

Australian government backs a US war against Iraq

Mike Head
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Even as discussions continue in Washington over the scale and possible pretext for a military attack on Iraq, the Australian government has already telegraphed its willingness to participate.

In recent weeks, Prime Minister John Howard, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer and Defence Minister Robert Hill have all offered support for a war against Iraq, whenever and wherever it is launched. In his latest statement, Howard declared in a radio interview last week that a US attack was “more probable than not” and that America was “likely” to request Australian involvement.

Whatever its final form, any US military operation will constitute a war crime of historic proportions. The various plans being canvassed in Washington would see up to 250,000 troops deployed for a one-sided onslaught against a relatively small country, with appalling consequences for the people of Iraq and the entire region. Estimates of the likely civilian death toll range as high as 10,000 in Baghdad alone.

During the 1990-91 Gulf war, up to 250,000 Iraqi soldiers and an unknown number of civilians were killed, as high-tech US war planes bombed the country’s major cities. Much of the country’s economic capacity was destroyed. Since then, ongoing UN sanctions, which continue to be policed by the Australian navy, have contributed to the deaths of an estimated half a million children from malnutrition and disease.

In many European capitals and among the United States’ allies in the Persian Gulf region—notably Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Jordan—there are concerns that the overthrow of Saddam Hussein would have seriously destabilising consequences in the Middle East and worldwide. There is also considerable apprehension that the US is seeking control over Iraq’s oil reserves—the second largest in the world—a fear that is keenly felt in Beijing and Tokyo, both dependent on Gulf oil.

In the face of these concerns, the Australian government has gone out of its way to prove itself a loyal ally by offering Bush whatever diplomatic support it can. Standing alongside US Secretary of State Colin Powell on July 11 during a visit to Washington, Downer declared that “only a fool” would seek to appease Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. “Trying to appease Iraq will only allow Iraq to continue to build its weapons of mass destruction and that will have very serious implications for the world as a whole.”

Downer’s remarks, an allusion to British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain’s reluctance to go to war against Adolf Hitler’s Nazi regime, imply that anyone who questions Washington’s war plans

is guilty of prostration before a potential global dictator. This turns reality on its head. In the first place, Hitler headed a major capitalist power bent on expansion across Europe; Saddam is a petty tyrant in a country and a region long oppressed by the major powers. Secondly, it is the US, not Iraq that is proposing an invasion.

Thirdly, no evidence has been produced that Iraq has assembled chemical, biological or nuclear weapons, while the US is known to have stockpiles of each. The US and its allies have demanded that Iraq perform the impossible and prove a negative: that it has no such weapons, or even the capacity to manufacture them. Given the technologies involved, this is tantamount to requiring the destruction of the country’s remaining industrial and scientific facilities.

Several days after Downer’s Washington remarks, Hill went even further. Without waiting for a US invitation, he suggested that Australia could send an armoured brigade to take part in a war against Iraq. When several military strategists pointed out that Australia’s army—currently heavily committed in East Timor—had no such unit ready to be deployed at short notice, Howard sprang to his minister’s defence, insisting that a brigade was available.

These statements follow Howard’s own trip to Washington in June, when he aligned himself with Bush’s aggressive militarism in the face of European and Asian disquiet. He reiterated his “firm and faithful” commitment to the “global war on terrorism,” hailed the US President as a champion of “freedom” and welcomed Bush’s “first strike” doctrine.

Within Australia’s business, military and diplomatic establishment, the Howard government’s stance has provoked revealing tactical differences. No one in these circles has expressed the slightest opposition to a US invasion of Iraq, or to an Australian military involvement. Criticisms have been expressed, however, of the “premature” timing of the government’s statements and their potential damage to diplomatic and trade relations with Middle Eastern and Asian countries.

One of the main triggers for concern was a recent Iraqi decision to halve a one million-tonne wheat order signed with Australian marketing authorities. Despite Australian participation in the US-led blockade of Iraqi ports, wheat exports to Iraq under the UN “food-for-oil” sanctions regime were worth \$829 million last year.

According to a July 29 editorial in the *Australian Financial Review*: “Mr Downer may have jeopardised wheat sales to Iraq—our second-largest customer—by appearing overly enthusiastic

about prosecuting a war with Iraq. To some extent, the same thing might be said about Robert Hill, the Defence Minister, for his rush to embrace America's assertion of rights to take pre-emptive action."

The *Sydney Morning Herald* echoed these comments and raised wider anxieties about the international fallout from the rush to back Bush, notably in Asia, the destination of 57 percent of Australian exports. Downer's remarks were "premature" given that "there are serious doubts whether Mr Bush could muster the international support his father enjoyed for military action against Iraq after it invaded Kuwait".

Other commentators raised the danger of diverting scarce military resources to distant Iraq, when they might be needed closer to home in the Asia-Pacific region, long regarded as Australia's own sphere of influence. An article in the *Australian Financial Review* last week warned of the "potential challenges facing Australia across the great arc of unstable, dysfunctional, failed and failing nations to the north". The past period has seen Suharto's fall and ongoing turmoil across Indonesia, fighting in East Timor, civil war in the Solomon Islands, a coup in Fiji and military mutinies and the near breakdown of the political system in Papua New Guinea.

Hugh White of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, a government-funded thinktank, declared: "We cannot assume that our next military commitment will be a minor contribution to the next phase of the war on terrorism on some distant battlefield. It is just as likely to be a major challenge to our direct interests close to home, where we will have to play a much bigger part in the response."

While mindful of this regional volatility, the Howard government has concluded that the only way of ensuring that Australia, a relatively weak and small power, can protect its commercial and strategic interests is to secure Washington's patronage. In the post-September 11 environment of increasing US unilateralism, this means offering unreserved support to the Bush White House.

The Murdoch media, which only months ago was castigating the Howard government for turning its back on Asian diplomacy, has spelt out these considerations with typical bluntness. In a July 24 column, Paul Kelly, editor-at-large of the *Australian*, accused of "wishful thinking" those who questioned the need to back any US strike against Iraq. "September 11 has created a new strategic challenge for America's allies" and, regardless of any short-term commercial costs, Australia had no choice but to join an Iraq war. Anything less would imperil the 50-year US alliance upon which Australian defence policy has rested since World War II. "The alliance framework makes it hard for Australia to say 'no' without damaging consequences," Kelly concluded.

In a little reported speech in Dallas on July 12 during his US visit, Downer revealed how closely the government hopes to engage the US as its regional guarantor. He indicated that the Howard government regards the 1999 intervention in East Timor a model for future US-backed deployments in the region. He expressed gratitude for the "important diplomatic and military assistance" that the US provided in 1999, describing the Timor operation as a "microcosm of the deep—and in our view,

essential—US commitment to the security of the Asia-Pacific region".

Without American support, the Howard government could not have sent troops to East Timor. Only once it had obtained Washington's approval—and promises of logistical and military backing if needed—was it able to insist on leading an international intervention force. Under the guise of shielding the Timorese people from pro-Indonesian militias, Howard's government dispatched almost one third of the Australian army's operational capacity to protect Australian interests, above all in the oil and gas reserves under the Timor Sea.

Definite domestic calculations are also driving the Howard government's stance. Just as in the US, where Bush's war plans provide a timely distraction from an accelerating political and economic crisis, fuelled by the collapse on Wall Street and continuing revelations of corporate criminality, so too the Howard government is keen to dispatch Australian troops to Iraq as a diversion from its own political problems.

Last year, facing deep popular hostility to declining living and working conditions, growing economic insecurity and worsening social inequality, the government seized upon the arrival of refugee boats and the September 11 events to mount a massive diversion. Aided by Labor's complicity, it focused its entire election campaign in October and November on "border protection" and the "war on terrorism."

Having done so, however, the government has proved incapable of pushing through the agenda demanded by Australian corporations—the further slashing of social spending, a radical restructuring of workplace relations, the privatisation of the telecommunications company Telstra and the removal of controls on media ownership. Nearly nine months on, the government is under growing pressure from the ruling elite to break out of its impasse.

Involvement in a new assault on Iraq, as well as the ongoing "war on terrorism," will also provide the government with a convenient pretext to continue with its agenda of bolstering the powers of the security and intelligence apparatus against political dissent. Howard's new "anti-terrorism" legislation, which amounts to an unprecedented attack on democratic rights and civil liberties, recently passed through parliament, with Labor's support, and is ready for use.



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