

# New Australian prime minister pledges support for US alliance and Afghan war

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In the wake of last week's leadership coup, the Australian Labor government has been at pains to stress the continuity of foreign policy under Prime Minister Julia Gillard, pledging support for the US-Australian alliance, and the ongoing Australian involvement in the US-led war in Afghanistan.

In her first press conference as prime minister on June 24, Gillard declared that the government would "honour the US and the other alliances that are so important for our nation." In a 20-minute phone conversation the following day, she reassured US President Obama that the Labor government was committed to the US-led occupation in Afghanistan.

Significantly, Gillard's backing for the Afghan war takes place as Obama escalates the conflict and casualties rise. The June death toll for foreign troops was 102—the highest of the war and more than double the figure for June 2009. In the same week that Gillard was installed, three Australian commandos were killed when their helicopter crashed, raising the total deaths for the war to 16. According to various polls, more than half of the Australian population is opposed to the war and wants troops withdrawn.

After speaking to Obama, Gillard was effusive. She told a press conference last Friday that it had been a "great honour and privilege". She again reaffirmed Australia's "enduring strategic alliance" with the US, repeating: "I fully support the current deployment [of Australian troops in Afghanistan]." To underline the point, later the same day Gillard met with the US ambassador to Australia, Jeffrey Bleich, exchanged kisses for the cameras and declared her "fascination with American politics".

The same message was delivered on Monday by Foreign Minister Stephen Smith, who was kept in his post despite speculation that Gillard might appoint ousted Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. Smith quickly affirmed that there would be no changes in foreign policy fundamentals "which are engagement with the Asia Pacific, our alliance with the US, and engagement in multilateral institutions such as the United Nations."

While the media has been dominated by discussion of the mining super profits tax, various analysts have confirmed that Gillard—aligned with Labor's so-called "left" faction—represents no shift in foreign policy and can be counted on to prosecute the interests of Australian imperialism. Some even regard Gillard as a welcome change from Rudd, who, despite being a former diplomat and fluent in Chinese, had soured relations, particularly with China.

In an article on Thursday entitled "Continuity in foreign affairs but questions remain", Greg Sheridan, foreign editor of Murdoch's *Australian*, commented: "In many ways, Gillard will be more

conservative, in a small-c sense, than Rudd, at least until after the election. Like Rudd, and all successful Australian politicians, Gillard is completely committed to the US alliance."

Sheridan pointed out that membership of Labor's "left", which had been "particularly suspect on the US alliance", had in the past been something of a barrier to the prime ministership. However, as he pointed out: "From at least the time she became deputy leader, Gillard shrewdly and effectively set about removing that veto on herself. She did this in part by attending the Australian American Leadership Dialogue and another similar dialogue with Israel."

Sheridan noted appreciatively that Gillard had, to a considerable extent, been "even more courageous than Rudd in staring down the Left of her own party." Referring to limited criticism of her attendance at the Australia Israel Leadership Forum in 2008, he wrote: "But she defied it and gave a fine address at Jerusalem's King David Hotel celebrating not only Australia and Israel's friendship, but also the common values of the two countries." Sheridan had nothing but praise for Gillard's backing of Israel's murderous war on Gaza in 2008-09. As acting prime minister, she "steadfastly, day by day, defended Israel's right to self defence against overwhelming commentariat hostility".

By contrast, Sheridan explained, the recent expulsion of an Israeli diplomat over forged Australian passports used in the Dubai assassination operation last January might have been "the single foreign policy issue that did Rudd the most harm in domestic political terms". The comment highlights the influential role of the Zionist lobby in Australian politics in general and the Labor Party in particular and explains why Gillard has so assiduously cultivated her standing in Israel as well as in the US.

After noting that Gillard had been "fulsome in her endorsement of the US alliance" during gatherings of the Australian American Leadership Dialogue, Sheridan pointedly recalled the fate of the last Labor leader to publicly criticise US policy. "[R]emember it was question marks over national security that first led to Mark Latham's decline as leader. In Latham's diaries the former leader revealed a searing hostility to the US alliance and a profoundly prejudiced attitude to Australian soldiers," he stated.

Sheridan obscures what actually happened. In an attempt to exploit widespread anti-war sentiment, Latham proposed, during the 2004 election campaign, that Australian troops be withdrawn from Iraq for use closer to home—that is, to strengthen Australia's neo-colonial operations in East Timor and the Solomons. In response to Latham's announcement, the Bush administration made an extraordinary intervention into internal Australian politics. President Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney and other top US officials publicly declared that any Australian withdrawal would

be “disastrous” and a threat to the US-Australian alliance. Latham quickly fell into line, but lost the election and was dumped as Labor leader.

Latham’s fate brought home a basic fact of establishment politics in Australia: unconditional fealty to the US alliance is a fundamental prerequisite for any aspiring prime minister. Rudd certainly got the message. Like Gillard, in his first press conference as Labor leader Rudd declared that he was “rock solid” on the US-Australian alliance. While he also called for the withdrawal of Australian combat troops from Iraq, Rudd repeatedly stressed that the process would be “staged” and “in consultation with our allies.”

There is no doubt that Washington would have known of last week’s coup and had vetted Gillard in advance. It also cannot be ruled out that the US had a more direct hand. Interestingly, President Obama twice cancelled visits to Australia this year. Certainly Obama faced pressing issues at home—in the first instance, his health bill hung in the balance, and in the second case, the Gulf oil disaster erupted. At the same time, however, the US president has pointedly made no special effort to undertake what for Rudd would have been a critical visit during an election year. One issue is clear: the US has certainly pressed Australia, on more than one occasion, for a greater commitment of troops to Afghanistan only to be rebuffed.

Gillard has deftly made all the right moves during her first week of office. But she is yet to address the deepening dilemma that has plagued successive governments over the past quarter century: the divergence between Australia’s geostrategic and military alliance with the US, on the one hand, and its growing economic dependence on Asia, especially China, on the other. That balancing act has only become more precarious as tensions have sharpened between Washington and Beijing, which is now Australia’s largest trading partner.

Rudd attempted to solve the conundrum by putting himself and Australia forward as the middle man that could act as problem solver and peacemaker. He proposed the establishment of an Asian-Pacific Community that would include China and the US and provide a forum for resolving frictions. Rudd’s grand design, however, has been the victim of the very tensions that it sought to ameliorate. The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), backed by China, has become the pre-eminent regional body—leaving the US on the sidelines and all but killing off Rudd’s plan for an Asia-Pacific Community.

However much Gillard might wish to avoid it, the problem of the “China factor” cannot so easily be resolved. Already it has emerged in the debate over Rudd’s obvious desire for the post of foreign minister. In his comment, Sheridan, a staunch defender of the US alliance, chastised Gillard for failing to immediately give Rudd the job. Other commentators, however, have opposed his appointment—now or in the future—and highlighted his failings in Asia.

Not accidentally, especially strident objections have come from Robert Gottliebsen from the *Business Spectator*, which vociferously opposed the super profits tax on mining companies that rely heavily on sales to China. In a comment entitled “Why Gillard shouldn’t make Rudd a minister”, Gottliebsen noted that there had been high hopes: “When Kevin Rudd became prime minister we had expected a deepening of Australia’s relationship with China, given that Rudd is fluent in Mandarin.”

However, expectations of closer ties and lucrative economic openings failed to materialise. “Rudd used his ability to speak Mandarin to lecture students at Beijing University on the Australian view on human rights. It

really annoyed the Chinese leadership. Then, our defence white paper referred to an unnamed country in Asia which posed a potential threat to our security. The unnamed country had to be China. The Chinese leadership was so furious with these events, as well as a string of other Rudd actions, that China banned senior Chinese officials and business people coming to Australia to speak on panels where Rudd was in attendance,” Gottliebsen wrote.

Relations reached a low point at the Copenhagen climate change summit. Rudd had invested much political capital in implementing an Emission Trading Scheme (ETS) and positioning Australia for an expanding and highly profitable carbon trading market in Asia that was expected to follow a deal at Copenhagen. Rudd’s plans, which were opposed at home by the mining and energy lobby, foundered on the opposition of China, in particular, to the US proposals. Bitterly disappointed, Rudd reportedly complained to a group of officials and journalists: “Those Chinese ratf...ers are trying to ratf... us.”

As Gottliebsen noted, Rudd had recently attempted to patch up relations with a visit to Australia by China’s heir apparent Vice President Xi Jinping, which established a forum to “inject new vitality” into the relationship between the two countries. But Rudd’s political demise has not been a major cause for concern in Beijing. The *Australian* drew attention to an editorial in the state-run *China Daily*, which declared that the change of leadership could be “an opportunity for both powers to communicate more clearly”. The newspaper went on to comment that the editorial appeared “to confirm the widely held view in Chinese diplomatic and business circles that Mr Rudd was not held in high regard in Beijing, where he was called tricky and two-faced, despite his Chinese language skills.”

After little more than a week in office, media commentary has been generally positive about the “continuity” of foreign policy under the Gillard government. What that might signify, however, as Gillard ventures onto a world arena fraught with sharpening rivalries, is far from clear.



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