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**Realisation at last on Iraq, Afghanistan**

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So, after nearly four years, we are back where we started in the war on terrorism. By the end of this year the Special Air Service will be hunting the Taliban again in the hills of Afghanistan, as it was in 2001. John Howard's decision, announced last week, is the right thing to do, but it carries a gloomy message about our future commitments, and some important implications for our defence forces.

The SAS's return to Afghanistan marks the final demise of Howard's original strategic concept for fighting the war on terrorism. From the time of the decision to deploy to Afghanistan in the weeks after September 11, 2001, Howard had a clear idea of how he thought Australia should contribute militarily to the campaign against al-Qaeda. We would commit small detachments of high-quality, sharp-end forces to combat operations. We would go in early, gain credit for early successes, and then get out quickly and bring our forces home. From the first, Howard said Australia would not provide forces for long-term peacekeeping, stabilisation and nation-building operations in Afghanistan or Iraq.

There were elements of strategic and political calculation in this approach. Strategically, Howard has always been concerned to ensure that Australia's forces did not get bogged down on the other side of the world in case they were needed for emergencies closer to home.

Politically, Howard probably calculated that while voters were happy to support short, successful, high-intensity operations that deliver quick results, their tolerance would be much lower for drawn-out, inconclusive and potentially unsuccessful counter-insurgency and peacekeeping tasks. George Bush's ideas for fighting the war on terrorism were somewhat similar. He planned for US forces to do the heavy lifting, and leave the rest of the international community to tidy up. As we all know, that model has failed because the international community could not, and would not, pick up where the US wanted to leave off. Bush discovered that in the months after Saddam Hussein fell. Now it has caught up with Howard. Once we got involved in Afghanistan and Iraq, there could be no quick victories, no limited commitments, no swift and easy exits.

Howard seems to have at last accepted this logic and where it leads. He was offered, but rejected, smaller options for renewed Defence Force deployments to Afghanistan. In sending the SAS, he has chosen to put troops back in the front line of an escalating conflict. This is not like Iraq, where Australian forces have relatively peaceful tasks. In Afghanistan the SAS will be helping the US to hunt the Taliban.

Taliban forces and influence have been reviving in the provinces bordering Pakistan in Afghanistan's south and east. The US has been undertaking operations against them in recent weeks. The US forces have taken casualties, including the loss of a Chinook helicopter. Their operations have reportedly delivered impressive body counts of suspected Taliban insurgents, but that will not be enough to stop the movement growing again, especially as it seems to be getting a lot of support from across the border in Pakistan. It will not be won by the time the SAS comes home after 12 months.

Nor will our commitment end then. Howard has foreshadowed that these forces will be replaced by provincial reconstruction teams which will combine security and reconstruction

efforts. You can see why Howard wanted to avoid this. It's a dirty, messy, dangerous business fighting insurgencies in other countries.

So we need to settle in for the long haul. It is sensible to plan that we will have significant forces deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan for years to come. Howard said that we could manage new deployments there because our commitments in East Timor and the Solomon Islands had been reduced.

But urgent military tasks will appear unexpectedly in our neighbourhood again before our forces come home from Iraq and Afghanistan. We need to be able to sustain these distant deployments and at the same time look after our interests and responsibilities closer to home. Now that the Government has recognised the nature, scale and duration of our military commitments in the war on terrorism, it should start to build the bigger army we need to cover both sets of tasks. Instead of buying tanks and elaborate amphibious capabilities, we should be expanding the army from six to nine battalions.

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