

Australian prime minister's world trip: "a bright new image" for US alliance

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Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd concluded a 17-day world tour to the US, Europe and China last weekend, having laid to rest any lingering illusions that the election of a Labor government would see a diminution of support for US military aggression throughout the world. At the same time, under the banner of "middle power diplomacy" Rudd has signaled a new, aggressive assertion of Australian imperialism's geo-strategic interests.

In Washington, Rudd used the first leg of his world trip to confirm the US alliance as the "central pillar" of Australian foreign policy. "The United States is Australia's oldest strategic ally, our closest strategic ally, our strongest strategic ally," declared Rudd arriving at Blair House (the president's official guest residence) on day one of the tour.

In defiance of all pre-election rhetoric about a "phased withdrawal" of Australia's military involvement in the Iraq war, the prime minister pledged ongoing support for the criminal US-led occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. Bush also revealed the two leaders discussed Iran, saying they had a "joint commitment" to ensure the Iranians did not develop a nuclear weapon. Rudd has extended full support to White House efforts in demonising Tehran and creating the pretext for unilateral military action.

Rudd projected a new face for Australian diplomacy during his tour, flagging a departure from the "unreflexive" bi-lateral relationship championed by his predecessor, John Howard. The reasons for this shift are not difficult to fathom. The Bush administration's militarism and unilateralism have produced a military and political debacle, discrediting US power on the global arena and galvanising antiwar sentiment among millions of ordinary people. The defeat of the Howard government last November—following that of Aznar's party in Spain, and Blair's resignation in Britain—was the latest casualty from the Iraq quagmire, a product, in the final analysis, of the historic decline of the United States.

Just as Rudd has carefully packaged his government domestically, offering an early "apology" to the Aboriginal stolen generations and a forthcoming "2020 summit" to hear from Australia's "best and brightest minds", a similar makeover has commenced in the field of foreign policy. Rudd has adopted a more "nuanced" approach to international relations, stressing his support for the United Nations and the principle of multilateral co-operation. But his appearance at the NATO summit in Bucharest, calling on the European powers to "share the burden" and deploy more troops to Afghanistan, ("across the country... not just in parts of it"), shows that behind all the window dressing, Rudd is just as loyal an ally to Washington as the previous government.

Notwithstanding Tony Blair's forced departure from British politics, Rudd Labor is advancing its own brand of "ethical" imperialism. According to the *Australian's* Greg Sheridan, Rudd's advocacy of multilateralism was opening doors in a way that it was "difficult to imagine John Howard doing." The prime minister's apology to the Aboriginal stolen generations and his ratification of Kyoto, meant that Labor offered "a bright new image". And while "no prime minister should make such decisions to court foreign approval" [no, of course

not!], Rudd's domestic sops had "certainly helped him with European and liberal American opinion". In other words, for Howard—an unabashed defender of Australia's shameful treatment of refugees and Aborigines, and an unflinching backer of the Bush administration in relation to Kyoto, Iraq etc... —to front NATO, or offer public criticism of Chinese human rights violations in Tibet, would have been deeply problematic. Significant sections of the Australian ruling elite believe Rudd is a far more effective defender of their imperialist ambitions than the recently deposed former PM.

Public opposition to the aggressive militarist stance of the Howard government was a major factor in the Coalition's electoral thrashing last November. But barely four months later Rudd has made clear that Australia's military presence in Iraq will continue indefinitely, along with an expanded military presence in Afghanistan.

In his address to Washington's Brookings Institution on March 31, Rudd described Labor's decision to withdraw 500 "combat troops" from southern Iraq as a "reconfiguration" of forces. "Our ground combat troops will be withdrawn," he stated, "but our air and naval elements are remaining and we are significantly increasing our civilian aid program."

Rudd Labor is withdrawing just over 500 of the 1,450 Australian Defence Force personnel stationed in Iraq. But attempts to present the withdrawal as an end to Australia's combat involvement in Iraq are a charade. The 500 troops being pulled from Al Muthanna and Dhi Qar provinces ceased active combat duties in 2006. Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston told a Senate Estimates Committee hearing on February 20 that these forces would have been withdrawn regardless of the outcome of November's federal election because "[t]he Overwatch battle group job is done". "We have achieved our objectives in southern Iraq. Frankly, if you look at the two provinces, it is time to leave."

The "air and naval elements" that Rudd has flagged will remain, offer far more critical support to the US-occupation forces. This includes Australia's 100-strong military detachment inside Baghdad's Green Zone and HMAS Arunta that guards two Iraqi oil platforms accounting for 90 percent of the country's GDP. According to Houston "I think the ship will be the last man standing... That will come out much further downstream, when the Iraqis have developed a reasonable naval capability."

At their joint White House press conference, Bush thanked Rudd for being "a good loyal ally on Iraq". Rudd, he emphasised, had consulted closely with US military commanders in relation to the announced withdrawal of troops from Iraq, "he acted like you'd expect an ally to act." The Australian troops were being withdrawn as a "return on success".

Behind the backs of the Australian people and in defiance of domestic polls showing more than 50 percent opposition to Australia's involvement in "the good war", Rudd informed the Washington press corps "we're in Afghanistan for the long haul". Rudd also indicated that Labor would bolster Australia's contingent in the event of increased troop deployments from NATO countries.

It was no wonder that Bush's praise for the new PM was fulsome, or that he was accorded access during his visit to the highest echelons of the White House. At the conclusion of their joint press conference an Australian journalist asked the US president would he describe the prime minister—as he had once famously described John Howard—as “a man of steel”? “Yeah, heck yeah,” replied Bush.

Ruling circles in Australia responded to Rudd's trip with approval. The *Australian Financial Review*'s Tony Walker observed that, “The Chicken Littles who predicted the sky would fall in on US-Australia relations if the alliance holy grail passed from custodian Howard to pretender Rudd have been proved comprehensively wrong.” *The Australian*'s Sheridan judged that Rudd “deserves immense credit for the way this visit has gone”. “Rudd's primary message,” Sheridan noted, “is that the US alliance remains central to Australian foreign policy and enjoys complete bipartisan support.”

Rudd's trip has confirmed that the long-running foreign policy differences between Labor and the Coalition have always been entirely tactical. Labor attacked what it regarded as the Howard government's unnecessarily servile relationship with the US, which, it believed, failed to maximise the benefits conferred to Australia by its geo-strategic ties to the Asia-Pacific region. Rudd's trip to Washington and then Beijing saw explicit efforts to leverage Australia's role as a junior powerbroker between the US and Asia.

This was made clear in Rudd's speech to the Brookings Institution. “Our foreign policy has three pillars: our alliance with the United States; our membership of the United Nations; and comprehensive engagement with the countries of Asia and the Pacific.”

To prosecute these three pillars, Rudd explained, “the Government intends to deploy what I have described as ‘creative middle power diplomacy’—both globally and regionally.” In Asia, he said, the US was currently excluded from key regional architecture including ASEAN and the East Asia Summit. “There is no US-led NATO equivalent in the region,” he declared. But Australia was “deeply enmeshed with the countries of Asia and the Pacific” and therefore in a position to facilitate closer US involvement in the region. “Our foreign policy intention is to prosecute a more activist foreign policy in partnership with our allies”.

Rudd advocated a more prominent role for APEC, one of the few regional bodies that includes both the United States and Australia. He also called for an expansion of Korea's six-party talks—composed of China, North and South Korea, Japan, Russia and the United States—into a broader regional security mechanism, incorporating Australia. Rudd's vision of multilateral dialogue mitigating tensions between the US and China reflects the dependent nature of Australian capitalism, but is belied by escalating conflict and rivalry among the major powers.

In Beijing Rudd was accorded a lavish reception, due in large measure to Chinese recognition of Labor efforts to position Australia more firmly as a “middle power”. In an April 12 comment entitled “PM makes great leap on China”, Sheridan observed in the *Australian* that Rudd's “frank” comments to the Beijing Stalinists regarding human rights abuses in Tibet marked “a radical departure from the practice of John Howard”. Rudd's close knowledge of China also meant that he was able to aggressively pursue key economic objectives for Australian business, including free-trade negotiations between Canberra and Beijing and a potentially lucrative climate change co-operation agreement. Rudd's China visit, Sheridan concluded, was “immensely sophisticated” and constituted “a cultural revolution in doing business with China”.

But Rudd's trip also highlighted the precarious balancing act that the Australian ruling class confronts as it seeks to protect its substantial economic interests with China, the country's largest trading partner, while simultaneously supporting US strategic objectives. Despite recent claims by economic commentators that Australia has “de-coupled” from the US economy, the statistics speak for themselves. The United States is the

largest foreign investor in Australia, the largest destination for Australian outwards investment and Australia's third-largest trading partner.

Speaking to Fox News on the eve of Rudd's American visit, Bush's former senior advisor on Asia, Michael Green, said Rudd was seen as “solidly pro-US alliance”, but added: “The one area where people have raised eyebrows about Rudd is on China policy. When he's here, he's going to want to make clear that the US alliance remains the bedrock and Australia is not going wobbly on China.”

In Washington Rudd proved he was on message, taking a swipe at Beijing over Tibet at a joint press conference with the US president. “It's absolutely clear there are human rights abuses in Tibet. We need to be upfront and absolutely clear about what's going on”. Rudd called on the Chinese government to “engage the Dalai Lama or his representatives” in discussions over the future “internal arrangements within Tibet” and said he would raise the matter during his visit to Beijing.

Rudd's condemnation of China's human rights record, made at Washington's insistence, was, from the standpoint of Australia's economic ties with China, a risky manoeuvre. He also announced the deployment of Australian peace-keepers to Darfur—part of a military operation aimed at the containment of Chinese influence in Africa. The small Australian contingent was offered during discussions with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, as Rudd declared his intention to seek a place for Australia on the UN Security Council in 2012-13.

While Rudd's tour has garnered plaudits among a hopeful throng of media commentators, his attempts to straddle Australia's conflicting interests with the major powers in Asia and the United States are ultimately untenable. As the *Financial Times* noted on April 8: “Mr Rudd hopes to avoid being impaled on the horns of a herd of approaching dilemmas. But if the US and China pull in different directions... or if the global credit crunch hits the country's internationally exposed economy, those difficult choices will not easily be sidestepped.”



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