

For Australia in Afghanistan, victory was never an option

Tony Abbott has declared the conflict over, but what did it achieve? Not victory, but a society in a fairer and more capable state, and with the potential to develop

Rodger Shanahan

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From the time that George Bush committed hundreds of thousands of troops, hundreds of billions of dollars and the focus of Washington's military and political brains to invading and occupying Iraq and left a relatively small number of forces to conduct a holding operation in Afghanistan, any possibility of victory flew out the window. Technology is wonderful but mass has its own attractions, and except for a brief period during the surge, the coalition never had sufficient mass to address the multiple problems that beset Afghanistan.

But in Afghanistan, the opposite of victory is not defeat. The Afghanistan of 2014 will be different to that of 2001. It won't be a model of democracy and was never going to be. Government control is not going to reach to every corner of Afghanistan and never was. Corruption is not going to go away and it was unrealistic to even begin to assume that it was. But government control can be exerted over the major population centres; the Taliban's focus on ordering society at the expense of developing a state has been replaced by a developing state operating in a conservative society; an urbanised middle class is emerging fitfully; and education and health care have improved dramatically over the decade of the coalition presence. Most importantly the initial aim of the mission, to deny terrorist groups free use of Afghanistan as a planning, training and staging area for attacks against the West has largely been achieved. They have re-emerged in other areas, but they are fractured and on the defensive. Not a victory for sure, but a long way from a defeat.

Perhaps that is the nature of modern conflict, and a lesson that Australia and the West should learn. It may be time, after more than a decade of war in far-off countries, to change our expectations of what we deem to be victory. Victories and defeats will be relative, rather than absolute measures. Victory is no longer measured in total surrender, but in leaving a society in a fairer and more capable state of governance than it was before military operations commenced and with greater potential to develop. Not a guarantee of development but a potential. By that measure Iraq could be deemed a failure and Afghanistan a success. After all, Kabul today looks positively tranquil compared to Baghdad or Damascus.

Australia played the role of a fitfully but increasingly engaged military partner. For a long time reluctant to take command of Uruzgan lest we get left holding the baby, Australia finally realised that it was possible that everyone could leave at more or less the same time. The province was neither the most, nor the least dangerous in Afghanistan as the deaths of 40 soldiers and wounding of hundreds of others attest. Late in the piece Australia saw the potential for a more holistic governmental approach and hopefully the knowledge we have gained from this experience will be used to better inform these processes for future contingencies. Uruzgan has had significant development aid expended on it, schools and clinics built which are all positives. But unless the Afghan government mans those schools with teachers and the clinics with health workers, our legacy will be that we built in, but didn't develop the province.

In terms of alliance management, our Afghanistan experience will have been more of a positive than Iraq. While the US was keen for any partners in its largely diplomatically orphaned Iraq venture, Australia was keen to provide embedded headquarters personnel and trainers but chose the safest province when it finally agreed to dispatch a task group. In Afghanistan our risk acceptance grew as focus shifted there. A decade of operations has meant that the army in particular is better equipped and operationally experienced than it has been for decades. It also has a generation of officers and soldiers experienced in operating in a complex society within a coalition environment. Hopefully this generation will have learnt that victory and defeat are now relative terms.