

**Justifying Afghan role a hard sell**  
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Nearly a decade after 9/11, narrow references to terrorism and the needs of the US alliance have passed their sell-by date.

POLLING is showing that more and more Australians want their troops out of Afghanistan, but the support of both government and opposition for Australia's continuing involvement suggests this is unlikely. Yet the reality is that Australia's commitment to Afghanistan is heading for a crisis — of one type or another.

The recent Essential Poll findings are broadly consistent with the trends captured by Lowy Institute polling, which has shown gradually declining support over the past four years.

There is, however, a bipartisan buffer that protects the government politically on Afghanistan. In fact, Opposition Leader Tony Abbott has even said he would be open to increasing Australia's commitment to the war. Nevertheless, the government would be unwise to rely on this convenient alignment with the opposition. For at least three reasons, our military commitment in Afghanistan is likely to become steadily — and perhaps dramatically — more difficult for the government to manage.

First, while Australian casualties are mercifully nowhere near those of the United States or other coalition allies, such as Britain, Canada, Germany or France, they are edging up and will further erode support for the war.

So far, the cost of the conflict in terms of Australian lives has been a slowly accumulating debt rather than a sudden shock to the human balance sheet. It is much less certain what would happen to public support if there were a larger number of casualties in one incident.

The chances of this are increasing as the US counter-insurgency campaign gathers pace. American expectations of what allies, including Australia, should do militarily in Afghanistan are also growing (and, perhaps with it, expectations of increased Australian troop numbers to fill gaps as other coalition partners leave).

But to appreciate the risks, you really only need to remember that there were another seven Australian soldiers on the helicopter whose crash this week took the lives of three commandos.

Second, as the costs of the war increase, the government's poor job of explaining why the war is important to Australia's security is brought into sharper focus. Much of this criticism is deserved, though equally applicable to the previous Howard government.

To his credit, the current defence minister, John Faulkner, has tried to lay out the case for the war in a more systematic fashion. Yet, in the forensic way in which he has described the reasons for Australia's involvement, he gives the impression that he himself is not entirely

convinced.

Explicitly and implicitly, Coalition and Labor governments have justified Australia's involvement in Afghanistan by narrow reference to terrorism and the needs of the US alliance. But almost a decade after the 9/11 attacks, this narrative has passed the time when a broader public — less obsessed than policy-makers with the finer details of counterterrorism strategy or alliance management — will accept it.

The government has also eschewed a broader narrative of the importance of a stable Afghanistan in a region that is still a central node for international terrorism, a region that contains two nuclear powers (with a third on the way) and sits astride major trade and energy routes.

It came as no surprise, therefore, that when we asked respondents to this year's Lowy Poll to rank three security challenges to Australia in west Asia, Afghanistan came out last behind Iran's nuclear program and instability in Pakistan.

This diminishing ability to justify the war in Afghanistan brings us to the third reason Australia's commitment will be increasingly difficult to manage.

If the government's justification for Australia's war is less and less compelling, then the only story left to tell is how and when we will leave. But telling this story will be politically complex not because it would be difficult for Australia to leave Afghanistan, but because, at least militarily, it would be easy.

Australia does not face the same challenges as those confronting the United States. Even if President Barack Obama suddenly decided to pull America out of Afghanistan, he could not do so overnight. He would still be fighting the same counter-insurgency war to prepare the ground for a US withdrawal — either to make it easier for the Afghan army to defend itself from insurgents once US troops had left, or to pave the way for a political settlement between the Afghan government and the insurgents.

By contrast, Australia's 1550 troops could leave in much the same way as the Dutch or Canadians — who have far greater numbers — are planning to leave, but with even less material impact on the strategic situation in Afghanistan. Of course, leaving would still have consequences, not least badly bruising Australia's strategic ties with the United States (whose officials still recall the current government's justification of Australia's withdrawal from Iraq as a way to focus more on Afghanistan).

What this means is that, caught between rising American expectations and declining Australian public support for the war, the government is rapidly coming to a choice: either add substance to its thinning narrative about Australia's involvement in Afghanistan (if it can) or make some very tough political and strategic choices about leaving altogether.