

POLICY BRIEF

LOWY INSTITUTE
FOR INTERNATIONAL POLICY

DECEMBER 2009

ANTHONY BUBALO
Program Director
West Asia
Tel: +61 2 8238 9140
abubalo@lowyinstitute.org

OBAMA'S SURGE: THE UNITED STATES, AUSTRALIA AND THE SECOND WAR FOR AFGHANISTAN

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

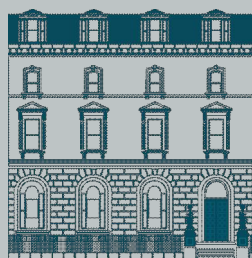
President Obama's announcement of a troop surge and the planned withdrawal of the Netherlands as lead nation in Oruzgan province in mid-2010, where the bulk of Australia's military contribution operates, raise a number of issues for Australia's role in Afghanistan. In particular:

- *the potential and perhaps unintended impact of any new lead nation on the relative improvements in security that have been achieved in Oruzgan province ;*
- *a possible demand for more Australian troops and greater flexibility in the way they are used in Afghanistan as the result of changes in US strategy;*
- *and the effectiveness of Australia's small but growing number of civilian and police personnel in Afghanistan.*

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

In the face of these specific challenges the Australian government should:

- *undertake an independent assessment of progress made by the Netherlands and Australia in Oruzgan province to prevent the relative improvement in security achieved there from being undermined;*
- *allow more flexibility in the way Australia's military trainers are used in Afghanistan, rather than increasing significantly overall troop numbers;*
- *increase the effectiveness of Australian civilian contributions by enhancing their training and developing means for greater interaction between these personnel and Afghan and international NGO staff.*
- *consider an ambitious regional diplomatic effort to limit the negative impact of external interventions into Afghanistan's internal affairs.*



LOWY INSTITUTE FOR
INTERNATIONAL POLICY
31 Blich Street
Sydney NSW 2000
Tel: +61 2 8238 9000
Fax: +61 2 8238 9005
www.lowyinstitute.org

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US President Obama's decision to dispatch 30,000 additional troops to the war in Afghanistan, announced in a speech to the West Point military academy on 1 December, has echoes of former President Bush's own surge of 20,000 troops to Iraq in 2007. Like the surge in Iraq, Obama's surge seeks to turn around a losing war, or rather to demonstrate that it is still ultimately winnable.

The President's reference in the speech to a date – July 2011 – for the start of a troop withdrawal has been justifiably criticised. It telegraphs US intentions to the insurgents, providing the Taliban with the option of waiting out the surge. It provides little reassurance to the Afghan government (and their Pakistani counterparts) about US and international commitment to Afghanistan. And it makes it more likely that the Afghan population will continue to hedge its support between the international forces that are in Afghanistan today and the insurgents that Afghans understand will remain there tomorrow.

Yet Obama's reference to a date also reflects reality. Declining support for the war and harsh economic conditions at home, combined with steady Taliban advances in Afghanistan, mean the Obama Administration probably only has 18 months to turn things around. Its goal in this short period will not be 'victory' or even 'stability' – this is hardly realistic – but rather to demonstrate that the war is salvageable. If the United States can regain this momentum then it can probably *afford* to start drawing down its troops in mid-2011 (or at least be flexible about this); but if it cannot, it will probably *have* to start withdrawing its troops at this time.

Australia's contribution to the war in Afghanistan faces looming issues of its own. The planned withdrawal of Netherlands forces from Oruzgan in mid-2010 raises questions about who will replace the Dutch as lead nation in the province and about the fragile stability that has been built there by the Dutch and the Australians. President Obama's announcement raises further questions about the number and role of Australian forces in Afghanistan and about Australia's civil and diplomatic contributions to the stabilisation of Afghanistan and its broader region.

The second war

In explaining the troop increase, President Obama referred to the original justification for the war in Afghanistan – the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. Yet, in many ways, the United States and its allies are effectively fighting this century's second war for Afghanistan. The first war was, of course, launched to target those responsible for planning the 9/11 attacks *and* those who had harboured them. It was quick, relatively inexpensive in blood and treasure and reasonably successful.

Yet, even while the international coalition and the Afghan government were fighting the residual battles of the first war, a second was emerging from its unresolved issues and consequences – chief among them the failure by the United States and its allies to plan for or properly resource, the development and stabilisation of the country after the Taliban were overthrown. At its heart, this second war for Afghanistan is an insurgency of neo-Taliban and non-Taliban elements that increasingly

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challenges both the post-2001 Afghan state and the international military presence in the country.

To the extent that it succeeds, the insurgency poses a number of challenges: it would increase the physical space that al-Qaeda and other extremist groups can operate and train in, expanding it from their current bases in Pakistan; it would diminish any pressure that these groups currently or in future may face in Pakistan; and it would, at the very least, reinvigorate an extremist narrative used to inspire al-Qaeda's partisans and emulators worldwide, and potentially help al-Qaeda revive its efforts to provide money and training to these groups as well.

It goes without saying that the insurgency is also a threat to the lives and future of many Afghans. It is correct to lament the weakness and corruption of the Afghan state today, but equally one should not ignore the progress that has been made in areas such as health care (in 2002, 9% of the population had access to basic health care; by 2008 it was 85%), education (student enrolments increased from 1.1 million in 2001 to 6.8 million today), women's rights and economic development (GDP has grown an average 10% per year since 2003).¹ This fitful and partial progress is endangered by a successful insurgency – and in some areas where schools and clinics have been targeted, that progress is already being reversed.

Given its weakness and failings, this post-2001 Afghan state might seem hardly worth fighting for, or possible to save. But even a hard-nosed assessment of Western interests would recognise that a weak Afghan state means regional countries will continue to play out

their conflicts and rivalries in Afghanistan at a cost to regional stability; or that it could result in another civil war, the consequences of which would be similarly negative. The Taliban were themselves a product of Afghanistan's last civil war and the refugee flows that resulted from it.

The challenge of (relative) success

The problem for Western policymakers is, however, that they must weigh the risk of these bad things happening against the reality of increasing troop and resources requirements for the war at a time when many contributing countries, including the United States, can least afford it. The first war for Afghanistan required roughly a sixth of the foreign soldiery that is *today* serving on the ground in the second, even before considering the additional troops that have now been sent.²

The first war for Afghanistan also had a clear and tangible, if largely punitive, goal – the defeat of al-Qaeda and the Taliban – even if it was never fully achieved. In the second war for Afghanistan the United States and its allies are, more or less, fighting the same adversaries, but the goal has become more nebulous: the 'fixing of the Afghan state' as Rory Stewart has described it.³

As Stewart has also noted, such an objective can ostensibly rally a consensus 'broad enough to include Scandinavian humanitarians and American special forces'⁴ But it obscures deepening differences between those who see nation-building as the end of the West's involvement in Afghanistan, and those who see it as a means to defeat the insurgency, to say nothing of the very different visions that exist

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about what a 'fixed' Afghan state would look like and would it would take to 'fix' it.

In this second war for Afghanistan it is also true that the presence of Western armies in Afghanistan fuels the insurgency, even if it is unlikely that the insurgency would disappear if Western forces did. It seems no coincidence that the rates of insurgent-initiated attacks have roughly matched the gradual geographic spread of foreign military forces. And while Western governments now point to the problems of Afghan governance it is also true that the international development effort since 2001 has, in many respects, been as ineffective and corrupt as that of the Karzai government.

Finally, it is even harder to make the case for an expanded effort in Afghanistan when the dominant perception is that the West is 'losing' – a perception that, ironically, seems to unite most proponents and opponents of continued Western involvement. As the Commander of US Forces and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), General Stanley McChrystal, noted in his initial assessment in August 2009 (a redacted version of which was released publicly) the situation in Afghanistan is 'serious', with 'many indicators suggest the situation is deteriorating'.⁵

This deterioration forced a shift in US strategy even before President Obama's announcement - in fact, it began in the final year of the Bush Administration, prompted by growing recognition that the war had been under-resourced and reflected in military reviews, command changes and troop increases that occurred in that year. It is that shift in strategy that the Obama Administration has now, with

some reservations, both endorsed and resourced.

Most crudely, this shift is portrayed as a change from one emphasising counter-terrorism, focusing narrowly on striking at Taliban and al-Qaeda targets, to one emphasising counter-insurgency, a broader strategy aimed at 'securing the population'. The strengths and weaknesses of this strategy in Afghanistan have been discussed elsewhere.⁶ The reality is, however, that no-one really knows if it will work – even if there is a case for it to be tried.

In some ways, however, the real challenge for the Obama Administration in Afghanistan will not be failure, but relative success. If the United States does succeed in regaining momentum from the insurgents or even the appearance of momentum (for example, if the Taliban decide to reduce their attacks and wait out the surge) over the next 18 months it will beg an obvious question. Should, at that point, the United States remain engaged in Afghanistan to ensure any new momentum is consolidated or should the Administration succumb to what will be a strong political imperative to leave while the going is relatively good?

Australia's war for Oruzgan

The idea that the United States and its allies are effectively fighting the second war for Afghanistan is especially true in Australia's case. In 2001 it contributed special forces, combat and transport aircraft and naval vessels as a part of the original effort to target al-Qaeda and topple the Taliban. But by December 2002 Australia's on-the-ground

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presence in Afghanistan had shrunk to a single Army officer. It was not until 2005 when a Special Forces Task Force was again sent to Afghanistan that Australia renewed its military involvement.

In April 2009, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd described the reasons for Australia's continuing commitment to Afghanistan:

In Afghanistan, Australia has two fundamental interests at stake. First we need to deny sanctuary to terrorists who have threatened and killed Australian citizens. Second, we also have an enduring commitment to the United States under the ANZUS Treaty which was formally invoked at the time of the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington.⁷

In the same statement Prime Minister Rudd elaborated on what this meant in practical terms by describing Australia's mission in Afghanistan as:

Strategic denial of Afghanistan as a training ground and operating base for global terrorist organisations; second, stabilisation of the Afghan state through a combination of military, police and civilian effort to the extent necessary to consolidate the primary mission of strategic denial; and third, in Australia's case, to make this contribution in Oruzgan province in partnership with our allies, with the objective of training sufficient Afghan National Army and police forces and to enhance the capacity of the Oruzgan provincial administration in order to hand over responsibility for the province in a reasonable time-frame to the Afghans themselves.

In effect, the Australian government has chosen to make its contribution to these first two missions largely in one specific part of Afghanistan, Oruzgan. A predominantly rural province in central and southern Afghanistan, Oruzgan is not as strategically vital as other southern provinces like Helmand and Kandahar, that border Pakistan, but neither is it unimportant. It contains both local insurgent groups and insurgents from other surrounding provinces. While not as stable as part of Northern Afghanistan, security in much of Oruzgan has improved in recent years relative to other parts of the south.⁸

Australia's Oruzgan-centric approach, which began in fact under the Howard government, serves a number of interests. It allows Australia to make a focused and geographically discrete contribution to the overall ISAF mission commensurate with its national capabilities. In terms of alliance interests, it demonstrates Australia's willingness to take risks by operating in that half of Afghanistan that is least benign, while managing that risk by focusing on one of the more stable provinces in that half. In its growing focus on a hand-over to local security forces, this strategy provides for an exit, possibly before the coalition mission in the rest of the country is completed.⁹

This strategy now faces, however, three sets of challenges and an opportunity. The first has been known for some time and relates to the likely withdrawal next year of the Netherlands' military forces from Oruzgan, where they have served as the lead nation. The second flows from the changing approach of the United States to Afghanistan in the last year, culminating in President Obama's latest announcement. The third relates to Australia's

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civilian contributions in Afghanistan, as well as a significant opportunity for an enhanced Australian diplomatic effort.

The Dutch model

The Netherlands is planning to give up the lead nation role in Oruzgan by August 2010, withdrawing as well some key military capabilities critical to the Australian military presence in the province, such as air and artillery support. The Australian government has resolutely ruled out taking over the lead in Oruzgan from the Dutch and is unwilling and in some cases, probably unable, to substitute some of the military capabilities that the Dutch will take with them when they leave. Neither of these problems is insurmountable, however, and it is likely a third country (or countries) will be found to substitute for the Netherlands in both respects.

There is, however, a less obvious issue raised by the likely departure of the Netherlands as the lead nation. The Dutch have taken a particular approach in Oruzgan which has come to be known colloquially as the 'Dutch model'. The Dutch characterise it as a comprehensive or '3D' (defence, development and diplomacy) approach that closely integrates civil and military operations. To some degree the 'Dutch model' is being echoed in the US military's recent emphasis on an integrated civil-military approach to the insurgency in Afghanistan.¹⁰

Some observers have argued that this approach – combining relative military restraint, significant research into local political and socio-economic conditions, high levels of local consultation and a concentration on the main

population centres in the province – has contributed to the improvement in security in Oruzgan in recent years.¹¹ Others are more dismissive, arguing that the Dutch have simply ceded ground outside the main population centres to the insurgents who do not feel threatened by their operations and therefore limit their attacks.¹²

Still others have argued that the truth lies somewhere in between. One senior Dutch officer has argued that it may, in fact, have been a combination of the more restrained approaches of the Dutch and more aggressive posture of the Australian forces that has contributed to the improved security situation. Specifically, he suggested that the aggressive approach of Australian special forces in the province has created space for the Dutch '3D' approach to operate and have effect (American special forces also operate in the province).¹³

Whatever the truth of the matter, there is an urgent need to understand the factors that have contributed to improvements in security in parts of Oruzgan. If it is true that Dutch military restraint – or some combination of Dutch restraint and more aggressive action by Australian and US special forces – has contributed to relative levels of stability, there is a risk that a new lead country might now undermine it, even unintentionally. As such it would seem prudent to conduct a reasonably comprehensive review of these issues well before the Netherlands leave, consistent with Australia's effort to manage the risk involved in its deployment to Afghanistan.

One component of such a process would be an independent assessment of progress in the province, and the political and other dynamics

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that underpin it, similar to that conducted by the Afghan NGO, The Liaison Office for the Netherlands, but expanded to incorporate Australian and US military and civil operations in the province as well.¹⁴ An important adjunct to this would be a forum (or forums) that brought together Afghan, Australian, Dutch and other relevant military and civilian representatives (including NGO representatives) to discuss and debate frankly and constructively what has been achieved in Oruzgan, what has worked (and what has not) and what needs to be done in future to ensure that this progress is maintained.

The American model

The second set of challenges relates to shifts in US strategy in Afghanistan – shifts that, as already noted, have been taking place for some time now. The obvious issue raised by the US move to a more manpower-intensive counter-insurgency strategy is a demand for additional troops. This is not simply a question of whether the Administration has or has not made a troop request. It is also a judgement the Australian government needs to make about what is the most effective contribution it can make to international efforts in Afghanistan and what is necessary to manage alliance expectations.

The Rudd government already made a significant increase in the number of Australian troops serving in Afghanistan at the beginning of 2009. Australia could probably increase its commitment further, making a contribution to the additional 10,000 troops that President Obama sought from allies in his speech. Yet as General McChrystal noted in his leaked report

on the situation in Afghanistan last August, while increased resources are required to succeed, there is a more urgent need for changes in strategy, and in the way international forces 'think and operate'.¹⁵ In this regard even a significant, but still ultimately marginal contribution of Australian troops is less important than what Australia does with the forces it already has in the country.

Australia does not have the numbers – and arguably the experience – to make a substantial war-fighting contribution to the US counter-insurgency effort in Afghanistan. Where it can and is increasingly making a contribution to the war effort is in the training of the Afghan army – something that the Defence Minister recently indicated may well increase.¹⁶ This is not without its own challenges, however.

The Australian military training and mentoring team is currently working with Oruzgan-based kandaks (roughly, battalions) of the Afghan Army. The most critical part of the military training model used throughout Afghanistan is the embedding of international troops in these units when they go into combat. It is the ongoing mentoring of these units under combat conditions that has the deepest and quickest impact on their military proficiency, as well as stiffening their war-fighting capability.

As reflected in the Prime Minister's statement above, the Australian government has emphasised that the focus of its training efforts is currently in Oruzgan province. Some press reports indicate that, unlike Australia's special forces, Australia's military trainers are effectively restricted to the province.¹⁷ Whilst security in Oruzgan is important, the current

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strategic priority is further south. It may well be that the Afghan government and the US military leadership would eventually decide to send Afghan forces currently in Oruzgan elsewhere. This is especially important given the need to place an Afghan face on security operations throughout the country as quickly as possible. Sending these forces outside of Oruzgan without their Australian mentors would, however, significantly diminish their effectiveness.

Lifting any restrictions that may currently exist on our trainers would probably make a greater relative contribution to the war effort in Afghanistan (and to the management of alliance expectations) than even a sizeable further increase in troop numbers (especially if any increased troops were also limited to operations in Oruzgan). This is particularly the case given the emphasis that General McChrystal and other US military leaders have placed on flexibility and 'unity of effort' amongst allied countries operating in Afghanistan. More generally, an enhanced focus on military training would be consistent with both the desire of the Afghan government and people to gain control of their own security and sovereignty, and with the wish of international forces to make an early, but responsible, exit from the war.

Civil and diplomatic contributions

A final set of challenges relates to Australia's civil and diplomatic contributions to the war in Afghanistan. General McChrystal has repeatedly emphasised that success in Afghanistan will depend greatly on an integrated civil-military effort that both

provides security *and* improves basic services and governance for the Afghan people. Indeed, it is in this area that even relatively small contributions will make a big difference to the war effort.

After a slow start, Australia has gradually expanded its civil and diplomatic presence in the country and the Australian Prime Minister recently announced a further contribution of civilians and police of unspecified number. The training and operation of civilian personnel and even police in an environment where security is deteriorating is, however, extremely challenging.¹⁸ Even the United States is grappling with this, so it would be a surprise if Australia were not as well. The anecdotal impression amongst some non-government organisation (NGO) personnel in Afghanistan - whose ability to move around is generally greater than that of government personnel - is that many of the government civilians of all nationalities are increasingly cut off from the situation 'outside the wire', diminishing their effectiveness.

There is no easy solution to this. Governments have a duty of care for their staff and simply being a government representative makes security a greater issue than for someone working for an NGO. As the US military commentator Anthony Cordesman noted in a recent address to the Lowy Institute, the reality is that many of the civil tasks will have to be performed in the field by the military in close liaison with their civilian colleagues.¹⁹

A detailed discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this paper. There are, however, two immediate ways the government should consider increasing the effectiveness of its

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civilian contribution in Afghanistan. The first is an enhanced program of training for civilian advisors that would make it possible for them to operate more closely with the military in a greater range of threat environments than is possible now. This would be expensive and time-consuming and would not mitigate all the risks faced by civilian personnel in Afghanistan, but it would also be a sound investment given the likelihood of Australia's being involved in these types of mission in the future, including in its own region.

Second, the government should explore forums and mechanisms that allow for greater interaction between government civilians and NGO personnel – both international and Afghan – on the ground in Afghanistan. This is not as simple as it sounds, particularly since many NGO personnel are wary of compromising their neutrality by being seen to visit military bases in Afghanistan. It could, however, be resolved through meetings and workshops in other more secure parts of Afghanistan or even outside the country.

Finally, consistent with the argument being put forward in this Policy Brief that Australia can and should be more ambitious in the way that it uses its military and civilian contributions in Afghanistan, there is an opportunity for a more effective use of Australian diplomacy. One key element in the current instability is the role played by many of Afghanistan's neighbours – and not just Pakistan – whose proxy competition and efforts to increase their influence in the country come at a cost to Afghan security and sovereignty. Building some form of accord or understanding amongst these countries would be a critical contribution to Afghan stability in the medium term.

This may seem a more appropriate role for some of the bigger players such as the United States or the United Kingdom. Yet Australia also has significant assets in this regard: the strong perception in the region is that it lacks any agenda and indeed that it does not have the historical baggage of others. This is not to say that any such initiative would not be extremely taxing of Australia's limited diplomatic resources. But the gains that could be made in terms of Australian and international interests in Afghanistan would certainly justify it, not least a more rapid, responsible and sustainable exit for US-led international military forces from the country.

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NOTES

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² Approximately 14,000 troops participated in the initial invasion of Afghanistan. According to a Congressional Research Service Report the average monthly foreign troop strength in Afghanistan in FY2009 has been 81,000, rising to an estimated 93,450 in FY2010. Amy Belasco, *Troop Levels in the Afghan and Iraq Wars, FY2001-FY2012: Cost and Other Potential Issues*, Congressional Research Service, 2 July 2009.

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⁴ Ibid.

⁵ General Stanley A. McChrystal, *Commanders Initial Assessment*. Reproduced in the Washington Times 30 August 2009: http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment_Redacted_092109.pdf.

⁶ See for example Anthony Cordesman, *Winning in Afghanistan: how the US will win or lose the war*. Washington, Center for Strategic and International Studies 15 September 2009; Andrew J. Bacevich, The Petreus Doctrine. *The Atlantic*, October 2008.

⁷ Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, Press Conference, Parliament House, Canberra, 29 April 2009.

⁸ The Liaison Office, *Three years later: a socio-political assessment of Uruzgan province from 2006 to 2009*. 18 September, 2009.

⁹ Hugh White, Comment: Afghanistan. *The Monthly*, October 2009.

¹⁰ See Annex C in General Stanley A. McChrystal, *Commanders Initial Assessment*.

¹¹ Afghanistan's Dutch model province. *The Economist*, 12 March, 2009; Damian Grammaticas, Dutch 'success' in Afghan conflict. *BBC News website*, 3 July 2009; The Liaison Office, *Three years later: a socio-political assessment of Uruzgan province from 2006 to 2009*.

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¹³ Hanneke Chin-A-Fo, We are fighting the Taliban and the narco industry. *NRC Handelsblad*, 25 March 2009.

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¹⁵ General Stanley A. McChrystal, *Commanders Initial Assessment*.

¹⁶ Max Blenkin, Review could change troop role: Faulkner. *The Age*, 2 December 2009.

¹⁷ See interview with Daniel Marston in Tony Eastley. *Are Australian troops trained for the war in Afghanistan?* ABC Radio, AM program, 21 July 2009:

<http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2009/s2631510.htm>. See also interview with Air Chief Marshall Angus Houston in Mark Colvin, *Defence to announce civilian casualties in Afghanistan*. ABC Radio, PM program, 21 July 2009: <http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2008/s2632431.htm>.

¹⁸ For a good discussion of this see Mark O'Neill, *Confronting the hydra: big problems with small wars*. Lowy Institute Paper 28. Longueville Media, 2009.

¹⁹ Anthony Cordesman, US policy toward Afghanistan and Pakistan. Lowy Institute for International Policy, Sydney, 14 October 2009.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anthony Bubalo is Program Director, West Asia, at the Lowy Institute for International Policy.

Before joining the Lowy Institute, Anthony was an officer in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) for some thirteen years. He has served in Australian diplomatic missions in Saudi Arabia and Israel, and was Senior Middle East Analyst with the Office of National Assessments from 1996 to 1998. From 2002 to 2003 he was a Director on the Australian government's Iraq Task Force. Immediately prior to joining the Lowy Institute, Anthony was DFAT's Senior Speechwriter.

He is the author, with Greg Fealy, of Lowy Institute Paper 05: *Joining the Caravan? The Middle East, Islamism and Indonesia* and, with Greg Fealy and Whit Mason, of Lowy Institute Paper 25: *Zealous Democrats: Islamism and Democracy in Egypt, Indonesia and Turkey*.

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