

New Australian PM pledges ongoing commitment to Afghan war and US alliance

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Julia Gillard, who replaced Kevin Rudd as Australia's prime minister yesterday, used her first speech as leader to send a clear signal to the Obama administration that her Labor government would not waver in its support for the criminal war in Afghanistan. Gillard declared the "sacrifice" of Australian troops—five of whom have been killed over the past two weeks, taking the total number to 16 since 2001—was necessary to "honour the US [alliance] and other alliances that are so important to our nation".

Gillard specifically praised her predecessor Rudd for "having the foresight to increase our commitment to Afghanistan", in order to leave no doubt that she fully supported the cabinet decision in April 2009 that increased Australian troop numbers in the country from 1,100 to over 1,550.

Gillard's emphasis on the US-Australia alliance underscores the real motives behind the deployment of troops to Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003 by the former Liberal-National government, as well as Labor's continuing support for the US occupations in both countries since its election in November 2007. Participation has been a *quid pro quo* for remaining under the US military umbrella, for continued US backing for Canberra's own neo-colonial operations in the Pacific region, such as in East Timor and the Solomon Islands, and for ongoing access to US military technologies.

As well, Australian-based corporations have reaped significant benefits from Canberra's role as a junior occupying power alongside its US ally. In Iraq, Australian producers secured lucrative wheat export markets, while avenues were opened for other companies to profit from construction, security and energy industry contracts.

In Afghanistan, the revelation this month that the country has vast mineral resources has been followed by reports that mining giants BHP-Billiton and Rio Tinto—two of the most

powerful corporations operating in Australia—are looking at bidding for iron ore, copper, cobalt and other mineral deposits. They will be competing for contracts with companies from non-occupying powers such as China, so the access and influence of Australian diplomats and military officers with the puppet Afghan government of Hamid Karzai, facilitated by their US counterparts, will be used to seek commercial advantage.

These are the strategic calculations and big business interests that lie behind the killings committed, and deaths and injuries suffered, by Australian soldiers in Afghanistan, not the so-called fight against "terrorism" or the establishment of "democracy".

The perspective of Washington and its NATO allies in Europe has been to transform Afghanistan into a forward base for their struggle to secure geo-political dominance over the energy-rich states of Central Asia and to prevent the vast reserves of oil, natural gas and minerals there from coming under the sway of China or Russia.

Labor's support for this agenda, which will continue unaltered under Gillard, was spelt out on Tuesday by Labor's Defence Minister, John Faulkner. Reacting to opinion polls taken following the five recent casualties, showing that two-thirds of Australians wanted troops pulled out, Faulkner told parliament that "our resolve in Afghanistan remains unchanged".

Faulkner declared that the current mission of Australian troops—assisting in the occupation of the southern province of Uruzgan, a former Taliban stronghold—would continue for at least the next two to four years. When the 2,000-strong Dutch force, which has operated alongside the Australian contingent, is withdrawn from the province in August, American troops will move in and an American general will take over command. No drawdown of Australian troop numbers would begin, he emphasised, until an Afghan

government army brigade had been fully trained and equipped to replace them, sometime between 2012 and 2014.

Faulkner made clear, however, that Australian troops could remain after then. At Washington's request, the Labor government has overseen a major boost in the size and activities of the combat component of the Australian contingent, a special forces group made up of 400 elite Special Air Service (SAS) personnel and Army commandos. Labor's policy is to keep these forces fighting in Afghanistan for as long as the US wants them.

The special forces group, which includes numbers of troops who have undertaken multiple tours of duty in Afghanistan, is highly valued by US commanders. Operating in small squads, they are used as a murderously effective assassination and snatch-and-grab force, hunting down, and killing or capturing, alleged Taliban insurgents in their homes and villages.

As part of the overall escalation of the war by the Obama administration, Australian special forces have been operating not only in Uruzgan, where the bulk of Australian troops are deployed, but also in Kandahar province. Kandahar is currently the focus of a major US offensive, involving tens of thousands of American, British, Canadian and Afghan government troops. This has led to some of the heaviest combat faced by Australian troops in the entire nine-year war.

Earlier this month, a unit of commandos was engaged by a large force of Taliban fighters in an area known as Shah Wali Kot. SAS troops had to be flown in by helicopter to provide support. An Australian general told the *Sydney Morning Herald*: "They were straight into the thick of a very intense gunfight as they were getting off the helicopters, and some of the helicopters sustained damage in the process." The Australian troops reportedly had to fight "house-to-house" through a village in order to extract themselves.

The death of three commandos on June 21 was the direct outcome of their involvement in the Kandahar offensive. A Chinook helicopter carrying Australian troops into the province crashed. It has not been confirmed whether this was an accident or whether the helicopter was shot down by the Afghan resistance. In addition to the fatalities, seven soldiers were injured, two seriously.

Two Australian Army engineers were killed by a roadside bomb on June 7, while they were searching a village near the

main Australian base at Tarin Kowt in Uruzgan. After nine years, the insurgents are still able to operate within kilometres of the facility.

The five deaths in June—along with over a dozen wounded—represent a dramatic escalation in the rate of Australian casualties, and military commanders have warned that this is likely to rise even more sharply over the coming months. The Australian fatalities are part of an overall spike in the losses being suffered by the occupation forces as a direct result of Obama's escalation of the conflict and the growing resistance of the Afghan people. So far in June, 79 US and allied troops have been killed—the highest monthly death toll of the war and more than double the number lost in June 2009. A total of 299 have already died in the first half of 2010, compared with 295 in all 2008 and 521 in 2009. Overall, 1,867 occupying forces have been killed since 2001.

As in the US and Europe, millions of people in Australia no longer believe the official propaganda repeatedly rolled out to justify the war. The conflict is increasingly viewed as no different to the Iraq war or the war in Vietnam—a brutal and unjustified occupation being carried out *against* the Afghan people.

Within the Australian political establishment the views of the majority of the population find no expression. Both major capitalist parties, Labor and the Liberal-National coalition, will contest the next election on a policy of continuing the war. The Greens, who occasionally posture as "anti-war", are calling only for a timetable for a withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, and solely on the nationalist grounds that they need to be available to defend Australia's neo-colonial interests in the South Pacific.



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