

What did we learn from the war in Afghanistan?

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Commentary

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The learning really starts when the war is over. As Australia's 12-year-long Afghan campaign draws to a close there are still big questions to be answered.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott has declared that Australia's mission in Afghanistan is at an end, but which mission? Australia has had a few.

Throughout the decade, Australia's overarching objective has been to support our ally the United States in its effort to reduce the terrorist threat emanating from Afghanistan. Within this, Australian military forces were tasked with constantly meandering missions. In 2001 the mission was relatively simple - defeat al-Qaeda and remove the Taliban from power.

Four years later when Australian Special Forces were sent back to southern Afghanistan, the mission was to make a noticeable contribution to coalition operations.

By 2007 the reconstruction of Oruzgan, Afghanistan's poorest province, had become a priority. Though as Australia's reconstruction commander at the time pointed out, not much had been constructed in Oruzgan in the first place. By late 2008 the crux of Australia's mission in Oruzgan seemed to be to fight those who would do our forces harm.

The final mission, from 2009, was to train Australia's replacements in Tarin Kowt - the Afghan National Security Forces.

Some will ask why Australians went to fight in the graveyard of empires - but that's the wrong question. The Taliban were effectively issuing passports to terrorists who had demonstrated both the intent and capability to wreak destruction and attack our friends. Our closest ally, the US, judged that an invasion of Afghanistan was necessary to reduce this threat. In 2001, Australia needed to be involved in that fight.

Others will ask whether now is the right time to leave Afghanistan - but that's the wrong question, too. The Australian Defence Force is leaving because the US military is leaving. This exit strategy has been decided in Washington, not in Canberra.

The critical question is should we have fought this war differently?

Australia's strategy in this war has been hesitant and often contradictory. To be fair, setting Australia's own strategy among the machinations of NATO, the Pentagon, and Foggy Bottom was always going to be difficult.

Until early 2009 Iraq inordinately distracted the US from thinking through sound strategy on Afghanistan. The year before, Australian prime ministers were refused access to critical NATO meetings setting the future course of the Afghanistan campaign.

At several points, Australia's strategic decisions faltered and were then reversed. In 2007 the Australian Defence Force advised that the mission in Oruzgan was not combat focused, but within a year Special Forces were mounting lengthy missions to combat insurgents.

In 2008 Australia demurred requests from US officials to contribute more combat forces, only to increase troop contributions by more than 40 per cent six months later.

When the Dutch left Oruzgan in 2010, Australia shrank away from the responsibility of commanding operations in the province. Instead, a US colonel commanded a combined headquarters in which the majority of troops and assigned forces were Australian. As it turned out, two years later Australia decided to take command anyway.

Restrictive geographic boundaries on Australian operations were introduced and then removed, prohibitions on targeting the nexus between insurgents and the lucrative narcotics industry were enforced and then years later quietly abandoned.

This strategic vacillation became most apparent whenever politicians tried to explain the war to Australians. Though only a handful of parliamentarians disagree with the cause, none could convince Australians that fighting in Afghanistan was the right thing to do.

A Lowy Institute poll this year found nearly two in three Australians thought a decade of fighting was not worth it. Convincing Afghans to support our military has been even harder.

Australia has not publicly reviewed its military operations and strategy in Afghanistan, unlike the US, Britain, Canada and New Zealand. When, and if, we do, three lessons from the conflict will emerge.

First, tactics are important, but strategy is vital. Australians - in and out of parliament - have been overly focused on the tactical actions of our troops in Afghanistan at the expense of the strategy that put them there. Knowledge of military strategic issues is so low among our parliamentarians, it borders on negligence.

Second, alliance management is much harder now than it was a decade ago. Contributing small niche military forces to coalition operations may not always meet the interests of the US military, or our own.

Third, luck in wars can breed complacency. For six years Australia fielded troops in Afghanistan with very few casualties; only when casualties started to mount was Australia's military campaign comprehensively and critically assessed.

The bulk of Australia's troops will return home in the coming months with only 400 or so left in advisory and logistical positions from 2014. Our new government's challenge is to

help explain to Australians what the military achieved in Afghanistan. A strategic review would help them articulate the answers.

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This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/comment/what-did-we-learn-from-the-war-in-afghanistan-20131029-2we2w.html>