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# *The war in Afghanistan and its wider context*

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Editor, *United Service*

Australia is at war in Afghanistan and has been for more than seven years. Following the al-Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001, the United States and a select group of allies, with United Nations blessing, invaded Afghanistan to oust the Taliban government, which had provided a sanctuary and training bases for al-Qaeda. The invasion was successful, but the Taliban and al-Qaeda leadership escaped to safe havens in the unregulated Pashtun tribal lands along the Afghan border in Pakistan. The follow-up stabilisation phase was inadequately resourced, particularly once the strategic focus shifted to a new war in Iraq in 2003. The Taliban was slowly able to re-group and re-train. Over the last two years, it has launched an increasingly successful insurgency war in southern and eastern Afghanistan from its bases in Pakistan, with a view to making the continued occupation of Afghanistan impossible for the occupying governments to sustain politically, if not militarily.

This two-year-old counter-insurgency war, in which the Australians are serving as part of a NATO<sup>2</sup>-led International Security Assistance Force, is the primary focus of this issue of *United Service*. We publish two excellent in-depth analyses of the war – one by Major General Jim Molan, which focuses on allied strategy and Australian government policy; and the other by Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Yeaman, which focuses on the operational and tactical levels of the conflict. We also publish two brief articles focused at the tactical level, one by Major Hayden Archibald on armed reconnaissance helicopter patrols – the modern ‘cavalry’; and the other a report on the killing of a senior Taliban leader by an Australian special forces patrol.

The two in-depth analyses of the war assume that the reader understands the current global context in which the war is being fought. Accordingly, I shall now attempt to capture those aspects of the wider global situation which are having a strong influence on the war, namely recent changes in United States foreign policy, the improving situation in Iraq, and the very difficult situation in Pakistan.

### **United States Foreign Policy**

The new administration in the United States, which took office last January, has made major adjustments to the nation’s foreign policy settings, some cosmetic – the

term ‘global war on terror’ has passed into history – and some very substantial, such as the relative importance of the Iraqi and Afghan conflicts, the commitment to solving the Palestinian question and the approach to engagement with the international community. The Bush administration’s unilateralism, such as its reluctance to work through the United Nations, and its ‘with us or against us’ approach to individual countries, were perceived by many as superpower arrogance and they alienated Europe, Russia, China, Arabia and the Islamic world, in particular. The new administration has decided on a more accommodating approach to Russia, a reaching out to the moderate Islamic world and a return to constructive and multilateral engagement on pressing world issues, such as nuclear proliferation and climate change.

One hoped-for benefit of these changes is increased international support for the United States position in Afghanistan, desirably accompanied by increased troop commitments and funds for reconstruction. There are indications already of a warming to this new, more nuanced foreign policy in Europe and the moderate Arab world in particular, but its success will depend, in part, on proving wrong those who see compromise as weakness and talk as appeasement. The Palestinian question, as long as it remains unresolved, also will remain a burden on the policy, but there is light at the end of the tunnel with respect to that other major impediment, Iraq and the perceived Western occupation of Arab lands.

### **Iraq**

President Bush’s ‘troop surge’, in which five additional brigades went into Baghdad in five months, has achieved the success that the counter-insurgency experts predicted it would. The Iraqi government has reclaimed its capital and has continued to progressively take over responsibility for its provinces. As a consequence, most of the ‘coalition of the willing’, including Australia, have withdrawn their combat troops from Iraq. While the situation there remains finely balanced, there is a good chance that the United States will be able to withdraw most of its troops within a couple of years. As United States and coalition troops are withdrawn, they potentially become available for re-deployment to Afghanistan.

### **Afghanistan**

The change in United States foreign policy coupled with the progress in Iraq has enabled the strategic focus to shift back to Afghanistan, where al-Qaeda with its global ambitions and reach remains based in the Pashtun heartland.

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<sup>2</sup>North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, which has deployed the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan under a United Nations mandate.

As Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Yeaman reports in his paper commencing on page 21, the International Security Assistance Force is making good progress at the tactical level in Oruzgan<sup>3</sup> in protecting the population; in building hospitals, health clinics, schools, roads and bridges; and in transferring skills and injecting finance (*i.e.* building community capacity) into towns and villages. Community confidence and initiative are returning and 'hearts and minds' are being won back to the government.

At the strategic level, however, the picture is much less positive. Major General Jim Molan, in an essay commencing on page 10, assesses that we are not winning the war and that we will lose it unless there is a major change in NATO strategy. In order to conduct an effective counter-insurgency campaign, there needs to be a dramatic increase in troop numbers; the ideologically less-committed Taliban need to be peeled away from their hard-core leaders; and the Taliban and al-Qaeda must be denied their sanctuaries in Pakistan.

The United States is now committed to a new strategy along these lines and a modest immediate increase in troop numbers, with more to follow as troops are progressively withdrawn from Iraq. Other NATO partners, however, have only promised small temporary increases over the period of the forthcoming elections scheduled for August and, at the time of writing, Australia was expected to follow their lead. This commitment is only enough to gain time – many more troops will be needed for an extended period if the insurgency is to be defeated. Pakistan, however, is another question entirely.

## Pakistan

Pakistan will not permit foreign troops on its soil, but has tacitly permitted the United States to conduct unmanned aerial vehicle ('drone') surveillance of the border tribal lands and to strike at the Taliban leadership when detected. Such strikes (with rockets from the drones) have been accompanied by civilian casualties, but have been increasingly effective against the Taliban leadership – to the extent that it is now pressuring the Pakistan government to stop the strikes.

The Pakistan Army has had limited success in controlling the Taliban in the tribal areas, in part because it is primarily trained and equipped for a conventional war against India and has difficulty adjusting to counter-insurgency requirements, but also because of the mountainous terrain and the fiercely independent Pashtun tribal culture which has never accepted external suzerainty.

Perhaps a greater difficulty is that the Pakistan Army, ever fearful of India, has a history of using Islamist dissident groups to further its own ends, both against India and its internal political enemies. Through its Directorate of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), it has fostered such groups in Kashmir for many years to tie down and unbalance the Indian Army. In the 1980s, the

ISI created the Taliban to win it control of the Pashtun south and east of Afghanistan, which it considered it needed for 'strategic depth' in the event of war with India. The United States provided weapons and money for the Taliban, which it viewed as a valuable proxy in the war against the Soviet Union, then the occupying power in Afghanistan. Its expectation that the Taliban would simply fade away once the Soviet war ended, however, was not realised.

The extent to which the ISI still controls the Taliban is unclear. There is now a Pakistani Taliban, led by Baitullah Mehsud, which is in direct competition with the central government for control of Pakistan. They have had notable success recently and now control the picturesque Swat Valley, within 150 km of the nation's capital, Islamabad. They have driven the Army and foreign tourists out of the valley and, with the unanimous approval of the national parliament, have imposed Sharia law. Indeed, within recent days, they have extended their influence throughout the Malakand Division of North-West Frontier Province and to within 100 km of Islamabad. Some observers, though, consider that the problem is not that the ISI cannot control the Taliban nor that the Army cannot run an effective counter-terrorism campaign – it is that they choose not to do so.

The civilian government, ineptly led by an inexperienced president, Asif Ali Zardari, is struggling for credibility and political survival. The Army, while seemingly content to leave government to civilians for the present, treats the government with barely concealed contempt and the ISI recently ignored directions from the government as waves of extremist violence spread across the whole country. Indeed, Pakistan in several respects is beginning to resemble a failing state – to the extent that Colonel David Kilcullen<sup>4</sup>, now a consultant to the Obama White House, assesses that Pakistan could collapse within months<sup>5</sup>. Were it to do so, al-Qaeda could gain control of Pakistan, with its population of 173 million, an army bigger than that of the United States and 100 nuclear weapons – a truly frightening scenario.

President Zardari, himself, declared on 8 April that Pakistan was fighting a battle for its own survival and needed the unconditional support of the international community in the fields of education, health, training and provision of equipment for fighting terrorism<sup>6</sup>. The United States immediately agreed to a large increase in aid (\$US1 billion) conditional on the Pakistan Army demonstrating a commitment to fight the Taliban. Additionally, United States special envoy, Richard Holbrooke, was charged with brokering a regional security compact involving Iran, Russia, China and India in the hope that such a compact would give the ISI the sense of security needed for it to stop supporting the Taliban. The next few months over the peak fighting season (summer) will be critical to the outcome.

<sup>4</sup>A former Australian Army counter-insurgency expert, who became a specialist adviser to the Bush administration and was an architect of the successful 'surge' strategy in Iraq.

<sup>5</sup>As reported by *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 April 2009, pp. 1 – 2.

<sup>6</sup>As reported by *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 April 2009, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup>A province in southern Afghanistan whose name is variously spelt 'Oruzgan' and 'Uruzgan'.