

DIGGERS NEED FREEDOM TO WIN FREEDOM

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The rules of engagement in Afghanistan are a national embarrassment

JULIA Gillard's elevation to the office of Prime Minister offers an opportunity to correct both the Rudd and Howard governments' feckless policy towards engagement in Afghanistan. Conveniently, the change in leadership in Canberra coincides with a change of command and a review of strategy in Afghanistan.

Australia has about 1550 soldiers in Afghanistan, mostly in Oruzgan province. The government's line on why we're there is that a Taliban victory and the prospect of Afghanistan again being used as a safe haven for terrorists would pose a threat to Australia. This is true: failure in Afghanistan would be a fillip for terrorist groups that have attacked Australians directly and undermine the stability of the region on which our security and prosperity depends. But that's not the most important reason why Australia is there.

As in Vietnam and Iraq, Australia continues to commit its blood and treasure in Afghanistan largely for the sake of its alliance with the US and, to a lesser extent, with other NATO countries. But instead of impressing its allies, Australia's heavily circumscribed commitment dismays them with its timidity.

The government has tried to minimise the risks of the deployment through three ``nos''.

The first no has been to the obvious step of taking over command in Oruzgan from the Dutch, who will pull out in August. With only a few dozen more soldiers, Australia could take command in Oruzgan, where it has been the junior partner of the Dutch since 2006. The US would make up for the departing Dutch troops with a battalion, which would be under Australian command, as well as any equipment Australia wasn't able to supply.

The second no has been to allowing Australian trainers to accompany the Afghan National Army's Fourth Brigade, whom they've been training, when the brigade is deployed outside Oruzgan. One battalion of the Fourth Brigade was sent to neighbouring Helmand province to join in the campaign for Marja; the Aussies were told to stay home. Mentoring, especially for combat, depends on relationships and trust, which means leading by example. Canberra isn't allowing the Diggers to do that.

The third no is to Australia's special forces, the second-biggest SF contingent in Afghanistan after the US, operating anywhere outside Oruzgan without permission from the Minister of Defence. A foreign officer has said this is like having a Ferrari but driving it like a Volkswagen. Australian special forces should operate, like the Brits and others, wherever in the southern region the multinational command deems they are required.

Following the deaths of five Diggers in two weeks, with public support for Australia's presence in Afghanistan supposedly waning and an election in the offing, calling for a more robust Australian commitment may sound like idiocy. But the current policy, which sacrifices lives and costs millions of dollars for virtually no enduring benefit, is indefensible.

Australia is in Afghanistan to maintain the respect and engagement of its allies. The heavily circumscribed posture doesn't impress Australia's allies; it tarnishes our brand. Political leaders like to say Australia is punching above its weight; in fact, we're not punching nearly as hard as our closest allies have come to expect of us.

Some may argue against committing more soldiers and other resources to a struggle the West appears bound to lose. Such a prophecy can easily become self-fulfilling. There are, though, strong grounds for concern about the strategy that the US-led alliance has pursued over the past nine years, but in order to have a say in improving that strategy, Australia needs to have a seat at the top table -- and the price of that seat is top-tier commitment.

For the addition of a handful of soldiers and the discarding of two self-defeating restrictions, Australia would get enormously more bang for its buck. Taking command in Oruzgan, allowing trainers to fight with the Afghan brigade they're training and unchaining the special forces would show allies and the world that under Julia Gillard Australia had rediscovered its, er, backbone.

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