

Canberra's slavish support for US brings short-term pay-offs in Asia

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Two high-profile visits to Canberra last week—by Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi—were the occasion for a certain smug self-satisfaction on the part of the Australian government. The fact that the two men were in Australia at all was regarded as a triumph. The importance was underscored by Prime Minister John Howard's decision to remain in Australia to meet the two leaders, rather than flying to Rome to join other world dignitaries at the funeral of Pope John Paul II.

Yudhoyono's visit was only the third in 30 years by an Indonesian head of state. His immediate predecessor Megawati Sukarnoputri persistently gave Howard the diplomatic cold shoulder—a measure of the continuing hostility and suspicion in Indonesian ruling circles over the Australian-led military intervention into East Timor in 1999. Clearly ecstatic over the reestablishment of close ties with Jakarta, Howard declared the two countries to be “forever together” and Yudhoyono to be “a true friend”.

In the course of his visit, Yudhoyono signed a broad agreement with Howard, paving the way for future cooperation in a range of areas, including negotiations over a security pact between the two countries. The Indonesian president promised to act as a bridge to Asia for Australia. In particular, he pledged to support efforts by the Howard government to attend an inaugural East Asian summit—the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) plus Japan, China and South Korea—later this year.

Abdullah's trip was the first for a Malaysian prime minister in more than 20 years. Relations between the two countries have been frosty for more than a decade. In his diatribes against the West, former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad frequently seized on Canberra's immigration policies and treatment of Aborigines as “proof” of inherent racism. As well as shoring up political support at home, Mahathir's demagoguery was aimed at justifying his proposal for an Asian trade bloc, excluding Australia and other “non-Asian” countries.

There were echoes of Mahathir in an ABC interview with Abdullah immediately prior to his visit. He described Howard's comments following the Iraq invasion of Australia's “right” to take preemptive action in the region against terrorist threats as “a little bit upsetting”. “We are inclined to believe that Australia is not really centring on Asia or on East Asia, but has more concern with reflecting the views as expressed by the United States,” he added. Compared to Mahathir, however, the tone was muted.

Abdullah refrained from repeating the criticisms, but the tensions were nevertheless not far below the surface. While the two prime ministers agreed to commence negotiations toward a free trade pact

between their countries, Abdullah remained noncommittal about the prospects of Howard being invited to the East Asian summit.

In an editorial hailing Yudhoyono's visit, Rupert Murdoch's *Australian* declared: “All of this is a tremendous rebuke to those critics of the Howard government who accused it of ignoring the region and who argued we could not chew gum with Washington and walk the road of engagement with our Asian neighbours at the same time... In fact, our military and economic closeness to the US is a great advantage in Asia, which understands that the world has only one superpower left and desperately wants it to remain fully engaged with regional security and economic issues.”

From the outset, Howard's slavish support for the Bush administration, including its doctrine of preventative war and the illegal occupation of Iraq, were aimed at securing US support for the assertion of Australian imperialist interests in the Asia Pacific region. In the immediate aftermath of the Iraq invasion, Howard bullied the tiny island nations of the Pacific into backing an Australian-led intervention into the Solomon Islands on the pretext of combatting terrorism in the “failed state”. In what amounts to a reassertion of neo-colonial dominion, Canberra has installed Australian officials in senior administrative and police posts, not only in the Solomons, but in Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and Nauru.

Within Asia, the Howard government has aggressively pushed for tougher joint security measures in line with the Bush administration's “war on terrorism”. It has backed Washington's bellicose stance against North Korea, dispatching Foreign Minister Alexander Downer last year to press Pyongyang into rejoining six-party talks over its nuclear program. At last year's ASEAN summit, the Australian prime minister pointedly refused to sign the group's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. While toothless, this vague non-aggression pact would have cut across Howard's policy of unilateral pre-emptive action.

Nevertheless Yudhoyono and Abdullah put aside their resentments to visit Canberra. The *Australian* editorial pointed to the reasons. The “one superpower's” subjugation first of Afghanistan then Iraq has instilled a degree of fear in ruling circles around the world, including in South East Asia. Under Bush's doctrine of preventative war, any nation could suddenly find itself the target of US bullying. So in order to ingratiate themselves to the US overlord, the two leaders are mending fences with Washington's regional satrap—Canberra.

It is not just Howard's critics in Asia who are falling into line. The media coverage of the two visits was noteworthy for its lack of any unfavourable commentary on the government's foreign policy. As the *Australian* editorial indicates, sharp divisions opened up in ruling circles from late 2001 through to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 over the wisdom of Howard's unequivocal support for Washington. Concerns

were expressed over the dangers of the Bush administration's aggressive unilateralism, as well as its implications for Australia's relations in Asia, particularly with predominantly Muslim Indonesia, which has always been a central element of Canberra's regional strategy.

Yet Howard was allowed to bask in triumph unchallenged. No-one in the ruling elite or the media even hinted at the recklessness of relying on support for US thuggery and war as a means of securing temporary diplomatic inroads in Asia. Howard's obvious hypocrisy in welcoming Yudhoyono, a retired general, who shares responsibility for all the crimes of the Indonesian armed forces (TNI), as an "impressive man" and a democrat was permitted to pass virtually unnoticed.

In 1999, the entire political establishment backed the Howard government's military intervention in East Timor, recognising that the fundamental interests of Australian imperialism, above all control of the Timor Sea oil and gas reserves, were at stake. The media was instrumental in whipping up public concern over the atrocities of the TNI-backed militia against pro-independence supporters as the pretext for the adventure. Six years later, without batting an eyelid, the same commentators have nothing to say about Howard's embrace of one of the perpetrators of the militia violence. In 1999, Yudhoyono was the TNI's chief-of-staff of territorial affairs with direct responsibility for East Timor.

For both sides in the debate, Yudhoyono's visit represents a return to business as usual. For most of the last 40 years, Australia fully backed the brutal Suharto dictatorship and all of its crimes, including the massacre of an estimated 500,000 people following the CIA-backed coup of 1965-66 that brought the generals to power. In the early 1990s, Labor prime minister Paul Keating referred to the coup as the most important and beneficial event in Australia's post-war strategic history and, in 1995, signed a comprehensive defence pact with the junta.

At the time of Australia's intervention in East Timor, Indonesia tore up the previous defence agreement. With Yudhoyono's trip, the two countries are to negotiate a new security arrangement and once again establish close military ties. As both leaders made clear last week, any deal will be predicated on a mutual recognition of each other's "territorial integrity and unity". On the part of Canberra that means a guarantee not to support other separatist movements in Indonesia.

The Howard government, along with the media and opposition parties, is already turning a blind eye to the TNI's wars of attrition in Aceh and Papua. In mid-2003, Megawati and her then security minister Yudhoyono gave the green light for an offensive by 50,000 heavily-armed troops against separatist rebels in Aceh. Despite a media blackout, reports leaked out of the province of summary executions, torture, rape and arbitrary detention.

After initially ignoring the December 26 tsunami disaster, Howard seized the opportunity to strengthen ties with Jakarta and to dispatch of Australian troops to Aceh—a key resource-rich region adjacent to the strategic Malacca Strait. Australian troops collaborated in Aceh with the Indonesian military even as it was engaged in continuing operations against separatist rebels. The operation created a precedent for the closer defence ties. Jakarta immediately approved the return of Australian troops following the Sumatran earthquake two weeks ago—unlike the delays and suspicion that surrounded the initial Australian involvement.

The two visits last week mark a certain coalescence within Australian ruling circles and shelving of foreign policy disagreements.

With the backing of the Bush administration, Howard has embarked on a more active approach to securing Australian strategic and economic interests in Asia. The government's tsunami aid package, and now the visits by the Indonesian and Malaysian leaders, received the full backing not only of the media but also the main opposition parties—Labor and the Greens.

Labor leader Kim Beazley was just as fulsome in his praise of Yudhoyono as Howard. Declaring these were historic times, he enthused: "There is now an Indonesian leader who comprehends us completely. This is a prize for this country beyond measure." The comments underscore Labor's bipartisan support on foreign policy as on every other issue. Insofar as it has any differences with the Liberal-National coalition, Labor is promoting itself as a more effective instrument for prosecuting the interests of Australian imperialism.

The objections of Labor, and also the Greens, to Howard's support for the Iraq invasion were that the government should be focussed on matters closer to home—in the neighbouring region. Now that Howard has clinched the visits of Yudhoyono and Abdullah and is securing closer relations in Asia, particularly with Indonesia, Labor has very little to say.

An article by Paul Keating published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* last week highlighted the common approach of the major parties. Keating rather peevisly criticised Howard for adopting the policy of previous Labor governments. The headline summed up the argument: "Be honest, new Asian role is an old idea but still a good one."

As Keating pointed out, previous Labor governments had maintained close relations with Washington and involved Australian military forces in the first Gulf War in 1990-91. "As a prime minister I committed troops to a US-led force in Somalia in 1993. Hawke [former prime minister], Gareth Evans [former foreign minister] and I never turned our backs on the US to curry favour with Asia. On the contrary, we leveraged our closeness with the US to make ourselves more effective in the region," Keating bragged.

The former prime minister noted that the Labor government's involvement in establishing the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), cutting across Malaysia's promotion of an exclusive East Asia Economic Caucus, was done with Washington's backing. "A former national security adviser to Bush snr, Brent Scowcroft, told me that Australia had, with the APEC leaders' meeting, set up a political structure in Asia that the US simply could not have set up itself. Everyone, he said, was too suspicious of US motives and US power."

As prime minister, Keating attempted to put a different gloss on his foreign policy. His "big picture" was for a more independent approach—less reliant on the US and more closely aligned to Asia. His latest declaration that Howard is mimicking Labor's previous policies is not simply a personal comment, but reflects the mood in the Labor Party as a whole. It indicates that even the limited past tactical disagreements with Howard, over the Iraq invasion in particular, are in the process of being discarded.



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