

Troops should be kept in Middle East

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Last week, the final Australian troops left Iraq. In 2014, our combat troops will leave Afghanistan. But the end of Australia's two main military commitments in the broader Middle East should not mean an end to our strategic engagement with the region.

These military deployments have strengthened security relationships with states in the Persian Gulf. Australia signed a defence co-operation agreement with the United Arab Emirates in 2007. The first GCC-Australia Foreign Ministers Strategic Dialogue was held this year, while the stream of high-profile political, military and senior bureaucratic visitors to the region has built up close personal relationships.

Despite this, the relationship can be very fragile. The problem is that once our troop presence in the Middle East ends, many of these new links could diminish. Budgetary pressures will make it difficult to maintain, let alone expand, non-commercial links with the region, while Australian officials familiar with and well connected in the region will inevitably move on.

At the same time, our security interests in the region have broadened and now encompass military, economic, political and consular issues. There are more than 20,000 Australians residing in the Gulf, a more than threefold increase in the past seven years.

Australia has entered into discussions over a bilateral nuclear safeguards agreement with the UAE with a view to selling it uranium to fuel its reactors due to come into service in 2017.

Given the nature of Gulf Arab decision-making, senior leaders interested in regional security issues also have great influence in business decisions. Australia is keen to further develop its commercial interests. Two-way merchandise trade between Australia and the Gulf states is worth more than \$8 billion, with the region accounting for more than 80 per cent of our vehicle exports. Trade in services is substantial and growing. While the Gulf is never going to be as important to Australia as our immediate region, neither should we think we can separate the way that regional leaders view the conclusion of our military commitments to the region from our broader relationships there.

We have done this once already. Failing to follow up on commitments made in return for basing rights after the 1991 Gulf War made it more difficult for Australia to secure operating bases in the Persian Gulf a decade later. We would experience similar or greater difficulties if we needed to re-establish ourselves in the region in the future.

We need a government strategy paper on Australia's relationship with the Middle East to articulate our strategic interests in the region and to allow for the development of a policy framework.

As part of this approach the government should send a signal to the region regarding our long-term interest. This could be done by transforming Australia's present military commitment in the UAE in support of our troops in Afghanistan to a much smaller military presence following the withdrawal of combat troops from Afghanistan in 2014.

Such a commitment could be tailored to meet Gulf and Australian training or perhaps maritime surveillance needs. Its practical and symbolic benefits in advancing the national interest would outweigh the small resource commitment. It would reinforce the impression among Gulf rulers that Australia is a committed middle power, with potential flow-on benefits in other areas of our bilateral relationship.

For Australia, it would provide a small regional base with access to civilian aviation and maritime transport hubs that could be used in a range of future military contingencies, from Pakistan to north Africa.

Australia's relations with the Middle East have largely developed in an ad hoc manner. Given its increasing strategic importance to us, the government should use the withdrawal of our forces from Afghanistan as the catalyst for developing a coherent policy approach to the region that takes into account all aspects of Australia's national interest. To do otherwise will once again consign Australia's relations with the region to benign neglect.

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