



## Hard elections and withdrawal

The US decision to reinforce their forces in the Baghdad area while the UK announced a further draw-down of British forces in southern Iraq appeared contradictory to some. It therefore met with predictable responses across the Australian political and media spectrums, especially from commentators unfamiliar with previously announced British plans and the nuanced situation on the ground in Basra. This was exacerbated by many viewing the issue solely in terms of its supposed meaning for the domestic political situation in Australia in an election year, rather than any strategic or operational meaning in itself.

The essential problem in Baghdad can be summed up by noting that four years after the fall of Saddam Hussein the Green Zone has become smaller not bigger. But the lack of security in Baghdad has complex causes, many of them peculiar to central Iraq and centred on the Shiite-Sunni schism generally. Whether the 'troop surge' in Baghdad is a last throw of the dice or not it is an inevitable step because the alternatives are all much worse.

In the south the overall and local situations are different. The Australian Overwatch Battle Group in southern Iraq is part of the British-led regional command covering the provinces of Basra, Al Muthanna, Dhi Qar and Maysan. Primary responsibility for security in all four provinces has been returned to Iraqi control. The British effectively withdrew from Maysan in 2006 and have been steadily drawing down their post-invasion force strengths in Basra since 2005. The main strategic driver of British withdrawal is the need to reinforce in Afghanistan.

The British provide or co-ordinate a range of operational, logistic and medical support to the smaller coalition partners, including contingency support should the tactical situation require more heavily-armed forces than the smaller contingents can necessarily muster themselves. At some stage the critical mass of the British commitment will reach the point where such support will no longer be available – as it now does for the Danish contingent in Basra (and its Lithuanian subunit) – and these contingents will duly withdraw from southern Iraq.

In Shiite-dominant Basra city there is now little need for an overwatch role by coalition forces. There is also a finely poised military balance between the Mahdi Army and the Badr Organisation both generally and within the Iraqi security forces. The British see no point in being a convenient target for extremists on both sides as they try to keep the peace between Shiite factions. As the Iraqi government and the US crack down on sectarian militias (and their infiltration of official security forces) in Baghdad there is also a danger that this will displace intra-Shiite fighting to Basra. The British are therefore redeploying out of the city itself.

### Highlights:

- Withdrawing the Overwatch Battle Group from Iraq
- Some lessons from the Super Hornet decision
- If not Super Hornets what?
- Will the RAAF get the F-22 Raptor eventually?
- Recruiting diggers from Pacific Islands is still wrong
- Measuring the costs of recovering our military dead
- Being friends with Japan means telling the truth
- Irony Corner: Senator Rachel Siewert and friends

In Al Muthanna and Dhi Qar provinces the situation is much more benign for a range of reasons. The populations are smaller and largely Shiite. Tribal allegiances and discipline are relatively strong. The Badr Organisation nominally predominates and there is much less tension with similarly nominal Mahdi Army followers. The Australians are not seen as an enemy or a convenient target and the presence of foreign troops is not resented by most. All these factors subtly interact to keep a pacific balance by Iraqi standards.

The background presence of the Australians is a confidence-building measure in community and tactical terms and a sign of support to the US alliance in a wider strategic sense. Australian withdrawal from the two provinces needs to be handled delicately so the pacific balance is not disturbed.

The final stage of the British drawdown (probably in mid to late 2008) will entail a complete withdrawal from Basra and all of southern Iraq. This will mean the Australian task group piggybacks on this withdrawal or is substantially reinforced. Given that the security situation is likely to be such that the overwatch role will not be required by then anyway the reinforcement option is highly unlikely.

At various times over the last four years the Australian Army training team in Iraq has fluctuated between 30 and 100 and will shortly become 100 again. The deployment of training teams predated the deployment of the battle group. Once the battle group is withdrawn the training team presents the only apparent policy difference between Labor and the Coalition. Labor has not suggested its withdrawal but has hinted at undertaking training tasks outside Iraq (as the French and Germans do in Jordan). This would work for some types of training (Australia has already contributed AFP personnel to Iraqi police training in Jordan) but not for others. With military combat training it would not do much for the credibility of the instructors in the eyes of their students, particularly the degree of mutual understanding and trust required. Whether Iraq could afford to move large numbers of trainees out of the country for basic training is also unlikely.

Decision points on further battle group rotations will come in mid 2007 and very early 2008. No matter which party is elected in Australia this year, the probability is that the Australian battle group will leave southern Iraq by mid to late 2008.

The terms *combat force* or *combat troops* have also been bandied about loosely in much of the media and political speculation concerning withdrawal of the battle group. The implication is wrongly made that no other ADF element in Iraq has a combat role or faces the prospect of direct combat – and therefore that the dangers to the remainder are somehow minimal. This is not true and is especially insulting to the security detachment in Baghdad who face considerable dangers on a daily basis.

At this juncture, political arguments as to whether the Australian Overwatch Battle Group in southern Iraq is still fulfilling a useful role on the ground boil down to a couple of key questions. First, do people seriously believe that the Howard Government is needlessly risking the lives of Australian soldiers simply to bolster its chances of electoral success later this year? Second, do people seriously believe that if this was so, that the CDF and Service Chiefs would not exercise their duty as the senior commanders of the defence force and resign in protest rather than betray their subordinates in such a manner. ●

## The price of the Super Hornets

When, over 12 months ago, the Autumn 2006 issue of *Defender* discussed the possibility that F/A-18F Super Hornets might be purchased as an interim option because of likely delays in the JSF program this was firmly denied by Ministers, the Department of Defence and the RAAF. Similarly, discussion of a possible interim option involving Super Hornets in the August 2006 issue of *Defence Brief* again brought firm denials that such a step would be necessary. Even the tip in the November *Defence Brief* that planning for such an option was well advanced met with some half-hearted denials.

Excluding for a moment judgements on the validity of the published strategic, operational and capability development justifications for this interim decision, there are some important general lessons from this protracted episode.

First, rather than a single episode much of the argument on the New Air Combat Capability project has resembled a running soap opera. Much heat and personal animosity could have been taken out of the professional and political arguments concerning Australia's next-generation air combat capability if there had been proper public debate instead. The refusal by many within Defence to genuinely debate the issues publicly has seriously backfired, not least in contributing to a loss of public confidence in capability development processes and encouraging the mistaken belief that defence funding is now somehow too generous. This is a pity as the clear trend over the last five years has been for the defence strategy required by our strategic situation to drive the resourcing needed, rather than the opposite as disastrously occurred throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

Second, the relatively sudden decision and the associated controversy has strengthened growing unease about the quality of the advice the Minister for Defence is apparently receiving from his personal staff – and the influence they exert in comparison to professional advice from the department and the ADF.

Third, the six billion dollars or so that the interim option will cost over a decade can be afforded at present but might cause future procurement across the board to be curtailed. There is also the fact that the procurement share of this figure (around \$A4bn) would cancel out the higher expense argument against procuring some fifth-generation F-22 Raptor fighters in the first place (if or when this aircraft is available for purchase).

Fourth, the sudden decision to change course and implement an interim option unnecessarily weakens confidence in overall strategic and capability development planning processes. Now there are those defence analysts and ideologues of a DOA-mindset who will misuse this issue to cast aspersions that the Service Chiefs are somehow out of control, and/or that much needed improvements in the ADF's force structure, such as the new destroyers and amphibious ships, are somehow superfluous or must be scrapped in order to afford the F-35. The relatively muted criticism from such quarters as yet is no doubt due an internal conflict between sinking the boot in and the DOA-mafia's traditional enthusiasm for airpower as a universal panacea for all strategic problems. That the Super Hornet decision largely resulted from ministerial-level political considerations, and certainly not from uncontrolled Service Chiefs, may not be immediately obvious to a general public long bombarded by DOA-mafia mythology about "gold-plating", inter-Service rivalry and the supposed need for civilian bureaucratic godfathers to keep the allegedly warring Services in line.

Modern joint-Service outlooks and processes have brought much focus, coherence and efficiency to our defence strategy, capability development and procurement processes. These reforms must be protected from those who would rush backwards into the failed dogmas of the 1980s and 1990s. ●

## If not Super Hornets what?

The option of procuring at least some Super Hornets has been a popular opinion at wing level in the RAAF for some years. Pilots at the tactical level, especially at squadron leader and wing commander rank, have long expressed a professional preference for a twin-engined and preferably two-seat replacement for our existing (two-engined) Hornets. Not one RAAF Hornet has been lost to engine failure although many have landed on a single engine. A degree of scepticism about the future F-35 Lightning II being only single-engined has merged over the last year or so with growing professional concerns about its effective capability for many maritime strike and maritime defence tasks.

As the primary USN carrier-based fighter the Super Hornet is an attractive alternative, at least in the interim, to assuage such concerns. It would also not require the same degree of maritime patrol aircraft and warship support for deployment or operations over water – a key lesson from operating the Hornet compared to the single-engined Mirage and Sabre fighters that preceded it. It is worth noting that the operating costs over decades for these supporting aircraft and ships do not appear to have been factored in to the through-life costs claimed for the F-35. Or indeed the higher attrition costs of operating a single-engined jet aircraft in both peace and war for decades.

Assuming an interim fighter is necessary, professional opinion among RAAF pilots appears to be split between the Super Hornet and the latest model F-15 Eagle. Both offer a good transition path to fifth-generation aircraft for pilots. The Super Hornet appears marginally better for RAAF technical staff.

The avionics and weapons fit are similar but the F-15 has much better range – always a prime consideration in the Australian strategic context. Among pilots the latest model F-15 is generally rated as the best air-to-air combat fighter flying except for the F-22.

The funds to cover the Super Hornet purchase, and their operating costs over the following decade or so, have been provided as a supplement to forecast and programmed defence funding. The long-term threat, however, is that when the current period of budgetary surpluses ends this might mean procuring lesser numbers of fifth-generation fighter and strike aircraft eventually – and a longer period of service for the F/A-18F. ●

## Prey for the Raptor

Defence Minister Brendan Nelson recently brandished a letter from a senior US official allegedly closing off the option of the USAF's F-22 Raptor multi-role fighter ever being sold to foreigners, even close US allies like Australia. The convenient timing of the letter and its less than specific wording added to scepticism about its antecedents, purpose and long-term relevance. The bottom line remains that there is considerable support across the political spectrum in the US to allow close US allies eventual access to a version of the Raptor. Moreover, if we never formally ask properly at the highest levels, the supposed opposition to such a decision can continue to be exaggerated in Australian circles for reasons of political or bureaucratic convenience. A determined campaign by Australia (perhaps with the UK and Canada) could well result in a reversal of ostensible US policy in this regard, either under the current Bush administration and Democrat majority in Congress or under the next administration no matter its political hue.

It is also not really an "either-or" problem. Critics of a Raptor option often erect the straw-man defence that Australia could not afford the F-22 instead of the F-35. This is not a valid argument as we could afford *some* F-22s (24 seems a good number does it not) and an air combat force employing both would be much

better balanced than a fleet of wholly one or the other. Furthermore, proponents of the F-35 are wont to defend the developmental Lightning II by pointing out that many of its systems will be retrofitted to the F-22. Surely this systems compatibility argument strengthens the case for a mixed and complementary fleet not weakens it.

Assuming the Raptor might eventually become available there are three major difficulties involved. First, and most importantly, on current plans the production line for the F-22 will close by 2012 if no more orders are received in the next year or two. This would be extended if the USAF is able to restore the numbers to be procured closer to the force structure totals originally sought but this is by no means likely. The production run might be extended by even some increased procurement but this is unlikely to mean much of an extension beyond 2014-15. This means that any campaign to procure the F-22 for Australia must begin now.

Second, the cost of the Raptor will remain high albeit with the eventual cost differential between it and the F-35 more a marginal one (under \$US40m by reliable estimates) than the current orders-of-magnitude difference currently claimed by JSF devotees. Given the two to three decade period any Australian F-22 or F-35 would be in service the initial price difference in through-life costs is effectively immaterial over the long term.

Finally, developing a version of the F-22 for foreign service would involve significant sums and technical effort in protecting the security of various US software and hardware systems. The cost of such "tamper-proofing" is broadly estimated at \$A1-2bn but is not regarded as too difficult a task in technical terms.●

## Pricing matters of honour and grief

Since 1914, in peace and war, the RAN has sustained around 1600 deaths at sea without the opportunity or means to recover the bodies even after hostilities were over. In the Army just on 18,000 (40 per cent) of the 46,000 killed on the Western Front during World War I remain unburied in known graves. In both peace and war the RAAF too have lost many dead where there was no body to bury.

The recent recovery of the wreckage of the Blackhawk helicopter which crashed whilst landing on HMAS Kanimbla in Fiji waters last November, together with the recovery of the body of missing SAS trooper, Joshua Porter, is an impressive feat. The helicopter was salvaged by civil contractors from depths around 2900 metres after being located using special equipment loaned by the US Navy.

If we expect fellow Australians to risk death and wounding on our behalf then there is a moral obligation to recover our military dead wherever possible – and to care for the wounded and disabled in perpetuity. We also have a responsibility to help care for those they leave behind. The recovery of Trooper Porter's body brings great comfort to his wife and family in their grief and will allow them, his mates and his unit to finally farewell him with a full military funeral rather than a memorial service.

As the tragic loss of Trooper Porter shows the bounds of *wherever possible* can now reach down to marine depths previously thought impossible. Moreover, on land, advances in technology such as ground-penetrating radar and DNA identification can unlock battlefield and air crash mysteries many decades old.

No-one seriously grudges the time, effort and expense involved in recovering Trooper Porter, but would we have done so if finding the helicopter was not also useful in terms of determining the cause of the accident and saving lives in future? Were we also happy to spend the money and devote the effort because we could in this case?

But the operation poses difficult precedents for future losses, especially those at sea. Expectations among the bereaved have ratcheted up another notch. At what point might the financial

costs and effort not be justifiable in terms of honouring the dead and helping the bereaved cope with their grief? At what point, for example, might the money be better spent helping disabled veterans or saving the living by providing them with better weapons and equipment. These are difficult questions with no easy answers but they must be asked.●

## More blackbirding calls

Recently there have been renewed calls for the ADF to meet its recruitment shortfalls by recruiting young, unemployed South Pacific islanders. This notion last reared its opportunistic head from its underlying paternalist cloak in mid 2005. It remains just as invalid on a range of moral, legal, economic, political and practical grounds. Some arguments against exploiting our third-world neighbours in this fashion may be recouped from the August 2005 *Defence Brief* at [www.ada.asn.au/defence\\_brief/Brief115\(Aug-Sep05\).pdf](http://www.ada.asn.au/defence_brief/Brief115(Aug-Sep05).pdf).●

## Being friends with Japan

Australia's new security agreement with Japan is a good thing. In the absence of any overarching common security treaty in East Asia bilateral common security agreements between democracies do no real harm and present a good example of transparency and co-operation to the dictatorships. The arrangement is not a collective defence pact or treaty as has been erroneously reported by some commentators and should not be compared with the Anzus alliance or even the Five-Power Defence Arrangement.

The agreement should also be used as another means to assist those elements in Japan, on all sides of politics, that continue to oppose the historical revisionism being championed by the current Japanese prime-minister and foreign minister. This is not an issue of history or lingering wartime animosity. It is a vital matter of contemporary diplomacy and strategy because Japan's behaviour in this regard so severely affects its current and future relations with all its immediate and regional neighbours.

Sadly, denial by Japan's leaders of Japanese atrocities across Asia in the 1930s and 1940s is on the rise again. True friends of Japan are those who encourage the Japanese people to truly face up to their country's record of atrocities rather than downplay or deny them. The example of Germany's full admission of World War II war crimes (and teaching the truth in schools), and its emergence as a leading member of modern Europe and respected world power, provides a telling contrast to Japan's frequent difficult relations with all Asia-Pacific countries in this regard.

The Japanese often express exasperation that previous apologies have not been accepted and that they are continually called on to make further apologies. But the main reason for this is the lack of sincerity and ambiguity of successive, half-hearted, Japanese apologies. Not to mention continued blustering denials of well established facts including Japan's appalling biological warfare experiments in China, major massacres of civilians such as the 1937 "Rape of Nanjing" or the forced prostitution of women by the Japanese Army throughout conquered countries.●

## Irony corner

Neophyte Greens senator, Rachel Siewert, claimed that a new joint US-Australian intelligence gathering facility at Geraldton would be a target for terrorist attacks. The only previous damage to other joint facilities since their inception in the mid 1960s has been from vandalism by "anti-Bases" demonstrators. A Western Australia Greens spokeswoman also claimed that the unmanned (in all senses of the word) facility would lead to an increase in rapes and sexual assaults in the Geraldton area.●

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