

Hardly a war to end war

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The 2003 invasion of Iraq and the continuing violence there will affect the future of the use of force — whether, why and how it is employed. Yet that impact will be less straightforward, and probably less profound, than the war's magnitude as a US strategic error might suggest.

There is debate aplenty in security circles about what Iraq means for the shape and conduct of future wars. Views differ over how much the insurgent tactics in Iraq might be replicated, notably in Afghanistan. Iraq has also sharpened arguments over how the United States and its allies should allocate resources in reshaping their militaries — between being better prepared to fight insurgencies in unstable states, or updating their capability for interstate wars that may never occur. These are necessary deliberations, though should begin with the caveat that the next war is never like the last. I will confine my comments, however, to some aspects of what Iraq might mean for future decisions by Western states, including Australia, to employ armed force.

The Iraq morass, with no pleasant end in sight, has cut short Washington's avowed post-9/11 willingness to launch large-scale and pre-emptive military action. The full cost of what was essentially a war of choice is only now becoming apparent to much of the US population. Trauma such as 24,000 US wounded will linger in the public imagination.

Nor will the political distortion of what turned out to be inaccurate intelligence as a rationale for war be forgotten easily. This legacy of mistrust may make many countries, including US allies, hesitate even more than they otherwise might about resorting to force, even when faced with substantial warnings of genuine future threats.

Still, well before Iraq, many citizens of liberal democracies were already heaven-bent on convincing themselves that force need have little place in their comfortable existence. Iraq has reinforced these perceptions: many in Europe, especially, see the carnage in Baghdad as Washington's problem, not theirs. Disturbingly, parts of Western public opinion have even begun conflating Iraq and Afghanistan, seeing both as places to be out of, even though the latter has long been one of the right theatres to fight Islamist terrorism.

Yet it is deeply premature to pronounce the demise of military might in US or wider Western policy.

The shock of 9/11 changed the US more than Iraq has, or will. Iraq may have stressed and damaged the US military machine — the army and marines anyway — but it has also put it through a ferocious test. In Afghanistan and Iraq, the US has proven a willingness to inflict and to sustain large-scale casualties. This should belie any perception among others — such as China — that the US politically was capable of waging war only of the minimal-risk kind seen in Kosovo in 1999. Rational states are not likely to call Washington's military bluff any time soon.

Another large-scale terrorist assault on the US would again almost certainly prompt a forceful response by Washington, somehow, somewhere. Indeed, a fresh show of strength by the US might not even require such blunt provocation. Some observers suggest that the muddle and humiliation of the Iraq experience could foster a strategic timidity in Washington not unlike the malaise following Vietnam. An alternative version of 'Iraq syndrome', however, might be a yearning in Washington for a clear, swift show of force elsewhere, to reaffirm America's predominance and self-confidence. If the 1991 Iraq war went a long way to vanquishing Vietnam syndrome, what will bring catharsis this time around?

We may have had a foretaste with the US airstrike on Al Qaeda elements in Somalia during the wider conflict there earlier this year. The world can expect more such opportunistic military forays, though probably not against Iran, or in any other situation where the consequences could easily spin out of control.

In short, then, Iraq has dulled any US appetite for new conflicts of the regime-changing, nation-building or otherwise open-ended sort, but not for the use of force in general.

As for the rest of the West, the picture is mixed. Those in Europe already unconvinced that armed forces can be good for much more than peaceful tasks will remain so. Those more persuaded that force sometimes remains a necessary part of foreign policy — notably the UK and to some extent France — will stick to their guns. It will, however, be even harder after Iraq for the US to cobble together 'coalitions of the willing'. Even in Afghanistan, where NATO has staked its credibility, the only rush of volunteers is that of countries vying for the safer jobs in the quieter provinces.

Australia, with its recent decision to send special forces back to Afghanistan, is one of the few US allies willing to risk battle there. The shifting currents in the use of armed force in recent times, including as a result of Iraq, have not passed Australia by. In particular, a painful confluence of circumstances has increased expectations of Australia — whether we heed them or not — to contribute troops to missions overseas, despite the modest size of the Australian Defence Force (ADF). In this, Australia may be paying the price of its own cleverness: its record of carrying out many operations at manageable political cost and with barely any casualties.

Washington's expectations of Canberra will endure, and probably rise further, partly because some other allies and partners are less likely after Iraq to join US-led coalitions. Pressure may build on Australia to do more to share daily risk on a large scale. We do not know how Australian political will would cope with dozens of casualties, as sustained by Canada. Meanwhile the stress Iraq has placed on the US army and marines suggests that our powerful ally will be even less forthcoming than during the 1999 East Timor crisis in offering ground forces if we needed help with large-scale stabilisation operations in our neighbourhood.

All of which means that the legacy of Iraq will add to a growing list of long-term demands on the ADF — whatever future Australian governments may come to determine as their deployments of necessity and their conflicts of choice.

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