

Politics will determine Uruzgan exit strategy

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Last week the Australian Defence Force took the unusual step of inviting journalists to visit Headquarters Joint Operations Command - an enormous warehouse east of Canberra from where the military commands its global operations. The focus was Afghanistan - specifically, explaining the complexities of the transition to Afghan-led security in Uruzgan province by 2014.

The Chief of Joint Operations, Lieutenant-General Ash Power, said "sometime early next year Uruzgan may well be announced as being very, very close, if not ready, for transition ... tranche three I'm hoping for".

The Afghan government and the International Security Assistance Force have previously announced two tranches of provinces and districts suitable for transition to Afghan control. A third tranche is expected to be announced before an international conference planned for May next year. It's not only our generals who are hoping that Uruzgan is on the third list. Our government has been signalling for weeks that the timeline for transition in Uruzgan is rapidly evolving. While Afghanistan is not an election-deciding issue, public opinion against the war has sharply increased this year after the deaths of 11 Australian troops.

But the timeline is largely out of the Australian government's hands. The trigger will not be a measurable improvement in the ability of the Afghan 4th Brigade to conduct independent operations, a measurable increase in security or development for the people of Uruzgan.

It will be a political decision made by ISAF and shaped by the US in the midst of a presidential election. The US military must further reduce troop numbers in southern Afghanistan this year and troop drawdowns in Uruzgan are significantly more appealing than in other southern provinces. The US Army force mentoring Afghan National Police in Uruzgan recently indicated it will soon reduce from battalion to company size. As reported in the Herald yesterday, the ADF is planning for a significant reduction in its Uruzgan troop levels by the end of 2012.

There has been real progress in security in southern Afghanistan since the US troop surge in 2009. An Asia Foundation poll records this year that 51 per cent of southern Afghans think their country is headed in the right direction, up from 33 per cent in 2009.

Australia's planning for transition in Uruzgan seems somewhat fractured. Despite the Prime Minister's commitment to provide development assistance in Uruzgan beyond 2014, there is little certainty as to what transition will mean for Australia's aid program in Afghanistan. AusAID will be unable to operate in Uruzgan without a significant ADF or US presence to provide security. It will be important to ensure that any short-notice planning that arises from US force posture decisions incorporates all aspects of Australia's commitments in Uruzgan.

The complexity of logistics in Afghanistan means that moving Australian equipment and assets out will take at least 12 months after any announcement. As the British defence force found in the last stages of its security handover in southern Iraq, such transitions can be demoralising. Australian military casualties will seem harder to justify, progress will be less visible. But all of our military deployments end eventually, and Australia's Afghanistan operation is now rapidly drawing to a close.

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