

Australian government invokes first-strike doctrine in Asia

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Despite provoking a storm of protest throughout the Asia-Pacific region, Australian Prime Minister John Howard this week refused to back away from statements that his government would, if necessary, respond to terrorist threats in the region by launching pre-emptive military attacks in neighbouring countries.

Howard made his initial remarks last Sunday during a television interview in which he repeated calls that he and Defence Minister Robert Hill made several days earlier for the United Nations Charter to be modified to allow nations to strike pre-emptively at the terrorists. The comments are in line with similar demands by the Bush administration as it prepares for an impending war against Iraq.

Throughout the interview, Howard stuck to his previous practice of refusing to state explicitly that his government would commit troops to join a unilateral US assault on Iraq, with or without UN sanction, insisting that such questions remained hypothetical.

But asked whether he would be prepared to act if members of Jemaah Islamiah, an alleged terrorist group, were planning an attack on Australia from a neighbouring state, Howard made no such reservation. He immediately replied: "Oh yes, I think any Australian prime minister would." Moreover, whereas the question related to terrorism, Howard went further, referring to attacks "either of a conventional kind or of a terrorist kind".

Howard reiterated his comments the next day in parliament, declaring that any prime minister who thought otherwise would be "failing the most basic test of office". While claiming that his remarks had been misinterpreted, he ruled out military action only against "our friends" in neighbouring countries.

South-East Asian leaders, including in Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia immediately denounced the statements as a direct threat to their country's sovereignty and warned they would respond to any Australian military intrusion on their territory.

In the Philippines, the foreign ministry accused Australia of harbouring "hegemonic ambitions". Vice President

Teofisto Guingona called Howard's remarks "an act of arrogance that disregards the right of nations, and prejudices our friendly ties". Manila threatened to pull out of a planned joint anti-terrorism pact with Australia.

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad said he would consider it an "act of war" if Australia intruded into his country. Mahathir recalled the anti-Asian White Australia policy, saying Australia stood out like a "sore thumb" in Asia for trying to impose European values "as if these are the good old days where people can shoot Aborigines without caring about human rights".

After a cabinet meeting with President Megawati Sukarnoputri, Indonesian military chief General Endriartono Sutarto said his forces would respond if Australia invaded Indonesian territory under the pretext of fighting terrorism. "Such an action is an act of aggression against another sovereign country and we will not stand by."

There is of course an element of grandstanding in these official statements. But the hostility was not confined to government circles. Howard's remarks were front-page news in most regional capitals, reflecting wider anger. An editorial in the Malaysia's *New Straits Times* newspaper denounced Howard as "Uncle Sam's foremost flunky". Anti-Australian demonstrations were held in several cities, including Kuala Lumpur and Manila, where protesters held placards condemning Australian imperialism.

In the face of this backlash, Howard was criticised in the Australian media, with editorials and commentators expressing concern that Howard had unnecessarily inflamed anti-Australian sentiment in the region, opened up a doctrine with unpredictable and destabilising consequences and directly endangered Australian commercial and strategic interests.

"After three decades of policy aimed at closer engagement politically and economically with Asia, Mr Howard's remarks were unfortunate," the Melbourne *Age* declared. "They may have raised suspicions about the place that Australia seeks for itself in the region. Mr Howard, experienced politician that he is, should have known that

some things are not worth saying.”

The Labor Party opposition, which has given Howard complete bipartisan support on joining the Bush administration’s “war on terrorism,” criticised his comments as insensitive to Asian governments. Labor leader Simon Crean suggested that Howard had blundered by canvassing an amendment to the UN charter, when it already permitted action in self-defence against a “clear and present danger”.

Howard’s statements were no blunder or mistake, however. In calling for revision of the UN charter, Howard is, first and foremost, demonstrating his loyalty to the Bush administration which has been advocating similar changes to permit a far broader scope for pre-emptive strikes than at present.

In part, Howard’s statements seek to justify a “first strike” US-led invasion of Iraq, as was noted by an editorial in Rupert Murdoch’s *Australian*, one of the most outspoken advocates of Howard’s alignment with Bush. “For the US, this is a pressing and urgent matter,” it observed, given that the US could decide to “take action in Iraq without UN sanction”.

Together with the Blair Labour government in Britain, Howard’s conservative Liberal-National Party administration has been the most unreserved supporter of Bush’s militarism, dispatching troops to Afghanistan and indicating its readiness to join a war on Iraq.

The only unqualified support for Howard came from Washington. Asked whether President Bush backed Howard, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer replied: “The president of course supports pre-emptive action. September 11 changed everything, and nations must respond and change their doctrines to face new and different threats.” He added: “Australia has been a stalwart ally of the United States in the war against terrorism.”

More is involved in Howard’s stance than the impending war in Iraq.

In the course of the week, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer sought to repair some of the diplomatic damage in the region, by insisting that Howard had said nothing new and the government was not pushing for changes to the UN charter. He called a meeting with the 10 ambassadors of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries in Canberra and sought to publicly dismiss as absurd the notion that Australia would send in special forces without consultation.

Howard undercut Downer the following day in parliament. He insisted that he had chosen his words carefully during the initial interview and dismissed calls by Labor leader Crean for an apology to South East Asian leaders. He declared that while the government had yet to take any decision on

alterations to the UN, “there ought to be debate about changes”. The charter needed to be “revisited,” he said, in light of the terrorist threat posed by Al Qaeda.

By insisting on Australia’s right to take pre-emptive strikes in response to a terrorist threat, Howard, with the backing of Washington, is effectively laying down the law to the region’s governments. Either fall into line with the US “war on terrorism” or run the risk of military action. The threat is not a purely abstract one. For months before the October 12 Bali bombing, Washington and Canberra had accused the Indonesian administration of failing to take tougher anti-terrorist measures and crack down on Islamic fundamentalist groups.

As a number of Asian commentators have noted, Howard’s comments recall the notion that he advanced in a 1999 interview with the *Bulletin* magazine, of Australia acting as a regional “deputy” to the global US policeman. With a definite tinge of racism, he spoke of Australia defending “moral values” in the region, “because we occupy that special place—we are a European, Western civilisation with strong links with North America, but here we are in Asia”.

Howard’s statement followed the Australian-led UN military intervention in East Timor, which was carried out in the name of defending the East Timorese but was aimed at advancing Australian economic and strategic interests in region, in particular securing control of the Timor Sea oil and gas fields. Following the *Bulletin* interview, Howard faced denunciation throughout Asia and condemnation at home, forcing him to issue a public denial that he had ever advocated the “US deputy” concept.

In the wake of the Bali bombings, however, Howard is seeking to reassert his doctrine in a different form. He calculates that the best means for advancing Australian interests in the region is to function as the loyal “deputy” of Bush administration in its “war on terrorism”. Since September 11 2001, Howard has worked closely with Washington to apply considerable pressure on Asian governments to align themselves unconditionally with Bush and reinstate military ties with the US. Now, he has added the threat of preemptive military strikes.



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