

The Australia-US Military Relationship. Australian Troops to Iraq?

Pre-empting Imperial Wishes: Australia reading the United States

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Region: [Oceania](#)

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There is a thesis in it. Versions of it certainly circulate: smaller, and weaker powers, tend to pre-empt the wishes of their masters or those who would promise to protect them. If performed successfully, rewards might issue from the mighty protector, be it in the form of dispensations and further guarantees of security.

The political environment of a democracy is peculiar in that regard, given that political pre-emption tends to be the internal province of police states. (To be in the dictator's special invitations list, best try to predict what his wishes might be.) The democratic system adds the complication of "the people" - those wishes of the electorate which have to be abided by. The elected classes do, however, have to undertake some elaborate window dressing when dumping a policy on the sceptics and people who might suspect they are being taken for a dangerous and lack lustre ride.

Australia provides the most acute example of this play between the constituency that needs to be bribed, if not deluded, and a government that wishes to be in the good books of its great behemoth of an "ally". (The term ally in the Australian-US relationship is more akin to a shotgun marriage between inherently unequal partners.) For that reason, ground must be smoothed out, and electors prepared for what those in Washington would want. It doesn't pay to reveal how demeaning that state of affairs actually is - Australia is, after all the fluff about special relationships, essentially subordinate, its sovereignty qualified and conditioned by US strategic thinking.

There is some precedent for this. An ongoing argument made by such individuals as Geir Lundestad, director of the Norwegian Nobel Institute, is that the United States and its entrenched presence in Western Europe during the Cold War was the product of "empire by invitation". The subtext there was one of pre-emption: the US will want their security enhanced by actually protecting Western Europe from the Soviet hordes. This also stood to reason, given that the American empire had come into being. "The American expansion went so deep and affected so many different parts of the world that it can be said to have resulted in an American empire."^[1]

Lundestad then ventures the notion that the cobbled empire that stumbled into the barracks and the institutions of Europe was a short-lived experiment, suggesting a rather naïve assessment.

By the 1970s, the US-European relationship had to be redefined in the wake of declining

American influence, but that never meant that US bases, or US influence, would vanish. Some guests are reluctant to leave, and while the Soviet Union wearily packed up after its torturous decline in 1990, taking its place on the mantelpiece of history, Washington's imperial juggernaut was reshaped.

The Abbott government has been doing its level best to second, even third guess, the decisions of the Obama administration. This has proven difficult in a sense, given the not infrequent bouts of indecisiveness that seem to arise in Washington. Will it re-deploy US forces in Iraq to add meat to air strikes against ISIS positions? Will there be a need for further sanctions on Russia to pressure separatists in Ukraine?

The measuring of what the US will do is important for the amateur psychoanalysts in the Prime Minister's office. If the murmurings are humanitarian, then the Australian response is to anticipate that. Abbott has spoken to US officials about the "potential humanitarian disaster" in Northern Iraq that awaits if the planes aren't flown in and the supplies aren't dropped. "President Obama has already said that it has the potential to become a genocide and that's why it's important for Australia to join with our international partners in doing what we can to render humanitarian assistance." [2] Note: it matters not a jot what the Australian assessment on the ground would have been – what Obama says, goes.

Humanitarian aid drops have a tendency of becoming military drops – food aid gives way to weapons when the moral rhetoric gets steamy with righteous indignation. Abbott is careful to underline the monstrosity he, and his colleagues, are facing while trumpeting the need to "protect civilians from a murderous onslaught." The fate of the refugees of the Yazidi sect are coming in for some heavy publicity. Describing the capacity of the Royal Australian Air Force in terms of its humanitarian credentials is one thing ("a fleet of six C-17A Globemaster heavy lift aircraft as well as C-130 Hercules transport aircraft" [3]); adding the military edge to it is something that will come in due course. "We are talking to our ... security partners about what we can usefully do to help."

At this writing, the prospects of troops joining a mission against ISIS is very real indeed. Minister for Defence, Senator David Johnston, has left that road open despite the fact that Washington has not approached either he or the Prime Minister. This, despite US Secretary of State John Kerry claiming on Tuesday that there would be "no reintroduction of American combat forces."

Abbott has, instead, decided to split hairs. "There is a world of difference between getting involved to prevent genocide and the kind of involvement that we've seen in recent years by Western countries in the Middle East." With such flexible reasoning, one that uses terms of invasion as if they were policing metaphors, anything is possible.

What is surprising about all of this is that the Canberra policy hacks should be surprised when other powers retaliate. The Russian foreign ministry has found Australian efforts to piggyback on the sanctions regime against Moscow primitively unimaginative. It is – the Australian reliance on commodity exports places it at the mercy of powers who might wish to turn off the tap of demand. The powers of reading what the US might do then will come to naught.

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Notes

[1]

http://www.fpn.co.me/fajlovi/fpn/attach_fajlovi/lat/studentske-informacije/obavjestenja/2013/11/pdf/Lundestad.pdf

[2]

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/09/australia-preparing-to-join-iraq-air-campaign-says-to-ny-abbott>

[3]

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/09/australia-preparing-to-join-iraq-air-campaign-says-to-ny-abbott>

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