Dual Aspects to the War in Afghanistan for Many Australians

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When I talk in community settings I find there is a curious dual aspect to the war in Afghanistan for many Australians. On the one hand, many people I meet are deeply troubled by the little they know about the war, and even more concerned about the great deal that they know they don't know about what coalition military forces, including Australia's, are doing there. On the other hand, this understanding is often accompanied by an unwillingness or a reluctance to take a step towards rejection of the war or criticism of the Australian government – even as they acknowledge the brazen and transparent implausibility of the government's real motive as being anything other than a felt need to maintain the US alliance.

This reluctance may stem from a number of different sources, each peculiar to the particular history and character of Australian involvement in this war.

- Many people who recognize that the war has altered the lives of most Afghans for the worse feel that there is no alternative but to go on, in the hope that somehow the presence of coalition forces will make it possible for them "to clean up the mess" their presence has created.
- The killing of Osama bin Laden has triggered a gathering recognition of the marginalisation of Al Qaeda as a global force. Yet there is often a fear, not unreasonable after a decade of major terrorist attacks, that Afghanistan will once again become - perhaps unwillingly - host to an Al Qaeda-like group.
- "The Taliban" has become a term connoting a single and singular group of people who are so culturally different from anyone we know that it is impossible to imagine living in the same world as them. How could "we" negotiate with "them"? The fact that there is no such single integrated group, and that the groups making up "the Taliban" are in fact quite diverse in character, objectives and background is freely acknowledged by coalition military insiders, but not by our government or media.
- There are entirely appropriate particular fears about the position of women and cultural minorities should coalition forces withdraw. The evident and well-documented fact that even under the present Afghan government, the situation of women and, say, Hazaras, is appalling does not offer much hope.
- After Vietnam and Iraq, Australians know full well that some of those Afghans who have worked closely with Australian military forces may very well face death when their employers and protectors leave.
- Will there not be a bloodbath after coalition forces leave?

It is cold comfort to point out that much of this is the result of CIA disinformation campaigns (as we know from Wikileaks), or the failure of Australian media to report

anything other than either Defence Department press releases or stories from officially sanctioned and constrained "embedded" journalists. And then there is the lingering racism and Islamophobia derived from this country's origins in European imperialism – and we should not forget the birth of Australia as a military contributor to maintaining the empire by sending a force about half the size f the current Afghanistan deployment to help avenge the fall of Khartoum and the death of General Charles Gordon by the "Mad Mahdi of Sudan" (aka Muhammad Ahmad) in 1885.

It would be politically foolish and morally wrong to belittle or ignore these concerns. Better to acknowledge the difficulty as honestly as possible, and be clear that while there are better options than the Australian government's cynical and immoral plans of continuing the war as long the US wants it, there are no perfect solutions, especially from outside the country.

Whatever is proposed has to deal with Australia's particular role. In other words, it is not enough inveigh against the American war machine. We have a specific responsibility and a particular arena of action. So we need to look at what is necessary and possible for our government, our peace groups, and those many Australians who feel some part of their selves and future is tied up with what happens in Afghanistan – however far away it may be. If we care enough about "Afghanistan" to allow our soldiers to kill Afghans and be killed by them, then there are responsibilities for Australians that outlast the inevitable but probably distant withdrawal date.

We need to be careful in talking about "peace plans" to recognize that not only are we dealing with other people's countries, but we do so on the basis of very limited and imperfect knowledge. But equally, complaining about government policy without trying to put forward an at least plausible alternative, based on some understanding of the drivers of this war and our fears about it, is also destructive. Here is a summary of one set of proposals for the Australian government and Australian community groups to debate and work towards improving or implementing[1]:

1. *Withdraw all Australian forces: completely, rapidly and unconditionally.* This has two goals: ending the Australian contribution to the killing, and more important still, weakening the political will of the coalition.
2. *Move the United Nations towards a more balanced position.* The United Nations is now in the position of supporting one side in an internationalised civil war. Coalition countries' participation in the war is legally founded on an annual resolution by the Security Council. Building a UN majority to withhold such a resolution will help move to the UN to a position where it can contribute to a genuine peace process.
3. *Form like-minded country groupings to frame honest broker role in an international push for peace negotiations.* Once out of the fighting Australia could work with former coalition countries like the Netherlands Canada and Germany – and conceivably in short order France, Poland Italy and Sweden.
4. *Deny sanctuary to terrorists through containment, leverage, criminalization of terrorism, intelligence and policing, and overt deterrence.* Face the fact that while

a resurgence of an Al Qaeda-type base in a future Afghanistan is unlikely, ignoring the possibility is politically unrealistic. A policy of containment and deterrence, coupled with positive incentives, is more likely to succeed in such an eventuality than a repeat of a decade of failed war. Any Afghan government is going to be highly dependent on foreign aid.

5. *Declare ongoing aid commitment comparable to war effort – strictly conditional on civil rights compliance.* If Australia cares enough about Afghanistan to spend more than a billion dollars a year to send its soldiers to kill and be killed – and for the United States, more than a hundred times that - then spending a significant proportion of that on post-conflict economic aid would make a big difference to human insecurity in the poorest country in Asia. Making such economic aid strictly conditional on protection of the rights of women and minorities would give Afghan power brokers a serious interest in compliance – an interest they do not have at present.

6. *Build a peace agenda that includes the constitutional framework and borders of Afghanistan.* Afghanistan is a quasi-state with borders drawn by foreign powers that bear no relation to the complex social make-up of an extremely poor and culturally divided country.

7. *Pilot test legitimate alternatives to the opium war economy.* Opium is the foundation of the real economy of Afghanistan, funding both sides of the war. The single most useful contribution Australia could make would be to support a pilot programme to test the viability of Afghan production of medical opiates. Since Tasmania produces a substantial proportion of the global medical opiate supply, Australia is in a position to help.

8. *Get serious about democracy in Pakistan.* The most difficult and dangerous aspect of the war today is its expansion into Pakistan and the rapidly developing destabilization of a large and fragile country armed with nuclear weapons. There are no simple answers, but the starting place is for Australia to urge cionsistent support for Pakistani democrats – in place of the unending string of military dictators and corrupt civilian prime ministers grabbing power from their feudal rural electoral bases.

One very clear answer is to face the most obvious problem – we know next to nothing about Afghanistan and we have almost no connection real people who live there. Visits, community linkages, speaking tours, personal connections of every kind other than those directed by violence and malevolence.

In his foreword to *My Life with the Taliban*, the remarkable autobiography of the Taliban leader Abdul Zaeef, the American analyst Barnett Rubin concluded:

> "For me this book poses one question above all: do I need to be this man's enemy? Politics and war may, alas, give their own answers, almost independent of our will, But a world where *Mullah* Zaeef and I cannot live in peace is not a world I want to inhabit."

We have a lot to learn and a great deal to do.

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[1] Richard Tanter, Out of the war: eight steps to a sustainable peace in Afghanistan, Nautilus Institute, Austral Policy Forum 10-03A, 15 December 2010; at http://www.nautilus.org/about/associates/richard-tanter/publications