

Using a first principles argument, it seems a simple question of undertaking a cost–benefit analysis to determine whether North Korea should exist or not. If it should but will still collapse eventually, is it better to continue propping it up, or to actively manage its collapse, or to just let it fail? The chances of agreement on this issue being easily reached between China, the US, South Korea, Japan and Russia are not good. The chances of North Korea agreeing as well are virtually nil. The dilemma for the outside world really remains whether we can risk waiting for an internal collapse in North Korea with all its attendant risks from a disintegrating regime lashing out first in desperation, or whether further external coercion or even direct intervention might bring a better result. North Korean threats of nuclear and conventional ‘retaliation’, and the somewhat ambiguous situation and position of China further complicate the issue.

The only country that can really make the call on whether ‘wait and see’ is still an option is South Korea because it would have to bear the brunt of the risks and consequences either way. Even if war is avoided, there are clear signs that some South Korean leaders are becoming somewhat traumatised at the prospect of Korean reunification. South Korea has studied the lessons of German reunification with great interest and rocketing concern. If the huge and strong West German economy could be so damaged by absorbing the most successful of the communist economies, South Korea naturally fears having to absorb probably the worst of them. While South Korea is the world’s 13th largest economy, North Korea’s is less than half that of Bangladesh. On top of this are the simple facts that the North is starving and its people are deeply traumatised psychologically by their long inundation in lunatic political, social and economic conditions. The only silver lining for South Korea, and it would be a two-edged sword, is that it might inherit a nuclear-weapons capability without the international odium of developing one.

While the world ponders these dilemmas, Japan and South Korea grow ever more nervous and North Korea’s leaders probably ever more paranoid. The benighted people of North Korea also continue to endure mass starvation, extensive and comprehensive repression, and the scary prospect of being sacrificed even more to the vanity and paranoia of their self-styled ‘dear leader’.

A firm base for an argument

Kites appear to be floating again in the sky of Australian public debate concerning possible basing of US forces in Australian territory. One impetus for renewed interest in such an option appears to be increased US desires to significantly reduce their large forward deployments in South Korea and Japan (principally Okinawa). Australian Ministers and senior US officials have denied that there is any serious US interest in long-term basing in Australia for large forces.

Discussion of this issue needs to be kept in perspective. For example, only one US carrier battle group is homeported outside the United States (in Japan) and US ground-force deployments are rarely substantial away from traditional ‘front line’ confrontations. The constraints of Australian geography, especially the distance to traditional ‘front lines’ in the Middle East and North Asia, will always limit the potential attractiveness of Australian facilities for large-scale US forces on a permanent basis. Despite some media speculation, the campaign against transnational terror in South East Asia does not require the forward basing of large US forces closer to the region.

Furthermore, and in our strategic and ADF interoperability interests, US forces have been exercising in Australia, either jointly or on their own, for decades — often for months at a time. Elements of the US military, especially the Marine Corps, have been interested in even greater training access to Australian facilities for many years. There are often more USMC (and Singaporean) fighters exercising from RAAF Darwin than Australian ones. The USMC have also often expressed interest in accessing ADF field training areas such as the much under-utilised (and difficult to access) Yampi Sound Training Area in the Kimberleys.

There is often much interest at State level in both the Northern Territory and Western Australia in hosting more US forces on either a temporary or permanent basis. While it is unlikely that large US forces might be based in Australia permanently, there are no insurmountable obstacles to more US forces in principle. A degree of knee-jerk anti-Americanism from some sections of the community cannot be discounted but can be appropriately placated or ignored. To put this in perspective, how many Australians are aware that Singapore maintains permanent and extensive air force training facilities in Perth?

Some Australian journalists and pressure groups can be expected to blow this issue out of all proportion in order to satisfy latent or blatant anti-American prejudices, or to provoke a reaction among Australia’s neighbours in order to get a ‘story’ or some publicity respectively. Some might even scratch both itches. Even without such gratuitous beatings of the regional bushes the reaction of Australia’s neighbours to any increase in US use of Australian facilities would need watching. Their reaction, however, poses few real obstacles if managed correctly. The US already has access to facilities in Singapore and this is viewed at a good thing for regional stability. Thailand and the Philippines are not likely to object as both have formal and informal alliances with the US, including regular joint exercises with US forces. Some elements in Malaysia and Indonesia might choose to view such increased US use in a bad light but most will not — at least in private. More to the point, the anti-Western bigotry that would motivate some Malaysian and Indonesian critics is inevitable no matter what Australia and the US freely choose to do. Growing US impatience with such posturing, in suitable diplomatic phrasing, was

apparently passed to the Malaysian government by the US Ambassador recently.

The bottom line is that firm US proposals are required for the public debate in Australia to go further if indeed it needs to go anywhere. You cannot really fly a kite successfully without something firm to tether it to.

Ducking criticism

Now since its bipartisan founding in 1975 the Australia Defence Association has genuinely striven to be as apolitical as it can be. The Association considers it needs to be apolitical in order to improve our national defences by raising political and community consciousness of defence issues. We could not function any other way even if we wanted to. A truly apolitical stance takes effort both in actual objectivity and fairness, and in scrupulously observing appropriate conventions and being seen to do so. Generally speaking we are confident that we hit the mark pretty consistently. All mainstream political parties respect the Association, even when we disagree with one of them from time to time.

The Association therefore hesitates to enter the perennial debate in Australia about the degree of political bias exhibited by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). The ADA notes, however, that in both the 1991 and 2003 wars with Iraq, Australian governments of both Labor and Liberal political persuasions have perceived that the ABC has shown a marked tendency to left-wing and anti-American views, rather than professional objectivity, in much of its war coverage. Perhaps these perceptions have arisen not just because of the existence, or otherwise, of bias but through the ABC's apparent reluctance to observe appropriate and commonsense apolitical conventions.

We also note that the ABC continues to vigorously deny the charges, as did its famous 'internal inquiry' into the 1991 Gulf War accusations. We further note that part of this attempted defence is to quote statistics that purport to illustrate letters of complaint about ABC bias are 'politically balanced' in overall numbers.

The ADA's archives contain letters of complaint and letters of praise from Australian governments of both main political persuasions. They contain even more complaints from cranks across the full political spectrum. Our experience is that the quality of the letters is just as important as the numbers. With this distinction in mind, and based on observation of media coverage of the recent war in Iraq by ADA members with some experience as professional warfighters, the following thoughts on the issue of ABC bias are offered.

Bias in broadcasting is not just a matter of what is said or shown. It includes the conscious or unconscious exclusion of alternative views and TV 'vision' to what is said and/or who is interviewed and for how long. Bias can also arise through a lack of real intellectual

diversity in the journalists, producers and researchers employed. In terms of war coverage, bias can also easily sneak in through ignorance of basic military operational matters (tactics, weapon capabilities, international law, need for operational security, etc.), or in not giving proper weight to the difficulties of reporting from both sides of the conflict. This is especially so where one side is a totalitarian state with a much greater motivation and capacity to deny access, stage manage supposed incidents, or intimidate those 'bystanders' who might be 'interviewed' by foreign media.

The concept and practice of being apolitical, even if you hold strong personal beliefs, is faced daily by members of the ADF and the forces therefore place great importance on being apolitical. The defence forces serve governments of all political colours with considerable professionalism and pride in this regard — even when governments do silly things concerning defence. The forces usually react to even the silliest criticism and comments from the general public with impressive equanimity. The general reaction of many ADF personnel when recognising perceived ABC bias is therefore interesting to note. As members of a profession proud of its apolitical traditions and record they rarely show outrage at the nature of the bias itself. More often than not, by a wide margin, ADF personnel are genuinely offended or disappointed by the lack of public broadcasting professionalism involved when a broadcast is not, or does not strive to be, apolitical.

In general, the apparent bias in ABC news and current affairs coverage during the wars in Iraq appeared worse on television than it was on radio (with the probable exception of JJJ), and not as bad on Radio Australia as on other radio. Problems with access and 'vision' may have contributed. It is also worth noting in comparison that the apparent pro-American bias in coverage by the Fox cable network was just as bad, if not probably worse.

With this in mind, and admittedly based on anecdotal evidence only of the apparent popularity of BBC coverage of the war among Australian viewers, the question of relativity concerning letters of complaint might be worth reviewing. Perhaps many Australians of a conservative bent have stopped writing letters of complaint to the ABC because they fear it does no good or because they have stopped watching or listening to the ABC altogether. Perhaps many Australians of a left-wing bent are unconsciously quite comfortable with the ABC, and only write to the Corporation because they are so shocked when finally (and rarely) confronted by the odd broadcast that makes them actually uncomfortable.

Now there will also always be those who will seek to defend actual or perceived ABC bias on the grounds that commercial media frequently exhibit the most egregious examples of 'cant and slant', and that the ABC is somehow 'merely providing balance'. This is