



The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus

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Power Shift? Australia and the Asia Pacific

The Asahi Shinbun, Ramesh Thakur & Richard Tanter

The election of Kevin Rudd as Australian Prime Minister in a Labor Party sweep has led many to anticipate a major shift in Australia's international relations and environmental policies, and possible realignments in Asia. We offer four brief assessments of the significance of the election for the region at a time when long-entrenched governments in England, Poland, and many parts of Latin America point to possible sea changes in international affairs.

Asahi Shinbun Editorial: Power shift in Australia

Australia's opposition Labor Party swept to victory in Saturday's federal election by defeating the ruling Liberal-National party coalition, ending 11 years of conservative rule. Labor leader Kevin Rudd, a 50-year-old former diplomat, will be the country's new prime minister.



Kevin Rudd

He replaces John Howard, who has been in power since 1996. Howard will retire from politics, having failed to hang on to his own parliamentary seat in the vote.

Global warming and the Iraq war were the two main campaign issues. The Howard administration has been less than keen to tackle global warming. The Australian government signed the 1997 Kyoto Protocol on climate change, but refused to ratify the treaty to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Howard was thus a strong ally of the U.S. administration of President George W. Bush, which has withdrawn from the Kyoto treaty. Yet Australia has been struck by severe drought for two years in a row. The dry spells have hit harvests of wheat, rice and other grains hard. Many Australian households remain affected by water-use restrictions.

In the campaign, Rudd's Labor Party criticized the Howard administration for its inaction on climate change and vowed to ratify the Kyoto Protocol. A growing number of industrial countries have been stepping up efforts to tackle environmental problems, and Australian voters, too, are now increasingly aware of its importance. That led to greater support for the party from voters.

Rudd plans to start work to ratify the Kyoto Protocol early next year. We welcome the return of Australia, an influential country in the Asia-Pacific region, to the Kyoto camp.

The move is certain to help propel international efforts to develop a new post-Kyoto framework to curb climate change.

Meanwhile, Rudd called the Iraq war a "mistake." He called for a gradual withdrawal of the 1,500 Australian troops from Iraq.

As one of his first steps after taking the reins, he intends to hold talks with the United States over his plan to pull his country's 550 combat troops from Iraq.

Australia's about-face on Iraq comes after a similar development in Poland, where the opposition camp unseated the conservative ruling party in October.

Poland's new leader, Prime Minister Donald Tusk, has promised to withdraw all his country's 900 troops from Iraq. These defeats of Bush allies have accelerated the weakening of "the Coalition of the Willing," as Bush called his allies.

Although Rudd berated the Howard administration for subserviently following the United States, Rudd has nevertheless pledged that maintaining Australia's close ties with the United States will be central to his government's foreign policy.

Rudd is likely to place greater emphasis on Australia's relations with Asian countries, and depart from his predecessor's excessive focus on its alliance with the United States.

On the campaign trail, Rudd didn't talk about radical changes in the nation's economic policy. His moderate political posture apparently eased voter anxiety about a change of power, winning him support across a broad range of constituencies.

Rudd's foreign policy views may resonate with Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda, who has proposed a diplomatic "synergy" with the United States and the rest of Asia. Both key allies of the United States, Japan and Australia, share a common interest in the region's stability and prosperity.

There are many challenges that can be effectively tackled through mutual cooperation.

One is to promote the idea of an East Asian community, an issue that Japan and Australia should work closely together on.

It is heartening to see a new Australian government that shows strong commitment to protecting the Earth. This will be the central issue on the agenda at the next

Group of Eight summit in 2008, which will be held at the Lake Toyako resort in Hokkaido.

Japan should try to deepen and expand its cooperation with Australia as a partner in its diplomatic efforts to get countries like the United States, China and India to become more seriously involved in the fight against global warming.

This editorial appeared in the Asahi Shimbun on Nov. 27, 2007 and in the (IHT/Asahi: November 28, 2007).

The Significance of the Australian Labor Rudd-slide

Ramesh Thakur

WATERLOO, Ontario ~ Poor John Howard. Reckless on climate change, clueless in Iraq, fickle on civil liberties, mean to migrants and minorities, ruthless toward the workers ~ and now jobless. He also was set to lose the Parliament seat he has represented since 1974, the first sitting prime minister to do so since 1929.

His political epitaph may well read, "Nothing so unbecame him as the manner of his going" (Shakespeare's "Macbeth"). Similarly, Howard should have exited last year. He would have gone out with political aura as well as dignity intact, remembered fondly by the faithful and gratefully by his party, and basked in well earned rest. Instead he fell victim to hubris.

The Liberal-National coalition had stayed in power owing to luck (such as Howard being in Washington on Sept. 11, 2001, when the terrorists struck in New York and Washington); sound economic management that delivered high growth, high employment and low inflation; and unbelievably weak and inept opposition. Through this, voters preferred to ignore and downplay accumulating evidence of dishonorable dealings.

Astonishingly, when Labor chose Rudd as its new leader early this year, Howard raised issues of trust, integrity and honesty in political leaders as a campaign issue in election year. He scored three own goals.

First, Howard brought the most vulnerable part of the coalition's record ~ truth, honesty and integrity in government ~ front and center in election year. Second, he energized the Labor base that had been hemorrhaging under previous leaders Kim Beazley, Simon Crean, Mark Latham and then Beazley again. Third, he communicated to the broad public, as nothing else could have, that the government was in panic mode. Instead of Rudd being burned in the glare of the blowtorch shone relentlessly on him, the government members have been swept off the treasury benches by blowback.

Rudd was prompt in acknowledging transgressions, apologizing for the lapses in judgment and promising to do better in future. This contrasted powerfully with the serial "can't" recalls, know nothings, wasn't tolds and didn't reads that Howard's ministers threw endlessly at the public. Opinion polls were consistently devastating: Most Australians considered Howard too old, deceitful, desperate and devious. Rudd is 50, Howard 68.

Rudd adopted a two-pronged strategy. First, he shrank Labor as a target by copying many of the coalition policies that in previous elections had driven a wedge through traditional Labor voters: firm reaffirmation of the alliance with the U.S., strong opposition to terrorism and terrorists, no wholesale return to the previous Labor government policies from the Bob Hawke and Paul Keating eras. He thus offered the reassurance of a low-risk change from the past to the future.

Second, he staked out a different future on some big picture issues like climate change, Iraq, industrial relations, health and education. He thus underlined Howard's image as yesterday's leader who had done well but overstayed his welcome.

The coalition stumbled more frequently and consequentially than Labor during the campaign. Nothing illustrates this better than the final two days. The husbands of a retiring and an aspiring coalition candidate were caught distributing leaflets claiming to be from a (fictitious) Islamic group urging people to vote for Labor because of its support for Muslim terrorists. The issue dominated media comment in the last two days, and reinforced impressions of desperation, deviousness and racism by the government. Rudd undercut Howard brilliantly by promising to spend less, branding Howard as reckless in his bid to bribe voters, while reinforcing his own image as a responsible fiscal conservative.

The campaign provides clues also to likely changes and continuity under Rudd. Howard's legacy includes a remarkably prosperous, dynamic and self-confident land of opportunity. But he went too far domestically in industrial wars against workers, culture wars against immigrants and history wars against the aborigines. In foreign policy, he swung the pendulum too far away from Asia to the point of being suffocated by the American embrace.

Rudd will likely begin preparations to bring combat troops home from Iraq but not Afghanistan, and to re-engage Asia (he is a competent speaker of Mandarin himself) without spurning America. The most dramatic early action will be ratification of the Kyoto Protocol and active engagement with the U.N. climate change conference in Bali next month.

In a sense this was the world's first climate change election. A better balance will be restored in domestic politics between civil liberty, state security, the rule of law and governmental accountability. Cultural diversity is likely to be celebrated once again.

Control of both houses of Parliament bred arrogance and hubris in Howard, leading to serially flawed judgments on policy and leadership. Rudd will need to avoid falling into the same trap with Labor governments in every state and territory as well as in Canberra.

Out of power everywhere across the land, the coalition will find renewal and regeneration a tough challenge. Yet contrarians within the party and effective opposition from outside the party are necessary for responsive and accountable government.

Ramesh Thakur, now a professor of political science at the University of Waterloo in Canada, is an Australian citizen and a former professor at the Australian National University.

This article appeared in The Japan Times on November 28, 2007.

The Rudd Election and Australian Global Policy

Richard Tanter

On the question of security policy, this is what I think will happen in the next half year:

1. Iraq: Rudd is committed to removing Australian troops from Iraq, and that is a popular position. In practice I think this will mean
 - a. Removing the Operation Overwatch Battle Group from Dhi Qar.

b. Retaining the ADF training group, mainly at Ali Base. For reasons I'll explain below it may even be boosted.

c. Retaining the RAN naval and RAAF air deployments in the Persian Gulf

d. It is not clear what will happen to the Australian components in the MNC command centres in Baghdad and Basra. My guess would be the latter will go, but the some elements former will stay. However, most of the Australian National Headquarters Middle East Area of Operations in Baghdad will transfer to Afghanistan (see below).

2. Rudd is very much persuaded of the "bad war, Iraq; good war, Afghanistan" position. Australia now has 1,000 troops in Afghanistan. [see Australia in Afghanistan, Nautilus Institute. There will be a redeployment of combat and support forces from one theatre to the other. Australian Afghanistan operations are now taking more casualties, though still nothing like US or Canadian levels. But they have increased sharply recently and this trend will continue. In April this year the Australian Special Operations Task group (SAS and other Army special forces) was somewhat hurriedly deployed back to Uruzgan less than 8 months after they were pulled out. Pulling out of Iraq would allow them and the protective group of the Reconstruction task Force at Tarin Kowt to be rotated more easily. (remember the ADF also has a big deployment [for its small size] in East Timor.)

Maybe some specialists will be left in the Camp Victory MNC HQ, but the longstanding concern inside the ADF about running the Afghanistan operation from Baghdad through the Australian National Headquarters - Middle East Area of Operations will result in shifting most ADF HQ functions and personnel to the National command Element in Kabul. There is a huge strain inside the ADF at the moment because of deployments in eight overseas operations, including three big ones - Iraq, Afghanistan, and East Timor

3. Iran: Rudd announced during the election campaign that a Labor government would initiate legal proceedings against Ahmadinejad on a charge of incitement to genocide. There has been no further development on that since then. Should the US attack Iran, Rudd would support the attack diplomatically with enthusiasm. It is unlikely the rest of his cabinet would be so willing, but Rudd will not be leading a Westminster-style government of Cabinet responsibility. He will certainly direct foreign policy. Rudd would be receptive to a US request for Australian military support, but would probably face resistance from ADF senior commanders on pragmatic grounds of over-stretch.

4. Rudd is best understood as Tony Blair, with many of the same skills, dispositions and weaknesses. All Labor prime ministers have supported the Aust-US [A(NZ)US] alliance - that's de rigueur in Australian politics. But Rudd is probably the most vocal supporter of the US alliance amongst postwar Labor prime ministers, and somewhat shocked many ALP supporters by declaring his loyalty to that alliance in his victory speech on Saturday night. This means he will be working closely with Bush to minimize the impact of the Iraq withdrawal commitment. Hence my thinking that it will be limited to combat troops and they in turn will be used to bolster the increasingly beleaguered, but unscrutinised, Afghanistan deployment. As mentioned he may also boost the training deployment in Iraq as another way of mollifying Bush.

Of course, the big positive gain from the Rudd victory is over climate change: here in Australia we are so desperate that even ratifying the Kyoto Protocol ten years too late (and recall that the deal Australia got at Kyoto was outrageously advantageous to it) will be great symbolically. Hopefully, something more substantive will come out of Bali, or if not Bali (because it's going to be hard) then in the ensuing protracted negotiations.

This appeared note appeared at Informed Comment on November 26, 2007.

Richard Tanter is Director, Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainability at RMIT and a Japan Focus Associate.

Kevin Rudd and Asia's Security

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 muddled 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 26th 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.

This comment appeared at PacNet Newsletter. Robert Ayson (robert.ayson@anu.edu.au) is Director at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at Australian National University.

These articles were posted at Japan Focus on November 29, 2007.

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