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Debate balanced only by reciprocal flaws

In this issue of *Defender* we publish articles on the war in Iraq from both the Government and Opposition perspectives. This issue also includes an article on the importance of Australia's alliance with the United States because this remains an essential component of any debate on Australia's current and future strategic challenges. This latter aspect was also the subject of an ADA submission to the current parliamentary inquiry into Australia's defence relations with the United States. Both the Association's written and oral submissions may be found on the Australian Parliament House web site at: http://www.gov.au/committees/inquiries_comm.htm.

The ADA shares the concern of many Australians that aspects of current Labor national security policy, especially concerning the war in Iraq and relations with the United States, appear to lack vision, coherence and perspective, and smack too much of old-fashioned, ideology-driven isolationism. There is also no doubt that some of the strongest concern in this regard is within the ranks of the Labor Party and its supporters, particularly among those with long experience and interest in defence, foreign policy and international humanitarian matters.

On the other hand, if the war in Iraq is as important as the Coalition parties maintain, almost in Manichean terms, then it seems incongruous that we have not substantially increased our commitment to the multi-national effort in that country. This is especially so when our increased help would appear most needed by our principal allies and the majority of the Iraqi people. Our straitened defence capabilities would, of course, only permit a larger commitment of ground forces for a strictly limited duration. This is, however, an excuse rather than sufficient reason to duck such a challenge if the situation is as bad as the Government apparently believes.

Perhaps the flaws in the respective positions of both parties are a temporary aberration due to perceived concerns about electoral gains and losses in an election year. We certainly hope so. ♦

More gambling with our future

As expected, the 2004–05 federal budget was mainly targeted at buying swinging votes in marginal electorates. This was to be expected in an election year where a close race is likely and where, despite occasional rhetoric to the contrary, both parties are naturally reluctant to draw attention to their long and indifferent records of insufficient and inconsistent national security spending.

The overall allocation for defence is \$16.3 billion

comprising an appropriation of \$15.9 billion and other revenue (asset sales, etc) of \$400 million. This is about \$725 million (or 2.4 per cent) more than last year. Defence spending is about 8.5 per cent of the total federal budget (\$192.3 billion) and is estimated to be around 1.8 to 1.9 per cent of projected GDP. The non-defence intelligence and security agencies also received an additional \$56 million. It is worth noting that the opaque accounting methods used meant the nation's main newspapers again all quoted different figures for defence spending in their budget analyses.

Purely for comparison, social security (\$82.6 billion) is about 43 per cent of the budget, health (\$35 billion) around 18 per cent, and education (\$14.2 billion) about 7.5 per cent. Given that defence is wholly Commonwealth funded, but these other three areas also receive significant inputs from the states and territories, this budget again puts paid to the myth that we are somehow 'wasting' too much on defence and not allocating enough for social spending.

These days, as long as the overall defence allocation is not cut, the budget night detail is not as important as it once was. The funds necessary to run our defence efforts fall into three broad categories: people, operating costs and capital investment. Most public interest is in the latter category and government press releases tend to emphasise the monies allocated to 'shiny new kit' for the ADF, and new base facilities—generally described, funnily enough, by federal electorate as well as geographic locality.

Equipping the defence force requires phased investment over time, not least because of the long periods taken to procure weapons and equipment, but also because many of the larger items (ships, aircraft, etc) or fleets of equipments remain in service for two to four decades (or longer when the phasing is cocked-up or otherwise delayed). In basic terms the capital-investment component each year tops up the first year of the rolling Defence Capability Program (DCP). This runs out to around 25 years in some cases but only the first 10 are budgeted in detail for project funding. This year's DCP top-up included \$2.9 billion for major equipment, \$421 million for facilities and \$518 million for minor equipment, repairs, rent and intangibles.

As per normal, around 41 per cent of this budget, some \$6.7 billion, will be spent on personnel costs (pay, allowances, health, housing, superannuation, etc). One in five dollars goes on Defence's public servants and the remainder on the defence force. The remaining 30 per cent of budgeted funds (around \$5.7 billion) goes on a wide range of operating and other one-off costs, including about \$132 million for another year in Iraq.

The capital-investment program has not been cut to subsidise personnel and operating costs, however, because Defence was unable to spend some \$600 million of capital-

investment funding last financial year, there has been some deferment of projects in the DCP to later years in the program. This will be a problem if those funds are not made available, as scheduled, in subsequent budgets.

The 2004–05 budget largely continues the sustained underinvestment in defence of the last three decades and further postpones or limits much-needed ADF modernisation. Our short-term-focused allocation of national resources to defence still fails to match the long-term strategic challenges we face. The small real increase in defence funding this year still lags well behind both GDP and general expenditure growth. As a nation we could and should spend more on defence but we choose not to in an uncalculated gamble on the future. ♦

Trooplift helicopter selection and LHD survivability

A considerable amount has been written about the two contenders for Project Air 9000, the initiative to equip the Australian Army with a new fleet of trooplift helicopters. Little of it, however, has provided significant depth in analysing the respective capabilities each aircraft being considered would bring, and how these might integrate with other key ADF capabilities.

Defence's own capability analysis has already established that the Eurocopter MRH 90 is superior to the M-model Black Hawk when it comes to amphibious operations. This is of great consequence as there is little doubt that amphibious operations are the way of the future for the defence force.

Also important is the impact that the choice of helicopter will have on the survivability of the Navy's new landing helicopter dock (LHD) amphibious ships, the first of which is planned to enter service in 2010. For example, the time taken to fold or unfold a helicopter's rotor blades is critical. The longer the time taken to prepare each helicopter for flight, the longer the LHD is exposing its position—thereby increasing the risk of attack from air and/or surface-launched anti-ship missiles, coastal artillery, asymmetric threats, etc. With each LHD required to be capable of launching six helicopters simultaneously, the infrared and radar signatures given off by all this activity are enormous. This 'bloom' telegraphs the LHD's location and intent.

It is understood that the MRH 90 takes about 15 minutes to prepare for flight and the M-model Black Hawk takes at least 45 minutes. This effectively means that an LHD embarking M-model Black Hawks would be exposing itself for three times longer before a flight can be launched than if it embarked MRH 90s.

There is much riding on the selection of the new trooplift helicopters under Project Air 9000 and not just for the Army. This decision is, to a very significant degree, really about the way the ADF expects to do its joint expeditionary business in the future—and protect its limited numbers of associated high-value platforms and their crews. ♦

Sinking subjective analogies on Iraq and Vietnam

The consolidation phase of the collective intervention in Iraq continues to present significant challenges. As the interim Iraqi government takes over and Iraq begins to resume its sovereignty, there will continue to be opposition by those dispossessed of power. To some extent this will be supported by those of Iraq's neighbours uncomfortable with any example of genuine popular sovereignty.

Many of the critics of the coalition effort in Iraq have been making comparisons with the allied involvement in the second Indo-China War, 1962–1975. Interestingly, most such critics have been drawing incorrect or exaggerated points and ignoring some real ones. It is also worth noting that most of those drawing comparisons between Iraq and Vietnam have been either political opponents of the current Australian government and/or those with little apparent knowledge or understanding of either of the two wars (or war in general). This has generally not assisted the objectivity or intellectual integrity of the proposed comparisons. On most important comparisons, there are major differences in the situations between Iraq and Vietnam.

First, the Vietnam War occurred within an overall 'Cold War' paradigm that long predated and post-dated it. The North Vietnamese were sustained by superpower-level support from the Soviet Union and significant support from the regional communist power, China. This support continued for decades. None of these conditions, or analogous ones, apply to Iraq.

Second, South Vietnam fell because it was progressively invaded by 17 North Vietnamese divisions over the 1968–1975 period not through internal insurgency. Up until the dying days of the South Vietnamese polity around 90 per cent of South Vietnamese chose to live in areas outside the so-called 'liberated zones', and voted with their feet by becoming refugees fleeing ahead of the North Vietnamese Army's push south. It was, after all, a North Vietnamese tank not popular resentment that knocked down the gates of the presidential palace in Saigon in May 1975. South Vietnam's vulnerability to invasion was exacerbated because overall strategic conditions in the Cold War effectively prevented an allied pre-emptive or counter-strike invasion of North Vietnam to force North Vietnamese withdrawal from the South. There are no equivalent forces to the North Vietnamese Army opposing the coalition and Iraqi forces in Iraq.

Third, South Vietnam was a long, thin country territorially. The original communist insurgency in South Vietnam and the eventual supporting North Vietnamese invasion were largely sustained by the use of major supply routes and sanctuaries in neighbouring countries (Laos and Cambodia). These lay along South Vietnam's entire land borders, were quite close to major population centres in South Vietnam, and were relatively immune to attack (at least until 1970) because of the overall 'Cold War' paradigm. Iraq is not a long, thin country and its borders are not mainly in mountainous areas of primary jungle

where infiltration across frontiers is relatively easy. The opposition to the coalition-led rebuilding of Iraq does not have the sustained support of neighbouring countries, nor the geographical advantages of major sanctuaries close to Iraq's main centres of population along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

Fourth, the insurgency in South Vietnam was completely and centrally controlled by the North Vietnamese although an allegedly non-communist front group, the National Liberation Front (NLF) and a Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) were nominally in charge in the South. Despite considerable propaganda throughout the Vietnam War, the NLF and PRG were swiftly disbanded and suppressed once Saigon fell. The opposition in Iraq is only loosely coordinated across the country, is confined to minority segments of the population, and is not led by any organisation with a pretence to (or capability of) being an alternative national authority.

Fifth, the Vietnam War was fought over most of the country and for a prolonged period. In Iraq, much of the country is relatively quiet, especially in the Kurdish-dominant north and most of the Shiite-dominant south. With a few relatively minor exceptions, such as the Iranian-backed 'would-be cleric', Muqtada al-Sadr, in Najaf, the active opposition to the coalition occupation forces is largely concentrated in only parts of the country and among one segment of the population—the dethroned Sunni ascendancy class (some 20 per cent of the population). Most importantly, the Kurdish and Shiite leaderships may not like the coalition occupation, but they know it is temporary. They recognise that a coalition withdrawal before a popularly elected (and probably federal) government has consolidated its hold on the country would result in civil war. Furthermore, even if in the worst case the opposition to the occupation worsened, or lasted until the coalition forces withdraw after the Iraqi elections next January, the timescales and force scales would be much shorter and smaller respectively than in Vietnam.

Finally, it was always difficult for either side in Vietnam to achieve their desired end-states, understand each others' end-states or keep to timeframes. Furthermore, both the North Vietnamese (and their Soviet and Chinese backers) and the Americans became locked into a cycle of escalation through the 1960s. Neither could afford to quit without conceding major strategic and ideological advantages, with worldwide and long-term consequences, to their adversary.

The situation in Iraq is quite different as everyone knows that the endstate, either way, will occur quickly following the elections in January 2005; and most agree that whatever government emerges from the elections will mean the effective end of large-scale military intervention by outsiders. In addition, the strategic and moral consequences of failure in Iraq, while uncomfortable, would be nowhere near the scale of those in Vietnam. Even success is likely to be qualified at best, especially in the short term. Any failure is likely to be, at worst, only relative. Moreover, if the situation in Iraq ever became untenable, the coalition could withdraw knowing that they had done their best and that Iraq and the region were still better off than they had

been under the regime of Saddam Hussein—even if many refused to openly concede the fact. ♦

Real and useful analogies

There are, however, some key similarities between the wars in Vietnam and Iraq, especially concerning wider strategic, operational and moral lessons about resolve.

In retired Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew's words, the allies may have lost in Vietnam but they brought a vital 10 years for the rest of South-East Asia. The free world had vital interests in preventing communist domination of the region and these were largely successfully protected even after the falls of Saigon and Phnom Penh. Similarly, at least in the US, there is general agreement on what is at stake in Iraq and Afghanistan following attacks such as September 11. The campaign in Iraq is simply part of the wider fight between civilised international discourse, political pluralism and personal and religious liberty on the one hand, and apocalyptic and bigoted Islamist terrorism, with which no meaningful negotiation is possible, on the other.

The war in Vietnam was the second of four Indo-China wars over the 1946–1994 period. The loss of Vietnam was a setback to regional stability, led to further regional conflicts (Vietnam–China and Vietnam–Cambodia) and, directly, to the Khmer Rouge-initiated genocide in Cambodia. These tragedies would probably not have occurred if the allies had successfully defended South Vietnam. The current war in Iraq followed the 1980–88 Iran–Iraq War and the 1991–92 Iraq–Kuwait War.

The toppling of the Baathist regime in Iraq may have been messy, but it probably signifies the end of Iraq as a threat to regional stability rather than the opposite. While Saudi Arabia grows progressively more unstable this is the culmination of an internal process that long predates contemporary events in Iraq, and which may be ameliorated by the influence and example of a democratic Iraq. ♦

Glass houses and stone throwing

In early June, during Prime Minister Howard's visit to the White House, President George Bush was asked the following question by an Australian journalist: '... you would be aware the alternative prime minister in Australia, Mark Latham, has promised to withdraw Australian troops from Iraq by Christmas—what signal would that send to the Iraqi people and the other members of the coalition?'. While President Bush kept his answer in the abstract in terms of personalities, few Australians who keep up with international current affairs were genuinely surprised by the vehemence of his answer:

'I think that would be disastrous, it would be a disastrous decision for the leader of a great country like Australia to say that we're pulling out. It would dispirit those who love freedom in Iraq. It would say that the Australian government doesn't see the hope of a free and democratic society leading to a peaceful world. It would embolden the enemy, who believe that they can shake our will. See,

they want to kill innocent life because they think the Western world, and the free world, is weak; that when times get tough, we will shirk our duty to those who long for freedom, and we'll leave'.

President Bush's forthright statement of his views has attracted some criticism as somehow interfering in Australian domestic politics. Unsurprisingly, most of the advocates of this line are Australian politicians and commentators who have not been backward about sinking the boot into President Bush and announcing their hopes for a Kerry victory in the November US presidential elections.

Much of the critical commentary concerning President Bush has also failed to acknowledge the big picture. The Americans, justifiably, see themselves as being at war and are well aware that war is ultimately a clash of wills. They are therefore not really inclined to dabble in the type of diplomatic pussyfooting that generally features in peacetime discourses with the international public. This is not well understood in Australia, often, it appears, because people do not want to have to understand.

Also not surprising is what leading US figures view as the hypocrisy and subjectivity of Australian critics of President Bush's comments. After all, the tone, tenor and circumspection of President Bush's remarks strike a stark contrast with Mark Latham's early 2003 description of President Bush (before Mr Latham's elevation to the Opposition leadership) as 'flaky' and 'the most incompetent and dangerous president in living memory'.

Also not unnoticed in US circles is that the criticism of Bush in Australia has often been made by those who do not appear to realise that Democrat presidential contender, John Kerry, has certainly not been advocating a precipitate withdrawal from Iraq. Given a similar situation in future such as that in Iraq now, it is likely that a President John Kerry would make very similar remarks and very similar judgments to those made by President Bush.

It is also quite possible that President Bush's remarks were meant as a warning, that Australia would be making a serious mistake if it adopted the type of isolationist thinking, and limited commitments to wider international security, that have bedevilled New Zealand's political and economic relations with the rest of the Western alliance over the last 20 years. ♦

Sea-change stirring across the ditch

Recently in New Zealand there has been much controversy about possible revision of opposition National Party policy concerning New Zealand's ban on visits by nuclear-armed or nuclear-powered warships. In mid May, the party's new defence spokesman, Simon Power, made a speech forewarning of policy reform in several areas. Some of this was swiftly disavowed by the party but it seems certain that the Nationals will eventually pluck up the courage to confront one of the great shibboleths of modern Kiwi politics.

During a recent visit to New Zealand, US officials met with new National Party leader, Don Brash. Unknown to

Dr Brash, and apparently the US delegation, a representative from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) was present and took notes. In a clear breach of Westminster system propriety, the notes were demanded by Ministers in New Zealand's Labour government and quoted in parliament in an attempt to embarrass Dr Brash. According to the notes Dr Brash made an off-hand remark that if the Nationals won the next New Zealand election the ban 'would be gone by lunchtime'. Dr Brash has denied making the remark, none of the US officials can recall it, and Dr Brash forbade MFAT officials to sit in on meetings during his visit to Washington DC in June.

The New Zealand political spectrum is markedly to the left of Australia's across the board. This is exacerbated by New Zealand having only a one-chamber parliament largely elected by proportional representation. Most recent governments have been coalitions or minority governments dependent on support from fringe parties. This has tended to make major political reforms in New Zealand difficult to achieve and many Kiwi politicians wary of confronting vocal but not necessarily large sections of the electorate.

The bottom line, however, is that over the last six months the National Party has come from well behind in the opinion polls, to a strong lead, by finally having the courage to tap growing popular resentment of the (second-term) Clark government's penchant for politically correct favouritism. While this has mainly involved tensions across New Zealand's bi-cultural divide, the same fundamentals largely hold true on the nuclear bans issue. The National Party is obviously treading carefully but abolition of the ban might also be a vote winner, especially in the longer term. Five developments and trends contribute to this:

- nuclear weapons have not been carried on US and British warships for many years so the main purported reason for the ban is ever-increasingly irrelevant
- more and more Kiwis appear to agree with the 1992 Somers Committee (Royal Commission equivalent) report which comprehensively demolished every argument about the supposed dangers of visits by nuclear-powered ships
- the ban is widely seen internationally as a failure, has not been copied by any important country, and is clearly not the innovative and world-leading example it was trumpeted as when introduced
- most Kiwis understand and approve of New Zealand's participation in the war on terror and note the partial thaw this has brought in strategic relations with the US
- many, probably most, Kiwis now realise that their sustainable economic and social future can no longer be divorced from wider strategic and political considerations, and that the isolationism of the ban has proved counter-productive.

With New Zealand also facing an election this year, it may not be too long before ANZUS again is the fully tri-national alliance needed in the present strategic circumstances. It may be that New Zealand might soon resume contributing its fair share to the collective effort of securing its own region and the wider international order. ♦

Blown into proportion

The threat from transnational Islamist terrorism and consequent homeland defence matters are topical themes in the defence capability debate. In particular, the threat from bombs is resurgent. The 2003 US Department of State Report notes that 67 per cent of international terrorist incidents comprised bombings (with 27 per cent being armed attacks and less than one per cent involving hostage taking). The Australian Bomb Data Centre (ABDC) reported 348 bombings, hoax devices and attempted bombings in Australia during 2002—mostly criminal in origin. For over 40 years the ADF maintained an Improvised Explosive Device Disposal (IEDD)—more commonly referred to as ‘bomb disposal’—capability in each State and territory. In the late 1980s the primacy for IEDD operations was transferred, quite correctly, to the State police services with the ADF maintaining a surge capability to support the one or two bomb squads that each police service could deploy. Since then, the ADF IEDD teams in the ACT and Tasmania have been removed and numerous bomb technician positions in other regions have been either axed or replaced by civilian ammunition logisticians. In the last few years the RAN, RAAF and the Army’s Incident Response Regiment (IRR) have improved their IEDD abilities but they have no specific domestic security role, nor are they centrally coordinated or regionally based to provide timely support to the police.

The new National Counter Terrorist Plan still requires Defence to maintain an IEDD capability. Now appears to be a suitable opportunity to determine if the deficiencies in ADF regional IEDD capacity should be remedied or the capability removed from the ADF. Deficiencies include command and control, equipment, training and intelligence support.

Regional IEDD operations, including operational tasking, previously under command of the defunct Military District structure are now undertaken by the Joint Ammunition Logistic Organisation (JALO) as an adjunct to its ammunition and ordnance inspectorate functions. Despite discussion on IEDD tasking since 1976, and the obvious advantages of a centralised command centre for an operational function common to the three Services, there is no single IEDD tasking headquarters. JALO is outside the normal command structure for responding to terrorist incidents. The IRR is under Headquarters Special Operations (HQSO), which would appear to be an obvious location for an ADF IEDD command centre. The UK centralised tasking model is worth studying.

The Echidna robots used for remote approaches to a device so as to reduce exposure by bomb technicians are now 16 years old and beyond their extended shelf life. Although a capability statement has been raised no

approved project to replace them is yet in train. The primary IEDD demolition weapon, while still effective, is 30-year old technology and newer systems are available. Of greater concern are the bomb suits; the first fleet of Canadian suits are now some 11 years old and the second fleet about eight years old. The protective armour has an expected life of seven years and the planned program of inspection testing was never implemented. While new suits were purchased for the Olympics, most of them did not find their way to the regions. The operators are being asked to wear protective equipment that is out-of-date and probably ineffective. The risk to bomb technicians is obvious, as are the moral and OH&S liabilities of the ADF.

The Army ammunition technical staff on call in the regions for IEDD tasking undergo extensive initial training but there is no formal retraining or re-qualification. The onus for training apparently rests with the senior representative in each region and they organise what they can with little or no resources. It is surely unusual that military personnel authorised to conduct high-risk explosive operations and to deploy weapons in an urban environment are not required to undergo regular retraining and re-certification. The training regime of the counter-terrorist tactical assault groups makes an interesting comparison.

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Finally, there is no direct formal link between the ADF’s regionally based

IEDD teams and IED intelligence systems. The links between the ABDC and DIO are primarily via JALO which does not have a dedicated intelligence or IEDD cell. The regional IEDD teams do not have appropriate secure communications or data systems. They are usually outside the counter-terrorist briefing program and often have to rely on local contacts with the police for current intelligence. Transferring operational control for IEDD tasks to HQSO, which does have a dedicated intelligence cell, would assist.

Senior ADF commanders and Defence officials, other government departments and probably the Government, believe that the ADF maintains an effective IEDD capability in the States and territories to assist the police if or when the most likely form of terrorist attack occurs. The reality is that there are fewer teams, they are lightly staffed, equipped with old and possibly dangerous equipment, and have poor intelligence links and an inappropriate command structure. Even if new equipment is procured to provide a materiel solution, the aspects of role, function, resources and position within the ADF’s counter-terrorist capability need to be addressed.

A policy decision needs to be made, on a capability level. Do we maintain and resource the regional IEDD capability or close it? ♦