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Iraq, Bush and Australia

by Rod Lyon

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Recent polling showing the majority of Australians have lost heart in the war in Iraq suggests the issue will be a prominent one during the 2007 Australian election campaign. Iraq was certainly a factor in the mid-term US elections in 2006, and probably will be an issue for the presidential campaign in 2008. But in 2007 it's going to be Australia's turn. The issue's prominence will be fuelled by the probable outcomes from President Bush's decision to 'surge' US forces: an escalating level of violence between Coalition forces and Iraqi extremists, a difficult period of urban warfare inside Baghdad and other Iraqi cities, and a rising casualty list. Moreover, a range of potential side-effects, including a more adversarial relationship between the US and Iran, may add heat to the debate over Australian engagement.

Australia's choices

How will Bush's new approach affect Australia? In terms of our forces already in theatre, much will depend on the 'management' of the Coalition's dealings with the Shia militias. A more inflammatory relationship between the two could make the south of the country—where the majority of Australian forces are based—less welcoming. And with the bulk of the US effort confined to Baghdad, the extremists might well find it in their interests to spread the conflict to other towns and districts. The attack on US and Shia forces in Karbala about a week ago—apparently by Sunni insurgents wearing US military uniforms—suggests just such a pattern of horizontal escalation, which might make the Coalition's mission more hazardous.

Regardless of whether it does or not, Australia's engagement in Iraq alongside the US—and Prime Minister Howard's explicit endorsement of Bush's announcement—can be expected to reawaken a debate in this country about our commitment there. The debate will be partly about where the Middle East fits in terms of our own strategic priorities. In the 2005 *Defence Update*, the government said that 'Australia's vital interests are inextricably linked to the achievement of peace and security in the Middle East.' The *Defence Update* does not describe the Middle East itself as a 'vital interest' for Australia. Joseph Nye once described vital interests as any interest for which a country would be prepared to go to war unilaterally. And frankly, Australians aren't prepared to go to war unilaterally over events in the Middle East. But there's no denying that the region is strategically important to us, and not least because of its 'linkage' to a range of interests, including the global economy, the War on Terror, proliferation, and US security policy.

Still, the debate will be about more than geographical priorities. Partisan divisions have marked Australia's engagement in Iraq from the outset. Simon Crean, then Australian Labor Party leader, is renowned for having farewelled ADF troops heading off to a war he did not believe they should be going to. Those divisions were reinforced during the 2004 election campaign, when Mark Latham ran on a platform of having Australian troops 'home by Christmas.' Even now the ALP and the Coalition government run different policies on Iraq, especially in relation to the exit strategy of Australian forces, with the Prime Minister stating only last Thursday that he was not prepared to 'rat' on an ally.

An Iraqi exit?

'Exit strategy' as a term came into vogue during the 1990s. But what does the term mean? Essentially it invites us to consider timelines for 'exiting' from our strategic commitments. The problem with the concept, as Gideon Rose argued some years ago, is that in first-order strategic contests there aren't clear 'exit strategies'. It would be equivalent to asking 'what was the exit strategy from World War 2?' Or 'what was the exit strategy from the Cold War?' 'What should Australia's exit strategy be from its ANZUS commitment?' Of course, in all those examples we didn't (or don't) have an exit strategy. In short, the more durable or the more compelling we think a commitment is—the more that commitment touches upon what we think of as critical strategic interests—the less likely we are to believe that it would make sense to impose a timeline on our commitment.

Indeed, perhaps 'timelines' don't offer us a good way to think about exit points at all; perhaps those points are better seen in terms of 'conditionalities' than in terms of time. Maybe it is more sensible to ask 'under what conditions would it make sense for us to exit a particular commitment?' If we look at the issue from that perspective, then it's easy to see that a defined set of conditions might sometimes take longer to realise than we initially expected, though in other instances might be achieved more quickly than we initially expected.

So what should Australia's 'exit strategy' be in relation to Iraq? This is a difficult question. So far, broadly speaking, we've seen Iraq as the US's game; so the most likely exit point has been one virtually of Washington's choosing. If we want to move to a more 'independent' sense of our exit point, then our exit point logically depends on us reaching one of two decisions about the conditions in Iraq:

- either we judge that we have achieved what we wanted out of our engagement
- or we judge that what we wanted is no longer attainable at a sensible price.

Let's start with the first option: that we might decide to withdraw because we have achieved what we wanted. Well, what does Australia want out of its engagement in Iraq? We would seem to have two important sets of interests at stake here: our own national interests in the Middle East, both strategic and economic, as well as a key security interest in having our major ally emerge from this conflict in relatively good shape. Wrapping them both together, it seems we still want a stable Iraq, in a less tense Middle East, and an ally that still picks up the burdens of shaping international security outcomes and providing public goods to the world. Those are large objectives. Moreover, we can't agree on how to achieve them. (How do we build a more stable Iraq? Is such a goal even possible?) But we can agree, probably, that we haven't achieved what we wanted to achieve out of our engagement. So, in relation to the first option, we haven't yet reached an exit point.

The second option—that we judge the game no longer to be worth the candle—is brutally Clausewitzian. Clausewitz's dictum that war is the continuation of politics by other means contains its own exit strategy. For it is the value of the political objective that constrains the magnitude, scope and duration of the violence necessary to achieve it. But this merely takes us back to our original puzzle: how strategically 'valuable' are the returns that we seek in Iraq? Here, strategists honestly disagree. For Bush and Howard and Blair, the outcome of the conflict in Iraq has tremendous strategic value. For their critics, it has less value: the Middle East has traditionally been shifting and difficult strategic terrain, and external interventions have seldom helped make it less so. So in relation to the second option, we probably can't agree on an exit point either, because we can't agree on the worth of the candle.

The government has made clear that it is in no hurry to withdraw Australian forces. The Australian Labor Party's policy is to withdraw our troops after some form of consultation with Washington. Senior ALP figures still seem to think that the Iraq war should never have gone ahead (that is, that the game was never worth the candle). It is certainly within the remit of the Australian government to withdraw its forces any time it chooses, from any theatre of operations. But the ALP policy seems not to define the conditions under which an exit and subsequent shift to different forms of security assistance would make strategic sense; indeed, it will be a challenge for the party during the year to define those conditions more carefully if it is not to be accused of 'cutting and running'.

True, pulling out of Iraq would reduce the stresses on the Australian Defence Forces. But decisions to exit conflicts—just like decisions to enter them—need to be taken with full regard

for consequences, and not merely the consequences for the ADF. George Bush's new strategy is a calculated gamble. John Howard's decision to tie himself publicly and unequivocally to the strategy is also a gamble. And, if it succeeds in gaining power, an ALP government might also find that a decision to withdraw Australian forces according to a set timetable would be a calculated gamble.

The game of consequences

We need to consider the withdrawal option with these questions in mind. If we withdraw Australian forces does it make it more likely or less likely that Iraq—a country with a weak state, ineffective security forces, and intense ethnic identities—could slide towards civil war? If we withdraw does it make it more or less likely that Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia will assume more aggressive, interventionist roles in relation to Iraq? If we withdraw does it make it easier or harder for the US to complete the mission (or at least to leave behind some semblance of order)? In other words, what follows withdrawal? Personally, I think that if one of the foundation members of the Coalition withdraws, then the tempo of the sectarian conflict will probably increase, the neighbours become more involved, and the prospects for the break-up of Iraq escalate.

What does Australia do now? It is not in our interests to see the intervention fail, and it is in our interests to do what we can to minimize the prospects of failure. Our reasons for that are not merely humanitarian, but strategic. They concern the future shape of Middle East security, as well as the confidence of our major ally. Moreover, what we do in Iraq has to mesh with what we would like to see happen in the broader region and what we think fits with our larger strategy for the War on Terror. Critics say that the Coalition's staying in Iraq aids Al Qaeda's recruitment campaign. So it does: terrorist recruitment thrives on images of Islamic victimisation. But recruitment would also surge were the Coalition to quit, because recruitment also thrives on perceptions of Islamic success. That's especially true now, when the Arab world is hungry for demonstrations of Arab power.

Given previous divisions, we are simply unlikely to find a point of consensus on the issue of Iraq: after all, why would we manage that now, when we haven't previously? In some ways, the issue is typical of the broader slippage in bipartisanship across much of our security policy. No consensus exists within Australia now, for example, about this country's strategic position in a world of unipolarity. Similarly, no consensus exists within Australia now about the relative threat priorities that we must counter, and whether our security environment has been fundamentally transformed by the events of 11 September 2001. And no consensus exists on the meaning and durability of traditional strategic doctrines, nor on the possible implementation of new ones.

Australia and the United States

Still, in any end-game calculations about Iraq, Australia does have one central strategic consideration at stake. Some think the United States will emerge from Iraq suffering a recurrence of 'post-Vietnam syndrome'. But what would a US policy of retrenchment or restraint look like in today's world? Vietnam was an atypically 'hot' conflict in a long, 'cold' war where force was predominantly used indirectly, and the US could keep using its forces that way even while licking its wounds from the Southeast Asian encounter. But in the 50-year, attritional, War on Terror we aren't predominantly using force indirectly: indeed, the argument the Bush administration has made—explicitly—is that terrorist groups can't be deterred. Bowing out of a hot war when we expect the war to remain hot for some decades yet would send a poor message about Western countries' commitment to the broader War on Terror.

Harvard international security professor, Steven Miller, argued in October 2006 that the effect of Iraq on US grand strategy would depend on how the intervention was interpreted in Washington. He surmised that the Bush administration might well conclude that it had achieved the 'destructive' side of its agenda there (toppling Saddam, weakening Iraq, ensuring the dismantlement of WMD programs) but failed in the 'constructive' side of its agenda (nation-building and democracy-promotion). The obvious conclusion, thought Miller, was that the US would be drawn more into relatively quick, 'destructive' options, and pushed away from relatively slow 'constructive' ones.

That line of logic is entirely sensible. But it will have a profound effect on US grand strategy. The Bush doctrine at its core is a blend of Walter Russell Mead's Wilsonian

and Jacksonian schools. Wilsonians are motivated by the constructive, idealistic side of the agenda, Jacksonians happy with the more limited destructive side. The post-Iraq grand strategy that Miller describes would likely drive a wedge between them, shattering the Bush doctrine. Perhaps that shattering would be less important as the presidential campaigning of 2008 got substantially under way, and people began to anticipate a new occupant in the Oval Office in 2009. Still, the lessons of Iraq would be deeply felt by a new administration of whatever political stripe.

In short, we should expect 'failure' in Iraq to reawaken within the United States a more vigorous debate that would have some of the overtones of the Clinton era: what is unipolarity good for? What should the United States be attempting to do with its power? That debate seems likely to translate into a greater measure of US self-doubt. And that's something that Australia would be reluctant to see: the unipolar power is currently responsible for providing an important share of 'public goods' into the international system, and a greater hesitancy in Washington about accepting that role would weaken global leadership and embolden challengers.

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