Australian Labor's militarist plans for South-East Asia

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20 September 2004

In the three years since the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, the political meaning of the "war on terror" has become increasingly clear. It has nothing to do with protecting ordinary people, but, rather, is a propaganda slogan used by the most powerful capitalist nations to prosecute their interests against their competitors.

The war and occupation of Iraq is a case in point. The Bush administration launched the invasion, not to rid the Saddam Hussein regime of weapons of mass destruction, which it knew he did not have, or because of a connection with Osama bin Laden, which it knew did not exist, but to seize control of Iraq's oil resources and establish the United States as the pre-eminent power in the Middle East. The "enemy" was not so much Saddam Hussein, as the chief rivals of the US in Europe and Asia. Now the bloody occupation of Iraq and the brutal suppression of the resistance are being designated as the "frontline" in the "war on terror".

Other regimes have taken a leaf out of the American book. The Putin government in Russia proclaims that its war of repression in Chechnya is part of the global "war on terror", while at the same time encouraging separatist movements in the neighbouring republic of Georgia. At stake is control of the resources of the Caucus region, and of the oil pipelines from the Caspian Sea Basin.

In the Middle East, the "war on terror" is invoked by the Israeli government of Ariel Sharon as it pursues the goal of a "Greater Israel" through the suppression of the Palestinian people.

Likewise, the chief factor in the Howard government's support for the US-led war on Afghanistan and the invasion of Iraq was not concern over terror—the Saddam Hussein regime never constituted a "terrorist" threat—but recognition that US support would be needed to pursue Australian interests against potential rivals in the Asia-Pacific region. This was the lesson drawn by Canberra out of the experience of East Timor, where it undertook the biggest deployment of Australian military forces since the end of the Vietnam War. The Howard government was only able to place troops on the ground there, and strengthen its position against Portugal, the former colonial power, with the support of the Clinton administration, which threatened to bankrupt the Indonesian government unless it agreed.

Well before the terror attacks of September 11, there was discussion in Australian military, academic and government circles about the "arc of instability" to Australia's north and the need for greater intervention. Just three months after the invasion of Iraq, the Howard government launched its police-military intervention in the Solomons. Since then, it has been in continuous discussion over what measures to take in Papua New Guinea.

While Howard argues that the closest possible alliance with the US—even to the extent of functioning as its "deputy sheriff," as he once put it—is the best way to strengthen the position of Australian imperialism within the region, this is not a unanimously held view in foreign policy and military circles. The counter argument is that while the Australia-US alliance must remain the bedrock of Australian foreign policy, it is necessary to maintain, from time to time, a certain distance from Washington, at least in public, in order to increase Australia's ability to manoeuvre. For Labor's defence spokesman, Kim Beazley, the most ardent supporter of the military on the frontbench, such an approach would strengthen the Australia-US alliance, enabling Australia to intervene in situations where the US could not.

These tactical differences are reflected in the Labor Party's criticism of the Howard government over the Iraq war, and the plans being drawn up by the Labor leaders for stepped-up political and military intervention in South-East Asia, should they win office in the October 9

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election. Of course, the actual policy issues are not discussed openly, but cloaked in references to the "war on terror".

In the election debate last Sunday, Latham's opposition to Australian involvement in the war on Iraq was not based on the fact that it constituted illegal aggression, or that it was grounded on lies. It was merely a "mistake" because it "diverted from the real task" which, Latham argued, for Australia, lay "in our part of the world."

Asked whether he still stuck by his pledge to withdraw Australian troops from Iraq by Christmas, Latham simply ignored the question. Instead, he set out Labor's plans for military intervention in South-East Asia to prosecute the "war on terror" and wipe out Jemaah Islamiya (JI).

According to Latham, the main problem was that JI was operating out of bases in the southern Philippines, but Australia was only marginal to the effort to stop it. "We've got a few surveillance operations, but no great maritime presence. This is where Labor will dedicate our resources—to our region, to our part of the world, to the real security of the Australian people. We should be part of that gateway operation with our neighbours, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore ..."

Interestingly enough, this interventionist policy was the main topic of a little-reported press conference held last Saturday. The conference followed a meeting of the Labor National Security Committee, comprising Latham, defence spokesman Kim Beazley and foreign affairs spokesman Kevin Rudd.

Latham argued that, while the Howard government could point to a number of agreements with individual states, Australia had to be involved in an "overarching regional strategy". The greatest challenge was to break up the JI networks and, to that end, Australia had to be involved in "maritime strategies to prevent JI operatives travelling to and from their bases in the Southern Philippines."

Elaborating on Labor's perspective, Beazley claimed that JI operatives used traditional smugglers' and pirates' routes throughout South-East Asia and that the Philippines government was unable to get at their bases in the southern part of the country.

But the "Australian Air Force, Navy and Army are particularly well suited in their equipment, in their force structure, for dealing with this task". At this stage, however, while Australian forces were involved in joint exercises in the region, this was not the same thing as "active patrolling." "We need to negotiate ourselves into the regional response currently being done by Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia but not with Australia. We have the capacity to assist here, we must negotiate ourselves in to be able to do it."

Not surprisingly, in view of these remarks, one journalist then asked Latham whether he would support sending in Australian troops to "hit" a "terror training camp" in Indonesia or the Southern Philippines.

Latham said that he would not get into "hypotheticals," but emphasised that Australian military involvement in patrolling and surveillance of the region was vital.

Beazley insisted that, rather than specifying how an Australian force might operate against this or that target, "the first objective is get Australia back into the regional security debate and the establishment of the overarching regional security structure." For Beazley, the importance of this task was underlined by the fact that earlier this year, an American move to begin patrols in the region was rejected by the Indonesian and Malaysian governments.

"Now clearly the task of a Labor government is not simply to tell the countries in the region what we should do and what they should do, but insert ourselves back into the debate with a serious offer of upgraded activities—activities that have largely gone off the boil."

When one journalist made the obvious point that if the governments of Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia wanted Australian involvement they would have asked for it by now, Beazley delivered a quick lesson in the methods of imperialist foreign policy.

"That's not how this world works my friend. You have to join the dialogue. And you join it on the basis on which you're trusted. And you have to appear sympathetic to their objectives, you have to be there alongside them. ... We think that we can get ourselves into that mode of discussion that we need to be in, in order to be able to achieve these objectives."

If Labor is returned to government then the few hundred remaining troops in Iraq could be withdrawn. But this may well be just the prelude to an eruption of Australian militarism within the Asia-Pacific region, under the umbrella, yet again, of the "war on terror."

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