

Alan Dupont

Latham needs to iron out the flaws in his doctrine

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The Labor leader has failed to suggest how the ALP will deal with the new challenges confronting Australia, says Alan Dupont

THE good news for Labor is that a pugnacious and assertive Mark Latham has begun to seriously challenge Prime Minister John Howard's national security credentials after a long period in which Labor has been essentially reactive on defence and foreign policy.

In his first significant speech on foreign policy to the **Lowy Institute** yesterday, Latham delivered a measured and balanced restatement of the principles and priorities that have long governed Labor's approach to foreign policy. This included a ritual reiteration of Labor's attachment to the UN and the virtues of multilateralism, as well as a renewed emphasis on the importance of Asia and a reaffirmation of the centrality of the US alliance.

What is striking about the Latham doctrine is how little it deviates in tone and substance from the comparable foreign policy pronouncements of the Keating and Hawke Labor governments. This is both a strength and a weakness.

Establishing continuity with his successful predecessors will play well to the Labor faithful, legitimise Latham's claim to be the authentic voice of his party and reassure those fearful that he has no intellectual framework for thinking about international affairs and Australia's place in the world.

But the speech is weak on policy prescriptions and fails to suggest how Labor will deal with the new challenges confronting Australia, which Latham acknowledges are vastly different from those faced by the last Labor government.

Moreover, there is an obvious inconsistency in Latham's rhetorical commitment to multilateralism and the refusal to consider keeping Australian troops in Iraq even under a new UN mandate. Joining ASEAN Plus Three would hardly be a ringing endorsement of multilateralism either, as it is a classical example of a preferential trade agreement.

On the US alliance, Latham is walking a fine line between agility and maladroitness. His talk of greater self-reliance and independence within an alliance framework works at one level, because supporting the US alliance without being reflexively pro-American is always good politics for a Labor leader.

But portraying himself as a man prepared to stand up to the Americans when our interests diverge is fine so long as Latham does not open himself up further to accusations of irresponsibility as he did with his unnecessary and ill-considered pledge to pull back Australian troops from Iraq by Christmas. This was a political and foreign policy miscalculation that could and should have been avoided. So some fence-mending with the Bush administration is in order, preferably before Latham's scheduled visit to Washington.

His blanket opposition to pre-emption also needs some modification. It must allow for the fact that pre-emption may be justified in certain narrowly defined circumstances. And it must recognise that international law has yet to grapple with the legal and ethical issues associated with a pre-emptive strike against a non-state actor such as a terrorist group.

Of course, these are relatively arcane points that will not have huge resonance with the electorate. Of more concern, because of its wider implications for Labor's defence and foreign policy, is Latham's curious resuscitation of the discredited Defence of Australia doctrine, in which he implies that bringing the troops home and circling the wagons is the most effective way of insulating Australia from terrorist attack. This leaves him vulnerable to the charge of ignoring the global reach of modern terrorist groups and their capacity to attack Australians and Australian interests far from our shores.

Latham makes the mistake of conflating proximity with importance. The reality is that there will be occasions when we must take the fight to the terrorists, wherever they are, rather than sitting passively waiting for them to strike our home soil at a time and place of their choosing.

The Labor leader is dismissive of the need for expeditionary forces, which seem to have become associated in his mind with fighting other people's wars. Nothing could be further from the truth. Our commitments to Somalia, Cambodia, Rwanda and Afghanistan were all expeditionary in the sense that the Australian Defence Force was required to deploy beyond the immediate neighbourhood. But each of these operations was supported by Labor at the time, because they were rightfully seen as being in Australia's interests.

If Latham feels otherwise, then it is incumbent on him to explain how he reconciles the defence of Australia, narrowly defined, with his earlier calls for a beefed-up Australian military presence in distant Afghanistan and "wiping out terrorist networks in South-East Asia".

These blemishes aside, Latham has probably done enough in his **Lowy Institute** address to establish his foreign policy credentials and differentiate Labor from the Coalition in a way that will find favour with a significant part of the voting public.

But his policy on troop withdrawal from Iraq remains his Achilles heel, and he will have to work hard to minimise the perception in Washington that he is personally antipathetic to George W. Bush, not just his policies.

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