

Australian Labor leader's US trip: a nod from Murdoch and the Washington establishment

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Australian Labor leader Kevin Rudd returned on Monday from a three-day visit to the United States, having assured senior Pentagon and State Department officials of Labor's unstinting commitment to the US alliance. The opposition leader also met with senior Treasury officials, global media baron Rupert Murdoch and Goldman Sachs' Robert Zoellick, signalling that he will be a "safe pair of hands" for the financial elite should Labor take office following elections due later this year.

Rudd's trip to Washington and New York, his first overseas visit since assuming the federal Labor leadership in December 2006, was aimed at allaying lingering concerns in Washington over Labor's commitment to US military and strategic objectives in the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific region.

Rudd did not disappoint, confirming his support for the US missions in Iraq and Afghanistan, and insisting that an emergent "Pacific Century" must be underpinned by a system of US-dominated political and military alliances.

Prime Minister John Howard has made unflinching loyalty to US militarism the centrepiece of his government's domestic and foreign policy. Under the banner of the "war on terror" his government has committed troops to both Iraq and Afghanistan—it was one of the first in the world to do so—and has kept them on-the-ground despite overwhelming public opposition. In return, the Bush Administration has offered a blank cheque for Australia's military interventions into small Pacific states, aimed at shoring up Australian and US interests against rival powers in Asia and Europe.

Rudd made clear this quid pro quo would continue. There would be no repeat-performance of former Labor leader Mark Latham's antics prior to the 2004 federal elections. Then, the newly elected leader raised the ire of Washington after a series of populist attacks on the Howard government's "kowtowing" to Bush. Among other things, Latham referred to government frontbenchers as "a conga line of suckholes" in his attempt to tap public antiwar

sentiment. This drew an unprecedented public intervention from US Ambassador Tom Schieffer, followed by a rapid public backdown, as Latham, framed by US and Australian flags, pledged support for the ANZUS alliance with the US and elevated the former Labor leader Kim Beazley (known as "bomber Beazley") to the position of shadow defence minister.

The keynote event of Rudd's US visit was his address to the Washington-based Brookings Institution on "The rise of China and its strategic implications for the US-Australia alliance".

Rudd's choice of topic was far from accidental. He has a highly-publicised knowledge of the "Middle Kingdom" going back to his days as an Asian Studies graduate at the Australian National University. He speaks fluent Mandarin and served as a senior diplomat in Beijing during the 1980s. But, with tensions growing between the US and China, this has become a point of concern, with sections of the political and media establishment fearful lest Rudd's China connections compromise Australia's strategic alliance with the US should he become prime minister.

Australian columnist Dennis Shanahan gave vent to these fears on the eve of Rudd's departure: "Simply put, Rudd is seen as being too close to China for Australia's comfort ...

"Rudd may have batted from the 'Long live Leninism, Stalinism and Mao Zedong' end of the Beijing cricket ground against the Poms, but he can't afford such free and unabashed humour and untrammelled partisanship as the prime minister of Australia."

In his speech to the Brookings Institute, Rudd laid such concerns to rest, saying: "The Australia-U.S. alliance has survived and prospered through twelve American presidents and thirteen Australian Prime Ministers ... it is an alliance of which we should both be proud and one which is destined to endure into the future whoever might form the next government in Canberra or in Washington".

The 21st century is "the Pacific Century", Rudd declared,

and its shape would be determined by “continued US strategic engagement in East Asia and the West Pacific anchored in the existing pattern of US military alliances, including those with Japan and Australia.”

Paying lip-service to the concept of China as “responsible stakeholder”, Rudd made pointed references to Beijing’s strategic ambitions in Iran and Sudan, warning that “[i]t is in the Asia-Pacific region where China’s shift to a proactive foreign policy from its historically isolationist stance is felt most acutely.”

Rudd urged the strengthening of APEC as “the principal pan-regional consultative and decision-making forum”. The proliferation of a series of regional forums in the wake of the Asian economic crisis, including ASEAN+3, which specifically excluded the US, was “not a good development”.

Significantly, he also called for the deployment of ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) member assets—“both military and civilian”—for the purpose of disaster relief and “broader security-related co-operation”. “The ARF” declared Rudd, “has spent far too long as a regional talkfest.”

Doubtless the Chinese leadership took particular note of at least one example offered by Rudd of ways in which ARF “assets” could be deployed: “Should China itself suffer catastrophic natural disasters in the future, it would provide over time a natural mechanism for the normal deployment of foreign assets to assist China should China ever make such a request,” he said.

In the face of mounting Great Power rivalry in the Pacific, Rudd’s speech to the Brookings Institute outlined, in a highly conscious manner, the shared economic and strategic interests of US and Australian imperialism. Trying on the current prime minister’s deputy-sheriff boots, Rudd offered Washington a “longstanding Australian tradition of creative middle-power diplomacy” pledging to “assist”, “facilitate”, and, “where necessary, brokering” the required outcomes.

For Australia, the China-US conflict poses an historic dilemma. China is Australia’s second-largest trading partner after Japan, but the US alliance has underpinned Australian foreign policy since 1941 and the Australian government’s close ties to Washington allow it to punch above its weight in the Pacific. The US is also Australia’s third-largest trading partner. As the *Australian’s* columnist Shanahan cautioned, “Australia’s national interest rests somewhere in between all the players and nowhere with any one player.” In the long-run, this delicate balancing act is untenable.

Rudd’s Washington visit included talks with officials of the Pentagon, State Department and National Security Council. No details have been made public, but the Labor leader indicated prior to his departure from Australia that US estimates concerning future operations in Afghanistan would

be on the table, along with “developments in Iran”. While Rudd has publicly criticised, on purely tactical grounds, US operations in Iraq, he has from the outset offered unqualified backing for the US invasion of Afghanistan, and for increased Australian involvement in the criminal US-led military occupation.

Having impressed his well-heeled audiences in Washington, Rudd travelled on to New York, where he met with News Corporation chief Rupert Murdoch. After an hour-long meeting, Murdoch signalled his support for the prime ministerial aspirant, strolling with him amid journalists and television cameras outside News Corporation headquarters, before the pair adjourned to continue their discussions over dinner.

Would Rudd make a good PM? “Oh, I’m sure,” Murdoch smiled, as he walked to a waiting limousine, followed by the impeccably-dressed Labor leader. While Rudd, along with Howard and Downer, later protested that Murdoch’s comments were merely polite, the media mogul notoriously wields his vast resources relentlessly and unabashedly against governments, political parties and entire nations, in the defence of his own corporate power and of the capitalist system as a whole.

Certainly Murdoch’s good manners were not extended to current prime minister John Howard or his treasurer. Did he think the PM should have made way for the treasurer last July, during a threatened leadership contest? “No, I don’t, no.” And would he back the Howard government in federal elections due by year’s end? “I guess we’ll have to see”, was the lukewarm reply—very far from the ringing endorsement extended to the Howard government in 2004.

A thoroughly servile media has offered not so much as a comment on the debased state of democracy revealed by these exchanges. Nor has it pressed Rudd on the content of his extensive talks with the media baron. There is, however, no doubt that Rudd was given orders, and that he eagerly affirmed his willingness to carry them out.



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