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Australia's Commitment to Afghanistan

With the withdrawal of the Dutch from Oruzgan Province imminent, attention has turned to Australia's contribution to the Afghan war effort. Our United States allies clearly believe that Australia can do more. Specifically, they want us to increase our commitment in the province from a battalion group to an independent infantry brigade group – a force capable of making a militarily-credible contribution to stabilisation and security operations.

Australia, so far, has indicated that it is not in a position to increase its military contribution or to take over the Dutch leadership role. It is willing, though, to increase the number of Australian government officials and civilian police with a view to improving provincial governance and mentoring Afghan officials and police to this end.

While such an increase in civilian assistance would be welcome, it is unlikely to satisfy the Americans; and as the chief justification for our Afghan presence is paying the premium on our national defence insurance policy (the ANZUS Treaty), we need to take the Americans' concern seriously. Unfortunately, the American public has been left with the impression that Australia's commitment is being minimised in order to avoid casualties.

For the past decade, the government has required the Australian Army to structure itself so that it "will be able to sustain a brigade deployed on operations for extended periods, and at the same time maintain at least a battalion group available for deployment elsewhere."¹

This guidance has raised expectations that it would appear Army is now struggling to fulfil, despite the last Army chief's public assurances that Army could comply with this guidance. This has left many to ask "what has suddenly changed?" If anything, Army should be more capable of meeting this guidance now than it was when the assurances were given. Two more Regular infantry battalions are coming on line and the Army Reserve is picking up the whole commitment for stabilisation operations in the Solomon Islands and will increasingly do so for those in East Timor. In fairness to Army, though, the chief did say that it might only be possible to sustain such a commitment by increasing the length of each deployment from the current six months to eight to twelve months – a change that would not be popular.

These discussions with the Americans are taking place against a background of steady erosion of public support in Western nations for the war, now in its ninth year. Nevertheless, within Australia, the Afghan commitment continues to enjoy bipartisan support and no exit timetable has been enunciated by government, which

is committed to sustaining the current Australian contribution until the allied aims in Afghanistan have been achieved.

There may be sound military and/or political reasons why Australia cannot do more militarily in Afghanistan, but the reasons need to be clearly articulated, not only in private but also publicly, if our relations with our ANZUS allies – especially the American public, who have not forgotten General George Washington's Farewell Address advising them "to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world"² – are not to be damaged.

David Leece³

¹Anon (2000). *Defence 2000: Our Future Defence Force* (Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra), para. 8.14, p. 80. This is the Australian government's defence white paper which was published in 2000. Its guidance was confirmed in 2005 and again in 2009.