintaining our commitment. This is partly the fault of the politicians who advocate "staying the course" without ever really setting out exactly what "the course" is. It also reflects the public's lack of understanding of the nature of the conflict and of our commitment in the years that we have been there.

Although there has been a coalition commitment to Afghanistan for a decade, the resources applied there have only approached appropriate levels in the past few years. Until then it was largely a holding operation while the "main game" in Iraq was being pursued. Australia's contribution to the conflict has changed from a reconstruction, to a mentoring and reconstruction, and since 2010 a purely mentoring task force. Along with our Special Operations Task Group we had been conducting two main lines of operation concurrently, but mentoring of the Afghan National Security Forces has been a focus only recently. Not enough attention was paid to the development of the ANSF, largely due to resource constraints, but that has been addressed over the past few years, a fact acknowledged by the Defence Minister last week when he noted that ". . . the position that we're in now is the position that we've arrived at six or seven years too late".

Afghanistan is not a war that will be "won" in the conventional sense. Many critics have spoken of our inability to achieve victory in Afghanistan, but few if any have outlined exactly what their measure of victory is. Some starry-eyed idealists in the early days of Afghanistan may have believed that a battlefield capitulation of the Taliban and a fully functioning, strong, centralised democratic government similar to ours would be possible achievements, but realists have always had their sights set a lot lower.

But setting one's sights lower does not mean that the sacrifices of the soldiers, or the price that others may have to pay, will be in vain. A worthwhile intervention in Afghanistan will be achieved with a lot of "relative" developments. A relatively stable society, a relatively functioning government, corruption and cronyism kept at relatively acceptable levels, the relatively universal emancipation of women and a relatively competent security force.

While all of these aims are laudable, the latter is the one over which we have most control, on which the security of Western and Afghan citizens matters most, and hence the one element that demands our weight of military effort in order to achieve this in Oruzgan province. The current professional military advice is that our forces will need to be maintained there until the ANSF is in a position to assume responsibility in 2014.

Advocates of ceasing Australia's commitment to Afghanistan have varied in their recommendations as to how we should conduct our exit. From the needless, panicked and downright dangerous immediate cessation of operational activity, to a more thoughtful accelerated program of withdrawal. The rationale though, is the same; regardless of what we do or how long we do it for, the result will still be the same. Nobody can make it better so we should stop trying. This ignores the fact that we have only really begun mentoring the ANSF in Oruzgan since late 2008 and made this the priority last year. Steady progress is being made, but to suggest that the task is impossible at this stage of its implementation is to misunderstand what our forces are doing.

Advocates of withdrawal also argue that al-Qaeda elements in the country were defeated long ago, and that any re-emergence of training bases for them or any affiliated anti-Western groups could be dealt with by the US from the air. But as we have seen in Libya and on countless other occasions,

there are limitations to air power. And terrorist groups in Yemen have demonstrated the limitations of not having a capable indigenous security force on the ground. The more time we have to train and mentor the ANSF to produce a capable organisation, the more difficult it will be for any groups to establish themselves.

The problem with strategic punditry without a feel for the ground is that gross generalisations are made and the second or third-order effects of proposals are often either ignored or not understood to begin with. Setting aside issues such as the progress in the status of women relative to that which existed under the Taliban, Australia will have direct diplomatic relations with Afghanistan past our military commitment, and a significant aid program well into the future. The best way in which to support these elements of our future national effort is to ensure that we give those ANSF for whom we are responsible the best chance of developing into an effective force. A premature withdrawal will not only compromise our and the coalition's operational aims, but ultimately work against our broader national interest with coalition partners such as the US in being regarded as a reliable security partner. Professional military advice is that our mission will be accomplished by 2014. Unless this advice changes, Australia should finish what it started.

Dr Rodger Shanahan is a non-resident fellow at the Lowy Institute for International Policy.