

of the Department of Defence. They might wonder, however, why senior Defence civilian bureaucrats were also present for discussions but the three Service Chiefs were excluded.

The backdoor demise in the mid 1990s of the statutory interdepartmental Defence Committee (comprising the CDF, Service Chiefs, Director-General ASIO and key Permanent Heads) has resulted in some highly unfortunate consequences. Not least of these is the exclusion of the commanders of the navy, army and air force from the highest-level interdepartmental committees involved with national security issues. This is just plain silly and unprecedented by any comparable international standard or practice.

Furthermore, in the case of a future integrated national security White Paper, there would obviously have to be high-level input from many departments and agencies. The current 'process' of committees of some departmental Permanent Heads supported by lower-level interdepartmental committees and task forces needs serious reform.

Given the integrated approach to national security now required, Australia needs a proper National Security Council rather than interdepartmental committees comprised of officials only. Such a council would involve ministers, senior ADF commanders and civilian officials in a similar manner to the War Cabinet and later the War Conference instituted during World War II.

Our proposed National Security Council would be chaired by an appropriate minister, and include all or most of the members of the National Security Committee of Cabinet when required by the seriousness of the issue. The Council would also always include: the Chief of Defence Force and all three Service Chiefs; the Directors-General of the Office of National Assessments, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation and the Australian Secret Intelligence Service; the Commissioner of the Australian Federal Police; and the heads of key departments (Defence, Foreign Affairs, Treasury and Attorney-general's). Some State premiers might also be invited to attend from time to time when relevant.

A National Security Council constituted along these lines would allow the highest political level of government to be continually across the issues and up with the thinking of its most senior professional advisers. It would also stop much of the process-driven bureaucratic game playing that sometimes prevents ministers from being as fully informed as they should be (and the expert advice of the Service Chiefs being excluded).

Many will be the self-serving arguments against such a concept from various senior officials. There are, however, no valid constitutional, legal or professional impediments. In the light of 21st century whole-of-nation threats a whole-of-government response, not a bureaucratic response, is clearly required.

Garnering disaster

While the force-on-force phase of the US-led campaign to topple Saddam Hussein succeeded beyond nearly all expectations, the continuing chaos of the subsequent occupation risks undoing much of the good. Over two months after organised Iraqi resistance collapsed in early April the allies still appear to have inadequate forces to impose order on the chaos.

US Defence Secretary Rumsfeld's direction to cut the forces needed may have appeared to work for the fight but any campaign also includes the consolidation and the orderly withdrawal phases. Occupations, even relatively benevolent ones, soak up forces until a semblance of street-level law and order is re-imposed and public confidence is restored enough for some semblance of normality to return. The corrupting nature and longevity of Saddam Hussein's regime and the Sunni-Shia schism in Iraq, has contributed to the problem as there is little enduring civil society to fall back on for rebuilding.

Unless this situation is fixed quickly, the US risks replicating the British quitting of Aden in 1968 on a large scale, rather than midwifing the first of a new order of democracies throughout the Middle East. Even worse, the US at first seemed to lack the will to restore order. Growing Iraqi impatience and even antipathy to their liberators may be in no small part due to many Iraqis just wanting enough order re-imposed, however temporarily, so they can eat, drink and work before moving forward to rebuild and democratise Iraq.

Despite pre-war Pentagon hype about post-war planning there were obviously not enough occupiers to deter or stop post-combat looting. Such looting also continued for far too long. Whatever the reality, the whole world unfortunately contrasted the photos of a well-protected Oil Ministry with the burnt-out shells of other ministries and museums. Losing much of the common treasure of mankind's earliest urban civilisation, despite Iraqis being the looters, was a colossal goal for the allies in the struggle of perceptions. Not giving Iraqis the bulldozers to topple the statues of Saddam Hussein on their own, and draping US flags everywhere, were examples of unprofessional military discipline and unnecessary triumphalism we may all regret in the long run.

There was an easily foreseen serious shortage of Arabic interpreters during combat operations that led to many unnecessary civilian deaths through misunderstandings and concern about suicide bombers. Misunderstandings and, much worse still, proliferate with a US armed forces not well populated with diggers oozing cross-cultural awareness and sensibility. Many US soldiers interviewed on TV continue to say exactly the wrong thing.

Given the US's long involvement with the Middle East it is somewhat surprising that they had no 21st century, Arabic speaking, 'General MacArthur' equivalent waiting in the wings. While things have looked up since the diplomat Paul Bremer eventually replaced the profoundly

charisma-challenged Jay Garner, a long and difficult road lies ahead.

If it all turns to disaster it may be morally and politically difficult for Australia to avoid shouldering a greater burden in the consolidation phase of the campaign. A requirement to contribute a reasonable number of ground troops to the occupation of Iraq would impose a near-impossible burden on the ADF, especially while our commitment to the security of East Timor continues. We simply lack the troops to meet, let alone sustain, both commitments.

Fragmentasi?

Last month hopes for a peaceful solution to the Aceh problem in Indonesia were again dashed. The current Indonesian government has again resorted to trying an exclusively military solution to what is a political, religious and cultural dilemma. It is noteworthy that the Swedish diplomats mediating the negotiations between Indonesia and the Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM), representing the secessionist Acehnese, have attributed the failure of the talks almost exclusively to Indonesia.

The Indonesian leadership and military (TNI) appear to have learnt little from their long but counter-productive campaign in East Timor, or indeed from previous counter-productive campaigns in Aceh. Initial objective international press and Red Cross reporting from Aceh has not helped Indonesia's case. While GAM are certainly not angels either, it will be hard for Indonesia to hide abuses by excluding the international and domestic media, and diplomats and NGO, as it did in East Timor during the 1970s and most of the 1980s.

The problem of Aceh is likely to pose a growing moral and practical dilemma for Indonesia's neighbours. While the case for Aceh's secession from Indonesia is different in fact and international law from that of East Timor (and of West Papua), continued Indonesian atrocities in Aceh may eventually cancel this out as it did for Serbia over Kosovo. There are clearly limits to the legal defence of invoking state sovereignty, especially where persistent and serious human-rights violations are involved and the secession appears to have considerable popular support in the territory concerned.

Furthermore, even more importantly, Indonesia itself cannot properly democratise while it is prepared to sanction the use of armed force — rather than consent — to hold on to provinces that strongly desire to secede. As Mahatma Gandhi noted, 'you cannot really be free while you oppress others'. Indonesia cannot be truly democratic itself at the national level unless it permits free provincial elections in Aceh (and elsewhere). While it is arguable how much popular support GAM really has, especially if not allowed to sway the result by intimidation, Indonesia needs to truly face the prospect that GAM or a moderate secessionist party might overwhelmingly win a free election. There is also no accurate method of determining GAM's true level of support without such a free election.

Australia's strategic relationship with Indonesia is an exceptionally complex one by any standard of international relations. We are locked together in perpetuity by simple geographic proximity and strategic inter-dependence. As well as coping with all the contrasts in ethnicity, religion, culture, economics and demography, our two countries have starkly differing national foundation myths.

Australians freely chose to join in a federal union, with some other possible constituents (such as New Zealand) deciding not to. Most Australians would have accepted a choice by the Cocos Islanders to go their own way if they had chosen this option in their UN-supervised 1984 referendum. Similarly, while it is an unlikely possibility it is virtually unthinkable, for example, that Australia would not let Western Australia or Norfolk Island secede should they freely choose to do so. Most secessionist impulses in Australia attract only fringe support because the arguments for and against secession can be freely debated and tested in a calm atmosphere. Federalism in Australia is as democratic as it can be and matures as our country matures. It minimises our regional differences by genuinely popularising our shared history and outlook. On the whole Australian federalism also shares national resources between its constituent states, with the resources largely flowing from the richer states and regions to the poorer ones by general consent. Our federalism draws us together in fact and perception.

In contrast, Indonesian decolonisation and 'nation building' was based on the concept of 'inheriting' Dutch authority over an otherwise diverse group of ethnic communities, cultures and polities. Despite promises to the outlying islands, federalism was strangled at birth because it was, and largely still is, seen as driving 'Indonesians' apart rather than drawing them together. Many Indonesians in the outlying islands also consider that national resources are being plundered by the majority Javanese rather than shared equitably. Three generations of Indonesians have also grown up deliberately immersed in the questionable belief that any successful secession would mean the end of multi-ethnic Indonesia as a whole. Particularly when general Indonesian federalism is perpetually postponed, the danger is that such a myth can needlessly become self-fulfilling when a secession becomes inevitable anyway. These effects can be seen in the manner in which many Indonesians have superficially reconciled themselves to the loss of East Timor. Many, perhaps most, regret its loss rather than truly face up to why Indonesia 'lost' the territory. The farcical sentences now being awarded by Indonesian courts allegedly trying cases of human-rights violations in East Timor exemplify the enormity of Indonesia's self-perception problem.

At this juncture, Australia has little alternative but to maintain a public position that Aceh is an internal Indonesian problem. Obviously attempts need to be made to encourage peace talks to resume and for the Indonesian government not to sanction continued harsh repression