STRATEGIC INSIGHTS

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Precarious State:

Afghanistan and the international and Australian response

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by Elsina Wainwright

Despite its role in the global war on terror after September 11 2001, Afghanistan lost a fair amount of international attention in 2002–03. Now it seems to be back on the agenda. Australia's contribution to security in Afghanistan, for example, went from one officer in June 2005 to a 190-strong Special Forces Task Group by the end of last year. These Special Forces personnel are being joined by a rotary transport contingent of 110 personnel and two Chinook helicopters. And in a few months time, Australia will

deploy around 200 military personnel to join a Netherlands-led Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), bringing the total Australian personnel on the ground to 500. This PRT commitment comes as part of a broader North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) expansion of around 6,000 troops into the south of Afghanistan.

But notwithstanding these initiatives, there is still a question as to whether Afghanistan is receiving sufficient international attention. While NATO is expanding into the south and then the east, the US will this year reduce its troop presence from 19,000 to 16,500, and further drawdowns might ensue. And according to current plans, Australia's involvement in Afghanistan will be reduced to the 200-strong PRT deployment by the end of this year, as the Special Forces withdraw in September and the Chinooks are withdrawn around November. Afghanistan, meanwhile, remains in a precarious state, with a host of challenges including increasing insurgent activity and a thriving drug trade.

This ***Strategic Insight*** examines the current situation in Afghanistan and the international security and reconstruction efforts. It also analyses the NATO expansion and the new Australian deployment, as well as what Afghanistan still needs.

Recent history

Afghanistan is comprised of multiple tribes, clans and ethnic groups, and has little experience of being a functioning state. Its recent history has been marked by twenty-five years of continuous conflict, dating from the Soviet invasion in 1979. More than six million Afghans—over one fifth of the population—fled the country after that time, and around one million Afghans were killed. Civil war followed the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, as the international focus moved elsewhere and the victorious mujahideen began to fight among themselves. The fundamentalist Taliban seized control of Kabul in 1994 and large parts of the country by 1998, establishing a theocracy that suppressed women and harboured the terrorist group Al Qaeda.

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The post-9/11 response

The September 11 2001 terrorist attacks brought international attention sharply back to Afghanistan. No longer was the United States prepared to tolerate the Taliban providing succour to the now-perpetrators of 9/11. When the Taliban Government refused to surrender Osama Bin Laden and his Al Qaeda associates, the US-led Coalition commenced operations against the Taliban and Al Qaeda. These operations were characterised by a 'light footprint' of minimal troops on the ground, and they took place with broad international support and the support of the majority of the Afghan population. Coalition and Northern Alliance operations succeeded in ousting the Taliban from power in late 2001. However, the Taliban and Al Qaeda were never completely routed, in part because of the lack of substantial Coalition ground troops.

The Bonn Conference of December 2001 laid out the blueprint for political processes in post-Taliban Afghanistan. An International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was established by UN Security Council Resolution 1386 that same month, 'to assist the Afghan Interim Authority in the maintenance of security in Kabul and its surrounding areas.' ISAF also entailed a minimal troop presence, in the order of 4,500 troops at the outset. As early as March 2002 the International Crisis Group was recommending that ISAF be expanded to more than 25,000.[1]

Yet in 2002 the decision was taken not to extend ISAF beyond Kabul. This was for a variety of reasons, including US reluctance to be drawn into nation building, in part due to cost and the increasing focus on Iraq. Various European states and Turkey were also disinclined to expand the force. An international donor conference that year pledged US$4.5 billion for reconstruction aid, but only part of that figure was actually committed, and much of that—and over three-quarter of US aid in 2002–03, for example[2]—was spent on humanitarian and quick impact assistance.

After these events, and as the international focus moved to Iraq in 2002–03, Afghanistan's rebuilding suffered a distinct loss of momentum. Australia, for its part, withdrew around 120 Special Forces at the end of 2002, not least because they were required for impending operations in Iraq.

In lieu of expanding ISAF but to mirror the 'ISAF effect', the US devised the concept of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in the northern summer of 2002.[3] PRTs entailed relatively small teams (around 60–450) of military and civilian personnel deployed with force protection elements to various regions. They were to assist with security and reconstruction, and to help with the expansion of the Afghan Government's authority throughout the country.

NATO took over ISAF in August 2003 (successive states had taken the lead before then), and at the end of that year, after US agreement, ISAF began to expand beyond Kabul using PRTs. By the second half of 2004, ISAF had established five PRTs in the north of Afghanistan; four PRTs were set up in the west in 2005.

These nine PRTs have been under the command of various countries within ISAF. Thirteen other PRTs, with participants including the US, United Kingdom, New Zealand and South Korea, have been under the control of the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). Unlike ISAF, which has a stabilising mandate, OEF's primary responsibilities have been counterterrorism and counterinsurgency, mainly in the south and east.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai, (front C) German Foreign Minister Frank Walter Steinmeier, (front L) British Prime Minister Tony Blair, (front 2nd L) UN Secretary General Kofi Annan (front 2nd R) and US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (front R) pose for a photograph amongst ministers and representatives from the international community at a London conference on Afghanistan, 31 January 2006. AAP/Adrian Dennis/2006 AAP

There have been a range of PRT models, determined in part by the situation on the ground and the different lead countries threat sensitivity. Tasks have included building governance capacity, training local security forces, and monitoring demobilisation programs. Some PRTs have focused more on security than reconstruction, whereas others have had a greater reconstruction focus. The New Zealand PRT, for example, has been able to emphasise reconstruction because it is in the reasonably settled Bamian province in the west.

The range of models has meant that PRTs have been contextualised to prevailing circumstances. This has had its advantages in Afghanistan, where the security situation and the needs on the ground vary widely. But PRTs have had disadvantages too. There has been little coordination between them, and national caveats have circumscribed—sometimes quite significantly—what various states' personnel can do.[4] This variability has led to competing demands on the Afghan national government. The situation has not been helped by the fact that ISAF and OEF operate in parallel and have had their own problems of coordination and overlap.

The success of each PRT has depended on national caveats, local Afghan leadership, and the degree of community engagement undertaken by PRT personnel. The British PRT in Mazar-e-Sharif and the New Zealand PRT in Bamian, for instance, have been comparatively effective and popular. On the whole PRTs have been reasonable vehicles for consolidating security and facilitating reconstruction in the relatively stable north and west. And since there have been no realistic alternatives for providing security and reconstruction assistance, they have been far preferable to doing nothing.

Afghanistan has had far fewer international troops on the ground per capita than efforts in East Timor, Kosovo, Bosnia and Iraq.

But it is interesting to compare the international efforts afforded to Afghanistan with those of stabilisation and reconstruction operations elsewhere. Afghanistan has had far fewer international troops on the ground per capita than efforts in East Timor, Kosovo, Bosnia and Iraq. By the end of 2005 there were around 10,000 ISAF troops for the whole of Afghanistan—and the bulk of these troops were based in Kabul. OEF had around 19,000 troops in the country at the end of last year, making for a total of 29,000 international troops in Afghanistan, with its population of approximately 28.5 million. The Iraqi operation, by contrast, involves nearly 181,000 international troops—almost 158,000 US troops and 23,000 non-US forces.[5] A well-regarded calculation holds that security operations require at least 1,000 troops per 100,000 citizens.[6] In East Timor, there were around 1,100 peacekeepers per 100,000 population in the first year—and height—of the operation, in Kosovo there were 2,058 per 100,000, and in Iraq there were 709. But Afghanistan had only 19 troops per 100,000 people in the first year, and there are currently around 100.

Afghanistan has also received far less aid per capita than Solomon Islands, East Timor, Kosovo, Bosnia, and Iraq. East Timor received US$257 per head of population in the first two years of operation, Bosnia received US$276, and Iraq US$225. Afghanistan, however, received only US$30 per head in the first two years.[7] Statebuilding operations are extraordinarily difficult in the best of conditions. The populations of Solomon Islands, East Timor, Kosovo and Bosnia are

around 530,000, 1 million, 2.2 million and 4 million respectively. When compared to Afghanistan's population, it becomes apparent how daunting the statebuilding task there is.

It is especially interesting to note the disparity in approaches to Afghanistan and Iraq, given they are of similar size population (Iraq has approximately 26 million people) and territory. The US has spent US$82 billion on Afghanistan since 9/11: US$76 billion for the Department of Defense and US$6 billion for 'foreign operations' (reconstruction and foreign aid programs, and embassy operations and construction). In contrast the US has allocated US$251 billion for Iraq since then: US$226 billion for Defense, and US$25 billion for 'foreign operations'.[8]

This disparity in part stems from the US Administration regarding Iraq—correctly—as of greater strategic significance. Iraq has played a central role in US efforts to reshape the Middle East, whereas there is a view that sees Afghanistan as containable. There was also a broad international consensus regarding Coalition operations in Afghanistan. Iraq, by contrast, was far more controversial, and has therefore left the US more exposed. But Afghanistan has shown before that it needs careful monitoring and can pose a serious threat to global security if allowed to deteriorate to too great an extent.

The lay of the land

Security

The light military and aid footprint has exacerbated some of the current challenges facing Afghanistan. The security situation in Afghanistan is far better than in Iraq; similar to Iraq, it varies in different parts of the country. But several issues are concerning.

First, there has been an increase in insurgent activity. There were around 1,600 Afghan deaths and ninety-one US military deaths from insurgency-related activity in 2005—a 20% increase in a year, making 2005 the most dangerous in Afghanistan since 2001. Successful US-led counterinsurgency operations seem in part to have caused the insurgency's recent change in tactics, from conventional engagement to greater use of suicide attacks (up almost fourfold in 2005 from 2004) and improvised explosive devices (which have more than doubled in the past year), plus an increased focus on soft targets. The southern and eastern provinces have experienced the most violence, but security in Kabul has also deteriorated appreciably. Such tactics, seemingly adopted from the insurgency in Iraq, are low risk and high yield, and are gaining in sophistication and frequency.

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A senior US official recently described the insurgency as now being a greater threat to the Afghanistan Government extending its influence than at any time since the fall of the Taliban.[9] The insurgency is a complex mix of Taliban remnants and some conservative Pashtun tribesmen alongside Al Qaeda and other foreign fighters. Some Al Qaeda and Taliban operatives are believed to be based in the Pakistan frontier provinces and often cross the porous border into Afghanistan.

In addition, Taliban elements have stepped up intimidation and assassinations of Afghans assisting international reconstruction efforts. Some villagers in the south have even been rejecting assistance, for fear of brutal Taliban retaliation. Taliban operatives

have been burning schools and executing teachers—initially those teaching girls, but schools teaching only boys have also been attacked.

Second, the drug trade is flourishing, and drugs have become an integral part of commercial and political life. The drug economy is now equal to 50–60% of Afghanistan's GDP, and around 87% of the world's heroin currently comes from Afghanistan. Although the number of poppy fields declined last year, bumper crops made for little reduction in opium yield. Farmers are using poppy production as collateral for loans—with drug barons sometimes the lenders—because rural areas have no finance system.

The drug trade has proved highly corrosive of good governance. A number of senior leaders, police and other officials throughout the country are intimately involved in the drug trade, and some drug barons are senior figures supporting Hamid Karzai's presidency. Furthermore Taliban elements have a symbiotic relationship with the drug trade and have access to drug funds.

The drug problem has become so insidious and the connections between drugs, politics and the insurgency so deep that the situation cannot be dealt with simply by removing the poppies. Just cracking down on opium production would not only take away many Afghans' easiest and most lucrative source of income. It would also cause Afghanistan's economy to collapse and could even destabilise Afghanistan politically.

The third issue is the role of local power holders, the so-called 'warlords'. Many benefited from the Coalition policy of cooperation as they fought the Taliban and Al Qaeda, and have thereby consolidated their positions. Some of these figures are a destabilising force: they have a track record of switching allegiance, have raised their own militias and have been involved in human rights violations and criminal activities, including the drug trade. President Karzai has removed some of the more egregious ones from positions of responsibility. But others have remained or been shifted sideways, and some have now firmed up their power as elected representatives.

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The escalating insurgency, narco-economics and politics, high-level corruption and rampant banditry have all helped to create a climate of lawlessness and impunity in Afghanistan. Addressing this situation is vital to Afghanistan's future, but it will be an inordinately difficult task.

Reconstruction

Reconstruction efforts have made some real progress. Democratic institutions are being consolidated: a constitution is in place, and the presidential elections in October 2004 and National Assembly elections in September 2005 were broadly viewed as successful. Some progress has also been made in the construction of roads, schools and medical clinics, and about 40% of Afghan girls are now in schools. The Afghan National Army is a long way from being fully functional, but it is being trained and is at about 30,000 strength. Around 60,000 former militia fighters have been disarmed in a demobilisation program. Over 3.5 million refugees have returned from neighbouring states, although more than 3 million Afghan refugees are still in Pakistan.

Afghanistan is an acutely fragile state: its social indicators are among the worst in the world…

But much remains to be done. Afghanistan is an acutely fragile state: its social indicators are among the worst in the world, including high infant mortality rates and a life expectancy of 45 years for men and 44 years for women. Economic development that has taken place has been very uneven: a few have become wealthy very quickly, often through corrupt means, whereas many even in Kabul languish without adequate electricity, water or heating. Returned refugees have compounded the challenges, and there are very few jobs.

Afghanistan's infrastructure and economy remain blighted by decades of conflict, and sabotage and lingering security problems hinder reconstruction and economic growth. And while Kabul has experienced some real improvements including increased economic activity, much of Afghanistan remains in virtual ruins, with parlous service delivery and inadequate roads, and therefore poor access to markets. The profound lack of human capacity is also impeding reconstruction efforts, not least with respect to governance, and corruption is a major problem.

The move south

In December last year NATO Foreign Ministers decided to increase ISAF by 6,000 troops and expand operations into the south of Afghanistan. This Stage 3 expansion involves ISAF moving into six further provinces—Daikondi, Helmand, Kandahar, Nimruz, Oruzgan and Zabol—and creating PRTs in Helmand, Kandahar and Oruzgan. After a subsequent Stage 4 expansion of ISAF into the east, NATO will take over responsibility for security in Afghanistan from the US, and have an around 21,000-strong presence throughout the country. The separate US-led counterinsurgency presence will also remain.

Troops deployed as part of ISAF Stage 3 will take part in stabilising operations, help mentor the Afghan National Army, and assist with security sector reform. The aim is to

Conflict for over two decades has left parts of Kabul in ruin. Photo courtesy ISAF

foster a conducive security environment in which reconstruction efforts can occur.

The UK, Canada and the Netherlands are the main countries contributing troops to this expansion. The UK is sending 3,300 personnel to the troubled, drug-ridden border province of Helmand: by July they will establish a PRT of around 200 personnel. Canada is building up a 2,200-strong troop presence and a PRT in the historical Taliban stronghold of Kandahar.

And around the end of July the Australian Government will deploy 200 personnel to join the Dutch-led PRT and broader Dutch effort of up to 1,400 forces in the restive province of Oruzgan, birthplace of former Taliban leader Mullah Omah. The Australian deployment will be a mix of security and reconstruction: about half will be technicians and engineers involved in the reconstruction of roads, bridges and other infrastructure, and the other half will provide logistics and light armoured protection. They will work with and receive protection from the Dutch troops, but operate under Australian command and rules of engagement.

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The south and east experience less Afghan Government control and verge on lawless in parts, and are the heartland of Taliban support and insurgent activity. ISAF's previous focus on the north and west enabled the south and east to grow ever more restive. It therefore makes sense for NATO to spread security and reconstruction efforts into these regions, where real threats to Afghanistan's stability lie. Afghanistan is NATO's first out-of-area operation, and how it fares will have a significant impact on the future of the Alliance. The US has wanted NATO to fill the gap as it draws its troops down, and more broadly it wants NATO—particularly the continental European states—to play a more active role in global security.

But the extension of ISAF and its PRTs to the south and east will be dangerous for all participating states, including Australia. These regions present a significantly more challenging threat environment than NATO faced in postconflict Bosnia or Kosovo, because there is an active insurgency. There is a view that insurgency activity is increasing in part because international troops are now moving into areas where they have not been in large numbers before, and that greater resistance is therefore being encountered. Predictions have been made that insurgents will test the arriving ISAF troops: forces could face suicide and roadside bombings.

There is a question as to whether NATO's rules of engagement will be sufficient: while these will be more robust for the south than in the north and west, NATO's posture remains an essentially peacekeeping and stabilising one.[10] There is also a question as to whether the PRT model can provide security and facilitate reconstruction in a situation where there is little peace to be kept. Before the Dutch Parliament voted to deploy the Dutch troops to Oruzgan, some Parliamentarians voiced concerns about trying to provide security in a combat zone, a problem which bedevilled UN peacekeepers in wartime Bosnia in the 1990s. And all Dutch Parliamentarians remembered Srebrenica, when Dutch peacekeepers with limited mandates evacuated in the face of a Bosnian Serb advance, upon which almost 8,000 Muslim men and boys were killed.

Some continental European states involved in ISAF—such as Germany, France and Spain—are worried about the threat environment and have opted not to move into the south. They have also resisted a counterinsurgency role for

NATO. But in the face of an active insurgency, it is vital that counterinsurgency tasks as well as reconstruction and security activities are performed, and it is as yet unclear whether the US will decrease its separate counterinsurgency presence.

Australia's renewed focus

There are a number of reasons why Australia has—and should have—renewed its focus on Afghanistan. First, Afghanistan remains a key theatre for global security: it was the crucible for Al Qaeda and jihadi terrorism until 2001. Many foreign jihadis attended Afghan terrorist training camps, including some members of Jemaah Islamiah, Lashkar-e-Toiba and Abu Sayyaf who have returned to our region to plan and execute attacks.

As September 11 2001 demonstrated all too starkly, instability in fragile states can radiate out and affect the region and beyond in the form of terrorism, transnational crime and refugees. Afghanistan is the classic case, encompassing all of these phenomena. While it is unlikely if the international presence withdrew tomorrow that the Taliban could take over the country in the short term, disarray in certain parts of the state—especially in the south and east—could allow them to regenerate and again provide a safe haven for Al Qaeda and similar groups. It is in Australia's interest that Afghanistan does not again significantly deteriorate.

Second, Australia was involved in the initial operations against the Taliban, and thus bears some share of the responsibility to help maximise post-Taliban Afghanistan's security and reconstruction. The third reason involves alliance management: the US is eager to keep others involved in Afghanistan, and a 500-strong deployment is an efficient way for Australia to make a contribution to the US Alliance.

And fourth, it is in Australia's interest for NATO to succeed in this operation, in particular to keep continental Europe engaged in the maintenance of global security. Accordingly, it is worth contributing to that effort to promote the operation's prospects of success.

The Australian deployment

Australia's deployment of 500 personnel is therefore an appropriate and proportionate one for a middle power to make to a fragile state of strategic importance but not in its immediate region. Given Australia's commitments and priorities closer to home, a significant increase in personnel or aid from current levels would not be warranted.

Australian troops will face an insurgency that could target international forces, and there could be Australian casualties.

Nevertheless, the deployment of 200 personnel to Oruzgan in particular will carry considerable risks. This PRT deployment is altogether different from Australia's involvement in Afghanistan until now, and it is one of most serious threat environments into which Australian non-Special Forces personnel have been deployed in recent years. Australian troops will face an insurgency that could target international forces, and there could be Australian casualties.

They will also face a conservative Pashtun population in Oruzgan. Importantly, a large majority of Afghans value the international presence to repel the Taliban and rebuild their state. A recent poll for the BBC World Service, for example, found that 72% of Afghans believe US influence to be positive.[11] However, some—especially more traditional—Afghans have resented various cultural insensitivities

on the part of some of the international forces, and there are some conservative Pashtun tribesmen involved in the insurgency.

The Dutch-Australian PRT will therefore need a significant security emphasis, and more robust mandates, rules of engagement and equipment will be required than in the north and west. The PRT deployment also presents Australia with a number of operational challenges. Australian troops have not in the past been closely interoperable with Dutch forces, and will likely be working more closely with them than with the Japanese in Al Muthanna in Iraq. In addition, Australian personnel will receive protection from the Dutch, and their security will depend on the Dutch rules of engagement. It will be essential for the Netherlands to have very robust rules of engagement to meet Australian needs; this will require tough decisions of the Dutch Government.

Effective community engagement will also be critical for the mission's success. The New Zealand PRT in Bamian, for instance, has been effective partly because of the level of community engagement and cultural awareness of the New Zealand personnel. Cultural, political and rudimentary language training for Australian personnel will help to maximise the effectiveness of community engagement.

When the Australian PRT effort is up and running, Australia will be involved for a couple of months in security and reconstruction within the PRT framework as well as in counterinsurgency activities as carried out by the Special Forces Task Group. These are both important tasks. The Australian Government will face the decision of whether to maintain a counterinsurgency role in Afghanistan when the Special Forces are due to withdraw in September. Such a presence would not necessarily require Special Forces: with appropriate backup it could be performed by regular infantry. This decision may become more pressing if the US draws down its counterinsurgency capacity and NATO remains unwilling to perform vital counterinsurgency tasks. Encouraging the US to maintain a strong counterinsurgency capacity in the south and east also makes great sense.

Soldiers prepare at dawn in Afghanistan to depart on a joint Australian and Afghan patrol, 9 November 2005. © Department of Defence

What Afghanistan still needs

International reconstruction assistance to Afghanistan has likewise entered a new phase, with the Bonn process being replaced by the 'Afghanistan Compact' formulated at a donor conference earlier this year. The conference was attended by over 70 states and organisations, and a total of US$10.5 billion in reconstruction assistance was pledged. For its part, the Australian Government promised $150 million over five years to consolidate institutions of governance, help combat terrorism, and assist with security, human rights, health and education.[12]

The Compact provides a framework for Afghanistan for the next five years, and sets out benchmarks for security, governance and development, including promoting good governance and the rule of law, and combating the drug trade. These are highly difficult tasks. Indeed, the scale of the statebuilding task in Afghanistan is so immense and the challenges so great that there is a risk that international efforts as currently configured will not be enough to turn Afghanistan around. Still, continued international efforts, even as currently configured—and it is unlikely that Afghanistan will receive a large injection of troops or aid—are critical for Afghanistan to have any chance of success.

The restoration and maintenance of security is vital for movement on all other fronts in Afghanistan. There is a need to tackle the insurgency head on, to prevent Al Qaeda and Taliban operatives from gaining ascendancy. The role of Pakistan in securing the border is also critical. Afghanistan needs robust institutions of governance, an economy free from the blight of narcotics, and effective security forces—including police. It also needs a functioning justice system to remove the culture of impunity. This involves tackling the drug trade: targeting complicit officials and giving Afghan farmers other viable options. Constructing physical infrastructure—particularly roads—should also continue to be a priority.

Stabilising and rebuilding Afghanistan after years of upheaval will take a long time—at least ten years, and probably many more. After all, troops are still deployed and statebuilding efforts continue in Bosnia over ten years after the Dayton Peace Agreement. A long-term commitment from the international community is therefore required. And Australia might need to think along those same lines as it considers how long its PRT deployment will be maintained. The Australian Government has announced it is for two years, as the Dutch have similarly stated, but there will likely be a need for such a presence to remain for considerably longer.

And even then, there are limits to what kind of state Afghanistan can realistically become. But if Afghanistan can become a stabler state with a positive reconstruction trajectory, this would be better for global security and no doubt for the Afghan people than the current precarious situation.

** The author would like to thank Alanta Colley and Vanessa Lai for their research assistance.*

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About the Author

Elsina Wainwright is the Strategy and International Program Director at ASPI. She is the principal author of *Our Failing Neighbour: Australia and the future of Solomon Islands* and the co-author with Hugh White of *Strengthening our Neighbour: Australia and the future of Papua New Guinea*. Prior to joining ASPI, she was an Associate with the management consulting firm McKinsey & Company. She also worked as a consultant political analyst for the International Crisis Group in Bosnia. She is a Queensland Rhodes Scholar, completing both her Masters and Doctorate in International Relations at Oxford University. While at Oxford, she was a Stipendiary Lecturer in Politics at Oriel College.

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Z00 24424

RRP $5.00 ISSN 1449-3993