

The Australian's foreign editor and Labor's leadership crisis

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Last Monday, the day Prime Minister Julia Gillard defeated former foreign minister Kevin Rudd in Labor's leadership ballot, Murdoch's *Australian* published an unusual article by its foreign editor, Greg Sheridan.

An effusive proponent of the US-Australia alliance, Sheridan has intimate connections with the foreign policy and defence establishment in Washington. His article urged the Labor caucus to re-elect Rudd as leader, and raised the former prime minister's foreign policy record, his relations with Washington, his attitude towards China and his related proposal for a new "Asia Pacific Community." It also discussed the US response to the 2010 coup that deposed Rudd as prime minister and installed Gillard.

The comment was one of very few media reports to broach any of these issues in the course of the government's leadership crisis, which was generally presented as nothing more than a clash of rival egos. Many aspects of Sheridan's article, however, are contradicted by what actually happened during the two and a half years that Rudd was prime minister. The entire column smacks of a cover up of the crucial foreign policy issues underlying the internecine struggle within the Labor government.

The piece, entitled "Gillard is not prime ministerial material and Rudd ought to return", was fulsome in its praise of Rudd. The former prime minister, Sheridan insisted, "has a profound geostrategic map in his head", whereas Gillard, on "geostrategic issues, [hasn't] the faintest schmick of an idea what's going on."

Sheridan continued: "All over the world, prime ministers and presidents, foreign ministers and senior officials tell me how valuable they find Rudd. I am not gilding the lily here, and I am certainly not making this up. Senior Americans, across a number of agencies and institutions, look to Rudd for policy advice on China. So do Canadians. And ministers across the Middle East tell me how valuable they find his contributions. Europeans regard him as a first-table interlocutor on important global and regional issues. All through Asia Rudd is seen as a friend who can get things done."

For good measure, Sheridan added: "Rudd's vision of an Asia Pacific community, and his brilliant advocacy in Washington, led directly to the US joining the East Asia Summit, an achievement equal to Hawke's creation of APEC." He went on: "When Rudd was first deposed as prime minister, senior US officials were aghast they had lost such a good friend, and equally astonished that someone as provincial and narrow as Gillard could become prime minister of a country such as Australia."

Diplomatic cables sent from the US embassy in Canberra to Washington while Rudd was prime minister, later published by WikiLeaks, paint a very different picture.

Far from Sheridan's claim of universal respect for Rudd, American dissatisfaction emerged very soon after he became prime minister. In late 2008, a cable dispatched by then US ambassador to Australia, Robert McCallum, summed up Rudd's first year in office. Under the subheading, "Rudd's Foreign Policy Mistakes", McCallum explained that the prime minister had made "a number of missteps". Among the many "significant blunders" listed was an incident in February 2008 when then foreign minister Stephen Smith, standing alongside Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, announced that Australia was withdrawing from the "Quad"—a strategic dialogue forum involving Australia, Japan, India, and the US—which Beijing had criticised as "Asia's NATO". The US ambassador told his colleagues that the Rudd government's announcement had been made "out of deference to China" and "without advance consultation" with American officials.

Another "blunder" was Rudd's proposed Asia Pacific Community (APC). On June 5, 2008, the day Rudd announced the initiative, US Ambassador McCallum wrote a scathing cable, describing the APC idea as "hastily rolled out, with minimal consultations." He continued: "Rudd seems to be in a hurry not only to demonstrate Australia's regional influence as a 'middle power', but also to begin to establish his legacy... The notion of an EU-style Asia Pacific Community that can smoothly manage the myriad political, economic and security interests of all the major players in this vast region seems a considerable stretch of the imagination."

Another cable, sent in February 2009 by the US embassy's Charge d'Affaires Dan Clune, complained that Rudd exercised total control over Australia's foreign affairs, bypassing Foreign Affairs Minister Stephen Smith and normal channels within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Rudd, the cable explained, "undoubtedly believes that with his intellect, his six years as a diplomat in the 1980s and his five years as shadow foreign minister, he has the background and the ability to direct Australia's foreign policy... His performance so far, however, demonstrates that he does not have the staff or the experience to do the job properly."

In 2009-2010, Rudd's perspective of building new regional institutions to accommodate China's rising strategic and economic influence clashed with the Obama administration's aggressive turn towards confrontation with Beijing. Washington sought to escalate the pressure on China throughout the region, and wanted Canberra to play the role of unquestioning ally, not "middle power" mediator. In this period, Rudd, who has never, in any way, opposed the US-Australia alliance, pitched his proposed Asia Pacific Community in the US as a means of managing China's rise. One diplomatic cable revealed that in March 2009, Rudd told Secretary of State Hillary Clinton that the APC was a means of

preventing the emergence of a Chinese “Monroe Doctrine”, and counselled the US to use military force if “everything goes wrong.”

Despite these entreaties, Washington could not accept Rudd’s perspective on China. The basic premise underlying the proposed accommodation of the Asian power was that US imperialism should accept a diminution of its geostrategic dominance in East Asia and the Pacific.

While Rudd, as prime minister and later foreign minister, was always compelled to fudge the explosive issue of US-China relations, its logic has been spelled out by other figures within the Australian foreign policy establishment. Foreign policy analyst Hugh White is among the most prominent spokesmen for a layer of the Australian ruling elite that is deeply alarmed by the implications of the growing US confrontation with China. In a lengthy essay published in 2010, “Power Shift: Australia’s future between Washington and Beijing”, White urged a new “Concert of Asia”, involving a grand diplomatic deal between the major Asia-Pacific powers, with the US ceding much of its strategic power in the Pacific to China.

Greg Sheridan angrily condemned White’s essay when it appeared, describing it as “the single, stupidest strategic document ever prepared in Australian history by someone who once had a position of some responsibility in our system.” There is a direct contradiction between this denunciation of White’s Concert of Asia and Sheridan’s warm praise for Rudd’s similar proposal to accommodate China through an APC.

The contradictory character of Sheridan’s argument is a necessary component of his efforts to distort the crucial foreign policy issues involved in the 2010 coup. These issues are particularly sensitive in Australia and the US, as they point to the motives underlying the Obama administration’s involvement in Rudd’s ousting.

According to the Murdoch foreign affairs editor, Washington was “aghast” when Rudd was deposed. In fact, as the WikiLeaks cables documented, the small group of trade union bureaucrats and Labor Party factional apparatchiks that orchestrated the June 23-24, 2010 coup against Rudd acted in close collaboration with the US embassy. Senator Mark Arbib and his fellow secret “protected sources” kept Washington abreast of all the internal divisions and rivalries within the government, while the Australian people were told nothing. Two weeks before the coup, as the ABC “Four Corners” programme recently revealed, Hillary Clinton called in Australia’s ambassador to the US, Kim Beazley, for a meeting to discuss what was happening. It is inconceivable that Rudd could have been removed from office without the green light from Washington.

Sheridan further claimed in his column last Monday that US officials were “astonished” that someone like Gillard could become prime minister. In fact, diplomatic dispatches sent from Canberra to Washington identified Gillard as the “front-runner” to replace Rudd as early as June 2008, just a few months after Rudd became prime minister. US officials received assurances from various Labor and trade union figures that Gillard’s origins in the party’s “left” faction had no policy significance and that she was firmly committed to the US alliance and to Israel. The June 2008 cable asked whether Gillard’s pro-US statements represented a change in views, or merely reflected “an understanding of what she needs to do to become leader of the ALP.” Twelve months later, in June 2009, another cable was headed “Gillard: On Track To Become Australia’s Next Prime Minister”.

Part of Gillard’s first day as prime minister was spent speaking with

President Obama for twenty minutes and then with US Ambassador Jeffrey Bleich. The public exchanges went beyond the usual diplomatic niceties. “The President and Prime Minister Gillard, they have very similar views, values, strengths,” Bleich declared. “I think they’re going to get along famously.” The ambassador has since maintained an unusually high public profile, frequently appearing on current affairs television programmes and in other media.

Gillard’s foreign policy record as prime minister is one of uncritical support for Washington’s initiatives. In her first phone call to Obama she pledged full support for the occupation of Afghanistan. Following the 2010 election, she declared that Australian forces would remain in the Central Asian state until at least 2020. Rudd, in contrast, had resisted US appeals for more Australian troops, and had proposed a 2-4 year withdrawal plan. Last year in Washington, Gillard was invited to address a joint sitting of the US Congress. Her obsequious speech included high praise for the US strategic focus on East Asia.

When Obama visited Australia late last year—after twice cancelling planned visits while Rudd was prime minister—he announced, jointly with Gillard, plans for the US military’s stationing of Marines and extensive use of military bases in northern Australia. This initiative forms part of US imperialism’s provocative drive to enhance its military infrastructure in the region, centrally aimed at encircling China. In an article in the *Australian* on August 19, 2010, on the eve of the last federal election, Sheridan recommended that the US military be offered “significantly greater basing facilities at Darwin.” He concluded that this would be a good way for the next prime minister to confront a “complex security equation in the Asia-Pacific, characterised by increasing competition between the US and China.”

What accounts, then, for Sheridan’s hostility towards Gillard? Why has he presented an account of the foreign policy record of the Rudd and Gillard governments that is so contrary to the documented record? That Sheridan felt compelled to assure his readers, at one point in his column, “I am certainly not making this up”, is itself revealing. The timing of the article is also unusual. Published on the day of the Labor government’s leadership ballot, Sheridan urged Rudd to be elected leader when it was already clear that Gillard was about to win the ballot. No other columnist in the *Australian* weighed in on behalf of either Rudd or Gillard in this manner.

Sheridan’s column can only be understood as an attempt to obscure the issues involved in the 2010 coup and the termination of Rudd’s tenure as foreign minister. There are real dangers for the ruling elite when the normally subterranean role played by US imperialism in Australian politics becomes more widely understood among layers of the population. This danger is all the greater under conditions where the US-China rivalry is rapidly escalating and heading towards a devastating military conflict, with catastrophic consequences for the peoples of the region, including in Australia.



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