

AFGHANISTAN'S CRITICAL YEAR

Major General Jim Molan tells **Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe** that Australia should invest greater resources in Afghanistan

Major General Jim Molan AO DSC retired from the Australian Army in July 2008 after a long and distinguished career as an infantryman. He has served in Papua New Guinea, East Timor, and the Solomon Islands. From April 2004, he served in Iraq for one year as the US Coalition's Chief of Operations and directed operations of all US Coalition forces. This period covered the battles of Najaf, Tel Afar, Samarra, Fallujah, Ramadan 04 and Mosul. He is the author of *Running the War in Iraq* (Harper Collins 2008), which is now in its second edition.

In late June 2010, he spoke with Sergei DeSilva-Ranasinghe, a defence analyst who has published widely on Australian, South Asian, and Indian Ocean political and security issues.

Honouring the US alliance

Australia has been an enthusiastic supporter of its alliance with the United States since World War II and has deployed troops in support of several major US military interventions in Korea, Vietnam and, more recently, Iraq and Afghanistan. According to Major General Jim Molan, Australia's military credibility is crucial to our alliance with the United States.

Jim Molan: As Australia is a Coalition partner of the United States, the credibility of our military, part of which is the government's willingness or unwillingness to use it, is very important for our future security. Our security is based on alliances, always has, and probably always will be. Alliances are give and take. For example, if we send military forces to a place like Iraq in order to impress our

allies, which is a legitimate reason, and our allies are not really impressed, then we are wasting our time. It's even worse if we send a force and then refuse to let it participate when our allies are facing desperate combat situations. We will be viewed as an unreliable military ally.

For many years now, players on the world scene have looked at the Americans and said, 'You know, hurt the Americans a bit and they'll all go home, they can't sustain casualties.' But guess what? In Iraq, they sustained more than 4,500 fatalities and 30,000 wounded; they have been there for eight or nine years and they're still there. All those terrorist and insurgent organisations that made assumptions about what an easy pushover the United States was are now uncertain. No one can say that what happened in Lebanon and Somalia—kill a few hundred Americans and they'll all go home—is happening now. Whether we like it or not, and a lot of people don't like addressing this issue because they were so against the war in Iraq, the security situation in Iraq is an extraordinary success. The achievement, predominantly by US forces, and now by Iraqi forces, has brought a stability to Iraq that gives the government a chance of pulling itself together. Of course there are still problems, but if we could achieve as much success in Afghanistan as in Iraq, we should be profoundly thankful.

When our allies are fighting desperately, as they were in 2005–06, and we refuse to let our forces be used, we have to bear the strategic consequences. Those consequences relate to military credibility, which relates to our global role and alliances, which relates to our overall security. You don't get anything for nothing. If we're going to contribute, we've got to contribute to an extent

that is appreciated by our allies. I don't think we did that in Iraq. The key lesson that we're missing doesn't really apply to the military, it applies to the strategic level. The key lesson is that if you're going to be in an alliance it's give and take – not mindlessly, not on silly adventures – but you have an obligation to take responsibility as an alliance member.

In Afghanistan, we seem to have avoided responsibility for Uruzgan province. We have been directly but quietly requested to take over, but we have dumped the responsibility back to our American allies. In my view, we can and should take responsibility for the province. The lessons that we are not learning are predominantly the higher level strategic lessons that relate to our future security and our operational-strategies. Our soldiers can handle the tactical level. We see that every day, they're fighting well in Afghanistan.

Australian troop surge

Not since the East Timor peacekeeping operation has Australia deployed as large a troop contingent as seen in Uruzgan Province in Afghanistan. However, Major General Molan argues that the number of Australian troops in Afghanistan should be doubled in view of the withdrawal of the Dutch forces in the province and the need for adequate troop density on the ground.

Jim Molan: In Uruzgan, the Dutch are about to withdraw half the troop strength [they withdrew in August], and we are not yet sure whether the United States will fully replace them, although we know they will replace the Dutch leadership. By the most generous estimates, we had half the number of troops that we needed in Uruzgan and we are about to lose half of those. How can we possibly say that in Uruzgan, we are supporting the Obama war plan of 'Disrupt, Dismantle and Defeat,' or protecting the population, or establishing the security that our civilians need to get out and do good work among the Afghans?

History would tell us that we need about 10,000 Coalition troops in Uruzgan to successfully conclude a counter-insurgency campaign; I think we could probably do it with 6,000 effective coalition troops. We have about 3,400 Coalition effectives now, not counting the Afghan National

Army, which is still limited in size and capability.

Personally, I do not care who provides the extra troops that are needed to do this right, but Australia can and should provide them, especially if no one else is going to do it. The Australian Defence Force has about 80,000 full-time and part-time personnel. In 2006 we had a maximum overseas deployment for a period of time around 5,200 or 5,600 personnel compared to the current 2,400, with 1,550 soldiers in Afghanistan and 800 deployed throughout the Middle East. That isn't many. Taxpayers are paying approximately \$28 billion a year for defence and some people are saying that we cannot deploy any more troops overseas.

This is a critical year for Afghanistan. We should take over Uruzgan and deploy another 2,000 Australian troops. If we can only provide one troop surge, now is the time. We've got the troops and the Chief of Army has said that we can replace the Dutch. But the Australian government wants to hold troops in readiness for regional contingencies. What are the regional contingencies for which we are going to risk success in the current war? I cannot see any possibility in the immediate future of any conflict between Australia and Indonesia. Are we going to invade Fiji or Tuvalu or Papua New Guinea? We've been saying there'll be a breakdown of law and order in Papua New Guinea that might require Australian troops; we've been saying that for around 40 years and it hasn't happened yet. Of course, we should have a couple of battalions in reserve to cater for any regional contingency, no matter how unlikely. Just because part of a battalion comes back from Iraq or Afghanistan should not mean they have the next year off.

We seem to have this attitude, which the Americans and Brits have long since lost, that when troops come back they don't go on another overseas deployment for a couple more years, no matter how important it is. That kind of thinking is out of date—in case of a regional emergency, peacetime deployment rules can and should be suspended. The government is using the idea of regional contingencies to avoid sending an adequate force into Uruzgan. It does not add up. The idea that to support one deployed force in Afghanistan, we need one equivalent force

preparing to replace the deployed force, and one equivalent force recovering from its deployment, is right for peacetime non-emergency force structuring. But are we to risk the entire success of the Coalition's deployment in Afghanistan because we are not prepared to use a 'recovering' force or a 'preparing' force for an emergency in the region? This really indicates the rhetoric that we are a 'force at war' is delusional. This is comfortable peacetime thinking and is out of place in the current world.

Strategic leadership

Due to the escalating crisis in Afghanistan, Major General Molan believes that the need of the hour among Australian politicians is to provide strong political and strategic leadership, especially when the Western alliance is at its most critical juncture.

Jim Molan: You only go to war for important issues, and these issues have to be important enough to take casualties for. There are things in this world that are still worth dying for, despite the personal and family tragedy that comes with it. If as a strategist you're not prepared to accept casualties, then I'd suggest you get a new job. Simplistic questions in facile polling, like asking 'Do you believe Australian troops should be brought home from Afghanistan?' is not a basis for policy.

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If the Australian government believes that it's got to go to war, it should do it properly. This government and the last government believed that Afghanistan was worth the sacrifice of Australian soldiers, and if that's still the case, the government has got to lead on this issue. I'm astounded that we spend so much time talking about what lessons the army has learned. The army will always learn its lessons and will learn them well. But what lessons have the politicians and strategic thinkers learned?

The mark, not necessarily in Australia, but the mark of Western nations overseas, is the failure of strategic leadership in marked contrast to the success of operational leadership. We saw this in the first couple of years of Iraq and we've seen it in the last couple of years of Afghanistan. Are the politicians in the Western world as good as our generals? On military strategic issues, I don't think so.

The challenge for those running the war at the operational level is that General David Petraeus has to take the lessons learned from Iraq and apply them, with appropriate adaptation, to Afghanistan. I think he and his predecessors have been doing this quite well. However, you can have the best plan and team in the world, but if you won't resource the plan, you can't succeed. The strategic lesson from Iraq and Afghanistan is the same—wars must be resourced. If you can't resource the war then do not commit. The Coalition did not do that in Iraq until towards 2007, and only just started doing it in Afghanistan. Australian troops do exactly what the government wants them to do, which is to conduct regular restricted operations in limited areas with limited forces, involving Special Forces, train the Afghans, and work on reconstruction and some civilian military operation. The question remains is that what Australia should be doing?