

The National Interest – 28 October 2007

Defence Issues in the 2007 Federal Election

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Peter Mares: Tensions on the border between Turkey and Iraq and the death of two Australian soldiers in Afghanistan within the space of a month are reminders that distant conflicts involving Australia's armed forces have a very long way to run.

Australian troops are on active duty in many other parts of the world as well, including East Timor, Solomon Islands and the Northern Territory, where soldiers provide logistic and administrative support to the federal government's intervention in indigenous affairs.

So, the Australian Defence Force is at full stretch and in the lead-up to the election both major parties have committed themselves to increasing future defence budgets by a minimum 3 per cent a year - in real terms.

In fact, over all there's not a great difference in the policies of the major parties on defence, which means there's also been little discussion about defence issues so far in the campaign.

Here at The National Interest we think a bit more debate would be worthwhile, so we've assembled a panel of experts in our Canberra studio to argue through the issues.

Richard Tanter is Senior Research Associate at the Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainability and a Professorial Fellow in International Relations at RMIT University in Melbourne. Richard Tanter, welcome.

Richard Tanter: Good to be here.

Peter Mares: Neil James is Executive Director of the public interest lobby group and think-tank, the Australia Defence Association, and he served with the Australian Army for more than 31 years. Neil James, thanks for your time.

Neil James: Thank you, Peter.

Peter Mares: And Professor Hugh White is Head of the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University, and is a visiting Fellow at the Lowy Institute of International Policy. Hugh White, welcome back to The National Interest.

Hugh White: Nice to be with you again, Peter.

Peter Mares: Neil James, the clearest distinction between the major parties on defence would appear to be Australia's role in Iraq. Labor says the troops should come out, the Coalition says they should stay until the job is done.

Neil James: Well, it's actually a bit more nuanced in both cases. For every conservative politician screaming 'cut and run!' at Labor, there's a Labor politician yelling 'quagmire!' back at the conservatives. The actual differences, in many cases, are more apparent than real. Labor's learnt from the Latham experiment and, in fact, is leaving most of the Middle East force, including elements in Iraq, in place. The dispute is over the further use of the overwatch battle group in Southern Iraq, and even there Labor has agreed to the rotation that's due early next year. So, the actual decision point won't actually come until early on in that rotation, where they have to make - whoever is the government - have to make the decision whether it's further rotated in the early second half of next year. And at that stage, given the British downsizing and given the overall security situation, it's likely that even a conservative government might consider not doing another rotation.

Peter Mares: And the Prime Minister has made clear that another option might be for less of a combat role and more of a training role in the future...

Neil James: Well, there is already a 100-person training team in Iraq. Labor is also interested in a training role but is trying, or is floating the idea, of possibly doing it outside Iraq itself. I think once they come to power and see the difficulties of that, that idea probably won't survive the quite logical reasons why it probably won't work. But the bottom line is, the differences between the two parties, even on Iraq policy, are minimal, but they both have an interest during the election campaign to talk up the differences rather than talk up the similarities.

Peter Mares: Hugh White, even some critics of the war in Iraq support a continued military presence, the argument being that even if the invasion was a mistake we can't simply withdraw. Having become involved in Iraq we now have a responsibility to remain until the situation in the country is stabilised.

Hugh White: Yes, I think that's right and I think that's the reason for the convergence in positions of the two major parties that Neil's described. What is very striking is that Labor and the Coalition are going into this election with policies on Iraq which are pretty much indistinguishable and that reflects the fact that however different the views might be about the wisdom of the original invasion, both now recognise that the US, no matter what it might wish, has very few options to withdraw substantially from Iraq for the foreseeable future in that it's going to be important for Australia in terms of its traditional alliance management approach with the US, to remain - at least at a kind of symbolic level - a member of the US coalition there. And I think both sides are trying to design a future Australian presence in Iraq which will achieve that symbolic mission whilst minimising the costs and risks to Australia and that's why, for

example, I think you saw the adjustments that John Howard announced in the debate last weekend.

Peter Mares: Richard Tanter, there is a reasonable argument there, isn't there?, that as part of the original invasion force we do have a responsibility to stay the course in Iraq.

Richard Tanter: I think as part of the original invasion force, and now the occupying power, we have a responsibility to behave responsibly to all parties concerned. And I actually think Hugh is not right about the lack of options. I think the real problem is that... There are two problems: one is as in any military retreat, since the war in Iraq is lost, the question of how you retreat tactically is very, very important...

Peter Mares: So, you're saying the war's never going to be won, the situation's not going to stabilise, we do have to find a way to get out...

Richard Tanter: We have to find a way to get out and the problem is that the longer we stay, we're in the position of relying on the United States to act as an honest broker while they walk out the door while conducting the war. And I think we're in a no-win situation, there. I think the situation is, in Iraq, that the war is lost; I think most American military understand that, I suspect most senior Australian military privately believe that. The question is, how do we actually get out and minimise the damage from now on, both in Iraq and to ourselves?

Peter Mares: And what about Afghanistan? Because, I mean, both sides supported the engagement in Afghanistan but we don't see a lot of progress there. In fact, it appears that we're bogged down in Afghanistan as well.

Richard Tanter: I think this is one of the great problems and Hugh and Neil have both emphasised the way in which, in Australian politics, both sides have a similar policy on Afghanistan. There's a view that if Iraq is lost, then Iraq is the bad war, that Afghanistan is the good war and a winnable one and a desirable one. And I think that's simply not true. We've learned a lesson in Iraq, we have yet to learn the lesson in Afghanistan. We actually know much less about what is really happening in Afghanistan than we do in Iraq. There are far fewer journalists, much less access from the outside; we have a situation where the Afghani Parliament itself has called for the withdrawal of American troops following the bombings in Southern Iraq and very large levels of collateral damage, collateral casualties; we have the breakout of local truces, peace initiatives in both the Pakistani border and Southern provinces. There won't be a military solution. Whatever solution is going to come will have to be, in some form or another, political. And I think, again, following the death of yet another Australian, following the death of some 70 Canadians and many Dutch and many Americans and British, to say nothing of Afghans, the question of how this war is going to end has to be addressed.

Peter Mares: Neil James?

Neil James: Yes, I wouldn't necessarily agree with some of that, because I think it really depends on the paradigm you use to examine the Afghan war and also the paradigm you use to examine warfare generally. There's a terrible trap that history teaches us of thinking that you have lost the war when you haven't actually lost it, and it's very dangerous to make pronouncements on this whilst a war is in progress because it's often only in retrospect [that] you can decide whether you've won or lost. And there's even an argument that in the early part of the Vietnam war the Allies won and then proceeded to lose it after the Tet offensive in 1968.

The Afghanistan War is essentially a counter-insurgency war. Afghanistan's always been a very nuanced and complex situation and we're probably not going to know for some time, and like all counter-insurgency wars the military effort must be conducted in tandem with a political effort. And many of the problems in Afghanistan preceded this particular war in Afghanistan and will probably continue after it. And there's a bit of a tendency to lump all Afghanistan's problems into the problem of current war, when some of them precede it and will probably survive it.

Peter Mares: And I noticed in one of the publications from the Australia Defence Association that you compare the situation to, say, Australia's engagement in Malaya against the Communists there, which lasted for 12 years. So, are you suggesting that we really have to look in decade-long time-frames at these conflicts?

Neil James: The time-frame in Afghanistan is probably much longer than it is in many other wars because of the nature of the problem. A counter-insurgency war fought in an area where there are porous borders, and Pakistan and Iran to an extent are just another Laos and Cambodia during the Vietnam war, you know. [They] produce quite multifaceted security situations. The big problem with losing the Afghanistan war isn't so much the situation on the ground at the moment, it's NATO's faltering will to persist, and the greatest danger that the war in Afghanistan will be lost won't in fact come from the situation inside Afghanistan, it'll come from the situation in NATO headquarters.

Richard Tanter: One of the questions I just want to raise is the question of in what sense is it in Australia's very serious strategic interest to be actually present in Afghanistan? What are the goals of that war? We went in there, of course, with the United States to break up the Taliban-al-Qa'eda training camps, which produced the terror attacks on New York. That was long since achieved and the question is now: why are we there? Why are we contributing to the legitimisation of that war.

The other thing is that Neil's quite right, I think, in terms of the assessment and the difficulty of assessing what's happening. One thing which is very clearly happening is that the consequences of that war seem to me to be very clearly expanding. And one which is particularly salient is the massive expansion of opium production, heroin export, transnational criminal networks, which have been generated over the last three years of the war. And this is the way in which the war is going to come back and bite those NATO countries, the United States, Australia and, of course, neighbouring countries. And so, the issues it seems to me in thinking about not just Iraq and Afghanistan are [not just] the (in a sense) conventional strategic issues, but the wider ways in which those wars play into the framework of Australia's interest broadly construed in terms of security, in a much broader sense.

Peter Mares: Hugh White?

Hugh White: I'm going to give you a really gloomy perspective on this, Peter. I think Richard is right, the war in Iraq is lost, there's no way of achieving the objectives we set ourselves with the United States. But there's also no way of withdrawing because, having destroyed the Iraqi regime, a critical factor in the Middle Eastern power politics has been erased and I think for the United States to withdraw from Iraq would immensely destabilise the rest of the Middle East, particularly in relationship to Iran. I therefore think the US simply does not have an option to withdraw. And I think you can see that realisation dawning in American politics. It's very clear, now, that none of the serious Democrat candidates are prepared to commit themselves to withdrawal of the US forces from Iraq, even by the end of the next Presidential term in 2013. So, I think, notwithstanding the fact that the war is lost, we can't win. The Americans can't win. They can't leave either. And they're going to be stuck there for a long time and I therefore think that, unless there's a really fundamental change in approach to alliance management in Australia, which I don't expect under either party, we'll stay there too.

Peter Mares: And does the same apply in Afghanistan?

Hugh White: Well, I think in Afghanistan the situation is a bit different because sadly, and notwithstanding events surrounding 9/11, Afghanistan is less strategically central than Iraq. I think our chances of achieving our objectives in Afghanistan are extremely low indeed. I think Neil's right - if there's any chance of success, it's a generation away. But whether anything we're doing now, the scale of our military operations, the scale of the external aid effort, the scale of the political reconstruction effort, is really making any difference to the fundamental conditions for peace and stability in Afghanistan, is to me very uncertain. That's not to say the individuals on the ground aren't doing a very good job in terms of the job they've been set; but whether all of that adds up to a recipe for the kind of Afghanistan we'd all like to see, I think is very doubtful. And some countries, including Australia, but many much more even than Australia, are taking serious casualties in Afghanistan, and will start to ask - I think legitimately - whether or not it makes sense to keep

putting young lives at risk in a military operation which has no serious prospect of achieving the results that have been set for it. So, I think in the end actually we are more likely to withdraw from Afghanistan just because for the rest of the world the stakes are not as high. That's not good news for the Afghanis necessarily.

Peter Mares: A bit of a story of Afghanistan's history, though... Neil James, Prime Minister John Howard says he's especially proud of the fact that defence spending has risen by 47 per cent in real terms during the life of his government. Is that something he should be proud of?

Neil James: Well the simple answer to that is 'Yes'. But if we'd had a Labor government over the same period, possibly the levels of spending would be pretty identical, because what they're really doing is cancelling out the severe neglect of defence spending through the '70s and '80s and '90s, when it either flatlined or declined.

There is a bit of a myth in Australia that the conservatives are better for defence than Labor. Generally speaking, they're both equally neglectful, except where they're forced into a situation where they can't be neglectful any longer. And that's largely what has happened. People forget that in the first years of the Howard government in the late 1990s, they weren't particularly attracted to increased defence spending, but when we were mugged by reality in East Timor, and then by subsequent events, the spending has climbed back to the levels it possibly should have been sustained at during the previous decades. But it's worth pointing out that even now, defence spending is not a significant proportion of the federal budget. It is still quite low by historical standards and, as an example, the amount we spend each year on new equipment is about 7 per cent of the annual social security budget. Other areas of government spending have continued to rocket at an exponential rate and defence spending, even with the increases, has remained either pretty static or conformed to much lower levels and rates of increase.

Richard Tanter: I think one of the things that comes out of that is the question of what is the purpose of defence spending. In fact, I think it's increased quite substantially, certainly in that the security agencies have had a tripling in their budget in some cases. What we're talking about, though, is what on earth is this being spent for and what do we hope to achieve. And one of the issues, it seems to me, that needs to be raised in the context of the election is what kind of security are we aiming at? And there's a very strong argument to say that apart from the wars that we have really leapt into in Iraq and Afghanistan with the United States, and the peacekeeping interventions in our own region, that more important security issues come from much more pressing things, such as climate change, infectious diseases and energy and security, which are certainly going to affect the interactions we have in Australia with countries like Indonesia, Papua-New Guinea and the Pacific. If you look at the latest government publication on defence, about defence policy, the defence update, the word 'climate' does not even appear once. There is no serious

discussion over this and, of course, there are no military solutions to them, but they are very real security issues.

Peter Mares: Hugh White, are we talking apples and oranges here though? I mean obviously new Joint Strike Fighters and Abrams tanks and things like that aren't going to do anything for climate change. But is that a security issue?

Hugh White: Well, I think it's sensible to conceive it as a security issue. But I think it's also sensible to say that the kinds of security policy instruments that you get from armed force are not useful against a lot of different kinds of security threats. I would agree with Richard: I think global warming is an immensely significant issue but I don't see any context in which armed force is going to be useful towards it. I do, however, think there are other security challenges which we will also face, which you may also face, in which armed force is critical. I must say I'd agree that the Howard government's achievement in defence spending is very impressive. I think what's particularly impressive is not so much the rate as the steadiness. As an ex-Defence bureaucrat, what you really look for from government is sustained defence spending so you know where you're going, and the fact that they were prepared to commit themselves to 3 per cent per annum real growth over a decade - and then extend that for another five years to 2016 - has revolutionised the way in which defence planning can be done. What I don't give them good marks for is the way they've chosen to spend the money.

Peter Mares: Well, there has been a bit of waste along the way. I mean, we had the example of the Seasprite helicopter project, the (I think) \$1-billion spent on helicopters that will probably never fly. We've also seen some decisions to buy, for example, the Joint Strike Fighter, or the Super Hornet fighters - both those big military purchases done without the full process of comparison and evaluation being gone through, the procurement processes that the government itself had set out.

Hugh White: I think that's right. And in particular I'd be critical of a number of choices that have been made without really considering what kind of capability investments give us the most cost-effective strategic options. For example, I think the decision to invest very large sums of money in the Air Warfare Destroyers, very big new destroyers, contract signed just a few weeks ago, is very unlikely to deliver as much for Australia militarily in coming decades, as other ways of spending the same money. Likewise, the decision to buy very large amphibious ships to transport the army: 27,000 tonnes. It seems to me to be not the most cost-effective way of providing what is, of course, a very important capacity for an army...

Peter Mares: And why is that? Is that because ships are, in fact, big targets and easy to attack. What's the problem?

Hugh White: There are two things. As far as the air warfare destroyers are concerned, my own view is that although you certainly need some warships in your force structure, investing large sums of money in warships which remain inherently vulnerable to submarines, mines and air attack, is less cost effective than, for example, putting the same money into submarines or into aircraft. As far as the amphibious ships are concerned, our risk problem is not that we don't need a lot of amphibious capability - we clearly do, particularly for operations in our own neighbourhood. But my own view is we get much more capability out of four, smaller ships than out of two really big ones. Always remember that if you've got two ships in your fleet, one of them for sure will be in maintenance at any time and the second one - when you really need it - is likely to be on a goodwill visit to Hong Kong or somewhere.

Peter Mares: Neil James?

Neil James: Well, this is the siren song. I mean, this is the idea that you can predict the future with such accuracy that you can pick and choose - and always pick winners - in terms of your strategic capabilities. Now, history teaches us lots of lessons but one is that unless you have a balanced force you inevitably run into trouble. We have sent the defence force overseas 50-odd times since federation and its never been well-prepared for any of the tasks eventually faced because the siren song keeps saying 'we know what the future's going to be like and we will only configure the defence force to suit exactly how we think our predictions will work.'

Now, if life has taught us anything since the Somali deployment in 1993, and particularly East Timor in 1999, where we only pulled it off by a fluke because it was so close - after we'd so gutted the strategic mobility of the Australian Defence Force that we had trouble mounting a campaign 300 nautical miles north west of Darwin - is that strategic and operational mobility in the region is paramount. The amphibious ships are where I have a strong disagreement with Hugh. No professional military officer in the Australian Defence Force thinks that four small ships are a better idea than two or three big ones for the simple reason that the size of the ship is driven by the actual tactical, operational and strategic needs.

If we look at some of the contingencies we have had to mount over the last 10 or 15 years, and even going back to the Fiji coup in 1987, it's quite obvious that the capability of the defence force to operate in the region needed to be dramatically improved. And that's why the amphibious ships and the C17 heavy air lifters, for example, are such a good idea.

Peter Mares: But the question is: we're buying all this heavy equipment... I mean, jet fighters and ships and all the rest of it. But who is the enemy that we're going to defend ourselves against?

Neil James: Well, this is the myth of capability development: the idea that you have to find an enemy before you can ever configure your defence force. And that's not how you need to configure the defence force in the long-term. You need to actually balance a range of versatile capabilities so no matter what the unpredictable future hurls at you, you've got some ability to cope with it. Now, the idea that you have to pick your enemy and configure just against a certain enemy, or a certain contingency, is a nonsense, and I think even Hugh would agree with me on this one.

Hugh White: Yes, I certainly would, Neil. I think you can look at this in two ways: the first is the whole range of tasks we know we're going to have to do including, for example, stabilisation operations in our immediate neighbourhood. I differ from Neil in what kind of force structure is most appropriate for that. I think his model of the amphibious ships presupposes that we know we're only going to have to do the job in once place at a time, whereas my approach focuses on the likelihood that we'll be busy in more places than one simultaneously.

But you also need to build your defence force against the possibility that the international order in which we live breaks down. For the last 35 years we've been lucky to live in a region in which conflict between major powers has been more or less unthinkable. But that's not hard-wired into Asia and when governments invest in things like Joint Strike Fighters, something which personally I support, they are in fact insuring against the possibility that the international order, which has worked so well for the last few decades, will work less well in the next few decades. And although I'm not sure that's the case, I think with a bit of luck we might work our way through it, I think the risk that we won't makes that a sensible insurance policy.

Richard Tanter: I think I actually want to disagree with both Hugh and Neil on this. The insurance policy argument is like the insurance policy issue facing any householder: how much is enough? And potential threats can always be found and at some point you have to draw a line, a perimeter, geographical or conceptual, in some way to say that this is where we're going to go. At one stage the Howard government was talking about sending Australian Navy warships to blockade North Korea. Now, I actually think that that may be politically useful to the United States, [but] it would be militarily absolutely insignificant and opens us up to a whole new area of conflict. More importantly, I think there's an extra dimension that has not been taken into account and that's the effects of this really very substantial increase - whether Neil's right, and we're rectifying a previous lack under earlier administrations or not - how this increase has been perceived in our immediate neighbourhood and what that effect that's having on our strategic situation.

We can hardly be surprised after the Joint Strike Fighter purchases and the other purchases we've been talking about, after our pattern of deployment, if Indonesia again starts approaching the Russians for \$1-billion aircraft deals and other related issues. In other words, we need to look at the effects of this

on the way our neighbours see us. The question needs to be asked: what would we really be thinking of doing? It's quite right to say that we can't predict the future completely and we can't know the direction of the current world order and how that's going to go. But do we really expect an outbreak of state-to-state warfare in the South East Asian archipelago (which is the most salient part for us)? And if we do, what are we then saying to Indonesia and how do we expect them to respond?

Peter Mares: Richard Tanter, Neil James and Hugh White, thank you all very much for your time.

All: Thank you. My pleasure.

Peter Mares: Professor Richard Tanter is Senior Research Associate at the Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainability, and based at RMIT University in Melbourne.

Neil James is Executive Director of the Australia Defence Association, and Professor Hugh White is Head of the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University.

And we welcome your comments on the defence policy issue. Obviously we didn't have time to canvass all the aspects of the story. Perhaps it's a vote changing issue for you. Let us know by putting your comments in The National Interest guest book.

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