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**The moral obligation to help in Iraq**  
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War is an uncertain business. So there has always been an air of fragility about John Howard's insistence that he could tightly limit Australia's long-term commitment in Iraq. Before the invasion nearly two years ago, Howard was insisting that Australian troops would not be left doing peacekeeping in Iraq once Saddam Hussein was gone. But even back then, US officials were tight-lipped and uneasy with Howard's idea that Australia might leave before the job was done.

And that was before they understood just how long and complex the post-invasion phase was going to be. Since then, alongside the understandable gratitude for Howard's political support in the early days, many in Washington — and London — have been sourly conscious that Howard has put very little substance behind his strong rhetorical support for Bush's policy in Iraq since Saddam's statue fell in April 2003.

So no one should be surprised the Government has come under some serious diplomatic pressure from the US and Britain to increase our contribution, especially as other countries' troops — including not just the Dutch, who we will replace, but Hungarians, Ukrainians and Poles — are starting to pull out.

Nor should anyone be surprised that Howard has bowed to that pressure and agreed to expand our contribution. But even those who are used to Howard's superb sense of political timing might be impressed by the agility with which he has changed policy.

Howard insisted through last year's election campaign that Australia would not significantly expand its troop presence in Iraq. But after his election victory, with Iraq looking less unmanageable after its election last month and with Bush in his second term looking less unilateralist and more consultative, Howard has found the perfect moment to perform the kind of lateral arabesque which is his political forte. No doubt some will wonder whether he planned it this way all along.

Whether he did or not, the decision announced yesterday appears to be a qualitative shift in the nature of Australia's military role in Iraq. Until now our forces on the ground there — only about 250-300 — have been involved in roles such as guarding Australia's diplomats, training Iraqi soldiers and providing medical services. Worthy and useful roles, but not on the front line in the critical role of building security in Iraq to provide the environment for democracy to take root.

The new commitment will, it seems, take us closer to the front line — albeit in one of Iraq's less violent provinces. It is still a little unclear what the troops' role will be. Will they protect Japanese troops and train Iraqi forces, or will they, like the Dutch, be responsible for securing the province itself?

Either way, as Howard acknowledged, there is a significant increase in risk. With more than double the number of soldiers on the ground, and with more of them out on a daily basis, the likelihood of casualties is higher. And a protracted deployment like this also carries another

risk — that we will be less well prepared to deal with sudden emergencies in our neighbourhood.

Are those risks worth it? On balance, I think they are. Whatever one thinks of the original decision to invade — and I thought then and think now it was a strategic error — our involvement in that decision imposes on us obligations to help in the political reconstruction of Iraq. That task has an essential military component. Hitherto our contribution to that component has been perhaps less than our obligations would require. This increased contribution will fix that.

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