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Iraq and 'staying the course'

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Some say that going into Iraq was always a fool's errand. It wasn't. There were good reasons for going in. But we tried to do too many things in Iraq, and set ourselves an impossible mission. When we went in we hoped to

- find and destroy any remaining chemical and biological weapon stocks, and remove the possibility that Iraq might one day have nuclear weapons
- topple Saddam Hussein, a ruler with 'form' in relation to use of weapons of mass destruction, and an appalling track record in relation to his neighbours and own people
- break any existing linkages between the Iraqi regime and fundamentalist Islamic terrorists, and bring to an end a history of Iraqi state-sponsorship of terrorist groups
- lift a rapidly-weakening sanctions regime against the country, the principal effects of which had long been shifted from the elite to the poorer sections of the population, and which Saddam himself was rorting
- create a democratic form of government in Iraq in order to underline the country's more peaceful strategic future
- stabilise Iraq as an important contributor to the world oil market, bringing Iraqi oil back on tap
- and make Iraq a vanguard for the political reform of the Middle East in the belief that such reform was essential to the slowing of the long-term growth in Islamic terrorist movements.

Many of those reasons were canvassed by Prime Minister Howard in a closely-reasoned speech to the National Press Club on 14 March 2003, where he outlined the Australian Government's reasons for supporting military action against Saddam Hussein's Iraq. A notable omission from the PM's list—at least in hindsight—was any argument that the coalition partners would transform the Iraqi polity into a garden of democracy. And a notable addition to the PM's list—additional, that is, to the points outlined above—was Australia's sense of its alliance obligations under the ANZUS treaty. During his speech the PM made clear that other options for achieving the goals outlined above were believed to be either unavailable or ineffective. Further, the option of doing nothing was believed to be potentially more costly than the option of intervening.

This set of goals was more than well-intentioned: each of the goals was—in an individual sense—strategically sensible. The goals were of a variety of characters. Some were merely strategic; they aimed at breaking state sponsorship of terrorist groups and minimizing the risk that weapons of mass destruction (WMD) could find their way into the hands of terrorist groups. Others had something of a grand strategic character to them: pushing the envelope of the democratic peace thesis in the belief that Western objectives would be profoundly served by the long-term growth of a society of democratic, open states in the Middle East. Some of the goals were simply humanitarian: the desire to provide a better solution to the Iraq problem than the sanctions, for example.

The goals also differed from each other in relation to the time necessary to realise them. The first four goals—those relating to WMD, Saddam, state-sponsorship of terrorism, and the sanctions—could all be achieved relatively quickly. The next two—implanting democracy and resuscitating the oil industry—were at best medium-term objectives attainable perhaps over a five-to-ten-year timeframe. And the final objective—transforming the political landscape of the region—might well be the work of decades.

Intervention therefore had to achieve an ambitious list of outcomes. It was the equivalent of trying to hit seven birds with one stone. Getting even half of the birds would have been remarkable. Moreover, the act of intervening had its own unintended consequences. Intervention was premised upon a particular judgment that the end of the Cold War had helped to foster: a belief that around the world captive populations were struggling to be free. We had seen this during the break-up of the Soviet empire. Sadly, in Iraq the phenomenon didn't take the direction we expected. Iraqis were struggling to be free all right, but fissiparous pressures, long suppressed, meant they were sometimes struggling to be free from each other.

What now?

If Australia wants to make a sensible contribution to 'sorting out' the issues that now bedevil the coalition's efforts in Iraq, then it needs to urge some overdue discipline to the broad set of objectives that helped motivate intervention in the first place. In short, if we are committed to 'staying the course', then we have to define better what that phrase means. How do we do that? We do it by clarifying the list of desired outcomes and thinking more realistically about our priorities. We tick off what we have already achieved, and pocket those gains. And then we make judgments about what's still achievable and at what cost.

On the positive side of the ledger, we can be confident that the short-term objectives have largely been achieved. The WMD point is satisfied. We've toppled and prosecuted Saddam. We've lifted the sanctions. And we've minimised the prospect for Iraqi state sponsorship of terrorism. Some of those gains might be reversible in the future, but there are few final solutions in international relations.

On the other side of the ledger, all our medium-to-long term objectives have been harder to attain. We haven't embedded democracy, though we have attempted to put in place some form of democratic structure and, encouragingly, the Iraqi population seems determined to vote. But constructing democracy is a long-term enterprise, and its success depends ultimately upon the level of indigenous commitment to that enterprise. Intervention could never do more than create the 'space' within which democratic Iraqi institutions might grow. Moreover, the software side of the enterprise—the values and principles which allow the system to work—is much harder to construct than the hardware side, even with high levels of indigenous engagement in the project.

Similarly, we've failed to stabilise Iraqi oil supplies, our other medium-term objective, and that's an important problem because oil sales are the basis of a thriving Iraqi economy. Not much reconstruction will occur without a steady flow of oil revenues. Most tellingly, our goal of a new, peaceful, democratic Iraq becoming the vanguard of political reform in the Middle East remains distant. Indeed, a torn, fragmenting Iraq has become something of a problem in the regional power balance, helping to strengthen Iran's regional hand and adding another layer of complexity to any decisions the coalition might now take.

Our ability to achieve and lock-down any of those medium-to-long-term objectives is now hamstrung by an extremely violent insurgency. The violence emanates from a series of groups including sectarian death squads, Sunni extremists, and Arab 'rejectionists', as well as Al Qaeda's supporters. We don't have a clear picture of many of the different groups. We are uncertain about their political agendas (apart, of course, from an obvious desire to hurt and dominate). And we are ill-informed about which of them might harbour longer-term animosities towards the West, much as the Afghan mujahideen did after the Soviet Union's withdrawal from Afghanistan. Helping to contain the security challenges emanating from those groups is the most immediate problem affecting the coalition's (and Australia's) decisions about future levels of engagement.

Still, the core members of the coalition probably all remain committed to their original views about the desirability of achieving the longer-term objectives. Pursuing those objectives

through other means—such as encouraging the longer-term growth of a pluralist, civil society — might start to feature more in our thinking about Iraq. Regardless of whether the coalition has 'boots on the ground' in Iraq, we would want Iraq to be democratic, just as we want China to be democratic. Hopefully, the oil recovery program is merely a matter of funds once a period of stability is reached inside Iraq. The hardest objective of all to achieve—as it always was—is the reshaping of the broader Middle Eastern security environment.

Exit plans?

Australia, which has suffered no combat fatalities and endured no Madrid-style train bombing should not lead a charge for the exit doors from Iraq, abandoning its coalition partners. Such a move would be most unseemly. But pressure is mounting in both the United States and the United Kingdom to think about exit points, and it is important that the coalition partners act as a coherent unit. Those exit points need to make strategic and not merely tactical sense. Ideally, they should allow us to retain the pocketed gains from intervention, to minimise resulting costs, and to keep open our option to pursue our longer-term objectives albeit through different means.

The exit points must also be based upon a consideration of what we leave behind, both within Iraq's borders and beyond them. In particular, we would not want to see either Iraq itself—or specific regions within Iraq—become a new sanctuary for Al Qaeda. To offset that possibility, the coalition partners might need to retain options for more limited future interventions should they prove necessary. At the regional level, virtually all exit strategies would result in an empowered Iran and a weakened Iraq, and growing Shia influence in the Middle East. That condition would have worrying security implications for the Gulf states, who would fear Iran's overlooming of their position, and might be drawn more towards new security arrangements both amongst themselves and with others as a result.

In practice, all three main coalition partners are probably hoping for some drawdown of their forces over the next 12-18 months. Without a substantial improvement in the security situation it is hard to see how that can be done. The numbers of US, British and Australian forces in-country are already relatively small, and there seems no chance at all that any of the coalition's members are going to boost troop numbers substantially in an attempt to improve the short-term security situation. Moreover, with the security situation so poor, it would not be a viable option to 'hand off' more of the mission to civilians.

The obvious breaking point is actually the Iraqi political system. Some anticipate a break-up of Iraq into distinct Shia, Sunni and Kurdish entities. The escalating sectarian violence is a potent indicator of this possibility. Others anticipate the failure of democracy and the return to a less-savoury form of political regime. One option, recently canvassed by Eliot Cohen, would be a 'junta of military modernisers.' This idea is not far-fetched. If we look at academic research designed to give us predictive capacity for military intervention in politics, the three best predictors seem to be the level of civil society, the legitimacy of the government, and the place of the coup in the country's history. On all three factors, Iraq might well be thought a serious candidate for military intervention.

Either of those outcomes would bring its own set of wrinkles. The break-up scenario would probably purchase a degree of stability, just as the break-up of the former republic of Yugoslavia did. But the Sunnis would find that much of their oil wealth had disappeared. And the three 'mini-states' would start to resemble the tiny Gulf states, increasing the relative power of Iran in comparison to its neighbours. The 'junta' scenario has previously worked as a path of modernization: in both Indonesia and South Korea, for example, militaries have—sometimes—been agents of development. Still, in many places they haven't been: the long period of military rule in Burma, for example, has resulted in the lowest GDP-per-capita of any of the ASEAN states.

Implications for Australia

There is a sense that we are moving towards some sort of 'endgame' in Iraq. It is not the endgame we hoped for. And it may be coming more quickly than some anticipated: given the escalating tempo of Iraqi violence, 2007 looks like being a critical year. Only radical options for constraining the violence are now available: large-scale intervention forces from outside, or

a more brutish crackdown from inside. Neither will look pretty. More than ever the coalition partners need to keep a clear-sighted view of their own strategic objectives.

Australia should talk to its coalition partners about where engagement in Iraq is headed. We have interests at stake here: we want an exit strategy that pockets the coalition's short-term gains, explores other options for achieving the longer-term gains, and leaves behind some form of stability both for the Iraqi people and the Gulf states. We also have a fundamental interest in the continuing good health of our own alliance, and so, in helping our ally to find a graceful exit route. It is not in our interests to have the United States slump into a 'post-Iraq syndrome' similar to the post-Vietnam one. The continuing importance of the Middle East for global security should help keep the US engaged there. But our dialogue should also reaffirm the value of US global engagement at a time when many Americans might be tempted towards more introspective and insular strategic policies. And finally the dialogue should also address 'next steps' in the War on Terror, for it is certain that the broader War will continue, and the bruising experience of Iraq will undoubtedly be a factor in both our—and Osama bin Laden's—thinking about the future use of force.

About the Author

Dr Rod Lyon is the Program Director, Strategy and International, with ASPI. Rod was most recently a Senior Lecturer in International Relations at the University of Queensland where he taught courses on conflict, international security, and civil-military relations. His research interests focus on a range of problems associated with global security, nuclear strategy and Australian security. He previously worked in the Strategic Analysis Branch of the Office of National Assessments between 1985 and 1996. As a Fulbright scholar in 2004, he was a visiting research fellow at Georgetown University in Washington DC, researching a project on the future of security partnerships in the post-September 11 environment. He was appointed to the National Consultative Committee on International Security Issues in April 2005.

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