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*Assessing the War in Iraq*¹

an address to the Institute on 31 July 2012 by

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During the recent Iraq War, Australia, a junior coalition partner, set and attained its own policy goals which were different from (albeit compatible with) those of the United States, the coalition leader. Dr Palazzo focuses on how this outcome was achieved and examines five factors which were crucial to its attainment. It has lessons for other middle powers.

Key words: Iraq War; coalition warfare; junior coalition partner; policy goals; strategic objectives.

Australia has always gone to war as a junior partner in a coalition. The Australian Army, and the broader Australian Defence Force (ADF), has never had the opportunity, or capacity, to fight a war on its own. Instead, Australia provides capabilities that fit within a senior force's requirements. In acknowledging its subordinate role, Australia has also accepted that it will have limited input into considerations of strategy. This has always been the responsibility of the coalition leader or leaders.

The Iraq War was different. Unusually, strategic calculation was at the forefront of the Australian Government's senior political leaders and their military advisors. The Australian Government of Prime Minister John Howard saw the War in Iraq as an opportunity to advance a long-held security objective, one that had little to do with events in the Middle East. For Australia, the policy goal for its participation in the Iraq War was the opportunity to enhance its relationship with the United States. In achieving this objective Australia identified factors by which a junior coalition partner can set and attain its own policy goals, and, importantly, avoid creating a conflict with the objectives of the coalition leader. Australian experience suggests that, for middle powers, it is possible to find a middle path.

Australia's Strategic Objective for Iraq

The Australian Government never accepted the United States purpose for going to war with Iraq. At no point did the Howard Government adopt the United States plan for regime change in Iraq as its own, nor did it ever maintain that the remaking of the Arab world was its reason for joining the United States-led Coalition. These were the policy goals of the United States and its President, George W. Bush. Instead, the Australian Government justified its participation in the Coalition on international co-operation grounds, namely the need to enforce United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR) 1441 and 687. In particular, Howard sought

the disarming of Iraq of its weapons-of-mass-destruction (WMD) which he believed posed a direct threat to Australia if Saddam Hussein was to make them available to terrorists (Howard 2010, 425 – 427).

Even so, the enforcement of UNSCRs and the danger represented by WMDs were not the ultimate purpose behind the Howard Government's decision to participate in the war. Rather, they were the enablers of a larger purpose. In much the same way that Bush's objective of removing Saddam Hussein was the first step in the achievement of his own government's larger purpose – the remaking of the Middle East – Howard defined a secondary goal, one that, in fact, took primacy. Shortly after taking office in 1996, Howard had established as a long-term security goal the reinvigoration of Australia's bilateral security relationship with the United States. His predecessors had gradually allowed this relationship to be taken for granted; never a good state of affairs for a country's key national security arrangement. At his government's first Australia-United States Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN), Howard's foreign minister, Alexander Downer, identified the enhancement of Australia's security relationship with the United States as a key policy objective³ (Young 1997, 1 – 3). Iraq provided Howard with the opportunity to advance Australia's relationship with the United States. Thus Australia's final purpose in joining the Coalition against Iraq was to support the United States and, in doing so, use the war as a means to strengthen the security relationship between the two countries. In pursuing this purpose Howard was remarkably successful, as is demonstrated by the close ties that exist between the two countries today.

The determination that Australia sought the opportunity to enhance its relationship with the United States will not come as a shock to anyone familiar with the broad sweep of Australian national security policy. Australia's ultimate defence is dependent on the agreement of a great power. The United States-

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³'Remarks following Australia-US Ministerial', 27 July 1996 at <http://canberra.usembassy.gov/irc/us-oz/1996/07/27/ds1.html> (accessed 27 September 2011).

Australian Alliance is frequently identified as the foundation of Australia's national security and its importance is highlighted in Defence White Papers and other official public announcements (see Department of Defence 2009, 93). For example, in his 2008 National Security Statement the then prime minister, Kevin Rudd, described the alliance as 'fundamental to Australia's national security interests'.⁴

The announcements following the 2011 AUSMIN talks in San Francisco show how far Australia has exceeded itself in re-energising the relationship with the United States. In fact, so close had the relationship become that one commentator described the meeting's Joint Communiqué as a 'joint plan of action'.⁵ The evidence of the depth and warmth of the relationship was on display when President Barack Obama visited Canberra in late 2011 and addressed the Australian Parliament.⁶ Obama announced expanded military ties, including the rotation of United States Marines on Australian soil, starting with a modest 250 personnel but building to 2500.⁷

Yet, what makes the formulation of Australian strategy for the Iraq War interesting is not that Howard used the war as a means to advance the nation's security interests. After all, the protection of sovereignty is one of the core responsibilities of the state. Rather, the importance lies in identifying the means by which the country achieved this end-point. It is the 'how' not the 'what' that is of significance and it is to this that this article will now turn.

The Junior-Senior Coalition Partner Dynamic

The Australian experience of the Iraq War suggests that there are a number of factors that enable a junior partner to implement the means by which to obtain a policy objective distinct from that of its coalition leader. The means Australia used to accomplish this can be summarised as:

- All of a junior partner's key decision-makers must understand the policy objective and be unified in its pursuit.
- The force structure of a junior partner's contribution to a coalition, and the capabilities and risk acceptance of this participation, must be defined early and then held to.

- A junior coalition partner must understand the senior partner's political-military dynamic if it is to negotiate successfully the potential competing claims for support by the senior partner's political and military leaders.
- Whatever forces a junior partner provides to a coalition must be capable of performing their assigned task. This is more important than the size of the contribution.
- The junior partner's strategic objective must be compatible with the senior partner's, and, perhaps most importantly, it must be modest.

These factors will be more closely examined in turn.

Unified pursuit of policy objective

The Australian scholar, David Horner, commented on a junior partner's need for strategic clarity in his book *High Command*, which considered Australia's role in Allied strategy in the Second World War. Horner concluded that if a small power 'is to extract the maximum advantage from its relations with a great power, all parts of its decision-making machinery must work in harmony' (Horner 1982, 442). This did not happen in the Second World War, and Prime Minister John Curtin and his senior general, Thomas Blamey, often worked at cross-purposes, to the country's detriment. Moreover, the United States commander in the South West Pacific, General Douglas MacArthur, exploited Australian divisiveness to his own ends (Horner 1988, 261 – 263).

By contrast, such Australian political-military divisiveness was not evident in the Iraq War. Howard and his senior general, the Chief of Defence Force (CDF), General Peter Cosgrove (and later Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston), acted as one in regard to Iraq. Cosgrove understood the government's purpose and worked towards that goal. To keep the ADF on target, the CDF tightly controlled the mission and kept the Prime Minister informed of its progress. Contemporary military theory contains numerous references to the effect of the "strategic corporal". In Iraq the influence of the junior ranks was minimal as Cosgrove aspired to be the "tactical general". Throughout the Iraq War, no issue was too unimportant for the CDF's strategic-level oversight. The commander of Australia's headquarters in the Middle East also served as Cosgrove's strategic-level theatre representative. He had direct access to the CDF – outside the formal chain of command – and kept Cosgrove alert to all activities across the Coalition that might have an effect upon Australia's ability to secure its goals.

Junior partner's contribution

In advance of going to war, Howard had outlined to Bush the limits of Australian participation. The political and military leaders of the United States knew and understood these limits and welcomed what Howard was willing to offer and how it was to be used. The United States also knew that Australia had committed only to the invasion phase of the war and never intended to

⁴Kevin Rudd, 'The First National Security Statement to the Parliament', on 4 December 2008 at <http://pmrudd.archive.dpma.gov.au/node/5424> (accessed 22 July 2011).

⁵Robert Ayson, 'AUSMIN: Nice icing, different cake?' *the interpreter*, Lowy Institute for International Policy, at <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2011/09/20/AUSMIN-Nice-icing-different-cake.aspx?p=true> (accessed 28 September 2011).

⁶Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament', at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament> (accessed 21 November 2011).

⁷'Expanded Military ties in Australia', at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2011/11/16/expanded-military-ties-australia> (accessed 17 May 2012); and 'Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Gillard of Australia in Joint Press Conference', at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/16/remarks-president-obama-and-prime-minister-gillard-australia-joint-press> (accessed 17 May 2012).

participate in Phase IV activities. When the war's invasion phase came to an end, Cosgrove resisted any thoughts of remaining in Iraq to assist with the country's occupation, and returned to Australia most of the deployed force as quickly as lift could be arranged.

As is known, Australia was only partially successful in limiting its Phase IV role and the ADF did have to deploy some additional personnel and capabilities. Some of these were of relatively short duration, such as the air traffic control team that served at Baghdad International Airport; others would become long-term commitments such as the recently wound-up security detachment that protected the Australian Embassy and staff in Baghdad. Eventually, Australia did choose to further increase its ground commitment by deploying a training team and a small overwatch battle group. However, these too were not open-ended commitments and they had clearly defined roles which greatly constrained the tasks that the government would allow them to undertake. The priority task was, in fact, force protection (Hammett 2008, 44 – 45). This is reflected in the Australian Government's selection of the provinces in which it allowed the training and overwatch battle groups to operate. From a threat perspective, Al-Muthanna and Dhi Qar were among the most benign provinces in the country.⁸

It should also be noted that, although Australia maintained several types of task groups in Iraq over the course of the occupation, their mission was never to fight the insurgency. That was someone else's job. Even in Al-Muthanna and Dhi Qar Provinces, Australian soldiers were not responsible for taking the fight to the enemy. Their job was training and overwatch, the latter a task that they were never called upon to perform. In fact, the only Australians with a direct role in the Iraq counter-insurgency (COIN) fight were those personnel embedded in Coalition headquarters – such as Major-General Jim Molan who served as General George W. Casey's chief of operations – and perhaps those personnel serving in Ballad as part of the Australian medical detachment or the even smaller team in Taji working at the United States COIN Center (Molan 2008; Hammett 2008, 45)⁹.

Senior partner's political-military dynamic

Australia was able to limit its role because it had a good understanding of the distinction between the political and military requirements of the United States' war effort. In the face of significant international opposition to the war, the Bush Administration was content with knowing that Australia was willing to commit forces at all. In fact, at the political level, there was no need for Australia to make a more robust commitment. Senior United States military leaders in the Pentagon or

at Central Command might have liked a larger Australian contribution, but their desires were of distant importance when compared to those of the Bush Administration. It could be argued that the United States political leadership would have been content with an even smaller commitment from Australia, as long as it was visible. In balancing aims and means with policy, perhaps Australia's commitment was in fact not small enough.

Howard and Cosgrove were able to exploit the United States political-military divide because they recognised that for Australia the war's centre of gravity lay in Washington, and to a lesser extent Canberra, not in Baghdad or Tampa (Central Command headquarters). Howard's and Cosgrove's understanding of this dynamic underpinned all Australian decisions regarding the conduct of the Australian Defence Force in Iraq. It was the opinion of Washington's political decision-makers that mattered most to Howard and Cosgrove. Of second importance to Howard was the opinion of the Australian domestic audience and he recognised the necessity of minimising casualties. In this the Prime Minister successfully managed a potentially divisive issue. Events in Iraq, by comparison, were considerably less important to the achievement of Australia's policy goal.

Capability of junior partner's contribution

In making its modest contribution, Australia did make sure that it was a capable one. This is another key tenet by which a junior partner can maximise its exposure in the eyes of a Coalition's senior partner. While the ADF did not send much to Iraq in numbers, and while it took on limited tasks, what it did send was very capable of fulfilling the mission that the two countries agreed upon. This is a great benefit for a Coalition leader. All too often Coalitions contain some national forces whose military contribution may be more negative than positive, who bring support requirements and capability dependencies that are so great that they offset their military benefit, although such contingents may still have political benefit. In Iraq, Australia may not have taken on a large task, but it was one that United States forces no longer had to perform, or even think about.

Compatibility of strategic objectives

Lastly, it appears that Australia was successful in securing its goal in going to war in Iraq because its agenda aligned itself with that of the United States. Although different, the Australian purpose remained compatible with the United States purpose. In seeking to secure its own goals, Australia was still supporting its senior Coalition partner's goals, if only by its presence. In going to war, Australia's strategists knew that, in Coalition operations, restraints remained on the ambitions of a junior partner. Australia was careful not to go too far in setting a distinct policy goal. Middle power leaders must remember that when defining a strategic purpose of their own, a key factor in securing its achievement will be how well it fits with that of the great power.

⁸For comparative data on threat level of Iraqi provinces, see icasualties database at <http://icasualties.org/Iraq/ByProvince.aspx> (accessed 1 June 2012).

⁹See also Alison Rehn, 'Diggers Battle-shy, claim US', *The Daily Telegraph*, at <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/sydney-news/diggers-battle-shy-claims-us/story-e6freuzi-111113814413> (accessed 1 June 2012).

Conclusion

Throughout the conflict, Australia demonstrated skill in linking aims with means, but it remains to be questioned whether the desired policy goal was worth the effort and cost of going to war. All powers, not just middle ones, should not embrace war lightly. They should carefully weigh the value of using force to achieve a policy goal with the anticipated cost, and then make a judgement on whether or not the effort, if successful, would result in a net benefit. For Australia the question to ask is whether the pursuit of an enhanced security relationship with the United States was a legitimate rationale for the nation's participation in the Coalition, and whether doing it would produce a beneficial outcome that exceeded the costs.

That Australia sought through its participation in the Iraq War to strengthen its security relationship with the United States was eminently sensible. Australia's alliance with the United States is sometimes derided by commentators as some form of 'insurance policy'. Yet, as insurance policies go, this one is not too bad, and not too onerous. It is indeed better than the other options.

For the Australian people to forsake their traditional reliance on a great power protector, either of two changes in attitude would have to occur. The first is that they accept that war has ceased to be a part of the human condition, thus allowing Australia to no longer fear threats to its territory or interests. Such a conclusion may be comforting, but there is little evidence to support it. Instead, the reality expressed in the title of Colin Gray's book on the future of war appears more accurate, *Another Bloody Century*, he called it (Gray 2005). The other option for Australia is to go it alone and for the Government to increase significantly defence's share of the national wealth. However, such a commitment has never found favour with the voting public.

That Australia managed to negotiate the strategic process – that is the linking of means with aims – not only successfully but also at very modest cost, is of note. In achieving its purpose in going to war with Iraq, Australia suffered just two non-battle fatalities. The cost in treasure was also modest. In comparison to other countries, the price Australia paid in Iraq to advance its security at home was cheap indeed. Therefore, from the perspective of a national security cost-benefit analysis, Australia's decision to participate in the Coalition against Iraq was the correct one.

Still there is need for Australia to avoid being too self-congratulatory in the achieving of its strategic purpose. Those who inhabited the corridors of power in Washington understood the game and it would be inconceivable that they were unaware of and/or intolerant of Canberra's separate agenda. But Washington had an agenda of its own and the securing of Australia's participation was a priority for the Bush Administration.

It would also be sensible to recognise that a key factor in Australia's success in achieving its political purpose was that this purpose was relatively modest; its task so much easier to achieve than that of the United

States. In strategy, the balance of aims, means and goals is a vital consideration, and in Iraq Australia got it right. There is no cause for self-congratulation, however, nor reason to assume that Australia's politicians and military leaders are unusually skilful. Rather, their main skill was in limiting themselves to an achievable goal; they correctly sensed the limits of the nation's power. Australia's leaders did not have to consider how to win the war; they did not have to deal with problems of anything near the same degree of complexity or danger as their United States opposites. Nor did Australia have to consider the steady drip of casualties whose sacrifice should not be forgotten. United States political and military leaders were operating in a realm that far exceeded Australia's considerably more limited ambitions and abilities. The United States may have failed to achieve its purpose in Iraq, but in part that was only because it was too grand in the selection of its political aim in going to war in the first place.

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