



U.S.-Australia: Still Mates! By Ralph A. Cossa

“Australia’s Path Bends Away from the U.S.” Thus read the headlines of an international “news analysis” commenting on the Labor Party’s recent victory down under and new Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s decision to attend the UN Climate Change Conference in Bali and to ratify the Kyoto Protocol. Some pundits went even further, citing Rudd’s fluency in Mandarin as foreshadowing an ominous tilt toward China. This is absolute nonsense!

Last time I checked, Kevin Rudd also speaks English. For those taking the time to listen, he has repeatedly and enthusiastically declared his “passionate” and “rock solid” support for the Australia-U.S. alliance. It may be true that his Kyoto decision will, as The New York Times asserts, “further isolate the United States, leaving it as the only industrialized country not to have done so.” But all of America’s other allies had long since hopped aboard that train (which is being driven, incidentally, by Washington’s closest Asian ally, Japan), so the impact is hardly earth-shattering.

More significantly, Rudd is in lock step with Washington (and with his vanquished opponent, former Prime Minister John Howard) in saying that there can be no Kyoto II without involving China and India. Hearing this from a Mandarin-speaking Prime Minister is not likely to make the message any more palatable to Beijing, but should help reinforce the reality that China can no longer expect a free pass as it continues to rival the United States as the world’s largest polluter.

Keep in mind that it was China’s (and India’s) exclusion that made the original treaty so unacceptable to the United States in the first place: shortly after then-Vice President Al Gore signed up to Kyoto, the U.S. Senate, by a bipartisan vote of 95-0, expressed its view that not including China and India made the agreement totally unacceptable. A President Gore would not have summarily dismissed the Kyoto agreement like President Bush did in 2001, but the end result – no U.S. ratification – would likely have been (and will continue to be) the same, absent participation by Beijing and New Delhi.

Much has also been made of Rudd’s campaign pledge to bring Australia’s combat troops home from Iraq. Largely overlooked was his bold commitment (contrary to the views of many in his own party) to not only keep combat forces in Afghanistan, but also to continue (and perhaps even increase) Canberra’s non-combat support to Iraq. At least a thousand Australian support troops are likely to remain in Iraq after the mid-2008 combat force withdrawal, still making it one of the largest foreign commitments, and others may very well be sent to Jordan or Oman to help train Iraqi soldiers there. Who among America’s other allies can boast of this level of support?

In other matters foreign and domestic, it is true that Kevin Rudd is unlikely to always say “yes” to Washington. Neither did John Howard, his “deputy sheriff” reputation notwithstanding. But, as one official told me, “we’re mates! We’ve been mates for a long time and we will continue to be mates for a long time to come; that’s not about to change.”

Nowhere was this more evident than at a recent Kokoda Foundation conference of current and former senior officials and terrorism experts that straddled the change in government in Canberra. The joint commitment to continue “the long struggle against radical extremism” that permeated the conference underscored the long-lasting nature of the alliance and the ability of allies to speak to one another frankly and directly with one eye always on the common goal.

The Aussies have long understood the downsides to calling this effort the “global war against terrorism,” a label that Washington is finally trying to abandon. After all, one does not declare war against a method, but against those who are employing it. More importantly, calling it a “war” draws emphasis away from the many non-military approaches necessary to prevail over the long term.

I would not pretend to speak for others at the conference, since I am neither a government official nor a terrorism expert. My own contribution was in looking at how the “long struggle” was playing in Asia and how we could better win the “hearts and minds” contest.

My message to the Bush administration, echoing what I hear in my travels throughout Asia and which seemed to resonate (or at least was not outright dismissed) at the meeting is this: “9/11; get over it!” Yes, the events of September 11, 2001 were horrific. But the U.S. was neither the first nor the last to suffer at the hands of extremists; many have suffered as much or more and still recognize that dealing with such forces is not the only (or one could argue even the greatest) challenge to our national survival or national interests.

All too often, U.S. foreign policy increasingly sounds to the rest of the world like presidential candidate Joe Biden’s characterization of rival Rudy Guiliani: “a noun, a verb, and 9/11.” Viewing the world through the lens of 9/11 makes it hard to focus on some of the real challenges that predate that event and remain with us today: the rise of China; North Korea’s nuclear ambitions; the prospect of the re-bipolarization of the world as relations between the West and the Kremlin steadily deteriorate; the challenges posed by proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, which do not end with keeping them out of the hands of terrorists (as critically important as that might be); rising nationalism, which complicates relations between the U.S. and many of its long-standing friends and allies (and makes dealing with the

China-Taiwan confrontation all the more difficult); and the list goes on.

Aussies understand that peace and stability in Southeast Asia in general and Indonesia in particular are essential, not only or even primarily because the region represents a “second front in the war on terrorism,” but because of its economic vibrancy and political diversity. Rudd is expected to concentrate more on this region, so should the Bush (and his successor) administration.

The Howard government opened the door by signing the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, which further isolated Washington as the only major regional power not to have done so. Rudd plans to further deepen Australia’s involvement in this region. Washington needs to follow suit. It also needs to place more attention on good governance (rather than the blind promotion of democracy as an end in itself) as the most important factor in winning future hearts and minds, while addressing the root causes that make so many third world countries fertile ground for radicalism.

The one thing that the current and future U.S. administrations will not have to ponder is where to look for good advice or good examples, or for a friend in need. When the going gets tough, there will likely be an Aussie standing by our side (and vice-versa). After all, we’re still mates!

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