Iraq 2003: A retrospective
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I thank the Lowy Institute for the opportunity to revisit the most controversial foreign policy decision taken by my Government, in the almost 12 years it held office. Before tackling the substance of that issue can I pay tribute to the bravery and professionalism of the men and women of the ADF who served in Iraq. Theirs was a dangerous mission; mercifully Australia suffered no battle deaths, but I am mindful of the impact the operation had on their lives, most particularly those who suffered injuries.

I left the Prime Ministership of this country with a lasting respect for our men and women in uniform. They are an ornament to Australia. Thankfully we did not repeat the shame of 40 years ago, when many of our returning men from Vietnam were the target of some who disagreed with that involvement. Although the level of engagement was vastly different in Iraq, on this occasion dissent was solely directed towards those responsible - the political leaders of the time - and not the men and women who had carried out their orders.

Context they say is everything. It certainly is in assessing the wisdom of Australia joining the coalition of the willing in Iraq, ten years ago.

Early in 2003 the world still lived in the shadow of 11th September 2001; the United States had entered a new phase of profound vulnerability and remained preoccupied with when and where the next terrorist attack on her homeland would occur; the notion of an Arab Spring was unthinkable, and here in Australia we had just felt the full force of Islamic extremism in Bali almost as if it had been on our own soil, and we had begun to embrace tough new anti-terrorism laws designed to smother home-grown threats to our peaceful society.

The 9/11 attacks challenged our normal understanding of international threats and conflict. They had not inaugurated a conventional war, no ultimatum had been delivered and no armies had rolled across borders, as they had done as recently as in 1991, when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. It was a world away from the Cold War when mutually assured destruction spawned a nervous peace. This was new and different, because of its scale, impact and sheer audacity. The stunning success of the attacks unnerved Americans, and many others.

Reflecting that new dimension an American President said, "The greatest threat to US and global security is no longer a nuclear exchange between nations but nuclear terrorism by violent extremists".[1] Another said "our greatest fear is that terrorists will find a short cut to their mad ambitions when an outlaw regime supplies them with the technologies to kill on a massive scale".[2] When uttering those words the two Presidents were expressing a common American dread, doubtless entertained by millions of their fellow countrymen and women. The first statement belonged to President Obama; the second to former president George W. Bush. They spoke eight years apart, but their respective words could easily have been spoken by the other, and from the same platform, as they expressed a like fear.

The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 were a greater violation of the American homeland than even Pearl Harbour. They produced amongst Americans an unaccustomed sense of vulnerability, which would last years. Vulnerability is a counter-intuitive concept when it comes to the United States. How can the most powerful nation the world has seen ever feel vulnerable? Yet it did after September 2001, and also, importantly for Australia, commensurately grateful for friends. Only in the absence of further attacks on America at home has that vulnerability gradually dissipated.

[1] Statement by President Barack Obama on the Release of Nuclear Posture Review, April 6, 2010
http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/statement-president-barack-obama-release-nuclear-posture-review

[2] President George W. Bush, address to the UN, September 12, 2002
http://www.un.org/webcast/ga/57/statements/020912usaE.htm

Yet, central to a proper understanding of why the US acted as she did over Iraq, and the implications that had for a close ally such as Australia, is to recognise that vulnerability. Americans thought their country would be attacked by terrorists again, and soon; to many in the United States why wouldn't a rogue state like Iraq supply dangerous weapons to terrorist groups; why wouldn't there be further plane hijackings, and that the next time a hijacked plane headed for a tall building it might contain a chemical, biological or even nuclear weapon? Such sentiments might seem exaggerated today. They didn't in the United States in the wake of 9/11.

That no further attacks took place either during the remaining 7 years of the Bush Presidency or the more than 4 years of President Obama's occupancy of the White House is greatly to the credit of both men. Little of that credit has been forthcoming. The anxiety of the early years has given way to a growing complacency that it won't happen again.

So much of the narrative about Iraq has focussed on what has been depicted as an ill-founded obsession regarding that country by George Bush and those close to him. Certainly Iraq was never far from their minds. Within hours of the 9/11 attacks Australia's then Ambassador to the US, Michael Thawley, said to me that he thought that Iraq would be back on the agenda for the Americans.

Yet to understand the American mindset about Iraq is to recognise that if there were an obsession about Iraq, then it was a bipartisan one.

To the Clinton Administration, removing Saddam was unfinished business. On his watch the Iraq Liberation Act was passed;[3] it expressly called for regime change in Baghdad. In 1998 Bill Clinton declared that "the world had to deal with the kind of threat Iraq poses, a rogue state with weapons of mass destruction, ready to use them or pass them to terrorists, who travel the world among us unnoticed".[4] That could easily have been George Bush or Donald Rumsfeld. The belief that Saddam was a threat to the region and beyond, and should be removed, crossed the aisle in American politics. It was little wonder therefore that senior

[3] Iraq Liberation Act, 1998, http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/105/hr4655#overview
[4] President Clinton, Statement on Iraq, 17 September 1998

figures in the Obama Administration such as Hillary Clinton and the Vice-President Joe Biden, when US Senators, voted in favour of military action against Saddam.

Australia's decision to join the Coalition in Iraq was a product both of our belief at the time that Iraq had WMDs, and the nature of our relationship and alliance with the United States. I never believed that Saddam was involved in the 9/11 attacks nor did President Bush or, to my knowledge Tony Blair. Such a claim never formed part of the public case put by the Howard Government for our Iraqi involvement. Some sections of the American administration may have had this conviction. It did not influence the Australian decision-making process.

He may not have been involved in 9/11, but Saddam had a grisly track record. He had used poison gas against the Iranians and the Kurds; gave $25,000 to every family of a Palestinian suicide bomber; was classified by the State Department as a state sponsor of terrorism; was responsible for up to 100,000 dead in the Anfal campaign of 1988 against the Kurds; his 1991 campaign of reprisals against the Shia claimed 50,000 lives. Between 600,000 and 1 million died in the Iraq/Iran war. His human rights record was unspeakable. The claims of some that life in Iraq was better under Saddam, than it has been since, defy belief.

The belief that Saddam had WMDs was near universal. As the Flood Inquiry put it, "Prior to 19 March 2003, the only government in the world that claimed that Iraq was not working on, and did not have, biological and chemical weapons or prohibited missile systems was the Government of Saddam Hussein."[5] Critics of what my Government did ranging from Jacques Chirac to Kevin Rudd all averred that Saddam had WMDs. The latter famously told the State Zionist Council of Victoria, late in 2002, that it was "an empirical fact" that the Iraqis possessed WMDs.[6] To drive the point home he even said that this was based on a report of the Federation of American Scientists, a group which grew out of the Manhattan Project - that is work on the first atomic bomb.

[5] Flood, Phillip (2004), "Inquiry into Australia's Intelligence Agencies", p. 177.
[6] Kevin Rudd, address to the State Zionist Council of Victoria, 15 October 2002.

Hard though it is now for many to accept, the party political division in Australia in the lead-up to the military operation in Iraq was not over the existence of WMDs. Rather, it was whether or not a further resolution of the UN, explicitly authorising the use of force, should be obtained as a pre-condition to Australia committing forces. Several times Simon Crean, Labor's then leader said that if such a resolution were passed by the Security Council, he would support Australian involvement. Given the dynamics of the Security Council (SC) then, this meant that if France and Russia changed their positions, then Labor in Australia would change. Those two countries were the permanent members really standing in the way of a further resolution – for their own political reasons, not because they did not believe Saddam had WMDs. I was convinced, after a discussion, late in 2002, with the influential former Premier Li Peng, that it was not a deal-breaker for the Chinese, and if the Russians and the French shifted, Beijing would waive the resolution through.

On 15th January 2003, Simon Crean even hinted that there might be circumstances in which he would support military action being taken absent a further SC resolution, saying "The UN could find itself in circumstances in which there is very strong support, based on the evidence that Saddam Hussein still has weapons, but a UN Security council resolution can't be passed because one of the permanent members vetoes it. In those circumstances, I'm saying we should consider those facts at the time."[7]

The debate in Australia about Iraq brought into sharp focus attitudes towards the UN. There were, on the one hand, the supreme multi-lateralists who abided, absolutely, by the UN book; if the SC said yes then all was in order; if the SC refused to, or had not endorsed something, then it must not occur, and, on the other hand, there were those who believed that nations had the right to exercise a value judgement independently of the world body, when the circumstances warranted.

[7] Simon Crean radio interview 3AW, 15th January 2003.

There have been recent cases of member states side-stepping UN deliberations in apprehension of the veto being used to frustrate their intentions. Kosovo was a clear example. NATO countries never put this to the test before the SC, knowing that a Russian veto would emerge because of Moscow's traditional friendship with Belgrade. They simply began their anti-Serbian bombing campaign. It succeeded, Milosovic fell, the Balkans were a markedly better place and the world was largely happy. Yet it was not endorsed by the UN.

Not all of those who opposed Operation Iraqi Freedom did so because they thought there was insufficient United Nations authority for the action to be taken, or because they did not believe Iraq had WMDs. One such group were the so-called realists, who included some senior Republican figures identified with President George HW Bush, and in particular Brent Scowcroft, National Security Advisor to the 41st President and a mentor to Condi Rice. The realists were probably untroubled by the UN issue, likely believed Saddam had WMDs, and regarded him as a loathsome dictator. Despite this they saw merit in continuing a policy of containing him and eschewing resort to military action. To them the world was too dangerous a place to become involved in such action except in the most compelling circumstances, which they did not think existed in Iraq in 2003. In other words, they largely shared the Bush administration's assessment of the threat but differed as to the most appropriate response.

In the light of what happened after the invasion they of all groups might feel entitled to point the finger and say "I told you so." Yet their attitude was open to criticism on two counts. To start with Saddam was not being contained. Until George Bush wound up the pressure on the UN to return weapons inspectors to Iraq in 2002, Saddam had been thumbing his nose at the world body and its WMDs strictures on him. The UN sanctions regime and the accompanying no-fly zones over Iraq were coming under increasing strain and were most likely unsustainable in the long term. The other flaw was that the realist approach did not in any way accommodate the huge psychological shift in American attitudes following 9/11. A policy of relaxed containment might have worked prior to the terrorist attacks. In the changed atmosphere of vulnerability, when Americans genuinely thought another attack on their homeland was only a matter of time, and action should be taken to pre-empt it, containment must have seemed to many oddly passive.

My Government never saw the obtaining of a fresh SC resolution as a necessary legal pre-requisite to action the removal of Saddam. It was always our view that Resolution 678, dating back to 1990 provided sufficient legal grounds for the action ultimately taken. That was reflected in the formal legal advice tendered to the Government, and subsequently tabled in Parliament.[8] By contrast there was great political value, especially for the British Government, fighting much internal British Labour Party resistance, if an explicit authorisation for military action were obtained. To have tried, albeit unsuccessfully, for a new resolution added weight to the moral and political case being built for a military operation.

The Clinton administration thought that 678 gave blanket legal coverage for all the military action it took to enforce the terms of that resolution. There was wide acceptance of that view, including in Australia. When Australia agreed, at President Clinton's request, to send Special Forces to the Gulf in 1998 to support "Operation Desert Thunder" by the Americans and the British against Saddam's WMD capacity as well as other strategic assets of the regime, because of another round of defiance by Iraq of UN resolutions, the Opposition readily concurred. Kim Beazley accompanied me to Campbell Barracks to farewell the men. We were as one on the correctness of their mission.

The late Jeanne Kirkpatrick, addressing the American Enterprise Institute in June 2003, told of a conversation she had had with Richard Holbrooke (since deceased) when he said "Three times Clinton did what many Democrats are now saying Bush can't do. He did it in Bosnia in '95, in Iraq with Desert Fox in December of '98, and in Kosovo in '99. In the Balkans case he had no SC authority".[9]

[8] Memorandum of advice to the Commonwealth Government on the use of force against Iraq. Tabled by the Prime Minister in the House of Representatives, 18 March 2003. Prepared by the Commonwealth Attonery-General's Department and DFAT, 12 March 2003.
[9] Quoted in Howard, J., Lazarus Rising (2010), p. 429.

A constant argument against our participation in the Coalition of the willing was the claim that it would increase the likelihood of a terrorist attack on our country. My response then was that Australia had been a terrorist target for several years before Iraq. Bin Laden's first belligerent reference to us had been in the context of the liberation of East Timor, which was in 1999, something which had widespread support in the Australian community. I have never taken a cavalier approach to terrorist threats, and no credible guarantees can ever be given that Australia is immune from such attacks. However the evidence to date is that our security services, our strengthened laws and an alert populace have combined to provide effective guardianship.

Another criticism was that joining the Americans and the British in Iraq would permanently damage us in the eyes of the Muslim world, and in particular Indonesia, the most populous Muslim country of all. I was sensitive to this issue, and that is why I paid a special visit to then President Megawati in February 2003 to explain to her that if Australia did go into Iraq our actions should be seen as part of an international effort to disarm Iraq, and not anti-Islamic in character. She made it clear that she accepted this. There no evidence that our involvement in Iraq damaged our relationship with Indonesia. Both through the close relationship I forged with SBY, and in other ways, Australia and Indonesia grew closer in the years after 2003. It was legitimate of me to claim that when I left office in 2007 that bi-lateral relationship had never been better.

The military operation against Iraq was speedy and effective; much more than most had expected, including for example Ehud Barak the former Israeli Prime Minister, and the most decorated soldier ever in the Israeli defence force and until recently the Israeli defence minister. In Canberra on 26th March 2003 – a few days after the war had begun – he told me that he expected that the military operation then underway against Saddam would require tenacious hand to hand fighting in the streets of Baghdad. In that same discussion he expressed little doubt that Iraq possessed WMDs.

After the fall of Saddam, and when it became apparent that stockpiles of WMDs had – to me unexpectedly - not been found in Iraq, it was all too easy for certain people, who only months earlier has said Iraq had the weapons to begin claiming that Australia had gone to war based on a "lie".

That claim is the most notorious one of all about the conduct of my Government, and of others, and merits the most emphatic rejection. Not only does it impugn the integrity of the decision-making process at the highest level, but also the professionalism and integrity of intelligence agencies here and elsewhere. Some of their key assessments proved to be wrong, but that is a world away from those assessments being the product of deceit and/or political manipulation.

In Australia, there was a parliamentary inquiry, as well as the Flood Inquiry which canvassed the pre-war intelligence. In its submission to the former, ONA said, "ONA said in a report of 31 January 2003 that there is a wealth of intelligence on Saddam's WMDs activities, but it paints a circumstantial picture that is conclusive overall rather than resting on a single piece of irrefutable evidence".[10] The Defence Intelligence Organisation (DIO) said in its submission to the same inquiry "Iraq probably retained a WMD capability - even if that capability had been degraded over time. DIO also assessed that Iraq maintained both an intent and capability to recommence a wider program should circumstances permit it to do so."[11]

The Flood Inquiry found "no evidence of politicisation of the assessments on Iraq either overt or perceived" or that "any analyst or manager was the subject of either direct or implied pressure to come to a particular judgement on Iraq for policy reasons or to bolster the case for war."[12] Flood further said that "assessments reflected reasonably the available evidence and used intelligence sources with appropriate caution." Flood said that the obverse conclusion that Iraq had no WMDs "would have been a much more difficult conclusion to substantiate."[13]

[10] Commonwealth of Australia (2003), Parliamentary Joint Committee on ASIO, ASIS and DSD.
[11] *Ibid.*
[12] Flood, Phillip (2004), "Inquiry into Australia's Intelligence Agencies", p 28.
[13] *Ibid.*

Neither inquiry gave a skerrick of support to the proposition that members of my Government had manufactured convenient intelligence or strong-armed the agencies into saying things they did not believe.

The National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) of October 2002, declassified in July 2003, gives some idea of the strength of the intelligence advice coming to the United States and her allies such as Australia. An NIE is a distillation of the views of all the American intelligence agencies, including the CIA. Its key judgements were as follows.[14]

> We judge that Iraq has continued its weapons of mass destruction programmes in defiance of UN resolutions and restrictions. Baghdad has chemical and biological weapons as well as missiles with ranges in excess of UN restrictions; if left unchecked, it probably will have a nuclear weapon during this decade.
>
> We judge that we are only seeing a portion of Iraq's WMDs efforts, owing to Baghdad's vigorous denial and deception efforts. Revelations after the Gulf War starkly demonstrate the extensive efforts undertaken by Iraq to deny information. We lack specific information on many key aspects of Iraq's WMDs programs.
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> Since inspections ended in 1998, Iraq has maintained its chemical weapons effort, energised its missile program, and invested more heavily in biological weapons; in the view of most agencies, Baghdad is reconstituting its nuclear weapons programme.

The intelligence bureau of the State Department entered a reservation to this assessment, but limited it to the claim in the NIE that Iraq had sought yellowcake from Niger. Using entirely different intelligence sources, Britain's MI6 had verified the claim disputed by the State Department.

[14] National Intelligence Estimate, October 2002, https://www.fas.org/irp/cia/product/iraq-WMDs-nie.pdf https://www.fas.org/irp/cia/product/iraq-WMDs.html

The strength of this assessment is unmistakeable. If that assessment had indeed been accurate, and Saddam had been left in place, only to provide WMDs to a terrorist group, for use against the US, the Administration would have failed in its most basic responsibility to protect the nation. Such a hypothesis underlines the eternal dilemma of intelligence. Intelligence assessments never produce evidence beyond a reasonable doubt. Almost always, the art of intelligence assessment involves assembling a mosaic from varying, incomplete and sometimes contradictory sources. To insist on such a standard of proof in the future would certainly avoid an Iraq-style intelligence failure, but could have other consequences. To illustrate, in his book *"The Finish"*, which deals with the killing of Osama Bin Laden, Mark Bowden quotes the deputy director of the CIA, Michael Morell, telling President Obama that he had spent a lot of time on both WMDSs and the tracing of Bin Laden to Abbottabad, "...and I am telling you the case for WMDs wasn't just stronger, it was much stronger."[15]

I had accepted the intelligence, as had all of the other senior members of my Government who had sat through numerous meetings of the National Security Committee of Cabinet. The Iraq Survey Group (ISG) found no stockpiles. The gist of its conclusions was that although no stockpiles existed, Saddam intended to reconstitute his WMDs once UN sanctions had been lifted, and that he had the programs and wherewithal to do so. Importantly the ISG judged that Saddam's regime attached great significance to its WMD capability; it had been crucial in maintaining superiority over the Kurds, and vital in the war against Iran.

As well as the available intelligence logic had suggested, strongly, that Iraq had WMDs. As the Flood Report observed, "The fact that Saddam chose to resist inspections to the bitter end suggested strongly that he had WMDs to protect (and perhaps that he hoped to avoid defeat by using them). If he did not have WMDs, why did he not ultimately comply with the inspection regime, in order to ensure the survival of his regime?"[16] But logic proved an imperfect tool.

[15] Bowden, Mark, "The death of Osama bin Laden: how the US finally got its man", 12 October 2012, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/oct/12/death-osama-bin-laden-us.
[16] Flood, Phillip (2004), "Inquiry into Australia's Intelligence Agencies"p.23.

We know now that planning for and implementation of the stabilisation phase was much more problematic than the initial operation to overthrow Saddam. The decision of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) under Paul "Jerry" Bremer to disband the Iraqi Army was a mistake, and the deBaathification process directed by the CPA went too far. As well as denying Coalition forces a home-grown vehicle through which to help maintain order, disbanding the army put on the streets tens of thousands of unemployed and disgruntled Iraqis. Many of them became eager recruits for the insurgency which raged, until largely subdued by the surge in 2007/8. And, as the former President, George Bush acknowledged in his book, it was a mistake for the Americans to cut their troop levels, in the ten months following the invasion, from 192,000 to 109,000.

The CPA held sway for too long, thus reinforcing the sense of an American occupation, anathema to all Iraqis, irrespective of their attitudes towards the removal of Saddam. The original disposition to cede, quickly, a large slice of genuine executive authority to a representative (although unelected) group of Iraqis, in advance of elections being held should have been preserved.

The post invasion conflict, especially between Sunnis and Shiites, which caused widespread bloodshed, did more damage, in my judgement, to the credibility of the coalition operation in Iraq than the failure to find stockpiles of WMDs. Persecution by the pro Saddam Sunnis of the Shia majority had been a feature of Iraq for the previous twenty years. It was inevitable that after Saddam had been toppled a degree of revenge would be exacted, but a stronger security presence would have constrained this.

The worsening security situation in Iraq, particularly the intense sectarian violence starting in 2006, which produced an alarming number of deaths, led to the adoption by the Bush Administration of the surge strategy, under the leadership of General David Petraeus. Based on improved intelligence and a "clear, hold and build" approach, which required committing 30,000 additional American troops at a time when there was growing pressure at home to pull out, it was a gutsy political call and in the result, overwhelmingly successful.

President Bush was a somewhat lonely believer in the surge. Many of his generals did not want it, and plenty of his senior officials were lukewarm. Many in Washington advocated cutting America's losses and, in the case of the current Vice President, partitioning the country. Coupled with the "Sunni awakening" in Al Anbar province and the intelligence-led special forces operations against terror networks it turned the tide against al Qaeda in Iraq, and gave hope that a relatively stable and peaceful nation was in prospect. I met the deeply impressive Petraeus in Baghdad in 2007. I hope that a man of such obvious ability returns to senior public life in the United States.

Iraq today is not a full democracy as we understand it - only Israel in the Middle East can lay claim to that description. Yet its citizens have on five occasions since 2003 voted either to elect people to govern them, or approve the rules under which they are to be governed, despite the violent intimidation they have faced in doing so. That says something for the thirst for freedom they have, and their willingness to participate in a democratic electoral process.

There are still major gaps in Iraqi infrastructure, with basic services still falling short. Yet the Iraqi economy enjoyed 10% growth in 2012; oil exports in 2012 hit a 30-year high at 2.6 million barrels a day. Per capita GDP is now markedly higher than it was before Saddam was removed.

To what extent has democracy really taken root in Iraq, and to what degree, if at all, have events in Iraq had an impact on the rest of the Middle East? I hope I won't be accused of invoking the Chou en Lai defence, when I say that more time should be allowed to pass before attempting to fully answer those questions. When asked what he thought had been the impact of the French Revolution on world history, the Chinese Communist leader had replied that it was too early to tell!

Unlike most of its region, Iraq's polity has not been roiled by the Arab Spring. That must surely have something to do with the democratic framework which has been established there in recent years. Shortly after the Coalition operation in Iraq, Gaddafi renounced his WMDs, and sought readmission to the international community. He and his regime are now

gone. Also it is hard not to agree with Nadim Shehadi of Chatham House when she said "The idea that the Arab Spring was triggered by a self immolating street trader in an obscure Tunisian town is just not credible."[17] The ferment in the Middle East now is such that it is difficult to predict what the outcomes will be in five or ten years time, and what influence, if any, events affecting Iraq have exerted.

In this context it is worth speculating that if Saddam had not been toppled in 2003 he, very likely, would still be in power. In response to a manifestation of the Arab Spring in Iraq his suppression of any uprising would have been just as brutal as that of Assad in Syria.

The reality is that the Middle East remains an incredibly complex place, where linkages and causal connection between events are very hard for even the most learned analysts to unravel. To my mind, however, it is implausible that the events we now know as the Arab Spring bear no relationship of any kind to the overthrow of Saddam's regime in 2003.

Although the legal justification for the action taken against Iraq was based on her cumulative non-compliance with UN Security Council resolutions, and a properly grounded belief that Saddam possessed WMDs, a powerful element in our decision to join the Americans was, of course, the depth and character of our relationship with the US. Australia had invoked ANZUS in the days following 9/11. We had readily joined the Coalition in Afghanistan; Australia had suffered the brutality of Islamic terrorism in Bali. There was a sense then that a common way of life was under threat.

At that time, and in those circumstances, and given our shared history and values, I judged that, ultimately, it was in our national interest to stand beside the Americans.

[17] Shehadi. Nadim, "Iraq: One day the world will thank Bush for shaking up the Arab region" February 2013, http://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/twt/archive/view/189203.

There were many who argued that we should stay out; we should say “no” to the Americans for a change; that the true measure of a good friend was a willingness to disagree when the circumstances called for it, and that in the case of Iraq we would hurt our country by backing the United States, and that in the long run declining to participate in the Coalition of the willing would be good for the alliance. That argument escaped me then, and it still does. In my view the circumstances we recall tonight necessitated a 100 per cent ally, not a 70 or 80 per cent one, particularly as no compelling national interest beckoned us in the opposite direction.

For those who believe that destiny has condemned Australia to a fateful choice between the United States and China – not a belief that I share – it is worth noting that in the years that followed the Iraqi operation Australia’s relationship with China burgeoned, apparently unhindered by concerns in Beijing that we were too close to the United States. I have long held the view that the Chinese get our alliance with America. They understand its historical, political and cultural provenance.

If anything, our actions in Iraq reinforced the reputation of Australia as a nation that stands by its friends, even in difficult circumstances. The recent strengthening of our strategic relationship with Japan, for example, is in part a result of the close cooperation between the ADF and the Japanese Self Defence Force in southern Iraq.

I acknowledge that my government’s decision on Iraq polarised attitudes in Australia. It is unlikely that the passage of time has softened attitudes towards that decision. It remains my conviction, however, that it was right because it was in Australia’s national interests, and the removal of Saddam’s regime provided the Iraqi people with opportunities for freedom not otherwise in prospect.