

Warring words:

Taking the war on terrorism seriously

Rod Lyon

The war in Iraq has been contentious. So too has been the broader War on Terrorism. A debate still rages, nearly seven years after September 11 2001, over a variety of issues, including

- whether terrorists are actual war-makers or mere criminals;
- whether the war in Iraq is a central or incidental part of the War on Terrorism; and
- whether future Australian governments will have the 'space' to reposition Australia's engagement in the War on Terrorism?

Warfighting or crimebusting?

I propose to tackle those three issues here. And since space is limited, let me dive right into the first. Are terrorists war-makers or mere criminals? This issue is still a critical one because how people think about terrorists shapes how they respond to their activities. If terrorists are just criminals, then the Australian Defence Force (ADF) would seem to have only a small role in the national counter-terrorism mission; the bulk of the mission would be borne by the police.

And in relation to terrorists planning attacks upon Australia, the key weapon in being able to prevent those attacks is often said to be good intelligence rather than military force. Terrorist groups live in the world of darkness and concealment; so the trick to countering them is to find them. Once they are found, the resources of the ADF would rarely be needed to defeat them. Arrest, trial and detention would be the appropriate mechanism for dealing with them. Legal avenues would usually suffice, and the vanguard of the counter-terrorist effort would therefore be civilian rather than military.

But I have problems with this view. As someone who once taught a university course on conflict, and spent considerable time looking at conflict patterns over recent centuries, let me just say that one of the most troubling features of recent conflict is the steady erosion of the Napoleonic model of war — a model based on armies which represented nation-states which represented citizens — and the continuing empowerment of smaller and smaller groups as 'strategic actors' able to shake the international system. The Napoleonic model represented 'mass warfare', but mass warfare has

been retreating as smaller, 'de-massified' actors become more effective. In some ways, this shift is analogous to the historical victory of the smaller, more agile mammals over the larger, lumbering dinosaurs.

Terrorism plays into that broader shift in the pattern of conflict. Indeed, it represents the strategic advantage that smaller groups can bring to warfare today. Increased destructive capabilities are open to them now — potentially even weapons of mass destruction — and they can wield their power at much greater reach. Those days when terrorists lived at home, and essentially played a role in the domestic politics of individual states, seem to have passed. An increasing fraction of the terrorist community is capable of thinking and acting globally. But terrorists bring an unfamiliar style of war to our homelands: they do not seek to conquer. Rather they 'raid', and as Anna Simons, a US anthropologist once noted, their style of warfare is an old one.

As their destructive capacities mount, terrorists are becoming more important 'strategic' actors in international security. They can burn skyscrapers — more than one at a time. They can release sarin gas in underground railway stations. They can bomb embassies and infrastructure. And, most importantly of all, they can make us think differently about principal threats to our own way of life and the policies we might adopt to maximise our own security. In short, they can make us think differently about our current security 'order'. So I think it is wrong to look at September 11 and note, as some do, that more people were killed by handguns in the US in 2001 than were killed in the terrorist attacks.

Whether something is 'strategic' or not has little to do with how many people get killed, and lots to do with the ability of a particular sort of event to reshape security orders. Terrorists want to reshape those orders. They have in mind a political objective, and that also helps to separate them from the ranks of the criminals. Terrorists apply force in pursuit of political ends, and so satisfy Clausewitz's dictum for separating war from meaningless violence: they see war as the continuation of politics by other means and at least some of them consider they are 'at war' with us. So, to round off my thoughts on the first issue, about the status of terrorists, let me say that I think some terrorists — not all, but some — qualify as war-makers, and that Australia, like other countries, should be going to war with them.

Where does Iraq fit?

Let me move to the second issue, which is about the war in Iraq, and where that conflict fits in relation to the broader War on Terrorism. In Australia and elsewhere, it is not uncommon to hear views saying that Iraq is a mere distraction from the War on Terrorism and that Afghanistan (or Pakistan, or 'Londonistan', or someplace else) is actually the 'central front' of the war. Let me say at the outset that I do not believe that Saddam Hussein was the secret mastermind of September 11: there is little evidence of any key Iraqi role in those events. But I do think that the invasion of Iraq was intended to have consequences in relation to the broader War on Terrorism.

First, it was intended to slow the day when the world reached the horrible strategic crossroads where weapons of mass destruction intersect with small-group radicalisation. After 11 September 2001, the Bush administration was looking for places where Al Qa'eda, a Sunni terrorist group, might source such weapons. Not surprisingly, it tended to focus in particular on those possible sources which included a regime which hated the United States, might well endure for some decades through a planned family succession, and had some 'form' in relation to previous use of WMD. (The Iraqis used chemical weapons against the Iranians and their own Kurdish minority in the 1980s.) And secondly, the intervention in Iraq was intended to lend weight to the cause of political reformation in the Middle East, since the initial calculation of the Bush administration was that it would be impossible to slow the long-run recruitment of Islamist radicals into terrorist groups without such a reformation.

Like the conflict in Afghanistan, the war in Iraq was intended to be an 'environment-shaping' conflict: a conflict that would enhance the West's long-term position in a probable fifty-year war. But all has not gone well. Sectarian tensions escalated dramatically after the bombing of the Golden Mosque, and 2006 and 2007, in particular, were very difficult years in Iraq. The gains that Bush sought have not all been in vain. Western governments — and publics — can be more confident that Iraq does not offer easy access to WMD for Sunni terrorist groups. But they can have little confidence about the long-term survival of democracy in Iraq, even though several millions of Iraqis turned out to vote in the elections held there. Many indicators — including the levels of violence, the vigorous rate of internal displacement and the slow progress on political reconciliation — suggest the country still faces a difficult future, and some form of sectarian partition remains a distinct possibility...

For most of 2006-07, Western strategic calculations were less oriented towards establishing a garden of democracy in the Middle East than they were towards achieving an exit strategy that avoided three bad outcomes: an Al Qa'eda sanctuary, a genocide, or a wider regional conflict. All three remain distinct possibilities from a coalition withdrawal strategy that goes wrong. But the bigger loss might occur in relation to Western strategy in the War on Terrorism: Iraq has not been a useful 'environment-shaper' for those hoping to deprive Islamist terrorists of fresh recruits — indeed, quite the opposite, at least in the short term. Unless we can reverse

that trend, the out-years of the War on Terrorism might be longer and harder than previously thought.

Gaining strategic space

Finally, what can Australian policy-makers do to increase the amount of policy 'space' available to future governments to recalibrate the country's engagement in the War on Terrorism? This is a difficult question, tied to a host of factors that have strategic and political importance as well as diplomatic and ethical priority. On the whole, defence and foreign policy issues did not prove to be central issues in either the Australian 2007 election campaign or the run-up to it. Domestic issues were much more central. Our engagement in Iraq was often portrayed as a principal difference between the major parties, but even there the differences are limited to the level and duration of the major ground force commitment, rather than to the issue of our broader engagement in the theatre. Defence issues traditionally tend to be marked by relatively high levels of bipartisanship, and the 2007 election was no exception.

Australia was always carrying a relatively light load in Iraq. Its commitment has been a finely calibrated one. It has thankfully suffered no combat fatalities as yet. And the major ADF commitment found itself deployed in a relatively quiet area of the country. The relative success of the US 'surge' strategy, and the full handover to Iraqi control of the southern provinces where the Australians were based, provided the incoming Rudd government with an easy exit point. We were not seen as deserting the Americans and where 'exiting' could be made to appear as a logical occurrence that reflected the achievement of certain conditions on the ground in Iraq. But Iraq's future is far from settled. Iraqis are not close to being able to secure their own future. Sectarian divisions are deep and bitter; and while Iraqi security institutions have improved dramatically over the last year they can still often be weak, ill-equipped, and under-trained.

Despite the recent positive gains in security there, Bush's grand objective for Iraq — a stable, unified, democratic country which is a partner in the War on Terrorism — currently seems an unlikely prospect. Moreover, on the US side, it is still difficult to see what lies beyond the 'surge'. Much of the initial scepticism about the strategy has lessened as the 'surge' has been given more time and resources to alter the situation on the ground in Iraq in a sustainable way. And violence has decreased as Sunni militants have been essentially treated as US partners rather than adversaries. But stabilising the Iraqi polity — if it is one polity — will involve a much longer-term commitment. And political will in the United States for the war in Iraq seems to be fading fast. The same is true in Britain and Australia.

The constricted nature of the debate within Australia about Iraq meant the issue of our own engagement there was sometimes treated as though it were the final question in terms of Australia's engagement in the War on Terrorism. This is not true. The War on Terrorism will continue 'after' Iraq; it is likely to be the strategic issue that will define a generation of Australian strategic thought. Why? For the reasons canvassed in relation to the first question above: that

'war' is increasingly the province of small, disaffected, often fundamentalist groups. Changing the name of the 'War on Terrorism', as some are wont to do, will have absolutely no effect on that structural driver. That condition results from deep historical forces, and it is wrong to believe that it is merely a transient and passing phenomenon.

The Iraq conflict might be only one of a series of serious conflicts that define that wider war. In the early stages of the 2008 presidential contest, Democratic-Party presidential aspirant, Barack Obama, has already spoken of the prospect that US military forces may have to be deployed in Pakistan in future. On this bigger canvas, the conflict in Iraq is not part of the endgame of the War on Terrorism, but merely one of its opening rounds.

Thinking ahead

How, if at all, can Australia's political leaders increase their 'space' in this policy area? Frankly, it is not obvious that they can. Howard's Coalition government attempted to address the rise in 'global-level' threats to Australian security by deepening co-operation with our country's major ally, and by building new partnerships with others where it thought appropriate opportunities existed. The incoming Rudd Labor Government has pursued a policy not that much different to Howard. Much, of course, depends on the particular emphases that the Labor government chooses to put on the various aspects of its security policy over the longer term.

The conclusions from the arguments sketched above are not optimistic ones. The arguments tend to be gloomy, and the predictions that arise from them dire. So let me say that I think there is a role for a 'softer' side of Western policy in the counter-terrorist arena. Policies of aid, development, reconstruction and dialogue must have a place in Australia's counter-terrorism effort, alongside military and policing responses, if we are ever to succeed in creating an environment where terrorists cannot flourish.

But we already have such policies underway, and it is largely a difference of emphasis that might lead us to call one government's approach 'soft' and another's 'hard'. On the whole, 'soft power' tends to supplement and not to replace hard power. The current international strategic environment is not especially responsive to the grand strategies with which Western publics became familiar during the 'long peace' of the Cold War. Australia, like many other countries, is still struggling to identify effective strategies with which to counter small-group, extremist threats. In that sense, it still has some strategic 'sorting out' to do. But I think, in the long run, it is possible to get 'beyond' the War on Terrorism only by taking that war seriously. ♦

Dr Rod Lyon is the Program Director (Strategy and International) at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute in Canberra. This article is an updated version of one originally published in the November 2007 issue of 'Debate', published by Fine Line Design & Publishing, and is republished courtesy of 'Debate' (articles available on the website at www.debate.net.au).

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But technology will supplement, not eliminate, the need for judicious analysis and judgement. So while the intelligence officer of the future will employ an increasing array of technologies when collecting, analysing and providing meaningful context for intelligence, he or she will continue to require sharp intellectual and observational skills, as well as the moral imagination to make sense of an environment offering few or subtle clues, but many potential dangers.

More challenging environment

Australia's increasingly interlinked international and domestic security environments now result in a blurring of the line between the normal and the exceptional state of affairs, and the mainstreaming of intelligence. This means two broad points about the future of intelligence work.

The business of intelligence is becoming more closely aligned to a range of areas of government, and as such is moving with and helping to shape the prospects of a modern, globally-integrated country. If this is where intelligence is heading, then the first point is that the future of intelligence work and the future of cosmopolitan nation-building are very much on the same trajectory.

In this sense, intelligence will play as much an enabling as a defensive role for a range of national goals as Australia becomes more and more globally integrated. In fact this may provide the best context in which to discuss the complex issue of the relation between security and liberty – an issue likely to remain subject to different perspectives within the community, and the different parts of our system of government, for some time to come.

The second point is that as this mainstreaming of intelligence product continues, it is vital that intelligence itself does not become 'mainstream' in the sense of 'run-of-the-mill'. I do not think it will, so long as we remain focused on what distinguishes intelligence from other types of advice. First, intelligence is concerned to get behind the veneer of public postures and penetrate the sphere of covert, dangerous activity. Second, intelligence is deeply engaged with the threat environment at both the 'micro' and 'macro' levels:

- intelligence, that is, about the concrete activities of particular individuals or groups of individuals; and
- intelligence informing our broad understanding of the security environment – nationally, regionally and globally.

Which together mean that intelligence is deeply engaged with the limits of the known environment.

Intelligence Services are professional sceptics about the visible world and seek to discern whether its machinations, or hidden reaches, hold serious risks for our national wellbeing. Despite the fact that intelligence cannot promise to forecast with precision an unknown and uncertain future, nor always deliver complete or unambiguous information, there will continue to be significant need for the sort of judicious advice intelligence can provide within the national policy-making process. ♦

Paul O'Sullivan is the Director-General of Security and head of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation. This article is based on his address to the Security in Government conference in Canberra on 05 December 2007.