



AUSTRALIAN GLOBAL military operations have reached a turning point after 13 years of multiple concurrent ops.

By the time you read this Australian conventional forces operating in Combined Team Uruzgan will have repositioned and reoled in the first of a series of steps leading towards the eventual withdrawal of conventional forces from the country.

Australian manoeuvre units are now concentrated at Multinational Base Tarin Kowt, having passed full responsibility for security in Uruzgan's outlying valleys to the Afghan National Security Forces.

Our troops have now finished their dangerous close liaison as combat mentors embedded within the 4th Brigade 205th Corps and Australian Diggers of the recently deployed 7RAR Task Group have been reoled as Advisors. The rotation was originally designated as the 1st Advisory Task Group before being renamed due to political sensitivities.

While the 7RARTG Diggers will be less exposed to some of the dangers faced by their predecessors, not least being the Green on Blue attacks by disaffected ANA soldiers that saw ISAF suspend close mentoring in September for almost a month, they potentially face heavy combat if the Taliban seriously contests the ANA's control of some valleys.

With less than three thousand troops scattered over more than 30 locations, many remote with seriously insecure approach routes, the ANA will face an uphill battle to maintain the security advances made by the Dutch, US and Australian troops in the Province.

Australia's biggest battles in Afghanistan may yet to be fought. As provincial response forces, 7RARTG's combat elements could find themselves drawn into battle if and when the ANA comes under sustained assault or seriously stuffs things up.

Australian forces in Timor Leste are also in the final phase of what is hoped to be the ADF's final withdrawal from the country with the last planned Timor Leste Task Group rotating in to Dili in late October.

The Australian led International Stabilisation Force is no longer international, with the withdrawal of the last Kiwi

contingent on November 9.

New Zealand is also extracting itself from Afghanistan with the scheduled withdrawal of the final New Zealand Provincial Reconstruction Team next year.

Likewise in the Solomon Islands, where the military component of the Regional Assistance Mission in the Solomon Islands (RAMSI) will be wound down next year. While no exact date has been announced preparation of future Op Anode rotations has been cancelled.

In short, the ADF may find itself with a significantly reduced mission list within a few months.

Our war in Afghanistan will not be quite over, with ongoing involvement of Special Operations Command in Afghanistan planned out to 2018.

The Government has agreed in principle to maintain a small Special Operations Task Unit probably based in Kabul dedicated to fighting high level Islamic fundamentalist terrorist militias. The plan is dependent on US intentions and the ability to negotiate a suitable Status of Forces Agreement with GIRoA.

All of this is however still wishful thinking. Unfortunately it will be the Taliban and the ANSF who will decide if the carefully planned ISAF extraction from Afghanistan will be as easy as the initial incursion into the country in late 2001.

As the Americans are so fond of saying, "it ain't over until the fat lady sings".

One of my pet hates is crystal ball reading. I am a firm believer that predicting the future is a mugs game, better left to fortune tellers at school fetes. It has no place in journalism. My experience has taught me that reality tends to be much stranger than fiction or any well thought out White Paper. Nobody predicted Green on Blue, 10 year old suicide bombers or plain weird shit like the Al Qaida's murder videos. Planet Earth spins and its wild children howl at the moon.

But, the people I talk to, and they know what they are talking about, have serious concerns about what may follow over the next 24 months.

Scenarios ranging from a relatively benign but bumpy transition to Afghan security control through to a complete



3RARTG Mentoring Team Bravo Diggers support 6/4ANA troops in a cordon and search mission in Shah Wali Kot Kandahar on October 20.



collapse of the ANP in the southern Pashtun provinces are all in play. Hopefully, none of the doom sayers will be right and Afghanistan and the ANSF bumble through. There are many reasons to be optimistic. There is also evidence that support for the insurgency is losing ground in Afghanistan.

Australians I interviewed in Uruzgan identified a number of trends, driven by dozens of factors, that are working to undermine the Taliban's hold on the population. Rising literacy, mobile phone access, television and the example set by ISAF are all combining to create an Afghanistan that is much more sophisticated and aware of the outside world than in 2001.

There are simply far fewer dumb arse goat herders that believe the Talib promise of glory, sex and wealth in Paradise. 2012's goat herder watches porn on his Nokia and could probably even name a few contestants on Indian Big Brother or WWF wrestling.

Either way, I will wait until I am writing about the second anniversary of withdrawal from Afghanistan before announcing this war over.

The end of so many missions over the next year or two has already led to complacency from our political leaders who are now actively pursuing a 'peace dividend' - impatient to redirect funds to buying votes even before the last Australian battles are fought. Massive cuts to Defence have already been made, with rumours of worse to come over the next few years as the Government tries to claw back the billions it has blown in the last five years.

Sadly Australia's modern Anzacs may be amongst the first to be culled in response to Gilliard's Defence dollar drought, with entire units facing the chopping block to make good debts incurred on pink bat insulation and solar panels.

The timing in many ways could not have been worse as the cuts strike the ADF at the very moment it has reached sustained excellence on the battlefield under the most trying of conditions.

Decades of rolling combat operations have seen the ADF develop a hard core of experienced warriors, the like of which has not been seen since Vietnam.

Eleven years of warfare in Timor Leste, Iraq and Afghanistan has seen a progressive sifting of the ADF as soldiers pass through our battlefields. Like a gold miner working his pan, each tour further refines our servicemen. After all these years much of what we have left in our combat arms is pure gold.

During my last embed I was really impressed by both the quality of the troops in the paddock and the system which trains, equips and mentally prepares them for what is probably the most complex battlefield in recent history.

The ADF has evolved from a slow moving and relatively timid organisation that seemed to only know what it couldn't do into one of the most professionally energetic militaries in the world.

While the wars have cost us much blood and human treasure, they have also produced arguably the most professional fighting forces Australia has ever fielded. Much of this excellence is

down to the amazing men who fight our battles for us.

While much has been said about fighting the last war in the next one; experience of combat is a force multiplier. Veterans add a backbone to any fighting force that no amount of training or gucci shooters will ever replicate.

I had hopes that this current generation of combat veterans would go on to add steel to our battalions for decades.

I am afraid that we will lose many of these invaluable people within a few years. The Army in particular could face a perfect storm of exiting soldiers under the combined assaults of the funding cuts in combination with the wind down of combat ops.

Holding on to this incredible team should be a priority as we may need them more than ever in the coming years. While the US and Europe may feel that they are relatively strategically secure, the same is not true for Australia. Every indicator points to the region being less stable than it has been since the

Vietnam War.

As the Government is so keen to constantly tell us we are witnessing the rise of Asia - the most spectacular migration of economic and strategic power since the 1500s.

China, still a tyrannical one party state despite the happy face it is displaying the world, has just launched its first aircraft carrier and is actively seeking naval and air forces capable of expeditionary warfare.

India, a country with non sanctioned nuclear weapons and whose population harbours extreme levels of anti-Australian feeling and whose media frequently indulges in irrational hate campaigns against this country, is seeking Australian uranium and rapidly expanding its armed forces in our direction, building major bases in the Andaman Islands which threaten sea lanes through which most of Australia's trade passes.

Closer to home Australia faces a number of a security problems that could see ADF forces employed in force.

Many of the pressures that led to Timor Leste's collapse in May 2006 are still present. Frequent friction between the Loro Sae dominated F-FDTL and the predominantly Loro Mono controlled Policia National Timor Leste has already led to minor violence and threats of retaliation.

Even nearer our shores a potential time bomb has been gurgling away in Papua New Guinea for decades. PNG is Australia's strategic 'vital ground'. It is no mistake that our only desperate fight for national survival occurred there. PNG as a collapsed state would be like Timor on steroids with a touch of the stone age thrown in.

While not a threat in a conventional military sense, PNG is a wild card threatened with inter communal violence, collapsing institutions, economic decline and potentially high level unfriendly foreign interference. A collapse in PNG could trigger a massive refugee flow in to Qld which in turn could lead to Port Moresby levels of chaos in Australian suburbs.



A 3RARTG MT Charlie Digger in Khas Uruzgan.

John Hunter Farrell
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