

Australian government commits more troops to Iraq

Peter Symonds
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The Australian government's decision yesterday to dispatch 450 more soldiers to Iraq has further underscored the criminal, neo-colonial character of the US-led occupation and Canberra's involvement in it. The deployment is aimed at shoring up the Bush administration's disintegrating "coalition of the willing" and at the same time securing Australian interests in the Asian region through closer ties with Japan.

The trigger for the decision was the imminent departure of 1,400 Dutch soldiers, who have been guarding Japanese engineers in the southern Iraqi province of Al Muthanna. As Australian Prime Minister John Howard explained, without additional security, "there was a real possibility that the Japanese could no longer remain there, and that would have been a very serious blow to the Coalition effort."

Howard was contacted by Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi last Friday, and again by British Prime Minister Tony Blair on Monday to ask for military assistance. The Bush administration was undoubtedly apprised of the move. The last government to be consulted, and then only to obtain its formal seal of approval, was Washington's puppet regime in Baghdad.

Canberra's decision provides a much-needed boost to the Bush administration right at the point where other countries are getting out of Iraq as quickly as possible. Bush is currently in Europe seeking military assistance in Iraq through NATO but has come up empty-handed. Ukrainian President Victor Yushchenko rebuffed Bush's request to maintain his country's 1,600 troops in Iraq. Earlier this month, Poland announced the withdrawal of 700 of its troops and is considering pulling out the remaining 1,700. In December, Hungary followed the lead of Spain in withdrawing its 300 soldiers.

While Washington and its allies are hailing the Iraq election as a huge success, the steady stream of those opting out of the occupation speaks otherwise. Each government confronts intense opposition from broad layers of people who are outraged at the lies used to justify the invasion and simply do not believe US claims to be bringing "peace and democracy" to Iraq. The vast majority of Iraqis want an immediate end to the US occupation and are sympathetic to the mounting armed resistance.

Not surprisingly, Washington, London and Tokyo all welcomed Canberra's decision, despite the small number of

troops involved and their location away from the areas of most intense conflict. In making the announcement, Howard indirectly acknowledged the fragile state of the occupation when he declared that Iraq was at "a tilting point". Just as he was the only leader at the World Economic Forum in Davos last month to publicly defend the US against a barrage of anti-American criticism, so Howard is determined to demonstrate his unswerving loyalty to Washington in its present time of need.

Contrary to Howard's claims, the dispatch of more Australian troops to Iraq has nothing to do with helping the Iraqi people. Every aspect of the decision is designed to advance the strategic and economic interests of Australian imperialism, not so much in the Middle East, but within the Asia Pacific region. The lynchpin of Howard's foreign policy has been to do whatever is necessary to secure the backing of the Bush administration for Canberra's own neo-colonial enterprises closer to home. Immediately after the invasion of Iraq, the Howard government intervened militarily in the Solomon Islands and bullied Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and other small Pacific Island states into allowing Australian officials to take over key administrative posts.

By increasing the commitment of Australian troops to Iraq, Howard is counting on cementing close ties, not only with the US, but also with Japan—Australia's largest trading partner. By providing Australian soldiers to guard Japanese troops, Canberra is clearly looking for a quid pro quo, if not immediately, then at some future time. Howard himself highlighted the importance of the Tokyo angle, when he declared: "The Japanese element of this is quite crucial because Japan is a major regional partner."

Writing in Murdoch's *Australian* newspaper, foreign editor Greg Sheridan made clear that he regarded Howard's decision as a masterstroke. "[B]y both augmenting our own presence and helping the Japanese stay involved, it cements the multinational coalition at a time when some others are withdrawing. It is right for Australia regionally because of the intimate military cooperation it provides for with Japan, our most important friend in Asia."

Senior officials told the *Australian* that Canberra "expected no payoff in the form of more favourable economic or trade

conditions” when Howard visits Tokyo in April. But the rubbing of hands in Australian ruling circles at the prospect of cashing in on the arrangement is clearly audible. The *Australian Financial Review* speculated that a Free Trade Agreement with Japan, which Tokyo has so far rebuffed, “would be a handy foreign policy trophy” for the Howard government.

Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi has every reason to be grateful. While he has been campaigning to amend Japan’s constitution to allow the overseas deployment of troops, restrictions remain in force. Japanese troops are nominally in Iraq in a non-combat role to provide humanitarian assistance to the Iraqi people. In reality, like the US and Australia, Japan has sent troops to Iraq to further its own imperialist interests—above all, to obtain access to Iraqi oil.

Significantly, the Japanese base camp in Samawah is located just 65 kilometres from the huge Al Gharraf oilfield, which is capable of producing 130,000 barrels-a-day. Japanese interest in Al Gharraf dates from the late 1980s when Iraq was a major supplier of oil to Japan. The first Gulf war in 1990-91 ended those prospects and Tokyo was determined not to lose out a second time. Just prior to the dispatch of Japanese troops in early 2004, Mitsubishi signed a contract for crude oil purchases with Iraq’s State Oil Marketing Organisation, by then securely under US control.

Like other governments, Koizumi confronts widespread domestic opposition and is acutely conscious that the death of Japanese troops will provoke protests. Tokyo reportedly paid \$95 million to local tribes in the Samawah area to protect Japanese soldiers. Tribesmen wearing armbands that read “volunteer soldiers guarding Japan’s SDF in Samawa” appeared in the town. Local protection was supplemented by Dutch troops. Now it is the turn of Australian soldiers to take over mercenary duty, defending Japanese oil interests in southern Iraq. These relations exemplify the cynical calculations and self-interested motivations of all those involved in the “coalition of the willing”.

Howard also faces widespread hostility at home to Australia’s military involvement in Iraq. To deflect criticism, he has piled new lies on top of the old ones. Prior to invasion, Howard insisted that Australian forces would not be involved in the postwar occupation. During last year’s election campaign, Howard declared that no more Australian troops would be sent to Iraq. Now despite evidence of discussions going back months, Howard insists that the latest decision was only made after approaches from Britain and Japan in the last few days.

Howard’s ability to ram through the latest decision is completely dependent on the complicity of the media and the Labor opposition. With varying degrees of enthusiasm, all of the major newspapers have published editorials or columns backing the new troop commitment. Even those that previously issued limited criticisms have fallen into line. In its editorial entitled “Getting on with the job in Iraq,” the *Sydney Morning*

Herald, declared that there was “a legal and moral obligation not to ‘cut and run’.”

Likewise Labor leader Kim Beazley, while opposing the increased military commitment, in the same breath added that he would “support the troops”. Like his predecessor Mark Latham, Beazley has no principled opposition to the occupation of Iraq and has since taking over as Labor leader been at pains to stress Labor’s support for the US alliance. Given the backing of the media establishment for Howard’s decision, there is every reason to believe that even Labor’s present limited objections will quickly evaporate.

Despite the relatively small number of soldiers involved, the Howard government’s decision does represent a qualitative shift in Australia’s military commitment to Iraq. While the Australian military has around 900 personnel in or near Iraq, to date only 160 of those have been combat troops. Their role has been limited to guarding Australian diplomatic staff in Baghdad. Even though the southern Al Muthanna province is not the focus of anti-occupation resistance, the new Australian troops will be far more directly in the line of fire. Two Dutch soldiers were killed and others were injured during their tour of duty.

Despite their support for Howard’s decision, there is a detectable undercurrent of concern in the media over the prospect that Australian combat deaths will rekindle the protests that took the entire political establishment by surprise prior to the 2003 invasion. For those who took part in that global mass movement, it is time to draw the necessary political lessons from that experience. All of the hopes that were placed in the UN, or France and Germany, or opposition parties such as Labor, proved to be illusory. To wage a political struggle against the criminal activities of US imperialism and its allies, requires the building an independent movement of working people, in Australia and internationally, to demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all foreign troops from Iraq.



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