

## **End of simplicity**

Owen Harries

The Australian

1 December 2006

P.12

If you consider the grand strategy of Australian foreign policy over the past century, what stands out is its essential simplicity and consistency. It has always consisted of allying our country closely with a great power that is committed to preserving the existing international order against those who want to change it radically.

For the first 40 years of Australia's existence, that power was Britain. After 1941 it was for a period Britain and the US. For the past half-century it has been the US alone.

Between them, those states strove to maintain the international status quo against those revisionist states -- Nazi Germany, militaristic Japan, communist Russia -- that sought to change it radically.

This policy may not always have satisfied the Australian sense of independence and pride -- "All the way with LBJ" in the mid-1960s was not, after all, an inspiring cry with which to send Australian men off to war -- but in geo-strategic terms it made good sense. Australia was and is a satisfied, status quo state. A huge, well-endowed country with a population of only 20 million, it has a lot more than its share of the world's good things.

It does not want that state of affairs to change. It cannot sensibly hope to get even more than it has, but upheaval and turbulence could easily result in it having less. So aligning itself with the leading status quo countries made good realist sense.

The fact that Australia shared certain important values and institutions with those countries made that a very acceptable and congenial policy, an easy one to explain and defend in the non-realist terms that many preferred.

When, on the day after 9/11, John Howard promised full Australian support for the US, even before he knew what the policy response of that country would be, he was being true to that tradition. Howard had no great experience in foreign policy, no desire to be an innovator. He merely walked an established path. Or so he assumed.

But there was one fundamental thing that Howard did not anticipate: that, with the Bush doctrine (not yet enunciated when he made his promise), the US was about to change from being a status quo power to a revolutionary one, solemnly and seriously committed to changing the world radically. The Bush doctrine, formally proclaimed in the presidential national security strategic document of September 2002, committed the US not only to combating terror but to actively promoting democracy and a market economy in "every corner of the world" -- that is, to transform the whole international system to conform with American values.

To that end it would, where necessary, use its vast military force, not only defensively to contain and deter its adversaries, but actively, assertively and pre-emptively.

Howard committed Australia to going along with the first manifestation of that commitment, the invasion of Iraq. As a result, Australia, a quintessential satisfied country, has found itself engaged in an ideological war against a country that, however vile its regime, did not in any way threaten us or the international status quo, and was, as we now know, our best wheat customer.

An alternative interpretation is that Howard did indeed understand the direction in which US policy was moving but was so convinced of the effectiveness of US power that he assumed the whole Iraq venture would be so quick and easy that the rewards for Australia -- praise and appreciation in Washington, a free-trade agreement -- would easily outweigh the costs.

In either case, it was an example of misplaced realism. And in either case it is extremely dubious whether uncritical, loyal support for a bad, failed American policy will have enhanced our standing as an ally in the long run. A reputation for being dumb but loyal and eager is not one to be sought.

We are now close to the end game in Iraq. By almost common consent, and even in the opinion of Tony Blair, America's Iraq venture is a disaster. Only a few -- those whose spiritual home is the last ditch, or who cannot for political reasons acknowledge what they know is true -- still dispute the matter.

As far as Australia's participation in the war has been concerned, there has been a marked discrepancy between the rhetoric and the commitment. The rhetoric has insisted that the stakes are high and the issues vital. "Our very freedom is at stake," declaimed Foreign Minister Alexander Downer earlier this year.

But our military commitment in Iraq has been extremely modest: some 700 to 800 personnel on the ground. And not only are the numbers small but Australian forces have not been deployed where the action is hottest, where the Americans have been taking serious losses and the British significant ones. Indeed, this may well be the first war in which Australian forces have been engaged in which they end up not suffering a single battleground fatality.

This undoubtedly makes it easier for government spokesmen to scorn "cutting and running" and failing to "stay the course". Such sentiments would be harder to express were there significant Australian losses. To take the ultimate example, no one spoke scornfully of "cut and run" when the withdrawal from Gallipoli occurred, after it had become clear that the venture had failed.

There is nothing shameful about recognising the fact and acting appropriately when failure has occurred, as it surely has in Iraq. The shame, if any, attaches to the original bad policies, not to the withdrawal.

There is plenty of scope for discussion as to what is the best course of action from here on, the order and tempo of events. But simply yelling "No Cut and Run" and having no apparent plan for ending participation in the business, beyond making our decision entirely dependent on the decision of an inept and demoralised Bush administration, is surely a pathetic sign of political and intellectual bankruptcy.

The US-Australian alliance will endure, both because it serves real interests and because the need for a "great and powerful friend" is deeply embedded in the Australian psyche. But for a middle power to maintain successfully a close relationship with a superpower is not an easy business. When that superpower is the only one in the world -- the global hegemon -- it is even harder. And when the hegemon is badly rattled and internally divided by a recent failure, it is going to be more difficult still.

The relationship is inherently unequal and there is always the danger for the weaker party of becoming so enmeshed in the affairs of the senior partner as to lose its autonomy. Nothing comes for free: privileged access to intelligence, participation in contingency planning, interoperability in weapon systems -- all these bind the parties closer on terms determined by the stronger partner. And the desire to be liked can come to take precedence over the insistence on being respected. Saying "no", however politely, can become difficult.

It may seem odd to speak in these terms during the tenure of John Howard, one of the toughest-minded politicians Australia has produced. But Howard came to foreign policy late. It is not his

metier. He is approaching the end of his career, seeks and enjoys international recognition, and the seductive power of Washington and the White House are considerable.

In any case, I believe that the days when Australian foreign policy was a relatively simple affair are coming to an end. Dealing with an unsettled superpower ally, while simultaneously adjusting to the rising importance of China as a regional power and a trading partner, is going to require skills that Australia has not had much cause to practise until now.

Every alliance requires a degree of trust. It also requires discrimination and balance, and a touch of scepticism. What Australia must learn from the Iraq experience is that it should not commit itself to marching in lock-step with anyone, let alone a superpower that is simultaneously committed to an incredibly ambitious program of global change, deeply divided domestically, and has the most inept president since Warren Harding in its White House.

Australia must learn to be as good an ally as it can be, while maintaining its freedom of choice.

Owen Harries is a visiting fellow at the Lowy Institute for International Policy in Sydney. This is adapted from his speech to the institute on Wednesday. The full version, entitled *After Iraq*, is available at [www.lowyinstitute.org](http://www.lowyinstitute.org).