

As the likelihood of war in Iraq has grown the arguments for and against have adopted an increasingly moralistic tone. On the one hand we are told of the moral imperative to avoid war so long as the inspectors are making progress. On the other, it is suggested that we have a moral responsibility to oust Saddam on behalf of the people of Iraq.

No contemplation of war can escape the test of morality, but any analysis must begin with a cold-hearted consideration of our national interests. Morality is a filter, not a framework, for deciding to wage war.

So what are our national interest in Iraq?

We have a clear stake in stemming the spread of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). Not because they are inherently wicked or immoral (remember we have our own cozy spot beneath the US nuclear umbrella) but because it is not in our interest to have still more countries able to threaten mass slaughter on others. It is especially not in our interest to have such weapons in the hands of regimes like Hussain's with a track record of aggression, support to terrorists, and the potential to disrupt the world's oil supply. Yes, oil. Like it or not, the world relies on oil from the Middle East and it is in our national interest to ensure its continued flow.

So how do we deal with Iraq proliferation? Two strategies have emerged. Either armed force is used to oust Saddam and remove his weapons or else we continue to use inspections and coercive sanctions to contain him.

The risks and benefits of each have been argued at length elsewhere. War has the advantage of providing a clearer and quicker end to the problem, but it risks provoking a WMD response from Saddam, destabilising amenable Arab regimes and increasing both anti-western sentiment and the terrorist threat. And war is such an unpredictable beast that no one can be sure of the price to be paid by combatants and innocents alike. In comparison, containment avoids the dire risks and uncertainties of the war option but it introduces a new risk - it simply might not work.

For what its worth, I judge that war is outright dangerous whereas a regime of intrusive inspections backed up with the threat of force is workable with only a small and acceptable risk of failure. There's just one problem, containment isn't an option on offer.

There is no way the US will be convinced that containment is a viable strategy. After September 11 they are in the business of eliminating threats not managing them. And without US commitment the strategy of containment is a non-starter. Short of a coup in Iraq, the US will move sooner rather than later, irrespective of the views of France, Germany and Russia.

Ultimately, we have the choice of either joining the US in pursuit of our common national interests in Iraq, or we can tacitly support the sniping Europeans on the sidelines. Not a hard choice once the critical importance of our strategic alliance with the US is factored in. Thus we should go with the US despite the reservations we might have about their risky plan. As is often the case for a small country like Australia, we get to play a part but we don't get to write the script.

What about the UN? Should our involvement be contingent on the Security Council? A second resolution would be nice, but the die has been cast and the answer must be no. We could have played possum and declined involvement months ago, but to desert the US at the twelfth hour after pre-deploying troops is simply not an option – not if we want the alliance to survive intact. Anyway, the UN Security Council is already a casualty of the war. If they agree a strong second resolution they will be seen as buckling under US pressure, if they don't agree then they will be simply overtaken by events.

So what of the filter of morality? For my part, and I can only speak to my own moral precepts, I see no impediment to ousting Saddam by force provided that proportionate force and proper regard for civilian casualties is observed throughout, and that the interests and rights of the Iraqi people are guaranteed afterwards.

Those using moral arguments to either support or decry war would do well to focus on these issues. Moral arguments will not alter whether there is war in Iraq or not, nor do they help in deciding on our involvement. But they can and should influence the conduct of the war and that of the peace that follows.