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The Ongoing Disaster of Australia's Policy in Afghanistan

James O'Neill

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According to a recent news report Australia is “open” to a request from the United States for more troops to be sent to Afghanistan. According to the report, Australian troops “*mostly work in a training and support role aimed at strengthening the Afghan force's ability to protect their own country.*” “*It is important, said Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, “that we work together to build up the capacity of Afghanistan's own security forces so that they can keep that country secure from the threat of terrorism.”*”

There was no opposition to this suggestion from Labor leader Bill Shorten, and neither did the country's media outlets bother to consider either the inherent absurdity of the Prime Minister's statement, or consider the geopolitical context that prevails in Afghanistan.

This has been the pattern ever since Afghanistan was invaded and occupied by a US led coalition, including Australia, ostensibly in response to the events of 11 September 2001 in the United States. That terrorist event was immediately attributed to al Qaeda, led by Osama bin Laden, who was being sheltered by the Taliban government of Afghanistan, who in turn refused to hand bin Laden over to the Americans.

That this sequence of events is almost entirely fictional has never been allowed to disturb the official narrative, which is regularly brought out to justify maintaining, or as with the most recent

request, increasing troop numbers. Quite what improvements in the situation in Afghanistan this latest ‘mini-surge’ might achieve is not clear.

One might have thought that after more than fifteen years of occupation, with the Taliban occupying more of the country than at any time since 2001, some fresh insights might be more productive. Similarly, when there has already been an expenditure of more than one trillion US dollars with no noticeable improvements and a great deal of deterioration in the country’s infrastructure, a better use of taxpayer’s dollars might be found.

There are other measurements of the occupation’s “success”. For example, opium production is now more than 20 times higher than it was in 2001. Or, as the UN pointed out recently, more than 9.3 million people, or 26% of the country’s population are in need of urgent humanitarian assistance. At the very least one might expect that this dismal record would induce a fundamental reappraisal of existing policy.

That has not happened and is unlikely to happen because it is abundantly clear that the US government and its coalition allies are unable or unwilling to look clearly at the historical reality. Without the willingness or ability to face reality, a fact based policy formulation is that much harder. The historical realities are well known and equally well documented, although the mainstream media seem incapable of acknowledging them. Ignoring reality is hardly a rational basis for policy. Among the matters that are not allowed to intrude upon the official discourse include, in far from exhaustive examples:

- i. Al Qaeda was formed in Pakistan in the late 1970s for the purpose of overthrowing the then relatively secular and Soviet supported government of Afghanistan.
- ii. The American trained and Saudi financed terrorists, then known as Mujihideen, were part of Operation Cyclone. Afghanistan was not the only target. The Muslim dominated republics of the southern USSR and China’s Xinjiang province were, and are, targets of terrorist infiltration and disruption.
- iii. The decision to invade Afghanistan was made in July 2001, months before the terrorist attacks of 9/11, when the Taliban government refused to allow an American consortium to build and control a gas pipeline from the Caspian Basin through Afghanistan, and instead gave the contract to an Argentinian company, Bidas.
- iv. The Taliban government had virtually eliminated opium production, at least in the areas that it controlled. One of the first consequences of the western invasion and occupation was a rapid and sustained increase in opium production. Afghanistan now accounts for more than 90% of the world’s heroin with a street value of between \$150 and \$200 billion depending on the level of purity.
- v. Then, as now, the narcotics trade is a vital part of CIA funding, as well as serving geopolitical goals such as causing destabilization in the target countries. It kills, for example, 25,000 Russians each year.

Despite the expenditure of more than \$1 trillion since 2001, there is no national rail system, not one new major hospital, and Afghan life expectancy is the 15th lowest in the world. The Afghan security forces, allegedly being trained ‘to build up their capacity to secure the country from

terrorism' contains significant "ghost forces", i.e. non-existent security forces, the wages for whom disappear into the corrupt pockets of local officials.

In the now familiar refrain, the utter failure of western policy in Afghanistan is blamed on others. According to US Brigadier-General Cleveland in 2016, "Russia and Iran were undermining the US and NATO."

What Russia has actually been doing, in co-operation with other States in close proximity to Afghanistan and adversely affected by the chaos continually generated there, is to try and create the conditions for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. A peaceful resolution would of course eliminate the US-NATO-Australia justification for remaining.

Although not reported in the Australian media, Afghan officials have approached Russia asking for help. The vehicle for that assistance is likely to be the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) with which Afghanistan has observer status. The CSTO is in turn linked to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) which Afghanistan will be linked to through China's massive One Belt One Road (OBOR) program.

Afghanistan's significant reserves of rare earth minerals, essential in modern technology, give it the potential to be a major contributor to OBOR's infrastructure projects. OBOR, not least though the growing geostrategic partnership between Russia and China, represents a major challenge to the US's unipolar hegemonic view of the world. The US will accordingly do nothing to promote the success of OBOR. On the contrary, its support for terrorist activities in countries participating in OBOR is aimed in part at inhibiting China and Russia from being countervailing forces to the US.

On 18 February 2017 a conference was held in Moscow to discuss Afghanistan's security future. China, India, Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan were the other attendees. A further conference, also in Moscow, was held on 14 April 2017, with 11 nations from the region participating.

The US was invited, but refused to attend. Australia was not invited, most probably because, as with the Astana peace conference on Syria, Australia is seen as an appendage of the US with no useful independent contribution to make.

If the US led coalition was really interested in a resolution of the ongoing Afghanistan security problems they would have welcomed the opportunity the Moscow conferences represented to break what US General John Nicholson, the US Commander in Afghanistan accurately described as a "stalemate."

Instead, we have the US military asking, yet again, for a boost in troop numbers, and Australia almost certainly to acquiesce, thus extending its participation in a useless war that does nothing to promote Australia's true national security interests.

A well-known definition of insanity holds that one is insane if one repeats the same action over and over and expects a different result. Australia's policy is not only dishonest and based on historical falsehoods and avoidance of reality, it is also arguably insane.

