

Australian foreign minister falls off the diplomatic tightrope in Asia

Peter Symonds
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Last week's visit by Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer to North East Asia provided a revealing glimpse into the strategic dilemmas confronting the Australian ruling elite.

The Howard government has unconditionally backed the Bush administration's militarist policies, dispatching troops to Afghanistan and Iraq in order to secure US backing for a more aggressive pursuit of Australian interests in the Asia Pacific region. This stance has provoked sharp criticism in ruling circles, reflecting concerns over the unfolding disaster in Iraq and fears that unalloyed support for Washington will undermine Australia's highly profitable economic relations with Asia—particularly with China.

The centrepiece of Downer's agenda was his trip to North Korea for talks over its nuclear program. His job, undertaken largely on behalf of Washington, was to convince the country's leaders to participate in the next round of six-nation negotiations in Beijing. Since taking office in 2001, the Bush administration has adopted a menacing stand towards Pyongyang, branding it in 2002 as part of an "axis of evil" along with Iraq and Iran and insisting that it dismantle its nuclear facilities or face the consequences. While Washington has now begun negotiations, it has made clear that any agreement will be on its terms, provoking angry responses from Pyongyang.

Australia is not a party to the six-nation talks, but, unlike the US, does have diplomatic relations with North Korea. As a loyal US ally, the Howard government was entrusted with ensuring North Korea's attendance, which would effectively defuse the issue prior to the US presidential elections. Both US Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice spoke to Downer prior to his departure. According to an Australian official, the foreign minister was not going "with a letter from anyone" but did have "the blessing of the US and other members of the six-party group".

Prior to leaving, Downer dutifully struck a belligerent note in a radio interview, warning his audience that North Korea had the capacity to launch a missile strike on Sydney. The claim, which was ridiculed by commentators as absurd, echoed Washington's previous grossly exaggerated allegations that North Korean missiles had the ability to strike US territory. North Korea has never tested such a missile. According to Aldo

Borgu from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute: "Unless the government knows something we don't, they won't have them for another 5 to 15 years."

As it turned out, however, it was Downer's stopover in China, rather than North Korea, that sorely tested his diplomatic skills. The Beijing bureaucracy has bent over backwards to accommodate to Washington on North Korea, using economic blackmail to pressure Pyongyang to take part in multilateral talks. But on the other flashpoint in North East Asia—the status of Taiwan—sharp differences exist between the US and China. Beijing, which regards the island as a renegade province, has repeatedly warned it will use military force to prevent Taiwan from declaring independence. Washington, while formally recognising "One China" based on the Beijing regime, is committed by Congressional legislation to defending Taiwan from Chinese attack.

As Downer is well aware, Australian diplomats have always walked a very fine line in Beijing. Australia's economic links with China are large and growing, and Australian business is keen to exploit the connection to the maximum. As a result, Australian ministers are seeking to open up economic opportunities in China without making political concessions that would in any way offend the US. The official line is that Canberra should encourage the US and China to minimise any conflict. But while this may suit Australian interests, powerful sections of the US ruling class regard China, as Bush put it in the 2000 elections, as a "strategic competitor"—that is, an obstacle to US global hegemony.

Initially, all appeared to be going well for Downer in Beijing. Chinese officials indicated that North Korea would, in fact, be attending the next round of talks and a free trade deal between China and Australia was further discussed. After a meeting with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, Downer boasted to the media that a new "strategic relationship" with China was mooted. "We are seeing the evolution of a much fuller, stronger relationship," Downer said, in which Australia would no longer regard China as just "a fantastic market," while China would think of Australia as more than just part of its supply chain.

Downer was then asked the obvious question: Was Australia committed under the ANZUS defence treaty to side with the US in the event of a war with China over Taiwan? Desperate

not to offend Beijing in front of his hosts, Downer declared that the ANZUS pact was only “symbolic” of the US-Australian alliance. “The ANZUS treaty is invoked in the event of one of our two countries, Australia or the United States, being attacked, so some other military activity elsewhere in the world, be it in Iraq or anywhere else for that matter, doesn’t automatically invoke the ANZUS treaty,” he declared.

These comments set off a small political storm in Australia. By putting a question mark over the ANZUS treaty, Downer had raised the possibility of a rift with Washington. Paul Dibb, defence analyst at the Australian National University, declared that Downer’s remarks “threatened the very fabric of Australia’s alliance with the US.” Greg Sheridan, foreign editor for Rupert Murdoch’s *Australian*, berated the foreign minister, warning: “Alexander Downer, in Beijing, has made a foolish, counterproductive intervention on Taiwan that marginally raises the risk of war across the Taiwan Straits.”

A spokesman for the US State Department pointed out last Thursday that Australia had “pretty clear” obligations under the ANZUS treaty to support the US—a message that was reinforced by Tom Schieffer, the US ambassador to Australia. Other commentators pointed out that the ANZUS treaty did actually oblige Australia to consult with the US, not only in the event of an attack on each nation’s territory, but also on military forces in the Pacific.

Within an election looming and having been under fire from the Howard government for undermining the US alliance, the Labor opposition immediately seized on Downer’s comments. Shadow foreign minister Kevin Rudd ridiculed the remarks as inept— “a rolled gold diplomatic blunder”, pointing out that Downer could have dismissed the question of a US-China war as hypothetical.

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Howard quickly stepped in to stem the damage by unequivocally confirming his government’s support for the US alliance. “Look, America has no more reliable ally than Australia, and I’m not ashamed to say that because in the long run it’s only America that could be our ultimate security guarantee. But we have interests in Asia... we have a strong relationship with China and it is not in Australia’s interests for there to be conflict between America and China.” Downer rapidly backtracked declaring his comments had been misinterpreted and that the question of conflict between China and the US was “an entirely hypothetical proposition.”

This was the last thing the Howard government wanted. It had viewed Downer’s trip as an important opportunity to upstage the Labor opposition by parading on the world stage as a trusted US confidante, and, at the same time, a major player in North East Asia. Instead Downer managed to call the US alliance—the lynchpin of Howard’s foreign policy—into question and failed in his mission to North Korea. Not only did Pyongyang refuse to commit itself to six-nation talks, but it also

unleashed a diplomatic barrage on Monday against Bush as “an imbecile” and “a tyrant” for pursuing a hostile policy to North Korea.

Downer’s comments in Beijing were, however, not simply a diplomatic blunder. Rather, they exposed the basic dilemma confronting the Australian bourgeoisie. While Australian capitalism has been completely dependent on the US alliance since World War II for its strategic defence, it has developed major economic partnerships in recent decades on which it is becoming increasingly dependent.

China is now Australia’s third largest trading partner and second largest export market. In the eight years since the Howard government took office, two-way trade has trebled to \$21 billion. Australia is a major supplier of iron ore, wool and crude petroleum to China, and more than 57,000 students from China are enrolled in Australian educational institutions. There is also a growing number of Chinese tourists.

In 2002, Beijing signed an agreement with Australia worth at least \$25 billion to supply liquefied natural gas to China. In the wake of Downer’s visit, a similar gas deal, worth another \$25 billion, was mooted. With a free trade agreement being discussed, economic relations could expand even further. It is little wonder that with these heady economic prospects in mind, Downer bent with the prevailing winds in Beijing.

No doubt, a more astute diplomat would have dismissed the question on Taiwan as “hypothetical”, and pretended that the possibility of clash between the US and China did not exist. But the fundamental objective problem nevertheless remains, that any conflict between Washington and Beijing will immediately pose Canberra with a choice which it has been desperately hoping it will never have to make.



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