

Facing testing times:

Prospects and perspectives on international security

Robert O'Neill

New tests

Australians stand at a very testing time in terms of shaping our security environment. I do not want to be overly pessimistic as we and our forebears have come through worse situations and gone on to great periods of prosperity, relative peace and cultural achievement. But for us at this time, that happy end is by no means assured.

Using the standpoint of my own experience, and from what I have learned from others around me at crucial times, I want to touch on some of our major challenges. I shall offer five perspectives on the current dangers before us, taken from different stages of my life at ten-year intervals: the first as a soldier in Vietnam; the second when I headed the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at the Australian National University; the third from the seat of the Director of the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London; the fourth from the Chichele Chair of the History of War at Oxford; and the fifth from Sydney as a member of the Board of the Lowy Institute for International Policy.

A soldier's perspective – Vietnam 1966

I began my working life as a soldier and was fortunate in Vietnam that I had a commanding officer who took great care when the lives of his men were at stake. My CO, Lieutenant Colonel John Warr never gave a command without discussion. If he sent a group on a dangerous mission he talked about it first with them. Perhaps it helped that he had been blown up and badly wounded by land mines early in his career and knew what severe wounding was like. Not a lot of Westerners, especially political leaders, know that today.

Surviving war is not a bad way to begin a life in which international issues were to play a large part. Such experiences help to give a true idea of the consequences when political leaders call for the ultimate sanction in international order, military action.

Forty years ago in November 1966 I had just returned to base at Nui Dat, in the province of Phuoc Tuy, South Vietnam, from an operation on a coastal island. I was sweating in my tent, putting the finishing touches to a piece of practical

military analysis. My unit, the Fifth Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment, had been on operations for six months. It was time to assess our methods and the results of those six months critically. Colonel Warr had set me, his intelligence officer, the task of assessing our operational experience to help us to shape our strategy for the next six months.

We were engaged in a war of insurgency and counter-insurgency – not without relevance to the main conflicts in which we are engaged today. The conclusions I came to in Vietnam were the following:

- Our principal challenge was not the Viet Cong main force and the North Vietnamese Army but the political cadres which the Viet Cong had inserted into towns and villages to convert people to their cause, hold their loyalty once given, obtain intelligence and supplies, and undermine popular support for the Saigon government.
- Our prime task had to be the removal of enemy political cadres from the towns and villages. The main force did not have to be pursued to their deaths but kept at bay, well removed from the population centres of our province, and lacking supplies, ammunition and intelligence.
- Our second priority was to help with reconstruction and development so that the local people's needs would be met effectively, and they might come to feel that a non-Communist government would give them a better chance of a good life than a Communist one.
- Major offensive operations in or near populated areas were highly counter-productive in terms of winning popular support. We might be forced occasionally to fight in towns but in so doing we destroyed the much of the fruit of our earlier efforts.
- Other kinds of operations, especially those aimed at eliminating Viet Cong cadres and winning popular support, were much less costly to ourselves in casualties and therefore much more sustainable politically by our own and allied governments.

These conclusions survived the following debate among my fellow officers and set the guidelines for our second six months of operations. We felt at the end of our year in Vietnam that we were beginning to get on top of the issues. A successful result could be achieved at a reasonable cost. Had the Vietnam War been confined to Phuoc Tuy province

I might have been right, but we all know I was not. Phuoc Tuy was just a small sub-theatre in a big country. It did not count for much by itself. Different ideas were being practised in other parts. The overall result was not a military disaster but it was unacceptable to the American public – too little was being achieved at too great a cost.

Fast forward to Iraq in 2007 – is it a familiar picture? Iraq is an even worse problem than Vietnam. It is not a unified nation-state with a long history like Vietnam but an artificial creation of the British Empire in 1921 to kill two birds with the one stone: holding down Arab tribal revolts while finding a place for Prince Feisal whom the French had ejected from Syria. Iraq has been held together by force ever since, ready to fly apart once the grip of that force was broken. In 2002 it was clear to me that the main problem in invading Iraq would be the insurgency and chaos phase that would follow the toppling of Saddam. When I put the point then to relevant friends in the United States who supported the pending invasion of Iraq, it was dismissed. ‘We will do the heavy lifting and get rid of Saddam. The allies can handle the occupation.’ Of course toppling Saddam was not the ‘heavy lifting’. So the coalition went to war with little understanding of what they were about, a flawed strategy and no policy in place for responding to what was bound to follow – a formidable insurgency. The invasion went in with a US force much smaller than that of General Westmoreland in Vietnam, who himself had faced a much smaller problem. As for allied forces in the invasion of Iraq, they were hopelessly short of the strength needed to mount a counter-insurgency campaign.

The Coalition launched the war without enough troops, US or allied, to do the job and without a strategy, force structure and the necessary civil capabilities for meeting the main challenge. Having blundered into a hornets’ nest, the intervening force and its allies in Iraq have taken a hammering. The fate of our Iraqi allies, and their civil population, like that of our Vietnamese partners in the 1970s, is perhaps the saddest aspect of the war.

Initially Coalition forces had little idea of how to fight an insurgency. The sense of all five of my counter-insurgency lessons from 1966 was ignored or violated. Although some US and allied soldiers have by now developed excellent ideas on what to do to win the support of the civilian population, while keeping control of the insurgency, the Coalition lacks the strength to put them into effect. The November 2006 US Congressional elections have shown us that essential American public support for a protracted war with higher force levels has been lost. Premature withdrawal seems very possible. We now face the prospect of a defeat with unpalatable consequences.

This will not be the end of counter-insurgencies for the US and its allies. National and sub-national uprisings, guerrilla warfare and terrorism are likely to remain active at the cutting edge of international politics for a long time, especially in the Middle East. I draw your attention to the recent reports issued by Elizabeth Manningham-Buller, Director General of the British Security Service, and the Oxford Research Group to this effect.

We are into a new phase of warfare. The lessons I have mentioned from Vietnam remain relevant. We, meaning the West collectively under United States leadership, must train our forces properly, build their numbers up and give them the necessary civil capabilities to be able to win the next time round, at acceptable cost and in reasonable time. In this kind of conflict lives and time are very precious commodities. Above all our leaders must learn to plan their interventions on sound strategic principles or eventually we will all be lost.

An Australian Scholar’s Perspective – Canberra 1976

In the 1970s I was working at the Australian National University with a distinguished group of scholars: Bruce Miller, Hedley Bull, Coral Bell and Tom Millar. They were some of the finest that Australia has produced and I was very lucky to be able to work with them. My purview moved from the Vietnam War to the community of sovereign states. How should states relate to each other and why should they adhere to a set of rules and concepts that we call international law? It all began with the Peace of Westphalia, the two treaties by which the Thirty Years War was concluded in 1648.

Opinions differ as to whether or not Westphalia was the real foundation of international order as we know it today. In my view it was very important because it marked recognition that a dominant power eventually has to heed the wishes of the lesser states around it or it will have no peace. This was a painful lesson for the Holy Roman Empire and the Papacy to have to learn. However the sad and costly experience of the Thirty Years War (which was close to a Hundred Years War if one goes back to the failure of the Treaty of Augsburg) compelled recognition that the world would work better if there was a recognition of sovereign equality between states in a formal legal and diplomatic sense, despite their differing strengths.

This lesson has obvious implications today, both for the functioning of alliances and for the pre-emptive use of military force against other states by the dominant power. Pre-emption, strictly speaking is not illegal, but it carries with it an implication of such abnormal behaviour that it is acceptable to the community of states only rarely and then only when there is clear and convincing evidence that a serious attack on the pre-emptor was thereby averted. In other circumstances, the claimed justification for pre-emption is viewed by most as a merely a fig leaf for aggression. When pre-emption is practised by more than one state at a time it leads to widening conflicts and instability. This is also true for pre-emption between a state and a sub-national terrorist group.

Anyone who disagrees with me is asked to reflect on the way World War I began: the Russians, the Austro-Hungarians, the French and the Germans all had war plans with essentially defensive aims but with pre-emptive elements in them. Once one began, the others were all drawn in without options to do otherwise. They suffered a four-year Armageddon which destroyed three and bled the fourth white. Unless pre-emption is based on the most accurate intelligence and practised

seldom, it is a prescription for continuing instability and wide-spread hatred of the pre-emptor.

IISS Director – London 1986

Around twenty years ago I was Director of the International Institute for Strategic Studies and had just returned to London from observing the summit meeting in Reykjavik between Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev. It was a truly remarkable meeting. Both sides agreed, after several years of bitter disputes, to scrap their intermediate-range nuclear forces in Europe and reduce the rest by 93 per cent. Soon this accord was extended to the total elimination of intermediate-range nuclear weapons. The Soviets also agreed to the US proposal that in future human rights problems could form part of the agenda of major issues to be discussed between the two sides. The Reykjavik meeting paved the way for a smooth and reasonably rapid end to the Cold War.

The Americans deserve great credit for the way in which they led the North Atlantic Alliance during the Cold War. The Soviets used the Warsaw Pact simply as a body to bless their policies and issue orders to. By contrast the Americans treated NATO as a forum for the airing of real differences and they were prepared to modify their own policies in order to maintain cohesion within the Alliance. There was a great deal of public dissent on defence policies across the Atlantic in the early 1980s. Not everyone was satisfied with the compromises reached, but vigorous debate maintained cohesion. Since then NATO has prospered whereas the Warsaw Pact has fallen apart. The spirit of free debate on key policies within NATO, not only at political and official levels but also in the public arena, was one of the most powerful determinants of the outcome of the Cold War.

The lesson for the 21st century is that nations which aspire to be leaders of alliances or coalitions need a sensitive ear, excellent connections with their partners on all levels including that of public opinion, and a willingness to adjust their policies in order to maintain cohesion among their friends and partners. Once alliances are split they take a lot of putting back together.

The Reykjavik Conference is famous for another attempt at a grand settlement – an attempt which failed but one which remains relevant to our future security. After the two sides had agreed to eliminate 93 per cent of their intermediate-range nuclear weapons, President Reagan proposed that all strategic-range missiles also be eliminated. President Gorbachev responded with a proposal to eliminate all nuclear weapons of all ranges and types. As we know the advisors to both leaders quickly walked their cats backwards and these proposals came to nothing. They are important, however, because they show that the two men who were in supreme command of their national nuclear weapons both regarded these systems more as sources of danger than of security. They both wanted a world without offensive strategic nuclear weapons.

Today, despite major reductions in both US and Russian strategic nuclear forces, we have at least nine governments with nuclear weapons under command and probably soon there will be ten. If the current enthusiasm for nuclear power

stations is sustained we will soon have a large number of countries capable of producing fissile material. Will they all abjure the weapons option? This problem will have to be addressed by strengthening the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty regime. In this process the example set by the nuclear weapons states will be of critical importance if we are not to have a world of forty or more states armed with nuclear weapons. If the nuclear haves will not give them up, the nuclear have-nots are going to become increasingly tempted by the strategic status that these weapons confer.

From the Chichele Chair – Oxford 1996

In 1987 I moved from the IISS to the Chichele Chair of the History of War at All Souls College, in the University of Oxford. The man whose name was on my chair, Archbishop Henry Chichele, had been a foreign policy adviser and war financier to King Henry V in the early fifteenth century. Chichele had backed the King's strategy of going to war with France. As leader of the Church in England he had provided the essential money for Henry's celebrated and successful Agincourt campaign in 1415. Chichele's status at court and in the Church rose, especially because this was a success won by the young king against very long odds. Chichele, I should point out, was no mere royal apparatchik. In 1418 the Archbishop, present on the battlefield, interrupted the English siege of Rouen to ensure that refugee townsfolk were not jeopardised and ill-treated in the way that the English Army had intended.

Following Henry V's early death in 1422 Chichele's power grew, both as Archbishop of Canterbury and as a member of the King's Council which ruled while Henry VI was still a minor. Towards the end of his long life Chichele persuaded Henry VI to join with him in funding a new type of institution at Oxford, in effect a specialised graduate college to train men of ability for the service of Church and state. Chichele wanted to ensure a more copious supply of the people that he never had enough of as supporting staff when he was carrying out diplomatic and strategic policy work for the King. All Souls College was one of the first of a long line of research and training institutes in the field of government service.

Today, through the broad international composition of Oxford's intake of graduate students in the fields of foreign policy and strategic studies over the past fifty years, All Souls is training talented young people from around the world, East Asia to North America, Africa to Australia, for service in government, academia and the research community. It will make its mark for a long time to come.

It has been a great gain for Australia that Frank Lowy, supported by his family, decided to found an independent foreign policy research institute in Australia. The first of its kind here, the Lowy Institute has serious responsibilities. It has to improve the standard of foreign policy ideas available to the Government in view of the dangers lying ahead. It has to build the right sort of reputation so that its proposals are taken seriously, both in the public debate and by the

Government, the Opposition parties, the Government's advisers and the media. The Lowy Institute also has the important aim of raising Australia's profile in international debates on foreign policy issues. Anyone who has worked abroad, especially in Washington and the European capitals, knows how hard this is to achieve.

All members of the staff and board of directors are working hard to realise this great opportunity. Just as Archbishop Chichele knew in 1438 when he began to build All Souls, the challenges of developing good strategic policy are both formidably difficult and also crucial. After five centuries the College has earned a place of respect and it has gone on to have a wider impact on the international scene as its students, and scholarship itself, have become globalised. We at the Lowy Institute are dedicated to a similar purpose for Australia and we are similarly grateful to our founder.

For meeting the security challenges to Australia today, we need good ideas, dialogue with government and a relationship which tolerates free expression of views, especially on differences with existing policies. None of these essentials comes easily. We, the analysts, need experience in practical work – diplomacy, war, business and politics – as well as intellectual quality before we have any notion as to what is a good idea. Once we develop some ideas we need to be able to discuss them with senior people in government so that our views are taken into account in the mix that goes into decision-making. Our colleagues in government will not bother to listen to us if they do not respect the relevance and quality of our work. It is up to us to win their attention and hold it.

Perspectives from Sydney – 2006

Moving up to 2006 let me assess our current challenges. Iraq, Iran, North Korea, and Israel and the Palestinians are the most obvious points of concern. There is a wider, and less identifiable, danger of a type of international class war between those who feel most discriminated against, especially in the Islamic community, and the West. We have to think hard about what kind of over-arching international organisation we shall need for a more secure and just future. Energy security is another extremely important field. And there are a huge number of related problems coming in the wake of changes in our climate.

Given the result of the recent US congressional elections, we need to think hard about the consequences of possible defeat in Iraq. That conflict can be won only by a much more effective coalition effort, requiring a major increase in US and allied troop numbers in Iraq, substantial improvements in training and operational methods, and a much stronger civil reconstruction effort. This is not likely to happen. The probable outcomes are either a sudden descent into chaos as Coalition forces are withdrawn, or a protracted sectarian and inter-ethnic civil war, overlain with an insurgency against remaining coalition forces.

In the event of chaos, effective government in Iraq will cease for at least some years during which terrorist groups

will be able to concentrate, re-build, flourish and reach out to other targets outside Iraq. Enemy forces will be heartened; recruiting will rise; funds and weapons will pour in; pressure will be exerted on regional governments friendly to the West; more young men and women who are willing to commit suicide to harm Western and Israeli interests will become available; and the oil price will rise to new heights. Defeat in Iraq will be a serious blow to the public standing of the United States and will invite other challenges to its authority. US citizens will have to be more careful of their own security both outside and inside their own country. US business abroad will feel more under threat of terrorist action.

Iran will read a message of encouragement for its intransigence in dealing with the West. It will almost certainly go ahead to produce nuclear weapons. It will exercise an overshadowing influence in Iraq, Syria, the Arab Gulf states and Israel. The lesson of US failure in Iraq will be read (perhaps wrongly) as US unwillingness to attempt regime-change in Iran. The North Koreans will probably draw similar conclusions, although with less justification than in the case of Iran because North Korea is nowhere near as strong a state. Nuclear weapons proliferation will become more difficult to control with the threat of intervention against the proliferators dismissed.

North Korea is not the only major security problem of the East Asian region. Tensions are evident between Japan and several neighbours. Taiwan could prove a *casus belli*. The United States and China could clash. Yet there are powerful

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forces helping to maintain peace in East Asia. The mutual linkages of economic interaction and greater knowledge of each other on the part of peoples around the region are helping to make war a much less likely outcome than in the second half of the twentieth century. This trend is in part a result of effective alliance leadership and diplomacy by the Clinton and current Bush Administrations. It is also due to a growing awareness on the parts of the principal East Asian nations of where their true interests lie.

From an Australian perspective there remain all too many weak states in the neighbourhood which will require copious assistance and occasional intervention by international police or military forces. Otherwise we risk seeing them spiral into disorder and poverty, becoming points of vulnerability from which other forces can penetrate our guard. The thankless task of the local hegemon falls to Australia here and we have to undertake it, and sustain the necessary forces and skills to deal with problems quickly, economically and successfully.

The way in which the Bush Administration decided to invade Iraq underlines the need for reform of the United Nations. After 9/11 the United States is not going to tolerate the position of being at risk of attack yet unable to retaliate merely because of lack of a UN Security Council consensus. On the other hand, the international community will not passively accept US pre-emption of possible enemies unless it can be shown to be clearly justified. We must continue to wrestle with the problems of Security Council reform. It is too important to let go. The UN remains essential in dealing with these and other international problems such as climate change. We need a new recognition of what is at stake here. The UN also has to improve its performance, especially in the fields of human rights, prevention of genocide, combating corruption, and its own internal administration. But while this process of reform is underway, the UN should not be ignored or disregarded by its most powerful members.

Climate change poses unknown hazards. Maybe they will be the end of us. Obviously large refugee flows are likely to be set in motion from the most severely affected areas, such as in Africa, as drought takes a firmer hold and in flat coastal regions of high population density, such as in Bangladesh, as sea levels rise. There will be other regions of distress of course. The necessary humanitarian aid can probably only be met through major commitments requiring extensive use of national armed forces. And there are bound to be more direct security implications as nation-state governments try to advance their own interests in these difficult times.

The Australian government has to take these risks more seriously and build them into security policy development, both at the national and at the international levels. Greenhouse gas reduction now is an important security objective. It is just possible that the combined effort it will take, involving the whole international community, might be sufficient of a unifying force to help us to re-integrate humanity into a cohesive body to fight humanity's external problems and not itself. Climate change helps to put our differences on issues such as religion, reform of the United Nations, nuclear proliferation and terrorism into a different

perspective. While I do not want to sound overly romantic or naïve about this prospect, the effort that will be required to prevent global warming from wiping out vast sections of the world's population could in many ways be a positive force for international order and co-operation.

Partnership, leadership, cohesion

We will need to do all this in close partnership with the United States. Not only is it the world's greatest power, it is also the only one with the strength of commitment and values to be able to exert credible leadership. It has huge capacities for good around the world. But it is also sailing through uncharted waters and in recent years has been in heavy seas. We Australians, as one of America's serious allies, have a responsibility to help the US through this difficult passage. We can do this in many ways through diplomacy, economic co-operation and military commitments. We also have an obligation, when we see our senior partner about to make a mistake, to speak out and warn of the consequences, and even offer some suggestions on how to reach our common goals more effectively.

As I look into the future I can see some very undesirable outcomes, but we are not in their grip yet. With a major effort intellectually, politically, commercially and militarily, we might just avoid them. We might just come through into the more peaceful upland that we hoped for so much at the end of the Cold War and then failed to find. The great challenge for leaders and analysts in the decades ahead will be to find ways of building cohesion and co-operation, not division and destruction. We must not let the 'War on Terrorism' destroy the world order from which we derive so much benefit and protection. ♦

Professor Robert O'Neill, AO, was Chichele Professor of the History of War at the University of Oxford 1987-2001. Prior to this he served in the Australian Army 1955-1968, was a Senior Fellow (later Professorial Fellow) in International Relations at ANU 1969-82 was head of the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at ANU 1971-82, and Director of the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London 1982-87. He was also Australia's official historian for the Korean War. In 1996-2001 he was Chairman of the Council of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, and Chairman of Trustees of the Imperial War Museum 1998-2001. Since returning to Australia he chaired the council of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute 2001-2005 and is a director of the Lowy Institute for International Policy. Professor O'Neill first wrote for the ADA in June 1978, was a national patron of the Association for many years before accepting his chair at Oxford University and remains an ADA Fellow. This article is drawn from his 2006 'Lowy Lecture on Australia in the World' delivered to the Lowy Institute in Sydney on 27 November 2006.