

# Keeping the US Alliance

## in perspective

Tony Parkinson

According to Bob Hawke's memoirs, there was a sullen reaction among senior colleagues in November 1990 when, as a Labor prime minister, he signalled his intention to commit Australian forces to the probable American-led and UN-endorsed war to force Iraq's withdrawal from Kuwait. As Hawke recalls it, his deputy leader and heir apparent, Paul Keating, was decidedly unimpressed: 'What has the US done for us?' Those words reverberate today as a new Labor leader, Mark Latham, has pledged to withdraw Australian forces from US-led coalition operations in Iraq by Christmas, arguing that our security priorities lie closer to home. As if on cue, commentators from the Left have raised the familiar chant that Australia's close engagement with the world's only superpower is proving more trouble than it is worth.

Self-evidently, much of the passion in this debate is driven by the awful images of the security crisis in Iraq, arising from a war many still hold to have been illegitimate. The privations and setbacks of the US-led occupation—the siege of Fallujah, the sickening terrorist strikes, the Islamist resistance in Najaf and, perhaps most conspicuously of all, the 'chamber of horrors' revelations about the conduct of American prison guards at Abu Ghraib—have deeply shaken international public opinion about both the viability and virtue of the project to liberate Iraq. In Australia, too, there is rising anxiety about the Howard Government's involvement in this confronting and harrowing security agenda.

For a significant element of the Australian Labor Party support base, in particular, resentment towards the Government's stance on Iraq is acute. In an election year, it would be surprising if events in Iraq were not to feed into the partisan political debate. But Mark Latham, as the alternative prime minister, needs to be extremely precise in how he articulates his differences with the Howard Government.

There may be more at stake than meets the eye. Having withdrawn conspicuously from his plans to visit Washington, Mark Latham faces a higher-than-usual burden of responsibility to weigh the wider consequences of what he says and does about Iraq. He should bear in mind that New Zealand's 1985 fallout with Washington might have

begun as a single-issue, 'pebble in a pond' controversy over nuclear warship port visits. The ripple effect, however, had far wider consequences, with the US fearing the effect of the precedent of New Zealand's actions for defensive missile deployments in Europe. Just as that was a crucial moment in the Cold War test of strength with the Soviet Union, the outcome in Iraq is crucial to the wider US-led war on terror, with the political will of the US and its allies exposed to enormous strains and stresses.

Peeling off would be a big call. This is why Mark Latham must be very careful. A populist pitch to bring the troops back to Australia from Iraq could easily come to be remembered as a vote of no confidence in US policy, of an ilk with the decision by Spain's socialists to pull out of Iraq. Given his 2003 depiction of George W. Bush as 'the most incompetent president in living memory', it is conceivable that Mark Latham personally may be entirely comfortable with such a posture.

For never far beneath the surface in this debate is a sentiment of long standing in the Labor tradition, a mantra that says Australia should be less compliant in the strategies of 'great and powerful friends', and that wars in the faraway Middle East are really none of our business. Or theirs. On this view, reincarnated by Mark Latham, but borrowing from decades of antecedence within the ALP, a refusal to engage any longer in US-led operations in Iraq would signify a robust declaration of Australia's foreign policy independence. On another view, of course, it might just as easily be characterised as a murky brew of visceral anti-Americanism and head-in-the-sand isolationism that logic says can only lead to a downgrading of the alliance, symbolically if not substantively.

There remain important voices in Latham's Labor Party who, whatever their views of the rights and wrongs of the war, believe Australia has obligations to help secure better lives for the people of Iraq. There are also those who understand the critical relevance of what is happening in Iraq for the future of the wider war on terror, and for the capacity of the US political system to sustain its commitment and support for this gruelling agenda.

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Will the counsel of these liberal internationalists be heeded? Or are we seeing the return of Lang Labor? In *The Hawke Memoirs* (William Heinemann, 1994) Labor's most successful prime minister reflected frequently on the task he faced in educating the ALP to shed its 'ritual anti-Americanism and pacifist naivety'. The book touches on the long history of foreign policy tussles within the ALP over the US alliance, in particular the attempts by the wartime NSW premier Jack Lang to disparage Prime Minister John Curtin's historic role in forging strategic links with Washington. Hawke believed Keating was too much under the sway of the 'contemptuous attitudes' of Lang, his mentor.

Lately, Bob Hawke has changed his tune. Like Paul Keating and Gough Whitlam he is supporting the Latham approach. It appears the echoes of Lang Labor worry him less these days. Today, sadly, the memory of too many in the ALP starts and stops with the feverish analogy of Iraq as Vietnam revisited: My Lai, the Tet Offensive—ah, those were the days. It is not hard to imagine Mark Latham as someone who looks in the mirror and sees a young Gough Whitlam. He certainly feasts on the folklore of Whitlam's surge to power in 1972. Labor mythology has it that a revitalised party under Whitlam was turbo-charged by an influx of young supporters desperate to end Australia's role in America's wars in Indochina.

The reality was some what more prosaic. By the time Whitlam came

to power, the McMahon Government had already withdrawn all Australian combat forces from Vietnam. It had been conscription as much as the unpopularity of the war that politicised these new Labor supporters. Promises of universal health care, free university tuition, and a raft of social reforms may also have had something to do with it.

Nonetheless, the mythology is powerful: a generation or more of party activists have been weaned on a world view that says US global strategy, if not inherently and irretrievably corrupt, is deserving of intense suspicion and scepticism. It is ludicrous to pretend this would not have implications for the state of the alliance if this undercurrent within the ALP was to be reflected in the attitudes and decisions of a Latham Government.

The United States has been Australia's most important bilateral partner for almost 60 years. The security relationship forms a key element in the balancing role played by the superpower in maintaining peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region. If not exactly part of the family jewels, the alliance is certainly a national asset. It is not to be trifled with. For a start, anyone who believes the alliance is dispensable had better come up with an explanation to the Australian taxpayer. The estimated cost of replicating the direct defence and intelligence capabilities Australia enjoys as a byproduct of its close ties with the US military could be as high as \$6 billion a year. In fact, without preferential access to US defence technology, some high-

tech capabilities would simply be irreplaceable.

In an emerging era of integrated warfare, America's technology edge is profound. Australian forces learnt its value during the East Timor crisis, in tracking the whereabouts of militias. In fact, since about the time of the Korean War, Australia's defence force has increasingly been trained and configured to work effectively alongside US forces. They work as well together as any other two armed forces. Hence, from the military as much as the political perspective, it is hardly surprising that, if and when the US is contemplating coalition operations, as in Iraq, Australia should be among the first approached. Yes, the alliance confers obligations as well as benefits. What alliance doesn't? And why shouldn't the burden be shared?

Australia cannot do a New Zealand. The Kiwis can flirt, if they like, with a foreign policy stance that casts them as some sort of non-aligned movement for rich kids. They can run tiny defence budgets, keep their heads down, and go out of their way to cause the least offence possible, in the hope that their remoteness—and the against-all-odds excellence of their down-sized defence force—will provide them with a buffer against the dangers of the world. Whether this is the wisest course to adopt given current global threats and moral challenges is highly debatable but, at a strategic level, New Zealand will always have the

fallback of the 'continental shelf' defence—that is, the comfort of friendly relations with a larger and more

powerful neighbour. It can be a Canada of the South Seas.

Australia has no such luxury. It occupies a vast landmass. It is the 14th biggest economy in the world. It is a significant regional player, militarily and diplomatically. And there are expectations—and not just in Washington—that it can be called upon to accept responsibilities beyond its own shores.

The so-called 'Defence of Australia' doctrine is not a cop-out clause for foreign policy. Certainly, it should never be used as an excuse to shrink or retreat. Independence is not, and has never been, synonymous with irrelevance. Surrounded by sea, both the US and Australia have powerful excuses for isolationism. In both cases, the geography provides a natural layer of protection afforded few other nations.

However, through the bitter experience of the global conflicts of the 20th century, and now the double dose of the September 11 and Bali bombings, both countries have learned that distance provides no refuge from the ills of the world. True, the primary role of Australia's defence force will always be to protect continental Australia from the threat of a conventional military attack by a hostile power. But this does not in any way relieve Australian governments of accepting their fair share of the burden in dealing with global challenges, whenever and wherever they arise—whether within the framework of the US alliance, or at a broader multilateral level.

In that context, it is always worth considering the statistical fact that one in every 20 Australians will, at any given moment, be living and working overseas. For these Australians, in the current global setting, 'Defence of Australia' is not much of a defence. Indeed, the emerging threats of asymmetric warfare targeting civilian populations demand a far more flexible response than that provided by strategic doctrine of the past 20 years. A stay-at-home defence force is not best-suited to the challenges of global terror. To put the equation slightly differently, it would represent a searing indictment of Australian governments, military, police and intelligence chiefs if our defence against terrorist operations ever came to depend predominantly on having frontline troops on the ground at home. It would be a sure sign not that we were any safer, but that we were too late—far too late—in understanding and responding to the dangers.

These are the changing strategic circumstances facing not only Australia but all the world's democracies. The US happens to be leading the global effort to counter the threat of violent, revolutionary Islamism because—frankly—there is nobody else who could or would. To be able to sustain this campaign, the US needs political and military support. As an ally and friend, Australia is an obvious candidate.

Critics of the alliance in Australia are often heard to complain that it's all one-way traffic, that the mutual obligation clauses are too ambiguous, that it's all very well for Australia to provide back-up for the Americans but that the alliance offers no explicit guarantee of US military support in the event of a serious threat to Australia's security. (Oddly, you never hear the same critics speak from the other perspective—does ANZUS guarantee Australian support for the superpower in the event of an attack on US interests?)

But even if we accept that there is ambiguity, it is an ambiguity that works to Australia's advantage. For although defence planners in Canberra might not necessarily be able to assume that in any and all circumstances the US would come to our assistance (indeed, the logic of the 'Defence of Australia' doctrine presumes Australia would accept for itself the responsibilities for dealing with immediate, regional threats) any potential adversary would have to ponder carefully what the superpower might or might not do in the event of a hostile act against Australia's interests or citizens. This is also true when evaluating the nightmare scenario of a nuclear threat, where the US provides extended deterrence to Australia and Japan alike.

The alliance also gives Australia blue-chip access to the most significant strategic councils in Washington. This intimacy works to Australia's advantage in the region—other countries know that governments in Canberra speak with unusual insight and understanding of trends in Washington, and can sometimes act as an intermediary. This is welcomed discreetly by neighbouring governments.

The US web of alliances and treaties in Asia provides a

'tripwire' that presupposes US intervention in the event of a critical security threat, and acts as a deterrent to potentially destabilising influences. Hence, most, if not all, countries of this region value the US strategic presence. In China, the only credible rival to US power in Asia in the long term, there are certainly ardent nationalists who suspect the US networks in Asia constitute a strategy of encirclement. Arms supplies to Taiwan are a constant irritant. Equally, though, there are key voices in Beijing who regard the US presence as vital. For example, were the US to pull back from its alliances in the region, would not Japan feel a need to spend aggressively on capabilities of its own, up to and including strategic missile forces and nuclear deterrents?

In the early 1990s, after the breakdown of the Soviet empire, it became fashionable to question the relevance of the US system of alliances. The Left, in Europe in particular, indulged in the 'beyond all wars' theory of global order, only to be reminded by gruesome conflict in the Balkans that they were a long way from ushering in a postmodern utopia. It would be wonderful if the international order could be maintained by consensus decision-making at the UN. But that is not the world as it exists, nor, sadly, a world that is foreseeable.

Saddam Hussein's Iraq raised a fearful dilemma for the international community, and, through the Security Council fiasco, the UN failed. It was another reminder—if one was needed—that without superpower involvement, there is no demonstrated capacity, militarily and diplomatically, to mobilise and lead campaigns to counter global security threats: either the readiness of terrorist networks to mount attacks on civilian populations, the preparedness of some regimes to monster their own people, or the unnerving proliferation of the shadowy trade in nuclear, gas or germ-warfare technologies.

The US, for all its wealth and power, cannot meet these challenges on its own. It needs broad international consent and support. Without this, the US public will start to ask why they—and they alone—should have to carry all the risks?

For this reason, among others, a joint commitment to global security is, and always has been, a pillar of the US–Australia alliance. Within the relationship, of course, it should always be possible to debate, strenuously, what range of responses, what mix of hard choices and careful balances, is most likely to reduce or eliminate common security threats.

It is not credible, however, to seek to dismiss or discount the nature of these threats, especially after the attacks of 11 September 2001—or, from Australia's perspective, to pretend the problems of the world are for someone else to fix. ♦

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