



## **Kevin Rudd and Asia's Security** by Robert Ayson

Kevin Rudd has been swept into power after a 6 percent swing by voters to the Australian Labor Party, which has changed the political landscape in Canberra. As with most elections in most democracies, domestic issues dominated the contest. This time the Howard government's unpopular industrial relations policies became the focus of discontent and a central argument for political change.

But Rudd assumes the prime minister's office having cut many of his political teeth on foreign policy issues. And foreign policy looms fairly large in the way he will differentiate his government from its predecessor. A policy of enhanced Asian engagement will be part of that differentiation. But Rudd knows that it will not be easy to promote Australia's interests in stable great power relations in Asia in a time when the indices of regional power are fundamentally changing.

The Sydney APEC Summit in September revealed much about the prism through which Rudd will view Asia's security. Not so important here is the well publicized fact that he addressed China's Hu Jintao in Mandarin. The more significant point is that in the English portion of his address to China's president, Rudd spoke of the United States as Australia's "great friend and ally" and China as Australia's "great friend and partner." Getting Australia in the right position to cope with the evolving, and often competitive, relationship between the U.S. and China is Rudd's primary foreign policy objective. Everything else is secondary.

Well known for his political and linguistic fluency for things Chinese, Rudd has needed to demonstrate his U.S. alliance credentials. On election night he devoted his first words on foreign policy to the argument that the U.S. alliance will be central to his government's foreign policy. This is doubly important because two of his government's first acts in international politics will distance Australia from the Bush administration. One is the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol, leaving the U.S. isolated as the only industrialized country not to have done so. The second is a negotiated withdrawal of Australia's combat forces from Iraq.

These initiatives will be welcomed in those parts of Asia for which the Howard government's approach to international security issues became too similar to Washington's. But along with much of Asia, Rudd believes that a strong U.S. presence in the region is crucial to a stable regional balance between the great powers. That means a policy of U.S. strategic engagement in Asia is central to Australia's own approach to the region. But it also needs to occur in a way that does not require Canberra to concur with Washington on all issues.

Until its last 12 months in office, the Howard government had succeeded in maintaining brand differentiation from the

U.S. by taking a more optimistic view of China's rise. But this distinction became muddied as the Australian election approached. In March the Howard government made such a fuss of its new security declaration with Japan that Australia risked becoming too closely identified with one side of the major power divide in North Asia. Soon afterward, a new Australian defense policy update gave comfort to China-skeptics in the Pentagon and in Tokyo with its warning that the Middle Kingdom's military modernization could destabilize the region. Rudd will not back out of the security declaration with Japan or the trilateral strategic dialogue which links the two countries with the United States. But Canberra will display an even greater resistance to any ideas of a wider Asian alliance system which could be seen as an attempt to contain China.

This philosophy extends to the new Australian government's approach to relations with India, singled out by Rudd as Asia's second rising power. If the Howard government was lukewarm on the idea of an Asian democratic quad involving Japan, the U.S., India, and Australia, the Australian Labor Party leadership will be positively against the notion of dividing the region strategically on the basis of different political systems. This will not necessarily be a problem in Australia-India relations given New Delhi's ambivalence toward the quad concept. But if he wishes to court the great power of the subcontinent that is having a greater say in East Asian affairs, Rudd may need to reconsider his opposition to Australian uranium sales to India that the Howard government was willing to contemplate.

Rudd also has at least one eye on Australia's immediate neighborhood. His upcoming visit to Bali to join climate change discussions is an ideal opportunity to sell his new policy of Asian engagement in a strategically important country that occupies a neutral position in the U.S.-China and China-Japan great power relationships. Rudd has indicated that his new government will be keen to deepen Australia's relationship with Indonesia beyond the friendly atmospherics which Howard enjoyed with President Yudhoyono. Yet deeper ties might be said to already exist courtesy of the police-led recovery in Australian-Indonesian relations after the Bali bombing. And no Australian prime minister can insulate this particular bilateral relationship against the problems that appear with very little notice.

Rudd also faces a challenge in delivering on his promise of a more engaged Australia in the South Pacific, given the extent of aid and intervention that came in the later Howard years. Even so, the state of Canberra's diplomatic relations with Papua New Guinea could hardly be worse, so there is still plenty of room for improvement. The South Pacific is also a region even a Rudd-led Australia may find itself at odds with at least one of the big North Asian powers – in the medium term with Beijing if China's quest for regional influence in the

Pacific Islands comes on too strong and in the immediate term with Tokyo if Japan's whaling vessels engage in illegal activities in the southern ocean.

The countries of Asia will find that the Rudd government, and especially its leader, is committed to regional engagement and to positioning Australia wisely in the emerging great power picture. Support for multilateral institutions (including the United Nations) will enjoy greater prominence in the Rudd foreign policy. But Australia's 26<sup>th</sup> prime minister will be under no illusion that old-fashioned relations of power between states are being sidelined in the region or that Asia is destined for increasing peace as well as prosperity. The region's realists, and there are many of them, will find that Kevin Rudd is someone who can understand and speak their language. They will find, in short, that Rudd is fluent in much more than Mandarin.

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