

Australian government extends unconditional support to US war drive

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The Howard Liberal government has extended unconditional and open-ended support for the Bush Administration's "war against terrorism", including, if requested, the commitment of Australian troops under US command. Its position echoes that of the Hawke Labor government in 1990, which was the first in the world to unreservedly pledge military backing for the US-led war against Iraq.

More than two dozen Australian air force personnel have already been deployed to participate in combat air patrols being flown over continental US and the government has agreed to a US request that the frigate *HMAS Anzac* delay its return from the Persian Gulf until at least September 23. The *Anzac*, with a crew of 164, is part of a US naval task group policing the decade-long sanctions against Iraq that have been responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians.

On Monday, Foreign Affairs Minister Downer declared in parliament that the Australian Defence Force was "ready to go" as soon as the US called on it. One military analyst commented: "They're planning like crazy without really knowing what they are planning for."

From almost the moment the hijacked aircraft plunged into the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, Prime Minister Howard has been at pains to project Australia as the United States' most loyal ally. The prime minister was in Washington during the terror attacks, having arrived three days earlier on a state visit to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the ANZUS Treaty signed between the two countries and New Zealand in the aftermath of World War II. On September 9, he was feted at a social function by top Administration officials, including Vice President Cheney and Secretary of State Colin Powell. The next day he met with President Bush and issued a joint statement reaffirming the Australia-America alliance.

Within five hours of the atrocity, and before any evidence had been assembled as to who the perpetrators were, or where they came from, Howard declared that Australia would unequivocally support the US in "any action that

might be taken." Being the first Western leader to do so, he was accorded a standing ovation in the US Congress the next day.

Five days later, and on the heels of the unprecedented decision by NATO to implement the mutual assistance provisions of its charter, the Australian parliament invoked the ANZUS Treaty for the first time, committing Australia to militarily defend the United States. The resolution stated that the terrorist actions "constitute an attack upon the United States of America within the meaning of articles IV and V of the ANZUS Treaty." Under articles IV and V, an armed attack in the Pacific area, or an armed attack on any of the parties by an outside force, obliges each party to "act to meet the common danger".

The resolution continued: "The decision is based on our belief that the attacks have been initiated and coordinated from outside the United States." Formally, it is up to the offended party to invoke the treaty. Moreover the Department of Foreign Affairs had reportedly advised that it was unnecessary for the parliament to pass such a resolution. Nevertheless Howard had it drawn up after "consultation" with the United States, insisting that both countries had come to the same position at "roughly the same time".

According to military strategists, the most likely outcome, at least initially, will be the deployment of crack SAS forces for covert ground operations, the use of navy frigates as part of a multinational naval force, air-to-air refuelling facilities and intensified intelligence gathering through the US spy base at Pine Gap in central Australia.

The prime minister's zeal in backing the US war drive has been matched by Opposition Labor leader Kim Beazley, who eagerly backed the government's resolution. In a letter to Vice-President Cheney last Friday, stressing Labor's bipartisan support "for an appropriate international retaliatory response," Beazley wrote "...the Commonwealth of Australia speaks with one voice at any one time in these matters, whatever the political shape of our national leadership." He went on to assure the US government that "should Labor win office in the next few months, Australia

will remain committed to an international intelligence, police and military effort against those who committed those atrocities and those who supported and harbored them.”

In the days immediately following the terror strikes, newspaper editorials attacked any attempt to probe the political reasons behind them, or any expression of caution or concern with the government’s agenda. An editorial in Melbourne’s *Age* warned: “Among the clamoring voices competing to explain the horror of what has happened there are already some who, while not purporting to justify the murder of the innocent, have nonetheless portrayed the terrorist attacks as the result of a moral debt incurred by the superpower because of its global strategies. This is the kind of argument that may acquire a superficial plausibility in seminar rooms where human life is spoken of as a bloodless abstraction, but in the world of real men, women and children it will always be untenable.”

Murdoch’s *Australian* on September 14 thundered: “War has been declared on terrorism—and those who do not answer the call to duty will be exposed as part of the problem.”

Other voices within ruling circles, however, have been less enthusiastic.

The *Age*’s chief political correspondent, Louise Dodson, in an opinion piece entitled “The PM should not slavishly follow George W’s lead” commented:

“Howard should wait and see what the US has in mind first, rather than backing Bush to the hilt no matter what. Howard’s challenge is to demonstrate he is a leader rather than a follower, and that Australia’s interests are not automatically America’s interests—no matter how genuinely we feel for Americans.”

A comment in Saturday’s *Australian Financial Review* warned that the government’s “unprecedented move to invoke the key Article IV...is a dangerous move. ANZUS is being invoked blindly, before Australia knows the nature and identity of the terrorist enemy or the scale and likely long-term consequences of any US response.”

It went on to question the prime minister’s unqualified support for US policy: “Perhaps the key question Australia could urge the US to consider is why so many young Middle Eastern men believe they have so little to lose that they are prepared to throw away their own lives, and to destroy the lives of other innocent people, to die as martyrs in the cause of hatred of the US.”

Another article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* entitled “Howard’s blank cheque for Washington may come with a hefty surcharge” pointed out that no other US ally had been as “unconditional as Howard in pledging military involvement...” It predicted that “if the more hawkish voices prevail in the US debate on the appropriate response, there may be significant Australian casualties and long-term

security costs.”

Both international and domestic factors lie behind Howard’s response. In the first place, the prime minister is desperate to retain US patronage for Australia’s economic and strategic interests within the increasingly volatile Asia-Pacific region. Last year, a Defence Department White Paper acknowledged the significance of the ANZUS Treaty for Australian imperialism, describing it as a “key strategic asset that will support our bilateral, regional and global interests over the next decade and beyond.” Redrafted following visits by US Defence Secretary William Cohen and US Pacific Commander-in-Chief Dennis Blair, the White Paper also pointed to Australia’s military dependence on the US: “The kind of ADF [Australian Defence Forces] that we need is not achievable without the technology access provided by the US alliance.”

Howard hopes that his unwavering support for Bush’s war drive will serve as a downpayment on future assistance from the US. His government’s intervention into East Timor in 1999, for example, to protect its gas and oil interests, could not have taken place without US backing. As *Australian* journalist Glenn Milne put it on Wednesday: “... stand by for a significant commitment from Australia to the current struggle, should Bush ask. Howard will want our contribution to be noticed—and for good national interest reasons.” On the other hand, Howard’s opponents are giving expression to longstanding concerns among layers of the ruling class that any tendency to align Australia too closely with the United States could harm its long-term relationships with China, Japan and the Asian region.

Domestically, for the first time in more than a year and just weeks away from a federal poll, Howard smells the possibility of electoral success. Having played the race card over the *Tampa* asylum seekers he is now playing the war card for all it’s worth.



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