



Iraq: Can we afford to lose?

Public debate on the war in Iraq is showing an increasing resemblance to the unhealthy situation in the late 1960s concerning the war in Vietnam. Proponents of action for action's sake on both sides are talking at, rather than to, each other. Of even more concern, they often appear unduly focused on short-term views as to domestic party-political advantage rather than employing long-term strategic perspectives.

As noted in the Autumn 2003 issue of *Defender*, unless the US was able to stamp out the serious law and order problem then occurring in Iraq, before it morphed into outright resistance, the situation would eventually risk replicating the British quitting of Aden in 1968 on a larger scale.

But why and indeed how the collective intervention to topple the Saddam Hussein regime was mounted is largely now strategically irrelevant. All wars are contests of will and end when one side gives up. The essential question is whether us giving up in Iraq would improve or worsen our overall security situation in the long term. That Islamist recruiting might be increasing, temporarily or not, as a result of the intervention in Iraq is not necessarily a reason to stop fighting there although it does necessitate changes to objectives and methods.

Warfare by nature is dynamic. The progress of all wars involves fluctuations in the respective strengths of the protagonists. The Axis powers appeared much stronger in 1942 than they were in 1940 but the democratic West persisted and still won by 1945.●

Debate neither controlled nor ordered

Several features of public debate on the subject of control orders have been disappointing in the extreme. The scare-mongering from some civil liberties lobbies is to be expected but the media prominence given to even their wildest allegations is simply irresponsible.

The High Court will rule later this year on the constitutional validity of the legislation providing for control orders in the fight against international Islamist terrorism. The Court is expected to follow the long-established principle that the defence and security heads of power in the constitution wax and wane in reaction to the threat. This principle underlay extensive National Security Regulations being employed during the two World Wars but the Communist Party Dissolution Act was struck down in 1951.

In international law armed conflict exists as a material fact not as a matter of individual state or personal opinion – either in declaration or denial. Islamist terrorists consider they are engaged in a war with the West and have continued to execute armed attacks on us. It is probable that the High Court will find that temporary and limited control orders on Islamist sympathisers or potential terrorists are fully justified in such circumstances.●

Highlights:

- Iraq: What really matters
- High Court to put its stamp on control orders
- Another resurgence in polemics from the DOA clique
- Why the modern ADF needs amphibians and tanks
- Are Super-Hornets coming to nest in Australia?
- Who won: Israel, Hezbollah or Iran?
- Solomons: Need for real regime change looms larger
- Irony Corner: Muddled thinking, Borgu and Gordon

Last gasps while the stake holds

A recent spate of media stories and editorials have alleged universally disastrous strategic choices concerning defence equipment procurement and implied that the Service Chiefs are somehow “out of control”. Some of these stories have a party-political context and allege failings by the previous or current Minister for Defence. Others seek to draw on internal leadership tensions in the Liberal Party by hinting that a Costello-led government might not be as supportive of the rebuilding of our defence capabilities. Some have even suggested significant tensions between the current Minister and CDF.

Several aspects are common to all the stories. None of them have come from journalists, columnists, editorialists or talkback radio figures known for their informed (and indeed previous) interest in defence issues. Other common failings include a marked lack of intellectual rigour, a generally ahistoric approach and little or no appreciation of joint-Service (rather than single-Service) imperatives and perspectives. The stories have generally presented a one-sided account with no proper acknowledgment of the opposing case, or even the middle ground, in the matters being disputed.

Many military professionals would advance a further observation. Very little of this orchestrated and biased media offensive has taken account of the expert views of the members of the ADF who have to implement our defence strategy and operate the new weapon systems being procured or adapted.

Luckily the stories have been easily dismissed in informed debate as legacy-protection polemics – and they have generally failed to resonate with broader national audiences accordingly. Despite the temporary froth and hyperbolic bubble generated, the ideas advanced are really last gasps from the clique of former defence civilian officials still trying to re-fight old bureaucratic battles they have long lost intellectually if not entirely politically. Strategic events and their resultant lessons since the 1999 East Timor intervention, and the 9/11 and Bali attacks, have well and truly driven the stake of reality through the heart of the disproven “defence of Australia” dogmas of the 1980s and 1990s.

There remains some danger, of course, that DOA might be un-staked and climb back out of its coffin through ignorance or political carelessness. It should not be forgotten that the Howard government was initially very slow to recognise the failures and inherent contradictions of the narrow DOA approach. The subsequent reforms in strategic policy and defence capability development were implemented only fitfully at first, and only over the last 5-7 years of the current government.

There remains a risk that a Beazley-led Labor government in particular might consciously or unconsciously regress to the old and outmoded DOA nostrums. Such a regression has superficial attractions for those within Labor seeking to wedge the conservative side of politics over Australia's involvement in the continuing war in Iraq. It might also be exacerbated by some remnant personal views held by the Opposition Leader himself – based on his memories as Minister for Defence during the late Cold War over 20 years ago.

On the upside, these views do not appear to be widely shared among Labor frontbenchers with national security interests or responsibilities, especially Shadow Defence Minister, Robert McClelland, and Shadow Foreign Minister, Kevin Rudd.●

Amphibs, tanks and reality

This reactionary media campaign has greatly relied on regurgitating and endlessly repeating several claims that are tendentious at best, coupled with straw-man arguments and much myth-making. Two prominent examples illustrate the intellectual dishonesty involved.

The new amphibious ships are constantly criticised as somehow too big, (“aircraft-carrier sized” is the term often used irrelevantly and in a pejorative sense). Their size, in fact, primarily results from numerous lessons obtained operating the under-sized LPAs in a range of operational, peacekeeping and humanitarian operations – and the undisputed operational requirement to be able to launch a simultaneous, six-helicopter, airlift of a rifle company in order to deal with likely regional contingencies. Naval advice, both serving and retired, and across all ranks and specialities is united on the strategic and operational soundness of the decision. Furthermore, no serious naval professional doubts the obvious through-life operational and maintenance efficiencies, and economic and personnel savings, of operating two larger vessels rather than 3-5 smaller ones (as some land-bound armchair commentators have suggested).

Similarly, the shrill claims about the supposed unsuitability of the 59 new Abrams tanks being bought to replace our 105 clapped-out, early 1970s-era, Leopard Mark Is have relied on several fibs and enough straw-man arguments to build a haystack. Contrary to common but inaccurate claims the tanks are not too heavy or otherwise tactically unsuitable to deploy in our region. Based on the Army’s wartime operational experiences in operating tanks in New Guinea, Bougainville, Borneo and Vietnam the tanks are needed to save infantry lives in the complex terrain of our region’s sprawling urban areas and jungles. The myth that they are being procured solely to accompany the US on high-intensity armoured forays in the Middle East is simply wrong on any number of grounds. Not least of these is because the very small number of tanks being procured means that only one 13-tank squadron will be available at any one time for a sustainable deployment. No ADF commander is ever likely to recommend contributing such a sub-unit to a foreign tank battalion. The different tactical cultures at that level simply entail too much operational risk.

Interestingly, the one large defence equipment project left largely uncriticised by the self-appointed “strategic priesthood” of former civilian officials is the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter. Given this is the one big project involving major financial, technical and strategic risks, and the only one where both military professional and scientific opinion is quite divided on its operational and strategic utility, this anomaly underlines the intellectual bankruptcy of their other criticisms. Their apparent myopia about the New Air Combat Capability project probably stems from several of the priesthood’s leaders being one-eyed airpower devotees in the manner that fixated civilian theorists often are.●

Stung again despite the warnings

Rumours persist of a deal for up to two squadrons of F/A-18E/F Super Hornets to help the Air Force bridge the ever-lengthening period between the precipitate retirement of the F-111s and the optimistically planned introduction of the F-35 Lightning II (Joint Strike Fighter).

If this occurs, it makes a mockery of longstanding and consistent official claims that such a step is unnecessary because of the confidence held in the JSF development program. It also re-emphasises the credibility, and compelling logic, of those who have criticised the risky idea that all Australia’s future air combat needs can be adequately met by the one aircraft-type fleet option championed so strongly by proponents of the (yet to fly) JSF.●

Who won?

Quite understandably, much debate rages over who, if anyone, “won” the recent war between Israel and Hezbollah – and indeed over what are the lessons of the war and the shaky truce resulting. As the July issue of *Defence Brief* predicted, no Australian contribution to UNIFIL-2 has been possible and the prospect of this understrength force successfully enforcing the UN Security Council Resolutions mandating the disarmament of Hezbollah remains highly unlikely. Moreover, UNIFIL’s apparent passing of the buck to the even more lightly-armed units of the Lebanese Army newly deployed south of the Litani River does not inspire much confidence – at least in the short to medium term.

Three points are worth noting. First, Hezbollah leader, Sayyed Hassan Nasrullah, has admitted that the strength and determination of Israel’s response to Hezbollah’s attacks greatly surprised him. This may be a negotiating ploy to allay Lebanese anger at Hezbollah dragging the whole country into an unwanted and destructive war but it is probably true nevertheless.

Second, initial Egyptian and Saudi criticism of Hezbollah (and Iran) for launching the war became muted as the conflict continued. But this was largely for pan-Arab solidarity reasons and is resurgent again following the ceasefire. The principal Sunni-Arab powers clearly see no strategic (or religious) benefit in allowing Shiite Iran to dominate the heart of the Middle East.

Finally, and most importantly, it is probable that Iran had been carefully preparing Hezbollah as a deterrent for use much later in diverting or countering growing international pressure directed at curbing Iran’s nuclear weapon ambitions. Whether intended or not, Hezbollah’s firing of over 4000 rockets into northern Israel (and the forceful Israeli response) has weakened not strengthened Hezbollah’s value to Iran as a long-term strategic bargaining chip. It has also led to a decline in threats by Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, to destroy Israel and kill all Jews (an ambition and declaration in clear breach of the UN’s Genocide Convention) although this is probably only temporary.

One other observation commonly voiced among Israeli commentators is also worth noting. It will be a long time before another fighter pilot heads their defence force.●

Requiring the patience of Solomon too

Hopefully the impending parliamentary vote of no confidence in Solomon’s Prime-Minister, Manasseh Sogavare, will rescue that country and the Australian-led RAMSI from a profound moral and practical dilemma.

The alternatives are pretty stark, both for the beleaguered people of the Solomons and for their neighbours assisting them to reform their endemically corrupt political system. Genuine regime change rather than just more shuffling of the crooks at the top is looming ever closer.●

Irony corner

- A *Bulletin* article alleging muddled defence strategy, and poor choices or worse in defence equipment procurement, was seemingly based almost entirely on the views of former senior Defence officials Hugh White and Allan Behm.●
- An un-named “defence insider” was also quoted in the same *Bulletin* article as saying: “The smartest thing [Brendan] Nelson did was get Aldo [Borgu]” because “he ...has a firm fix on what acquisitions really ought to fly”.●
- Australia’s nomination to the list of potential commanders for UN peacekeeping forces, Major General Ian Gordon, is apparently not being considered for the one in Sudan.●