

Is it time for Australian troops to pull out of Afghanistan?

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It's hard to see progress in the Afghanistan conflict in a week in which a US soldier has massacred 16 Afghan civilians, the Taliban has broken off peace talks and our presidential ally, Harmid Karzai, has demanded all coalition troops return to their bases.

It's understandable that these incidents hasten calls to accelerate the removal of Australian troops from Uruzgan. So let's consider what Uruzgan would look like if we were to heed calls in Parliament last week for an immediate withdrawal of the Australian contingent.

For a start, we need to consider the sheer logistics of moving combat troops, their armoured vehicles and hundreds of container-loads of equipment out of Tarin Kowt. It took the incoming 2007 Rudd government the better part of a year to achieve the easier task of moving Australian troops out of Iraq. The move from Tarin Kowt would be a more complex and risky endeavour. So we should appreciate that there really is no such thing as an immediate withdrawal.

But an accelerated withdrawal would mean prematurely ending the Australian Defence Forces's support for the Uruzgan rule of law program that trains Afghan police, prosecutors and judges and perhaps not achieving a critical mass of local professionals trained in justice and human rights.

It would mean aborting Australia's embryonic support for a public defender's office in Uruzgan.

A hasty departure would leave the many NGOs delivering aid and development in the province without a plan for their security and protected movement, seriously hampering Ausaid-sponsored programs that are improving primary education and rural development. The Capacity Building Project for Uruzgan, which Ausaid began last year with the Netherlands Government, aims to teach civil servants in Uruzgan how to read.

Closing that program a year early could be the difference between having a mayor in Tarin Kowt who can read and one who can't.

Removing our ADF mentor teams early might not leave the Afghan National Army 4th Brigade enough time to consolidate its position in new patrol bases, or to learn how to resupply its brigade operations with fuel and food. Shifting our Special Operations Task Group earlier might make it harder for Afghans in towns like Gizab to consolidate their own security, after having received Australian help to overthrow Taliban warlords in their area.

Amid a deluge of bad news from Afghanistan, it is easy to forget that what our people in Uruzgan achieve in the next year can still shape the future for Afghans there. But there are no quick ways to end the pain of the Afghan war and we must remain patient.

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