Australia’s drawdown in Afghanistan

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Introduction

Australia first sent troops to conduct operations in Afghanistan in 2001, as part of a multinational response targeting al-Qaeda in response to the 11 September terrorist attacks. Since this time Australia’s contribution has significantly increased, in an effort to prevent Afghanistan becoming a terrorist safe-haven while building the capabilities of Afghanistan’s own security forces. However as the war has continued, Australia and other contributing nations have increasingly focused on the need to transition out of a combat role safely and effectively.

During an April 2013 speech on Australia’s drawdown from Afghanistan, the Defence Minister Stephen Smith cited the ‘mistakes’ associated with the withdrawal by the United States and its allies from the Vietnam War, before reciting the old adage that ‘people may not remember how you arrived, but they certainly remember how you leave’. In making this point, the Minister demonstrated a sense that Australia’s transition in Afghanistan is not simply a logistical exercise, but also of significant strategic importance.

Since March 2011, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) have systematically taken the lead for security, with the final 91 districts transitioning to Afghan control as of June 2013. However, this evolution has not occurred in a vacuum; it is instead the result of significant negotiation, planning and cooperation between the Afghan Government and the International Security Assistance Force’s (ISAF) contributing nations. This research paper will address some of the key military, political, and diplomatic aspects of Australia’s and the wider ISAF drawdown, and provide some early indications as to what Australia’s post-2014 mission in Afghanistan could look like.

The politics of transition

With the war in Afghanistan having lasted more than a decade, ISAF contributing nations have become increasingly aware of the logistical and political implications of transitioning from combat operations to a reduced support role. These considerations have regularly been addressed at key international forums. For example, in November 2010 the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Summit in Lisbon initially flagged the end of 2014 as a benchmark for Afghan forces to assume full responsibility for Afghanistan’s national security. However the Summit Declaration also noted that
any transition would need to be ‘conditions-based, not calendar-driven’, and did not imply the total withdrawal of ISAF troops.\(^5\)

A year later, the Bonn Conference in December 2011 brought together 85 nations to discuss implementing a ‘transformation decade’ for Afghanistan, to follow the end of ISAF-led combat operations in 2014. Conference participants determined that Afghan authorities would have full responsibility for internal security by the end of 2014, and also committed to assist the ANSF post-2014 with training, equipment, finance and capability development.\(^6\) Australia’s contributing statement to the conference strongly supported the goal of assisting the Afghan Government to meet its long-term security goals by providing ongoing support to the ANSF.\(^7\)

The subsequent NATO Summit on Afghanistan, hosted in Chicago during 20–21 May 2012, provided ISAF countries further scope to form resolutions regarding the future drawdown. The Summit Declaration acknowledged that ‘irreversible transition is on track and will be completed by the end of 2014’, and resolved that Afghan forces would take the lead in providing security by mid-2013. In terms of future support, the Summit Declaration cited NATO’s commitment to ongoing capacity building initiatives, through the notionally titled ‘Operation Resolute Support’, and provided preliminary benchmarks for the ANSF’s size and budget.\(^8\)

**Australia’s changing role**

As ISAF has developed broad transitional arrangements for its overarching role in Afghanistan, Australia has accordingly seen its own role shift. An early catalyst for such changes occurred in July 2012, when Afghan personnel first took the lead for security in Uruzgan province. This evolved further by the end of 2012, as Australian troops concluded joint patrols with the Afghan National Army (ANA) 4\(^{th}\) Brigade and handed over control of forward operating and patrol bases to the ANA.\(^9\)

In March 2013, ISAF officials determined that Australia’s main operational hub in Afghanistan (Multi-National Base–Tarin Kot) would be closed at the end of the year.\(^10\) This would see over 1,000

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7. While Australia is not a NATO member, partnership arrangements were developed with NATO to allow greater dialogue and cooperation between Australia and the alliance on shared issues such as Afghanistan. North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), *NATO cooperation with Australia*, NATO website, accessed 14 August 2013. Permanent Mission of Afghanistan to the United Nations in New York, *Australian conference statement*, The International Afghanistan Conference, Bonn, 5 December, 2011, accessed 2 July 2013.
10. Ibid.
Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel return to Australia, from a total force of approximately 1,650 (as of March 2013).\(^{11}\) However prior to this closure, the ADF will continue to train and provide advice to the ANA 4\(^{th}\) Brigade and maintain combat readiness should they be required to support Afghan Forces. Operations involving Australian Special Forces will continue until the end of 2013, after which they will transition to a smaller Kabul-based training team in 2014.\(^{12}\)

A key outcome of the transition period so far has been the growing bilateral relationship between Australia and Afghanistan, which was officially marked in May 2012 when both countries signed a ‘Long-term Comprehensive Partnership’\(^ {13}\). This arrangement committed Australia to providing long-term support for Afghanistan, in the key areas of security, trade, development and capacity-building. The Afghan Government has signed similar agreements with the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Italy and India.\(^ {14}\)

Within the Australian Parliament, the current Afghanistan mission has received strong bipartisan support, which is likely to extend beyond 2014—Prime Minister Tony Abbott has previously welcomed a longer-term training and counter-terrorism role for ADF personnel in Afghanistan.\(^ {15}\) Conversely however, the Australian Greens have opposed to Australia’s military involvement in Afghanistan.\(^ {16}\)

**The logistics of leaving**

As at April 2013, approximately 200 additional Australian personnel had been deployed to Afghanistan to facilitate the ADF’s ‘redeployment, repatriation and remediation’. The drawdown effort is anticipated to involve an inventory of some five million pieces of equipment—worth an estimated $1.5 billion—including hundreds of vehicles, shipping containers and accommodation modules known as Drehtainers. As at March 2013, the ADF had approximately 1,300 Drehtainers in Afghanistan. Of these, half will be gifted to the ANSF, some will accommodate Kabul-based Australian trainers post-2014, and the remainder will return to Australia for refurbishment.\(^ {17}\)

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According to the Chief of the Defence Force, General David Hurley, Australian forces intend to leave very little material in Afghanistan, particularly equipment the ANSF cannot maintain or which could be illegitimately obtained by anti-government forces.\(^\text{18}\) Any gifting of materiel to the Afghan Government will also be dependent on the overarching NATO Training Mission–Afghanistan, which oversees the gifting process among ISAF partners to ensure standardisation.\(^\text{19}\)

From a comparative perspective, the United States’s much larger footprint in Afghanistan will translate to significant drawdown costs. For example, as at February 2013 the United States had more than US$36 billion worth of materiel in Afghanistan, including an estimated 50,000 vehicles and 90,000 containers. Internal US Department of Defense (DoD) reporting has indicated that the removal/transfer costs of these assets could be close to US$6 billion.\(^\text{20}\)

In contrast, Australia’s withdrawal from Afghanistan is projected to cost approximately $192 million, of which facilities remediation is the largest financial burden, accounting for more than $45 million.\(^\text{21}\)

In terms of removal methods, the majority of the ADF’s inventory will be either flown to Dubai or transported by road to the Pakistani port of Karachi, before being shipped back to Australia.\(^\text{22}\) Government estimates indicate approximately 100 pallets of general cargo will be shipped back to Australia per fortnight prior to the end of 2013.\(^\text{23}\)

Also noteworthy are the significant cost differences which exist across different land/sea/air routes. United States Government analysis indicates the cost of transporting a single container can range from US$8,000 to $67,000, while vehicle transport costs vary from US$19,000 to $153,000.\(^\text{24}\)

**Post-2014 outlook**

The overarching theme featured in the collective resolutions emanating from the Lisbon, Bonn and Chicago summits—besides the desire for increased stability, democracy and prosperity in Afghanistan—is that Afghanistan never again becomes a safe-haven for international terrorism.\(^\text{25}\) NATO’s top military commander in Afghanistan, General Joseph Dunford, has similarly indicated that the ANSF requires continued international assistance in order to maintain the country’s security gains.\(^\text{26}\)

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18.  PJCFADT, *Department of Defence annual report*, p. 3, op. cit.
Accordingly, as ISAF-led combat operations come to a close, many contributing nations have committed to at least some level of ongoing support in Afghanistan post-2014, in order to reinforce the security gains made so far. This will incorporate the two main elements of training and finance, with a potential third component being ongoing Special Forces support.27

**Training**

Many nations, including Australia, have already shifted their focus in Afghanistan to training local forces. For example, the Australian-led Artillery Training and Advisory Team completed its mission with the ANA School of Artillery in mid-April 2013.28 Although current estimates reveal the ANSF now delivers up to 90 per cent of its own training, Australia will likely join the proposed NATO-led training mission in Afghanistan post-2014, to improve the quality and range of ANSF skills.29

On 5 June 2013, Defence Ministers from NATO and other ISAF countries endorsed the concept of a new post-2014 mission in Afghanistan, with the fundamental aim of training, advising and assisting local Afghan forces. This mission will be ‘significantly’ smaller than the existing ISAF force and will prioritise both national institutions and the senior command of the army and police.30

The United States will almost certainly be the largest contributor to this post-2014 training mission, although DoD officials are yet to indicate the exact size of its contribution.31 Germany has been more prescriptive, offering 600–800 military trainers initially for two years commencing in 2015, after which personnel would be reduced to approximately 300. Although this would ensure Germany maintained a leading support role in northern Afghanistan, this would be contingent on overarching support from Afghan authorities and integration into the broader NATO-led training mission.32

Italy has also indicated it would keep 500–700 troops in western Afghanistan, while other nations including Belgium, the Czech Republic, and Romania have also signalled their willingness to contribute trainers post-2014.33 For its part, the United Kingdom has committed to facilitating a Kabul-based, ANA officer-training academy post-2014, at the request of Afghanistan’s President

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28. S Smith, Drawdown from Afghanistan, op. cit.
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Hamid Karzai. Australia is slated to provide 75 trainers to support this academy, while New Zealand will also provide a contingent of trainers.

Despite these proposed training initiatives, there remain significant questions as to whether the ANSF is sufficiently equipped or capable to achieve its post-2014 security responsibilities. For example, a March 2013 Defence Committee report to the United Kingdom parliament expressly highlighted the ANSF’s probable lack of operational resources post-2014, including logistics expertise, medical care and close air support. In addition, other external factors impinging on the ANSF’s capabilities, such as governance issues and a lack of external funding (at least out to 2017), have also been observed as potential obstacles for ANSF success going forward.

Finance

In June 2013, Defence Minister Smith stated that Australia would provide US$100 million annually to support the ANSF, starting in 2015. This contribution would complement the efforts of other partner nations to resource the ANSF in its ongoing task of providing domestic security.

As the biggest contributor to ISAF, the United States’s transition to a non-combat role in Afghanistan will also have significant financial implications. The United States has provided more than $57 billion to the ANSF since 2002, and during 2006–2011 it funded over 90 per cent of total security expenditure in Afghanistan. As Figure 1 demonstrates, the United States is projected to maintain its position as the ANSF’s major financial donor until at least 2017. However, any reduction of the United States’s financial contribution is likely to be reliant on an increased capacity of Afghanistan to fund its own security arrangements. To this end, the Chicago Summit Declaration identified 2024 as an appropriate deadline for Afghanistan to take on full financial responsibility for its own security.

40. Chicago Summit Declaration, op. cit.
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Figure 1: Projected United States and other donor support for ANSF

(Special Forces)

Former Defence Minister Smith also suggested that Australia would be prepared to contribute Special Forces troops for training and/or counter terrorism operations post-2014 in Afghanistan, if there were an appropriate mandate. This decision was justified on the basis that an enduring Special Forces contingent would help prevent Afghanistan once again becoming a safe-haven for international terrorists.42

The United States has reportedly canvassed ongoing counter terrorism operations within Afghanistan, while the deputy national security adviser, Benjamin J. Rhodes, has also emphasised the need to ‘ensure [al Qaeda] can never return to Afghanistan’.43 However, any potential Special Forces involvement in direct combat operations would need prerequisite support from Afghan authorities. Such support is far from assured, given the dismissive comments made by Afghan Foreign Minister Zalmai Rassoul in March 2013, who stated that any partner Special Forces involvement ‘is not going to be a combat mission’.44

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41. GAO, Afghanistan—key oversight issues, op. cit., p. 22.
42. S Smith, Paper presented on Afghanistan, op. cit.
Potential risks

Despite the international community’s ongoing plans to support Afghanistan’s existing security gains, commentators have highlighted that the ANSF will face significant challenges in maintaining or increasing its effectiveness as a viable security force. The extent of further destabilisation efforts by the Taliban or potential political infighting will be a key challenge for Afghanistan’s leaders post-2014 and could have significant repercussions in not only Afghanistan, but more broadly across the region.

Furthermore, the crucial relationship between the United States and Afghanistan also requires both parties to negotiate a variety of key strategic risks. Within this dynamic, attempts by Afghan officials to coerce the United States to ‘guarantee’ Afghanistan’s long-term security could prevent the passage of an overarching bilateral security deal, leading to a total pull-out of United States forces in 2014. Having tried unsuccessfully to secure a similar security agreement with local officials at the conclusion of the most recent Iraq War, failure to secure this current agreement in Afghanistan would put any future NATO-led training mission in jeopardy, including any further Australian involvement in Afghanistan.


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