

AUSTRALIAN VOTERS' GUIDE TO INTERNATIONAL POLICY

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The parameters of Australian policy on Iraq and Afghanistan will continue to be set by the American reality in these two countries. And the reality is that America is losing in Iraq, is treading water in Afghanistan, but cannot withdraw totally from either in the short to medium term.

In Iraq, the US 'surge' is working, but the surge is a strategy not a solution. It was designed to buy time for political reconciliation between warring Iraqi factions and for economic reconstruction. Militarily, the surge is not sustainable beyond the middle of 2008, so the window of opportunity it levered open will soon close. But so far, neither the reconciliation nor the reconstruction that it was meant to catalyse is occurring in any significant way.

In fact, Iraq's fastest growing exports are the terrorism tactics — notably suicide bombing — now being used to great effect in Afghanistan. The situation there is marginally better than Iraq. There is little risk, for example, that the Taliban will return to Kabul in the short term and therefore, to the nominal seat of national power. But there is also little prospect the current Karzai government will exercise real authority, competence or legitimacy much beyond Kabul any time soon.

The United States cannot, however, afford to leave either Iraq or Afghanistan precipitously. In both cases, but especially in Iraq, early withdrawal would see dramatic increases in violence and refugee outflows and hand a victory to international terrorists. More particularly, such a move would cede greater influence to Iran in a region containing 60% of the world's known reserves of oil and 40% of its gas.

Most Republicans and Democrats already agree about staying in Afghanistan. But beyond the political theatre currently being played out in Washington over the pace of any US drawdown in Iraq, neither mainstream Republicans nor Democrats are calling for total immediate withdrawal from there either — at least not yet. The result is likely to be an ongoing US military presence in Iraq of anything between 60,000 to 130,000 troops for the next three to five years to, depending on the size of the force, provide security, hunt al-Qaeda, train Iraqis and deter Iran.

This is a recipe for muddling through at best. The Iraqi state is gone and little is being built in its place. The Iraqi Army is getting better, but is still utterly dependent on the United States. Gradually reducing already stretched US forces will make those remaining in Iraq even more vulnerable. As Israel found in southern Lebanon in the late 1990s, when reduced to a largely defensive posture, all you do is take casualties.

Nevertheless, more out of fear of the consequences than hope for the future, there is, in the words of one respected US commentator, a 'tenuous case for strategic patience in Iraq', and the same could be said of Afghanistan. This poses three key questions for any new Australian government:

First, how to manage an alliance expectation that Australia remain in Iraq and Afghanistan, probably for the life of the next Australian government. Decisions will be required on whether to maintain, withdraw or reshape current commitments.

In Iraq, a decision will be needed on whether to renew the deployment of the Overwatch Battle Group at Tallil by June 2008, or to re-role it given the relatively benign security environment in which it is operating. In Afghanistan, the future of Reconstruction Task Force in Oruzgan is already in question given the possibility that the Dutch forces with which it operates may depart. Should the Netherlands withdraw critical elements, such as air support, the government would be forced to decide whether to withdraw the Task Force, move it to another sector or even to increase the size of the Australian presence in Afghanistan to make up for lost Dutch capabilities.

The death of an Australian soldier in Afghanistan may bring into sharper focus the fragile nature of public support for Australian involvement in that war. Once seen as the 'good war' to Iraq's 'bad war' this year's Lowy Institute poll found that opinion is now evenly split. Further casualties could limit the next government's options when considering the future of Australia's military presence there.

Decisions on Iraq and Afghanistan will not, however, just be a case of navigating the last year of the Bush Presidency. The party affiliation of the US president may change in November 2008, but

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US interests will not. As the foregoing implies, any new president will have limited scope to withdraw quickly from Iraq or Afghanistan. A Democrat might even try to multilateralise Iraq as a way of reducing the pressure on US forces, meaning a greater, not a lesser, expectation of a continuing Australian contribution. Likewise in Afghanistan, growing calls for withdrawal on the home fronts of some NATO contributing countries mean more pressure on Australia to stay, if not to increase its presence.

Second, the US focus on Iran will intensify and will be accompanied by expectations of rhetorical and perhaps even practical Australian support. The United States and others in the international community are already exercised by Iran's nuclear program. But the US will also want to mitigate, as far as possible, the negative consequences of its failures in Iraq, most notably by ensuring Iranian power and influence are contained.

The result will be even more diplomatic and possibly even more military action by the United States over the next two to three years targeting Iran. There is already bipartisan support in the United States for additional diplomatic and economic sanctions. In the final year of the Bush Presidency a limited military strike cannot be totally ruled out either. At the very least the US will be looking for political support from Australia for any of these actions. While a request for military support in any US strike on Iran is less likely, the use of Australian naval forces to enforce a sanctions regime or to protect sea lines of communication in the Gulf is possible.

Third, the circumstances of Australia's engagement with 'West Asia' — the Middle East, Central and Southern Asia — have changed quite dramatically in the last five years, but in many respects government policy is still catching up. Any new government must think more deeply about how the region fits into Australia's strategic priorities and what this means in terms of policy responses.

Even if the region's importance was simply a function of the alliance relationship — something that is unlikely to change — the government would still need to decide whether West Asia is the best place to use Australia's limited military and diplomatic power in support of the alliance.

But energy security, international terrorism and Australia's growing trading relationship with the Gulf, in particular, also mean that the region's importance to Australia today goes beyond simply the execution of alliance obligations. In this respect a new government will need to decide on the best balance of approaches to securing Australia's strategic interests in West Asia, whether via cooperation with the United States, or through other bilateral or multilateral means.