

Jump TO Article



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Can the war in Afghanistan be won?

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On 24 February 2009, Jim Molan addressed² the Institute on the topic “Modern warfare – an Australian general’s perspective”, in which he drew heavily on his recent operational experience, especially as director of operations of allied forces in Iraq in 2004-05³. In this essay, General Molan applies the insights he gained and lessons he learned in Iraq to the current conflict in Afghanistan. He observes that the conflict is not going well and that the probability is that we will lose unless we change our approach to it. He outlines what the allies must do to win and canvasses options available to the Australian government and defence force. While a synopsis of his views has been published in the daily press, this is the first time that the full paper has been published.

Events in Afghanistan are not going well⁴. They are not yet catastrophic, but they are serious indeed. If we do not change the situation, the probability is that we will lose – the Taliban and al Qaeda will control Afghanistan, instead of the Afghan people.

The Afghanistan insurgency is at least as difficult to solve as the Iraq insurgency. It is just as complex (ethnic, religious, tribal), the country is poorer, the population less skilled, and there is a significant border problem. But the level of violence in Afghanistan is still far below that of the Iraq insurgency for most of its six years. Iraq serves as an example of how success is possible. Iraq teaches us to keep our nerve, that endurance is important, that severe downturns in fortune are the norm in wars, but also that these wars can be won.

The Deteriorating Situation

The situation is deteriorating across the four ‘lines of operations’ that structure counter-insurgency: security, governance, development and information.

Security. Attacks against security forces, the people and non-government organisations have increased. There is a reliance on local militias (‘warlords’). The Taliban and al Qaeda have a border sanctuary in Pakistan. There is a lack of unity of effort among the foreign security forces (ISAF⁵). There is an inability to protect the population or essential services. The Afghan National Army is under-strength and undeveloped. The Afghan National Police is a severe problem. The ISAF itself is grossly under-strength and many elements have restrictions on how they may be used, which limits the effectiveness of even the small number of foreign troops available.

Governance. Corruption threatens government credibility and effectiveness. Corruption, drugs, the economy, jobs and security are intimately linked. The Karzai government may not be able to recover credibility; and there are elections coming up.

Development. There is a lack of internal resources and coordination; and the international financial crisis may limit access to more development funds. Compared to Iraq, the weakness of the Afghan economy is a severe restriction; and it is not helped by the lack of coordination of what little development aid there is. The lack of security impacts on every aspect of development and the likely cost of development to potential donors is very high.

Information. The Afghan people’s perception of the situation is shaped by the poor performance of their government and the impact of weak security, which limits the people’s commitment to the counter insurgency. Foreigners’ perception of the situation is shaped by the media, which have difficulty in seeing Afghanistan as a core issue. Support for Afghanistan, which was high when little was happening, is now being questioned. The government is not selling the Afghan situation to the Australian people just as the Howard government did not to sell Iraq to them. Our soldiers are supported (almost over-supported), but governments seem ashamed of their commitment. This leaves the field open, especially to foreign media networks and influence.

Positives in the Situation

Nevertheless, what is happening in Afghanistan is quite normal for any conflict. Afghanistan appeared to be easy at the beginning, but no conflict is easy. Each war needs to be learnt and the only way of learning a war is to do it.

There are a few positives in Afghanistan. There have been elections and there is a government. Most problems are recognized. We are denying Afghanistan as a base for international terrorism, which was our initial reason for becoming involved. Security forces are impacting on the Taliban and al Qaeda leadership in

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²The lecture was attended by 90 members and guests.

³See: Major General Jim Molan (2008). *Running the war in Iraq* (HarperCollinsPublishers: Sydney) 358 pp. RRP \$32.99

⁴The deterioration in the situation applies across the country and in most functions. Many factors are contributing to this: strategic and tactical, military and non-military, Afghan and foreign.

⁵International Security Assistance Force, Afghanistan

Afghanistan and in Pakistan, but both are proving resilient. The tactics to defeat this insurgency are now well known, but are not being universally applied. Effective technology is available, but is very expensive. Australian forces are performing well at the tactical level. The Afghan army is very slowly increasing in size and work has started on the police. Pakistan seems to be more active in countering Islamists on its side of border. Anti-drug policies are emerging, but consistent execution and economic substitution is now required. NATO⁶ nations are indicating some willingness for minor troop increases. United States forces will increase by three combat brigades (about 10,000 troops) by the end of next year and may increase by a total of five combat brigades (perhaps as many as 30,000 troops when support troops are included) over the next two years. There may be greater increases from the United States after 2011. Most importantly, Islamists know that the United States success in Iraq stands as an example of United States resolve – that the United States can ‘stay the course’, even though the new administration is yet to indicate its real intent by actions on the ground.

Popular Beliefs

Popular beliefs, legends and myths divert discussion on countering the insurgency in Afghanistan, just as they did for the counter insurgency in Iraq – with as little validity.

- “Victory will not be achieved by military means alone”. No military person of any credibility ever said that it would.
- “This is a ‘civil war’ so foreigners should not be involved in it”. This implies that, if it were a civil war, foreign involvement would be prohibited. It should not be.
- “Western forces are the problem, so remove them and the problem will go away”. This naïvely forgets the evil that the Taliban and al Qaeda have displayed in the past, and denies the morality of our own forces.
- “The Soviets could not do it, so how could we be successful”. There are no guarantees in war – we might still fail. The Soviets had 130,000 of their own troops and 300,000 Afghans under arms. More advanced technology is not the answer, but it is a factor. The quality and experience of United States troops is far higher than those of the Soviets; and our knowledge of modern counter-insurgency is far better. One of our greatest weapons is our morality and our openness to scrutiny.
- “Australia does not have a strategic interest in Afghanistan”. This is an interesting view of the challenge posed by extreme Islam to Australia, given that Australia’s neighbour, Indonesia, is the world’s largest Islamic country. It is extremely

narrow-minded, and denies humanitarianism and our responsibilities as a rich citizen of this interdependent world.

- “There is only one course of action, and it is to: talk to the Taliban; or conduct a diplomatic offensive; or change the nature of the government”. There is no one solution – such insurgencies are only amenable to a comprehensive strategy.
- “Western democracies are incapable of long term commitments”. This is a problem, but the United States stayed the course in Iraq, and the issues are the same.
- “The financial crisis now means we cannot afford it”. The financial crisis is the greatest own goal of the fight against extreme Islam. If nothing else, its enormous size finally put the cost of the Iraq war into some perspective. If the issues are recognised as being big enough, the costs of a commitment to Afghanistan can still be met.
- “It is seven years since the post ‘9/11’⁷ fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan, so we cannot win now”. How long the Afghan war has been running is an academic issue. This phase of the Afghan conflict has only been running for two years. The war is in its initial stages and is being managed no better or no worse than most other insurgencies, especially Iraq.
- “Australia is so small we could not make a significant contribution”. The United States and the United Kingdom are desperate for assistance. Australia can make a significant contribution and as a minimum should look to the Dutch and Canadians as a guide to what would be appropriate.
- “Australia went to Afghanistan to prevent international terrorism – we are already strategically successful”. This is a popular official self delusion meant to reinforce a view that Australia has done enough, and confuses rhetoric with actual results.
- “Australian troops are fighting well – we are tactically successful”. There is no denying that Australian troops are fighting well at the tactical level in Afghanistan. If nothing changes, it should be expected that, like Vietnam, they will continue to perform brilliantly at the tactical level until the day that we lose the war.

Enemy and Allied Strategies

The Taliban and al Qaeda strategy is well known and can be defeated. It is based on terror, aimed at the people and at foreign support through non-government organisations (NGOs), in contravention of every law of war. They will conduct operations over a long period. They will use terror while complaining to sympathetic

⁶North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

⁷‘9/11’ – the al Qaeda attack on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001

elements of the media of the barbarity of the foreign troops' actions, especially one of our most effective weapons, aerial attacks. They will attack foreign forces' commitment and resolve using all means (information and casualties). They will question the efficacy of foreign involvement, quoting the Russian and British failures. They will attack local forces to dissuade them from involvement. They will expand the conflict as much as possible to complicate the problem (drugs, Pakistan, Iran, Kashmir and India). They will fund their efforts from drug money, government corruption and crime. They will play on the shortcomings of the Karzai government, which is no more incompetent or corrupt than any similar government, and we should not expect much more for several electoral generations.

Our own strategy is confusing. In fact, there are multiple strategies. The dominant one is NATO's, but the one with the most potential is that of the United States. 'Multinational' anything is always very difficult. Strategy is only meaningful if it is brought into being through committed action. ISAF (including Australia) supposedly has a declared strategy 'to win', but the allocation of resources does not reflect such a strategy. The actual strategy must ultimately be one of winning and resources must be proportional. The most important resources are time (reflecting commitment), and the instruments of counter insurgency (military, non-military, funds, philosophy, commitment, information and morality).

There can be no certainty. Winning is never guaranteed. Resource commitment in such foreign interventions is about probability. Resource commitment only decreases the probability of being defeated, and increases the probability of winning. Almost any level of increased commitment of effective troops will be beneficial, but only an appropriate level of commitment provides a chance of winning.

History indicates that, to resolve a counter insurgency, 20 reliable soldiers or police per 1000 of population are needed, as part of a population-focused comprehensive plan, over a period of about 9 years. Compare Afghanistan and Iraq, even in rough figures. Afghanistan's and Iraq's populations are similar – Iraq's is 27 million and Afghanistan's is 30 million. In Iraq, there are over 500,000 Iraqi security forces (army – 200,000, police 300,000, plus others); and 175,000 foreign troops, of which 155,000 (at the peak) were United States troops who were serious about their commitment and had no national caveats on their use. In Afghanistan, there are only the 60,000-man Afghan National Army⁸; and 60,000 foreign (ISAF) troops, many with national caveats preventing their effective use. In Iraq, with the historically correct number of security forces, we are winning. In Afghanistan, with inadequate numbers of forces, we are not.

⁸The Afghan army is growing to 80,000 and then will grow to 120,000 – some reports say 132,000. The police are less developed and far fewer in number.

The Need for a Campaign Plan Based on Population Security and Adequate Troops

There is no one answer to this problem, but the closest to a single answer is 'population security', which demands that the population is protected to the extent that there is some normality and the people trust the government and security forces, commit to them, and reject others. There are many ways of achieving population security – economy, jobs, education, police, troops and information. The major contribution to population security, however, is security force numbers.

Security force numbers ('boots-on-the-ground') are a critically important issue. If you have an inadequate number of troops, you will never get to the clever parts of counter insurgency, that is, the 'hearts and minds' of the people. You will never provide security to the people, and the people are the key. Insurgency – 'armed politics' – is a struggle for the trust of the people. Insurgency influences through security, governance, economy and information. A counter insurgency campaign must influence the people towards their government and away from the insurgents.

To do this, you need the right troops with the right attitude and capabilities for the right time period. The forces need to be effective. There is little point having troops that will not conduct offensive operations, that are careless of the population's safety, that are not schooled in the latest counter insurgency techniques, or that are not under single command and producing unity of effort.

So a practical campaign plan to resolve the conflict is needed in Afghanistan, covering security, governance, development and information, with security as the primary focus at the start of the campaign. Modern counter insurgency doctrine and techniques must be used. The plan in the field must be, with some local variations, to clear, hold, build and transition⁹; and must be implemented by an adequately large force.

The basic question must always be: Is the war winnable? It is my judgement, based on years of study of counter insurgencies and as a practitioner in Iraq, that Afghanistan is still winnable. This view cannot be proven, and there are no guarantees. Afghanistan does not yet appear to be at a tipping point. War is not a science. More troops do not guarantee anything – it is all about probability, but more troops do indicate resolve. More troops give a greater chance of shaping the future to create an advantage in some area or in some way that can rarely be predicted in advance. With more troops, if an opportunity arises (as happened in Iraq with the 'Sunni awakening'), you can exploit it. But more troops will be of little value unless they are effective troops.

⁹That is, to clear the insurgents from an area, secure and hold the area, build local governance and essential infrastructure in the area, and then transition to local control.

An Interim Holding Strategy

Providing the required number of foreign troops in Afghanistan will be difficult but not impossible. It is likely to take some time. A holding strategy may be required until a winning counterinsurgency strategy can be applied at some stage in the future when troop numbers are sufficient. A good deal of friction is likely to be created if a strategy to win is attempted with an insufficient number of troops.

There is high risk in a holding strategy, but it may be inevitable in the short to medium term. Our enemies in Afghanistan are unlikely to employ a holding strategy while we build up troop numbers. But we must stay in the game to win. It will take years to build an Afghan army that is even marginally effective and you need foreign troops to enable the Afghan security forces to develop over several years. If no one else (ISAF or Australia) is going to commit but there is still a desire to win, then the strategy must be to hold until the United States can muster sufficient troops to address the insurgency effectively. In Iraq this took five years. In Afghanistan, it may take at least another three to five years.

The danger of a holding strategy is that the strategic situation may change while you are holding. The Taliban and al Qaeda can do a lot of damage in that period. The world situation may change: an Israeli attack on Iran with or without United States involvement; opportunistic involvement by Russia or China; a conflict between India and Pakistan; or an even worse world economic crisis.

There is a good chance that the war in Afghanistan can be won if the West gets serious about the struggle. It took five years to get serious in Iraq, and this phase of the Afghan war is really only two years old. Seriousness is primarily indicated by troops on the ground. This demonstrates unequivocal resolve and undercuts the enemy's 'wait-you-out' strategy. Unequivocal resolve encourages the enemy to compromise, because no one wants to compromise while they think there is a chance they will win.

Do not get sidetracked by stating an end-state in terms of withdrawal of troops, or a precise timetable. Instead, state precisely what can be achieved operationally with the troops available. If you are going to Afghanistan in order to go home by a certain date, cut out the middle man and just stay home. Win first and then go home.

What is Winning?

So what is winning?¹⁰ To put it simply, Afghanistan is the prize, and the Afghan people are the means of gaining the prize. Whoever ends up controlling

¹⁰The formula answer that we developed in Iraq indicated that this is a rhetorical issue and not one of substance. Of course you need an aim when you become involved in a conflict, but your aim is likely to change anyhow, so why hobble yourself. Wars might be an extension of policy or politics by other means, but wars also create their own politics.

Afghanistan will be the 'winner'. It could be the Taliban or al Qaeda, it could be the warlords, or it could be the Afghan people through some form of elected government.

If a form of words is required, then we (the West) can say that we have won when we have assisted the Afghan people to create an Afghanistan that is:

- governed for all its people – probably a less corrupt form of Islamic 'democracy';
- our ally in the war on terror – not a base for international terrorist attacks; and
- at peace with itself – it has an acceptable level of security, delivers essential services, is developing economically and is not drug dependent.

What Must We Do to Win?

To significantly increase the probability of winning, the West should take a number of steps as part of a comprehensive counter insurgent approach.

Ensure that there is unity of effort from the coalition through unity of command. Unity of command does not necessarily require one person in charge¹¹. It merely requires all members of an alliance to be willing to submit to an agreed authority, with national caveats that do not threaten the mission. Unity of command is difficult in any alliance, but with a NATO group in an out-of-area commitment where the perception is that core interests are not threatened, it is very difficult indeed. With the civilian counter-insurgent effort being so important, the need for manifest civilian control at the top complicates matters.¹²

Use effective foreign troops. For troops to be effective, they must be capable and willing to undertake offensive operations, because wars are not won by protecting yourself. Nations contributing forces must accept risk to their personnel in terms of the inevitable casualties; and must be prepared to: take responsibility for a function or a geographic area as part of the overall campaign; submit to unified control; and use modern, legal and moral counter insurgency techniques, including Iraqi-style technology (especially for intelligence, surveillance, biometrics, and time-sensitive targeting).

Effectively use an adequate number of foreign troops for 3 to 5 years. Once there are foreign troops that are themselves effective, there must be enough of them, and they must be used effectively over time. They

¹¹The nomination of a United States officer as overall NATO military commander, with authority over all United States troops in Afghanistan, is a good start.

¹²In Iraq, this was achieved by a combination of military commander and civilian ambassador who, after the occupation, worked well together. It was easier in Iraq because it was a United States war. The United States was providing most troops, doing the bulk of the fighting and suffering the majority of the casualties. The war was run by the United States President and the Secretary of Defence, with minimal (if any) consultation with allies. This is a luxury compared to Afghanistan.

must be used primarily for the security of the population, establishing a security framework across the country, including a presence among the people that delivers physical protection from the insurgents and terrorists, and protects essential services (power, education, food, jobs, and transport). In this way, the people see some rewards for their suffering. As well, the foreign troops must attack the Taliban and al Qaeda leadership – inside Afghanistan and, within reason, over borders. They must also protect the Afghan army and police as they build to an appropriate size and capability, manage their creation, and mentor them as they train and start to fight. Inevitably, until security is firmly established, the foreign troops will also have to carry out almost the full range of civilian functions of development and other assistance. Finally, foreign troops must protect the government, the judiciary and the electoral process at all levels.

Use every aspect of leverage to improve governance. This requires bold and innovative leadership in the foreign community to pick and use the most effective levers against corruption, and is essentially a process of trial and error.

Work on the neighbours through a diplomatic offensive. This has been referred to as a “Dayton Accord”¹³ for Afghanistan. This could only be achieved from a position of strength where neighbours understood that the coalition was serious about what it was doing in Afghanistan.

Engage with the Taliban by all means possible. This occurred from at least the second year in Iraq (referred to as Sunni or tribal engagement in its early forms), but only saw real success in the fifth year when the Sunnis could see that they had limited chances of success, and were then willing to compromise.

Once security is adequate, commence serious construction/reconstruction. We felt obliged to conduct reconstruction in Iraq in the early insecure times, but most of it was wasted because we had insufficient troops to protect what we had built. What was not destroyed by our enemies only existed for as long as our enemies permitted its existence. Because of this, the benefit which should have flowed to the government from the people’s gratitude ironically flowed to the insurgents, because it was they who permitted its existence. It is inevitable that the military will have to coordinate and deliver reconstruction in the early stages of a counter insurgency campaign, as is happening in Afghanistan now, but real reconstruction will not occur until there is security. We are only at that stage now in Iraq after six years of campaigning.

When possible, begin to transition security to the Afghans. This may be a process of trial and error. We backed off severely in Iraq in 2006 under General Casey, and tried a different approach under General Petraeus.

Wield information as a weapon. People with no understanding of countering a violent insurgency will object to the concept of information as a weapon. They will betray their naïvety by assuming that everything our enemies say is the truth because they are the underdog, and everything that the coalition says is lies. There is no equality of scepticism. Information as a weapon only works if it is the truth, if the conflict that you are involved in has a legal and moral base, and if the prosecution of the conflict is conducted legally and morally.

Watch for unpredictable opportunities and be in a position to exploit them. This may well be the key to the successful resolution of the conflict in Afghanistan. While taking all the steps above as part of a comprehensive strategy, you must also retain enough physical and mental flexibility to recognize an opportunity should it arise, and to exploit it. The Sunni Awakening is an example¹⁴. In Afghanistan, such an opportunity might arise through a split in the Taliban, in relationships with neighbours, in attitudinal changes in Islamic bodies, in the appearance of a leader or a social movement. It would be fatal to rely only on such an event and not to prepare for it by having sufficient effective troops for a sustained campaign, for it is these acts that create the conditions for the unpredictable to happen. There must be an amount of hope in the prosecution of any war, but it should not be the dominant strand of strategy. Conversely, also having a physical and mental reserve would allow counter insurgents to be resilient enough should the situation unpredictably go the other way – such as the emergence in Pakistan of a government overtly supportive of the Taliban; or the meddling in Afghanistan by a great power.

What can Australia do?

Australia’s strategy will continue to be popularly expressed in terms of troop numbers. Australia may not be able to make a significant increase in troop numbers in the short term and Defence advice may not support an increase in troop numbers because of the way it looks at risk. But Australia can make a significant and meaningful contribution.

Withdrawing or committing to a conflict is inherently political. In fact, the recent Australian deployment to Iraq and the current deployment to Afghanistan can be seen as almost entirely political because they lack any real military logic. Now that the Afghanistan war has gone bad, the Rudd government seems to be as identified with it as the Howard government was with the war in Iraq. Then, Afghanistan was seen as the “good war” compared to the “bad war” of Iraq. Ironically,

¹³The General Framework for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995 that put end to the 3½ year war in Bosnia.

¹⁴If the United States in Iraq was not attuned to the possibility, if it did not have enough troops to support the Sunnis in their initial moves, if they did not have enough leverage in Iraq to influence the Shi’ites to accept the Awakening, then the opportunity might have passed with dire consequences.

Iraq is now being won and Afghanistan is being lost – that is the way of war. The Prime Minister's presence at the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008 implied acceptance of responsibility for how the war would be run. The tough rhetoric now requires action. Any increase in commitment is certainly difficult politics. But a more visible losing of the war, which will appear a few years from now if action is not taken, could be even more difficult politics.

Australia has real options and they are numerous. The following four options are only four points along a continuum of possible Australian responses. Options are expressed in troop numbers because that is inevitable – but at this stage of the conflict, it is troops that are needed. Still, any commitment must be both sustained and comprehensive, with non-military elements in proportion to the military elements: involvement in strategy and tactical decision-making, joint military forces, financial aid, NGOs, interagency (aid, diplomacy, police, detention, policy *etc.*).

Option One – stay at current level of commitment. Australia's commitment to Afghanistan in terms of troops is approximately 1100, which are subordinate to the Dutch who run Oruzgan Province. This level is compatible with other Australian military tasks (Solomons, East Timor, *etc.*), the impact on particular groups such as special forces, aviation and intelligence will need to be managed, and it involves little increase in financial cost. If nothing else in Afghanistan changes, then Australian forces will keep doing a competent tactical job until the war is lost. It avoids the difficult politics of increasing troops and incurring casualties now, but creates difficult politics when the war is demonstrably lost in the next few years. It attracts difficulties with alliances if we are to be asked for more troops and we say no. It is feasible if the United States and NATO provide enough troops to win, but it will reinforce United States and United Kingdom views, arising from the Iraq experience, of Australia as a poor military partner. It does not take into account what our Dutch allies are planning – if the Dutch do withdraw in 2011 as has been discussed, this option may not be open to Australia, as it may have to withdraw also.

Option Two – marginally increase the commitment. This option might involve commitment of a "Dutch-style" joint combat group of up to 2000 personnel, probably remaining under Dutch control in Oruzgan. There are deficiencies in key capabilities that would make it difficult to undertake as a full package before 2011 (attack and transport helicopters, artillery, human intelligence, biometrics, unmanned air surveillance, civil/military, and other scaled aspects of interagency such as AUSAID and Australian Federal Police). Except for these critical capabilities, it would take only months, rather than years, to prepare such a force. The deficient capabilities are what makes the difference, but could be added on incrementally. Unless others heavily commit, it would still be difficult to win in Oruzgan, because current troop levels are so

inadequate. A marginal increase might be a good course to take until the United States arrives in force after 2011. It would certainly satisfy allies (a very important strategic aim) if we were prepared to use this group offensively. It may impact on other commitments, but could be managed. It would cost more.

Option Three – make a significant increase in commitment. Such an increase would allow Australia to lead security and development in a single province, still with other allies, but the local campaign could be run by Australians for Australian interests. It would increase the chance of a coalition win in Oruzgan, and so in Afghanistan – a plan for success instead of a plan based entirely on hoping others will do something. It would require a balanced joint combat force of up to 6000 personnel for 3 to 5 years. It may take Defence up to two years to prepare to do this, and it would be fair to aim for the full force deployed by 2011. The cost would be large in dollar terms and in lives. It would certainly satisfy alliance expectations and, used skilfully, might provide leverage to increase the commitments of others.

Option Four – withdrawal of commitment. Withdrawal will always be a legitimate option. Wars can be lost and governments owe it to their people to leave all options on the table. The threat of withdrawal is leverage against allies and against the Afghan government, but such a threat is a 'one shot' tactic and only as meaningful as the size of your commitment. A withdrawal of Australian forces may occur unilaterally or as part of a beaten coalition, neither of which has much on the up-side. Afghanistan is not lost yet, but may need to be recognized as lost some time in the future.

The Immediate Future

Given that Australia has options, what should she do in the short term? Generally, Australia needs to acknowledge three principles that apply to the war as a whole, and a fourth specifically for Australia:

1. unity of command and effort are essential, focused through a comprehensive campaign plan covering security, governance, development and information, and executed by an adequate military and non-military force – if it is continually hoped that others will solve the problem or that talking to the Taliban or neighbours alone is the answer, the hard decisions will be postponed and they will only get harder;
2. an appropriate military force level to succeed in Afghanistan is approximately 500,000 Afghan security forces (army and police) answering to a government that enjoys a degree of popular support and which is backed up by reasonable international development aid – to try to solve Afghanistan with much less is to ignore the lessons of history;
3. to create such an Afghan force, 150,000 to 175,000 effective foreign troops would be needed and then used cleverly for 3 to 5 years;

and

4. the Australian government should have the option to increase its force levels in Afghanistan, if it wishes, from current levels to a maximum force of 6000 troops, with proportional non-military elements and development aid, over the period up to 2011 – this would be a big demand on a defence force that has been limited in its funding for 30 of the last 40 years, and as a result, is risk averse on the big issues.

With these principles fixed firmly in its collective mind, the Australian government must continue its lobbying to get wider alliance troop commitments, using Australia's willingness to commit as leverage. In the short term, Australia should maintain its current level of military and non-military commitment. In the medium term (6 to 12 months), Australia should prepare to marginally increase its commitment to a joint combat group of up to 2000 personnel. In the longer term (12 to 24 months), Australia should prepare to significantly increase its commitment to a joint combat group of up to 6000 personnel.

Conclusion

Defence may be reluctant to offer real military options to the Australian government because, on big issues, it has been forced to be risk averse. If the government wants such options in the periods mentioned, then it will need severe ministerial 'hands-on' to lead Defence the way the government wants it to go, and to define acceptable risk. Whatever the Government does, it must put pressure on Defence now, or the option to marginally or significantly increase its commitment will not exist.

My judgement is that the tipping point in Afghanistan will be in two or so years, perhaps in the summer of 2011. If the government wants to act in that period, it cannot reasonably expect to ask Defence six months beforehand. Defence's answer will be the same as it always has been – a little bit of this, a little bit of that. Now is the time for the minister to lead Defence to create meaningful options for the government in 2011.

The Author: Major General Jim Molan, an infantryman, retired from the Australian Army in July 2008 after 40 years' service which included a broad range of command and staff appointments in operations, training and military diplomacy. He has commanded army units from a 30-man platoon to a division of 15,000 soldiers, as well as the Australian Defence Colleges. He has served in Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, East Timor, Malaysia, Germany and the United States. In 2000, he commanded the evacuation force from the Solomon Islands. In April 2004, he deployed for a year to Iraq as the Coalition's chief of operations during a period of continuous and intense combat. In this position, he controlled all operations of all forces across all of Iraq, including the security of Iraq's oil, electricity and rail infrastructure. This period covered the Iraqi elections in January 2005, and the pre-election shaping battles of Najaf, Tal Afar, Samarra, Fallujah, Ramadan 04 and Mosul. For distinguished command and leadership in action in Iraq, General Molan was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross by the Australian Government and the Legion of Merit by the United States Government. In 2008, he published his book *Running the War in Iraq* through Harper Collins (see footnote 3). [Photo of General Molan: Colonel J M Hutcheson MC]