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A decision that was probably inevitable

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War is an uncertain business, so there has always been an air of fragility about John Howard's insistence that he could tightly limit Australia's long-term commitment in Iraq. Even before the invasion nearly two years ago, Howard was insisting that Australian troops would not be left doing peacekeeping in Iraq once Saddam Hussein was gone. US officials were tight-lipped and uneasy with Howard's idea that Australia might leave before the job was done.

Alongside the understandable gratitude for Howard's political support in the early days, many in Washington — and in London — have been sourly conscious that Howard has, in fact, put very little substance behind his strong rhetorical support for George Bush's policy in Iraq. So no one should be surprised that the Government has come under some serious diplomatic pressure from the US and Britain to increase our contribution, especially as other countries — including not just the Dutch, who we will replace, but Hungarians, Ukrainians and Polish — are starting to pull out.

Nor should anyone be surprised that Howard has bowed to that pressure. But even those who are used to Howard's superb sense of political timing might be impressed by the agility with which he has changed policy.

Howard insisted right up through last year's election campaign that Australia would not significantly expand its force in Iraq. But with his election victory in the bag, with Iraq now looking less unmanageable after its own election last month, and with Bush in his second term looking less unilateralist and more consultative, Howard has found the perfect moment to perform the kind of lateral arabesque that is his political forte. No doubt some will wonder whether he planned it this way all along.

The decision announced on Tuesday appears a qualitative shift in the nature of Australia's military role in Iraq. Until now our forces on the ground there — only about 250 to 300 of them — have been involved in roles such as guarding Australia's diplomats, training Iraqi soldiers, and providing medical services, roles not on the front line in the critical role of building security in Iraq to provide the environment for democracy to take root.

The new commitment will, it seems, take us closer to the front line — albeit in one of Iraq's less violent provinces. Will they simply protect Japanese troops and train Iraqi forces, or will they, like the Dutch they will replace, be responsible for securing the province itself?

Either way, as the Prime Minister acknowledged, there is a significant increase in risk. With more than double the number of our soldiers on the ground, and with more of them out and about daily, the likelihood of casualties is higher. A major and protracted deployment also carries another risk — that we will be less well-prepared to deal with emergencies in our neighbourhood.

Are those risks worth it? On balance, I think they are. Whatever one thinks of the original decision to invade — and I thought then and think now that it was a strategic error — our involvement in that decision imposes on us obligations to help in the political reconstruction of

Iraq. That task has an essential military component. Hitherto our contribution to that component has been perhaps less than our obligations require.

There will also be another, intriguing, consequence. Howard said Japan specifically had asked us to take over the role of supporting its troops in Iraq. That fits with the growing strategic relationship between Canberra and Tokyo. The opportunity that service together in Iraq offers for building links between our armed forces may be one of the more significant and beneficial implications of this decision.

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