

**Australia's commitment in Afghanistan:
moving to a more comprehensive approach**
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Amid the clamour of the closest fought federal election campaign in decades, one event in a distant theatre of conflict went largely unremarked in Australia. 1 August 2010 witnessed the formal transfer of command of the erstwhile Task Force Uruzgan (TFU) from the Netherlands to the multinational Combined Team—Uruzgan (CTU), in which Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel now comprise the greater number of coalition forces operating in a dangerous province where they have served since 2005. The deaths of a further three Australian soldiers in southern Afghanistan in the week before polling day, followed by another, two days after the election, brought the conflict sharply back into the national consciousness.¹ Both prime ministerial candidates offered their condolences to grieving families. They also reiterated strong bipartisan commitment to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission to stabilise Afghanistan through a population-centric counter-insurgency (COIN) campaign.

Nonetheless, amid an increasing demand for public debate about Australia's commitment to Afghanistan, the \$6.1 billion² Operation Slipper³ military deployment in support of ISAF will probably be a first order issue for whichever side of politics is able to form a minority government. However, the full implications of Australia's new responsibility for leading the Uruzgan Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in addition to more onerous security sector reform activity are still being realised. Furthermore, our whole-of-government response to meeting the challenges posed by the Dutch departure, including an increase in our civilian contribution, is a work in progress.

This paper discusses the implications of Australia's new role in Uruzgan. It advances a number of recommendations focused on a 'comprehensive approach' to how, together with our coalition partners, we can better manage the transition of security in Uruzgan to an Afghan Government lead, while building the province's capacity for improved governance and long-term socioeconomic growth.

Continuity and change in Uruzgan

The new arrangements in Uruzgan arose as a consequence of a decision taken by the Netherlands parliament in late 2007 to end its military commitment in Afghanistan. An attempt to extend the deployment beyond its



July 2010 deadline following a request from NATO precipitated a domestic political crisis in the Netherlands, leading to the collapse of Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende's coalition government in February this year. The pull-out of the 1,950-strong Dutch contingent marks the most significant withdrawal of personnel to date by a major ISAF troop contributor and NATO member in the nine-year war.⁴

The Netherlands assumed lead nation status in Uruzgan from 2006 following the expansion of the ISAF area of operations into Regional Command South. The Dutch deployed a battlegroup, PRT, a rotary wing detachment and other support elements, including a 'Role 2' hospital facility, to a large coalition base adjacent to the provincial capital, Tarin Kowt. Subunits of TFU were located at Deh Rawod and in a network of forward operating bases after Dutch forces pushed out into insurgent-held districts. The Dutch national effort in the province, which numbered up to 1,400 troops, was supported by an ADF Special Operations Task Group (SOTG) and successive Reconstruction and (later) Mentoring Task Forces. By 2010, the combined coalition force strength in Uruzgan had reached 2,600 personnel.

Dutch forces served with distinction in Uruzgan and employed population-focused techniques which were held up as a model for other ISAF members. The Dutch approach to COIN centered around the so-called '3-D' strategy of defence, diplomacy and development. The mission was essentially civil-military in nature and involved integrated military, political and economic elements. Under this methodology the Netherlands stressed 'reconstruction where possible and military action where necessary'. The stabilisation and support mission aimed at transferring responsibility for the province to the Afghan government.

The process involved combating the Taliban-dominated insurgency and building the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF), while at the same time reaching out to Pushtun tribes and establishing development programs. During the four year period the Dutch were deployed in Uruzgan the number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) assisting the local population grew from six to 50 as security steadily improved. The result was better healthcare, education, commerce and infrastructure—much of this achieved in close partnership with Australia.

The US now leads coalition forces in Uruzgan under an ISAF flag. The new organisation is only a month old and it remains to be seen whether CTU has the capacity to continue the 3-D approach. Nevertheless, its American commander, Colonel James Creighton, has stated that the Dutch effort won't be wasted. Indeed, he regards it as his mission to 'maintain what the Dutch have done and build on it if possible'.⁵ This suggests a continuation of the 3-D strategy within Uruzgan but perhaps with a greater emphasis on security over development.

The transition has reportedly gone smoothly—a US Army manoeuvre unit replaced the Dutch battlegroup despite some concerns about its ability to extend control over certain areas previously held by TFU. And at this stage some of the infrastructure projects undertaken by the Netherlands PRT may have to be scaled back. Significantly, key combat enablers provided by the Dutch military are being 'backfilled' by assets from the US Army's 82nd Combat Aviation Brigade and 10th Mountain Division. Moreover, CTU is designed as a more integrated outfit, unlike the previous arrangements in Uruzgan, which were in effect two separate Dutch and Australian national efforts. This might offset the reduced force levels now available in Uruzgan.

CTU has a multinational headquarters. Of the senior positions in the command structure, Australian civilian and military officials fill those of Senior Civilian Coordinator Uruzgan PRT, Deputy Commander CTU and Commander Multinational Base Tarin Kowt. All told, CTU comprises around 1,800 military personnel drawn mainly from Australia and the US, but also includes much smaller contingents from Slovakia, France, Singapore and New Zealand.

It should be noted that CTU is not a one-for-one replacement of the Dutch, and that a greater proportion of the US forces in Uruzgan are combat troops. But 800 fewer boots on the ground can only partially be explained by US forces requiring a smaller logistical footprint than their predecessors (as a result of President Obama's 'surge', the US is able to draw on its expansive supply chain now in place across Regional Command South to support deployed forces). However, it's optimistic of coalition planners to factor Afghan National Army (ANA) units that are currently incapable of independent operations into the force density equation in Uruzgan.

Right now, Uruzgan must make do with fewer coalition troops as ISAF concentrates its military resources on reversing insurgent momentum in the Taliban's historical strongholds of Helmand and Kandahar. The focus of the coalition's main effort is to conduct *shape-clear-hold-build* operations to secure the most populous and threatened districts, and thus drain away insurgent influence in southern Afghanistan. In practice, this involves a mix of targeting Taliban command and control, providing population security, conducting security sector reform and governance capacity-building, and economic development. If done right, all the components should mutually support each other.

Combined ISAF and Afghan Government planning teams have identified eighty districts as 'key terrain'—simply defined as those areas that afford a marked advantage to whichever party controls them. Supplementing these are forty-one 'area of interest' districts which, for a variety of reasons, exert influence on key terrain districts. Taken together, these 121 districts make up Afghanistan's vital economic, transport and population corridors. But only one of the districts—Deh Rawod—is within Uruzgan.

Nevertheless, Uruzgan is still the third most dangerous province in the south, and violent incidents there are at an all-time high. Placing the local population at the core of the COIN effort means sending ADF personnel outside their fortified forward operating bases, where they may be exposed to insurgent ambush and improvised explosive devices—at least until sufficient numbers of capable ANSF can be raised. Besides this, CTU can expect a displacement of Taliban fighters into its 22,700 km² area of operations as troops from this year's coalition 'force increase' work to restrict insurgent freedom of movement in adjacent provinces. Further complicating matters is the need for major security operations to hold the Afghan parliamentary elections, scheduled for 18 September 2010, in the face of insurgent intimidation.

Australia's overall force numbers in Afghanistan are authorised at 1,550 personnel and remain unchanged following the Dutch withdrawal. The bulk of that force is engaged in ISAF security and development lines of operation within Uruzgan. Their main operational objective is security transition. This is to be achieved by raising the effectiveness of the Uruzgan-based 4th Brigade of the ANA's 205th 'Atal' (Hero) Corps in defending its own country. By the end of this year, Australia will have the primary responsibility for mentoring the 4th Brigade's headquarters and all five of its constituent *kandaks* (units). Around 700 soldiers in the 1st Mentoring Task Force are now committed to this task. It must be assumed that this allocation of increased effort to the training of the ANA has necessarily been offset by unspecified reductions to other capabilities within the ADF commitment.

On advice from the Chief of the Defence Force, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, the Australian Government has assessed that the ADF training mission will need between two and four years before Australia can begin a conditions-based transfer of the main responsibility for security in Uruzgan to the Afghan Government. Following this, Houston has indicated that our troops will assume an overwatch role. This timeframe is consistent with the Afghan Government's 'Kabul Process'⁶ objective of the ANSF leading and conducting military operations across Afghanistan by December 2014. The strategy is dependent not only on the application of military capability, but also on increased civilian capacity and aid delivery. As a result, the ADF will need to provide increased support to civilians from Australian Government agencies, coalition states and implementation partners involved in strengthening governance in Uruzgan and helping to build the provincial economy for the next few years.

What should the comprehensive approach mean for Australia?

The concept of operations for the Australian Government in Uruzgan is consistent with the ISAF strategy and calls for a 'comprehensive' approach. Although there's much evidence to suggest that the ADF and civilian agencies are moving towards adopting this methodology, they're yet to embrace a genuinely integrated civil-military commitment in Afghanistan. But what exactly do we mean by a 'comprehensive' approach? The pursuit of a 3-D style strategy lies at its heart, but it also entails a move beyond Australian integration to see us working closely with coalition partners, the Afghan Government, multilateral bodies and the NGO community in support of our mission in Afghanistan.

The operating environment in Uruzgan—the main focus of our national efforts—comprises the overlapping domains of host nation, joint ADF and combined ISAF, Australian and US whole-of-government efforts, international agencies and NGOs. All are negotiating a complex human and physical terrain amid an adaptive insurgency. Success in these challenging circumstances requires the development of shared attitudes, values, practices and goals that transcend and integrate individual entities into a consolidated whole. We still have some way to go in achieving this.

As a start, Australian Government agencies may require improved interagency planning and training—both key enablers of the comprehensive approach—in the way they expect to operate in the field. The ADF and the main agencies it must work with in the theatre of operations—the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) and the Australian Federal Police (AFP)—all have differing perspectives on security challenges and methods of operation. The aim, ultimately, should be to develop a common understanding of issues likely to be encountered in Afghanistan.

It should be acknowledged that the ADF and civilian agencies have worked hard to improve their interoperability on overseas deployments since the East Timor crisis of 1999. The Department of Defence, AusAID and the AFP all have liaison staff in each other's agencies. These strategic and operational 'embeds' are sought-after positions, have gone a long way towards overcoming institutional hurdles, and have enhanced awareness of different agencies' authorities, roles, responsibilities, resources and core competencies. In addition, a range of Australian Government agencies have employees attending military staff courses at the Australian Defence College.

Interagency relationships within Australia's relatively small national security establishment are sufficiently developed that we don't need structural changes to enable the comprehensive approach. At this stage, Australia doesn't require a dedicated organisation like the United Kingdom's Stabilisation Unit—a joint organisation of the Department of International Development, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Defence that brings multidisciplinary expertise to overseas deployments. It's designed to bridge cross-governmental issues and helps to address challenges in collaboration between civilians and the military.

Nevertheless, the task in Afghanistan highlights the need to increase the ability of Australia's civilian agencies to deploy overseas by instilling in them 'expeditionary mindsets'. This means that civilian staff must train and exercise with the ADF so that they can work effectively in insecure environments like Uruzgan. But it might also require some reshaping of existing approaches to civil–military cooperation.

Defence having the lead for whole-of-government predeployment training creates a problem of 'scale' for the much smaller civilian agencies. They don't have large pools of deployable people and are hard pressed to release key staff for ADF exercises, which can run over several weeks. Defence may need to adjust its force preparation processes and be more adaptive to the needs of its partner agencies. Notably, the AFP conducts its own United Nations-endorsed predeployment training at its International Deployment Group Wanggirrali Ngurrumbai Centre at Majura in the Australian Capital Territory, but also participates in ADF mission rehearsals. Given the problems of departmental asymmetry, the Australian Government should perhaps consider a role for the interagency-staffed Asia Pacific Civil–Military Centre of Excellence in Queanbeyan, New South Wales, to develop tailored training solutions for Australia's commitment in Afghanistan.

Significantly, personnel preparing for overseas deployment must have a practical appreciation of the policy context in which they'll be operating. Predeployment training should also familiarise course members with the history, tribal dynamics, cultural practices, social mores, religious observances and value systems of Afghanistan. More specialised training could look at the Afghan legal system, shari'a and customary law, and local patterns of land tenure in Uruzgan. In the context of applying the comprehensive approach in Afghanistan, this type of training should also be extended to AusAID-contracted implementation consultants and, eventually, to civilian specialists on the Australian Civilian Corps database.⁷

Uruzgan Provincial Reconstruction Team

Australia has assumed the lead of the Uruzgan PRT, which is now coordinated by a senior official from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. It's among the largest of twenty-seven similar teams currently operating throughout Afghanistan. It combines around sixty civilians from Australia and the US with an eighty-strong ADF force element incorporating Army Chief Engineer Works personnel and a combat team for organic force protection. The command and control structure of the PRT is still in development and has multiple national and coalition lines of accountability. The integration of civilians from a number of agencies into the Uruzgan PRT is a highly effective force multiplier. Civilians bring expertise, focus and specialised capability to the stabilisation mission and may contribute to reducing the duration of the military deployment.

PRTs are by definition civil–military cooperative efforts and it's worthwhile examining how the Australian-led hybrid body will carry out its major roles in Uruzgan. Those roles are aligned with the three pillars of the Afghan National Development Strategy—security, governance and development—and include fostering security and stability, extending the reach of the Afghan Government and rebuilding physical infrastructure. Through the PRT methodology, ISAF plays a supporting role in the extension of governance and socioeconomic growth in Afghanistan, which must be an Afghan Government-led process. The challenge for CTU is how to promote local authorities as a legitimate alternative to the Taliban.

The Afghan Cabinet's approval of a subnational governance framework in March was a positive step. This was a benchmark of the January 2010 International Conference on Afghanistan (the London Conference) for service delivery at the district and community levels, where the COIN campaign will be won or lost. The idea is to empower 'district development assemblies' and 'community development committees' by delegating central government decision-making and budgetary authority to the provinces to enable a 'bottom-up' approach. Through this process, it's hoped that capacity building and development assistance will create small rural infrastructure projects to provide incentives to steer people away from opium poppy production and the insurgent economy.

Development challenges must be properly diagnosed before applying policy prescriptions. AusAID is currently undertaking comprehensive needs assessment for Uruzgan for consideration by the Australian Government and its partners in CTU. AusAID's development assistance is aimed at strengthening the capacity of Afghan institutions to govern more effectively and to provide basic services for local people. Capable civil servants in Afghan Government line ministries are vital to increasing and improving capacity for service delivery at the national and subnational levels. The focus is on improving literacy and numeracy, and supplementing the meagre salaries of government employees.

To properly fund the activity of the PRT, the Australian Government will increase the percentage disbursed in Uruzgan from its \$123.1 million (2010–11) official development assistance (ODA) for Afghanistan from 5% to 20%. The government is also committed to channelling 50% of the ODA through Afghan Government programs in line with undertakings made at the London Conference, provided necessary accountability measures and reforms are in place.

The establishment of effective governance is critical to improving development and security. CTU works with the central and provincial governments and will deal with other credible actors present in Uruzgan. The approach is to adopt a more inclusive posture than the Dutch, who shunned local power brokers, in order to balance the province's often competing Pushtun tribes. The dilemma for Australian officials is that they have little option but to deal with so-called 'malign actors' that fill a power vacuum in Uruzgan. One controversial figure is Matiullah Khan—a sometime chief of the now defunct Afghan Highway Police in Uruzgan, whom US and Australian

authorities refer to as a 'security provider'. Building a deep understanding of Uruzgan's complex social networks by conducting a wide-ranging study that harnesses local knowledge should be a priority for CTU.

Although AFP officers are nominally included in the overall number of Australian Government civilian staff in Uruzgan, they aren't integrated into the PRT structure. And in many ways the police capacity-building activity they're engaged in may be regarded as the Achilles heel of CTU efforts. As is the case elsewhere in Afghanistan, the Afghan National Police (ANP) is widely perceived as an incompetent and corrupt entity that more often than not serves sectional interests at the expense of the general community. Added to this, there's an absence of established rule of law in Uruzgan, where insurgents are engaged in a violent competition in governance with the Afghan state. In these circumstances, it's extraordinarily difficult for a civil police force such as the AFP to reform the ANP.

For their part, AFP officers are not trained, equipped or organised as a paramilitary force and have little place in war fighting. As a result, the 28-strong AFP contingent is restricted to training local police at the Police Training Centre within the confines of Multinational Base Tarin Kowt. The AFP received \$32 million in funding over two years to run this facility, which has so far graduated more than 500 police officers. The Dutch provided three police operational mentoring and liaison teams to coach the ANP 'outside the wire'—a role now performed by the US military. As security improves incrementally in Uruzgan, AFP officers may in time operate from the forward operating bases, outside Multinational Base Tarin Kowt, on advice from the ADF.

In the meantime, any increased commitment by the AFP in Afghanistan should be aimed at much higher level reform activity, such as Australia's ongoing support to the Afghan Government's Major Crime Task Force, which is responsible for investigating serious corruption. Another area where the AFP can make a tangible difference is in ANP doctrine and curriculum development within the NATO Training Mission—Afghanistan, which is the coalition body responsible for generating and sustaining the ANSF.

Leveraging our national expertise

The need to promote Afghanistan's economic growth was highlighted at the London Conference. Strong attention must be paid to developing the country's agricultural base, which is the major source of income for most of the Afghan population. It's here that Australia can leverage its national expertise to assist in rehabilitating Afghanistan's historically strong licit agricultural sector. This will generate long-term employment and help to foster economic growth and political stability. Extending agricultural assistance to farmers may also assist the Afghan Government and ISAF counter-narcotics strategy by helping farmers in opium-growing districts to transition to alternative crops, thereby interdicting the nexus between narco-trafficking and the insurgency.

Uruzgan's economy is almost entirely dependent on agriculture based on surface water. Under the Dutch, TFU facilitated various projects and programs in local agriculture within its secure development zones. For example, earlier this year, the German Organisation for Technical Cooperation distributed 400,000 almond trees to farmers in the Chora Valley and Tarin Kowt basin. What we need now are more experts in dryland agriculture and livestock management to follow on with similar efforts. Furthermore, Australian agribusiness advisers can help to establish value-added industries, such as apricot drying, wool processing and tanneries, and provide much-needed marketing assistance for local produce.

It's hoped that Dutch funding and oversight of major projects, such as the construction of roads in Uruzgan, will continue after December 2010, but that's

not certain. Thus, it's important that CTU moves to assume responsibility for the type of infrastructure development that underpins efforts to improve security in the province and build the local economy. A good-quality road transport network is vital in delivering Uruzgan's agricultural goods to markets, both within Afghanistan and in the wider region. The province's highly prized almond crop, for example, is now accessible to burgeoning markets in India as a result of a transit trade agreement recently signed by Afghan and Pakistani authorities.

There's also potential for improving irrigation, as well as hydro-electric power generation on a larger scale than is currently the case in Uruzgan through the construction of dams. The drought-prone province's main watercourses flow south-west and coalesce at Deh Rawod, where they join the Helmand River. A number of sites in Uruzgan's various districts have previously been identified for dam construction. However, ensuring water security and meeting local energy needs requires substantial resources and a secure environment. The associated irrigation canals and electricity transmission grid are vulnerable to disruption by insurgents.

One notable area of economic opportunity is the mining sector. Afghanistan has abundant mineral resources, but they haven't been developed much beyond artisanal and small-scale mining; nor have they been studied using modern mineral resource assessment methodologies. Uruzgan's minerals include tin, tungsten and fluorite deposits, and there are coal mines in the Khas Uruzgan district. Further study of the province's mineralised areas is clearly warranted. The Australian Government could investigate the possibility of commissioning a geological survey, with a view to assisting Afghan authorities to establish future extractive industries in the province. Needless to say, this type of resource exploitation is a longer term proposition that will require significant external investment in building supporting infrastructure and skills sets.

Conclusion

It's critical that the Australian Government and its coalition partners in CTU maintain continuity of the 3-D strategy, which is arguably the best means to achieve our operational objective of transition to an Afghan Government lead in Uruzgan. The province is a more dangerous operating environment as insurgents move to offset the coalition force increase in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, we continue to work off a low governance and socioeconomic base. Over the short term, there's no guarantee of additional resources to reinforce CTU as ISAF focuses its efforts on securing Taliban strongholds to the south. Thus, CTU has to 'work smarter' through the comprehensive approach in order to realise the force multiplier effects provided by increased civilian expertise.

Notes

- 1 To date 21 ADF personnel have been killed in Afghanistan and a further 149 wounded.
- 2 Mark Thomson, *The Cost of Defence: ASPI Defence Budget Brief 2010–2011*, ASPI, Canberra, 2010, p. 179.
- 3 Operation Slipper is Australia's military contribution to the international campaign against terrorism, countering piracy in the Gulf of Aden, and maritime security in the Middle East Area of Operations. Australia's military commitment to Afghanistan operates as part of ISAF as a peace-enforcement mission under Chapter VII of the UN Charter and UN Security Council Resolution 1833, and at the invitation of the Afghan Government.

- 4 In addition to TFU, the Dutch commitment to Afghanistan also included a detachment of eight F-16 fighter aircraft and a national logistic support element based at Kandahar Air Field, with other personnel attached to various ISAF headquarters.
- 5 <http://www.rnw.nl/english/print/139278>
- 6 The Kabul Process was set out at the International Conference on Afghanistan held in the Afghan capital on 20 July 2010. It involves a series of milestones charting the transition to Afghan Government leadership.
- 7 The Australian Civilian Corps, located within AusAID, has an interim capability to deploy civilian specialists to countries affected by natural disaster or conflict. By 2014, it will comprise a register of up to 500 personnel from government and the broader Australian community, chosen for their skills in areas such as stabilisation and recovery; public administration and finance; law and justice; agriculture; engineering; health administration; and community development.

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