

Australian Labor prime minister elect reassures “our great friend and ally the United States”

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The last remaining member of the Bush administration’s “coalition of the willing” that invaded Iraq in March 2003—Australian Prime Minister John Howard—was ignominiously ejected from office last Saturday. The scale of his electoral defeat was underscored by the fact that Howard became only the second sitting prime minister in Australian political history to lose his own seat.

Spain’s right-wing government, led by Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar, was swept from office in 2004 on a wave of opposition to the presence of Spanish troops in Iraq. Tony Blair was forced to step down as British prime minister in June, in large part because of the overwhelming popular hostility to the war in Iraq. Following the defeat of Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski last month, Polish troops will be withdrawn.

Many other countries that joined Washington’s criminal venture in the aftermath of the invasion have also departed—Japan, the Philippines, Italy, Hungary, New Zealand, Portugal, the Netherlands, Lithuania, the Ukraine and Thailand, among others.

As the US media emphasised in the wake of Saturday’s election, President Bush has lost one of his “staunchest allies”. “During recent years, Mr Howard was unabashedly in the American corner at times when other world leaders were keeping their studied distance... Mr Howard could at times sound more hawkish than Mr Bush on the need to stay the course when the war was going badly,” the *New York Times* commented.

During the election campaign, neither the Labor nor Liberal parties wanted a public debate over the US-led occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, instead assiduously burying the issue. There is no doubt, however, that hostility to these wars was a major factor in the ousting of the Howard government. An opinion survey by the US

Studies Centre at Sydney University in July found that 64 percent of respondents were opposed to the war in Iraq and 50 percent opposed Australia’s involvement in Afghanistan. The survey also noted a dramatic drop in confidence in the US as a positive force in international affairs—from 66 percent in 2001 to 37 percent this year.

However, anyone thinking that the incoming Labor government will alter course in any significant way is going to be rapidly disappointed. In his victory speech on Saturday night, Labor prime minister elect Kevin Rudd pledged to work with Australia’s international allies, specifically extending “our greetings tonight to our great friend and ally the United States” as well as to “friends and partners” in Asia and Europe.

Following a phone call from Bush on Sunday, the Labor leader went one step further. After announcing that he would visit Washington “as early as possible”, Rudd added: “I said to President Bush and I emphasised to President Bush the centrality of the US alliance in our approach to our future foreign policy.”

Rudd made this position absolutely clear last December, when he assumed the Labor leadership, declaring he was “rock solid” on the US-Australia alliance. His limited promise to withdraw 550 Australian combat troops from Iraq was designed to placate overwhelming popular opposition to the war, while offering guarantees to the Bush administration that a Labor government would remain firmly committed to the bogus “war on terrorism”. Rudd has emphasised that any withdrawal will be “staged” and “in consultation with our allies”.

Under the new Labor government, between 300 to 400 Australian soldiers will stay in Baghdad on security and headquarters assignment and a further 700 navy and air force personnel will remain in the Middle East. Labor has never had any principled opposition to the war in Iraq,

and thus the Rudd government will not in any way challenge the ongoing US-led occupation, which has cost the lives of an estimated one million Iraqis. Moreover, Rudd may well bolster the number of Australian troops involved in the US-led war in Afghanistan as well as in Canberra's own neo-colonial operations in East Timor and the Solomons.

The US and international media have clearly understood Rudd's reassurances to the Bush administration. *Time* described Labor's two main foreign policy items—withdrawal of troops from Iraq and ratifying the Kyoto protocol—as “largely symbolic,” pointing out that only a third of the Australian deployment in the Middle East would be pulled out over seven months. “On foreign policy, Rudd is expected to stick largely to Howard's way. Australia will remain a ‘rock solid’ friend of the US but reserve the right to act ‘independently’.”

The *Wall Street Journal* was critical of Labor's support for the UN, but nevertheless concluded nothing much would change in Australian foreign or domestic policy. “For now, that [Labor's policy] likely means pulling some—but not all—Aussie troops out of Iraq, a war that he has consistently denounced. He will likely keep soldiers in Afghanistan, where they are doing some of the toughest fighting, but for the wrong reasons—a Rudd government would look to the UN for legitimacy, not to its own moral compass.”

In its editorial yesterday, the British-based *Financial Times* noted approvingly: “Australian businessmen and investors have rightly greeted Mr Rudd's victory with equanimity. His fiscal policies look as conservative and sensible as his predecessor.” Turning to foreign policy, the newspaper pointed out that Rudd had quickly softened the political fallout from Labor's partial withdrawal of troops and ratification of Kyoto. He was careful “to try to keep Mr Bush sweet by hailing Australia's ‘great friend and ally the United States’.”

None of the commentary referred to what is most likely to be the immediate foreign policy test confronting the new Labor government—preparations for a US military attack on Iran. With less than a year to go in office, Bush is far more interested in Labor's attitude to the regime in Tehran, than arrangements for the redeployment of a few hundred Australian troops from Iraq. There are signs that Rudd has already offered guarantees of Australian support for a US military action against Iran.

In early September, Bush flew into Sydney for the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum declaring that Iran and Iraq were the top items on his agenda. After

meeting with Howard and his cabinet's National Security Committee, the US president met with Labor leader Rudd on September 6. By all accounts, this was a very amicable encounter, which was extended by Bush from 30 to 45 minutes. While the partial withdrawal of Australian troops from Iraq was raised, Bush undoubtedly used the meeting to sound Rudd out on Iran. And he was not disappointed.

Australian warships and personnel are currently in the Persian Gulf, working with the US fleet. The head of the joint naval task force in the northern region of the gulf is currently an Australian—Commodore Allan du Toit. According to the British-based *Sunday Times* in October, Australian special forces have been operating with their US and British counterparts along the Iraqi border, and possibly already inside Iran. In his talks with Rudd, Bush was concerned that such cooperation would continue under a Labor government.

Since those talks, the Bush administration's studied neutrality towards the Australian election stands in stark contrast to its treatment of former Labor leader Mark Latham prior to the 2004 election. Like Rudd, Latham called for a limited withdrawal of Australian troops from Iraq. In an unprecedented intervention into domestic Australian political life, top US officials, including Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney, publicly declared that any Australian withdrawal would threaten the US-Australia alliance, forcing Latham into a humiliating back down.

A formal statement released on Sunday by the White House, after Bush telephoned Rudd to extend his congratulations, contained not a hint of tension or disagreement. “The United States and Australia have long been strong partners and allies and the president looks forward to working with this new government to continue our historic relationship,” it declared. Bush had clearly received the assurances he was after.

Labor's unconditional support for US militarism places it on a collision course with the millions who cast their votes for the party on Saturday. Having tossed Howard out, they will quickly become disillusioned with a government that not only maintains Australian troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, but commits itself to a new US military adventure against Iran.



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