

## **Is the Afghan campaign worth a further 42 Australian lives?**

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Something has changed for Australian soldiers in Afghanistan. You can see it in the arithmetic. In the last year the rate at which our soldiers have been dying has gone up almost eight-fold. We ought to be asking why and we ought to be doing something about it.

Here are the numbers. With the death of Sergeant Todd Langley last week, 27 Australian soldiers have died in the five years since our taskforce went into Oruzgan province. But 18 of those have died in the past 13 months. So in almost four years until June last year we lost nine killed in action, while in just over one year since then we have lost twice that number. That can't be a statistical anomaly.

Why is this happening? It is not that we have more troops on the ground because the force hasn't grown in the past year. It expanded from about 1000 to its present size of 1550 in mid-2009, a year before the casualty rate jumped so sharply.

Perhaps they are facing stiffer opposition? But not if you believe what the government and the Australian Defence Force keep telling us. They say that the Taliban have been mauled and are on the back foot.

So the most likely explanation is that our soldiers are undertaking more hazardous operations. In other words, they are being asked, or ordered, to take more risks. And one has to ask why that should be so.

We shouldn't be too squeamish about this. The conduct of combat operations inevitably involves tough decisions about the price you are willing to pay in soldiers' lives to achieve your objectives. But those who are charged with making such decisions have a huge responsibility. They have to be sure that the lives they are spending produce a reasonable chance of achieving their objectives and that the objectives themselves are worth that cost.

If I am right and the surge in casualties has been caused by a change in the kind of operations our soldiers are undertaking, then the people making the operational decisions need to be clear about whether their operations in the past year have delivered strategic results worth the lives of 18 people.

Much more importantly, they need to be sure that the benefits of future operations will be worth the costs that have yet to be paid. Because what matters above all today are not just those who have already died, but those who will die in future if the pattern continues.

Of course, we cannot be sure that the rates of the last 13 months will persist. But unless another explanation is found, it's a fair hypothesis that if we maintain the same operations with the same size forces, we will lose similar numbers killed.

How many would that be? June 2010 was an especially bad month, so let's exclude the six deaths that month from the calculation as an aberration. That leaves 12 soldiers lost in 12 months. One a month.

How many more months? The Australian government is coy about this, but Barack Obama isn't. He has said US forces will be out of the fighting by the end of 2014, and we can be pretty sure that ours will leave with them. That's about 42 months.

So on these trends, if nothing changes, we should expect that an additional 42 young Australians will be dead by the time we pull out of Oruzgan. If we could change our operational pattern and return to the casualty rates of 2006-09, 30 of them would still be alive.

Of course, if we pull out of Oruzgan right now, no more soldiers would die. But that is not going to happen, so the debate needs to refocus on question of what our soldiers are being asked to do there

and what kinds of risks they are told to run.

This debate has to start with a sober assessment of what we could possibly achieve in Afghanistan from now on. Even if we concede (which I doubt) that what happens there matters much to Australia, what are the chances of making a difference in Afghanistan from here on?

Nothing our forces do in Oruzgan will make any difference unless the wider coalition effort can achieve big improvements in the country. But that is not going to happen. It is clear the coalition operations are winding down. Not only the US, but the big European partners are signalling the end of the road. I can see no reason to expect Afghanistan will be much different when the foreign forces leave than it is today, no matter what they do between now and then.

So here are the big questions for the men and women who order Australian soldiers into action in Afghanistan. Are the risks to those troops from the operations we are now conducting justified by any real prospect that Afghanistan will be any better off when we leave in 3 years? If not, how can such operations be justified?

And who is responsible for asking these questions and making these decisions? It is easy for ministers to say that the operations are a matter for the military, but that is not true. Ultimately, it is not up to soldiers to decide the strategic value of a soldier's life. That is a matter for politicians. Julia Gillard, Stephen Smith and their cabinet colleagues are responsible for deciding how many more Australian soldiers will die.

As things stand, when we pull out in 2014, another 42 soldiers will have died and Afghanistan will be no different than it is today. Who could then deny that those lives will have been squandered for no purpose?

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