

time until the situation stabilises, governance improves, and Afghan security forces that can meet international standards for professionalism and respect for human rights are able to take over.

The Rudd Government has also consistently stated that it does not envisage increasing the size of the ADF commitment. Australia is already the largest non-NATO troop contributor, the tenth largest overall, and the sixth largest among the contributors doing the actual fighting. Again this public position is logical, especially as so many of the Western European members of NATO refuse to pull their weight in the war. Any increase in the Australian commitment at present would only allow such countries to further renege on their responsibilities as ostensible members of an alliance at war. ♦

Being a partner not a passenger

Most of our military commitment to Afghanistan is in Oruzgan Province where we are the junior ISAF partner to the Netherlands. The Dutch, along with the British, Danes, Estonians and Lithuanians, are certainly not among those Western European NATO members dragging their feet in Afghanistan.

At the end of 2010, however, the Dutch may have to scale back or withdraw their contingent from Oruzgan due to legislative and parliamentary constraints in the Netherlands – which is permanently governed by amorphous coalition administrations elected by proportional representation. The US has stated that should the Dutch withdraw, and no other NATO member be prepared to replace them, the US will do so.

Unwilling as the Australian government is to face this situation (at least publicly), it does confront us with vital strategic, operational and moral choices. That we should and will stay the course in Oruzgan is not one of them.

That we should not stop adding our voice to those NATO members with troops actually fighting in southern Afghanistan, who are insisting that the recalcitrant NATO members mend their ways and help in that region, is not one either.

But it would be in neither our operational nor our strategic interests for the USA to become the senior ISAF partner in Oruzgan. In terms of our operational cultures, it would instead be better for us, the Americans and indeed the Afghans, if we assumed the responsibility of senior ISAF partner to command and control the necessary counter-insurgency operations at the operational and tactical levels.

Similarly, at the strategic level, in terms of both the war across Afghanistan and our wider global strategic relationship with the USA, it would be better for both Australia and the US if we assumed the majority ISAF responsibility for the securing of Oruzgan. Not only has the US already borne too much of the burden in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is important we assure our major ally that we are willing and capable of more than token or 'niche' contributions to the joint military

endeavours of the Western alliance. Canada has set an excellent strategic and moral benchmark in this regard.

This would undoubtedly require us to deploy a battalion group to the province (and we can). Based on allied experiences this would need to include artillery, tanks and, if they achieve operational capability in time (which is doubtful), our new armed reconnaissance helicopters. Otherwise the US or someone else would need to provide the attack helicopter support needed. ♦

Escalating a war in order to win it

As in all wars we must also be prepared to escalate the war in order to win it. Just as we (and our allies) successfully did and threatened during Confrontation in the early to mid 1960s – and in effect achieved by deterrence in stopping the 1999 East Timor crisis from becoming open hostilities.

The suggestion that an increased troop commitment somehow indicates that you may be losing a war is just that, only a suggestion. It is also often just a mutation of the reflexive claim of 'quagmire' that is too readily tossed up in place of reasoned argument from time to time.

The increasing success of the American 'surge' in Iraq provides a good example of an operational and political circuit-breaker – in that country and the wider region strategically. It again demonstrates that increases in force size, or actual or threatened escalations in force, can lead to resolution of a problem (if not always victory in the conventional sense) – and do so sooner than continuing to accept a perhaps problematic status quo. ♦

Monash fever erupts again

In World War I the Australian Corps, of five divisions, was our major commitment to the Western Front in France and Belgian Flanders. We also had the Desert Mounted Corps comprising two Light Horse divisions and various independent formations and units in the Palestine campaign.

General Sir John Monash was an exceptionally able and talented senior commander. He commanded at brigade level from June 1913, divisional level from June 1916, and then corps level from May 1918. He remains probably the best known senior Australian military commander in popular terms, certainly so in the case of historical figures.

Monash was instrumental in significant victories on the Western Front and in the evolution of modern military staff and operational planning processes. Being an Australian, and originally of a citizen-soldier background and with Jewish antecedents, Monash also remains distinctive in the public mind even generations afterwards. Memories of him are further burnished because of popular, but not always historically accurate, folk memories of the perceived indifferent performance of many British generals in comparison.