

# Australian PM sinks Rudd's bid for UN secretary general

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Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull effectively ended the bid by Kevin Rudd, former Labor foreign minister and prime minister, to replace Ban Ki-moon as UN secretary general when he steps down in December. He bluntly told reporters yesterday that, in his “considered judgment,” Rudd was not qualified for the role.

Turnbull's decision was not only a blow to Rudd, but was a slap in the face to Liberal deputy-party leader, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, who had publicly declared that the former Labor leader was qualified for the UN job. At the first full cabinet meeting of the newly-elected Turnbull government on Thursday, Bishop, supported by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, presented a submission supporting Rudd's nomination.

The issue has not only highlighted the deep divisions within Turnbull's fragile Liberal-National Coalition government, which is back in office after the July 2 election with the slenderest of margins—one seat in the lower house of parliament. It also raises the question as to Washington's hand in events, amid mounting tensions between the US and China over the South China Sea.

Rudd hit back yesterday by releasing correspondence with Turnbull dating back to April, which indicated that he had the prime minister's verbal support for his bid. He stated in his April letter that he had “reasonable grounds for support of my candidature in critical capitals.” After Turnbull changed his position on May 1, Rudd again wrote, pointing out that “you have always said to me that the Australian government would be ‘mad’ not to support my candidature.”

Despite Turnbull's opposition in May, Rudd continued his campaign. He claimed in a letter this week, seeking a last-minute meeting with the prime

minister, that he had reached an agreement with Bishop “to proceed with exploring my possible candidature.” Turnbull turned down the request.

Opposition within the Coalition to Rudd's bid spilled into the open this week with a series of public statements before the cabinet meeting by senior ministers. Cabinet Secretary Arthur Sinodinos said on Monday that “there would be a lot of people on our side of politics who say they have reservations about supporting Kevin.” In remarks on Tuesday designed to make clear his opposition, Treasurer Scott Morrison declared that he “couldn't possibly comment” on whether Rudd was “not eminently qualified” for the job.

Supporters of Tony Abbott, whom Turnbull ousted as prime minister last September, have been bitterly opposed. Immigration Minister Peter Dutton declared in April that Rudd was behaving like a pest. “Kevin was never happy just running Australia. He believed he was always destined to run the world,” he said. “Kevin's ego makes Donald Trump's look like a rounding error.”

The issue raises broader questions for the ruling elite about the ability of the Turnbull government to implement far tougher measures—in particular the austerity agenda being demanded by big business. The fractious first cabinet meeting of the new government made no decisions on any matters.

The *Australian*'s foreign editor Greg Sheridan, who has supported Rudd's UN bid, wrote a scathing comment today declaring: “The Liberals under Malcolm Turnbull now resemble Labor at its worst in the Rudd-Gillard years—ill-disciplined, rancorous, incapable of producing or sticking to good process, making the wrong decisions for the wrong reasons, essentially paralysed....”

“If the government can get itself into this much trouble over the simple matter of nominating Rudd for the UN, God help us when it confronts genuinely challenging decisions that require toughness, courage, skill and cabinet solidarity on matters of more importance to the national interest.”

Turnbull refused to elaborate yesterday on why he regarded Rudd as unqualified for the UN job. On paper at least, he has considerable experience firstly as a career diplomat fluent in Mandarin, then as foreign minister and prime minister.

Former Liberal minister Eric Abetz, an Abbott loyalist, branded Rudd “a narcissist, a micro-manager, an impulsive control freak and a psychopath.” These remarks recall the accusations against Rudd as dysfunctional that were used by Julia Gillard to oust him as prime minister in mid-2010 in an overnight inner-party coup.

Rudd’s removal, however, had nothing to do with his administrative skills. Rather he had alienated the Obama administration by calling for an accommodation between the US and China, right at the point when Washington was preparing to confront China and announce its “pivot to Asia.” Rudd was ousted by a handful of factional strongmen, including present opposition leader Bill Shorten, who were regarded by the US embassy as “protected sources,” behind the backs of the Labor cabinet and party, as well as the Australian population as a whole.

Six years on, the US “pivot” and military preparations for war against China are far more advanced. Tensions between Washington and Beijing have sharply escalated following the ruling on July 12 by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague finding in favour of a US-backed Philippine case challenging China’s territorial claims in the South China Sea.

Rudd’s response was highlighted by an *Asia Times* comment yesterday entitled “China-friendly Aussie ex-PM fails in UN Secretary General bid.” In an interview on July 13, Rudd declared: “Look I believe in the UN. I actually believe in multinational institutions. But the key issue we face is what do we do now in terms of resolving disputes in the South China Sea? And that, I think, is now a practical case of diplomacy and negotiations.”

The last thing that Washington wants is a resolution

of disputes that it has been exploiting for the past five years to drive a wedge between Beijing and its neighbours and to justify a US naval build-up in these strategic waters.

Last week former Labor opposition leader Kim Beazley, who was Australian ambassador to Washington and is well-connected in US ruling circles, urged a military response to The Hague ruling. He called on the Turnbull government to “work back in” freedom of navigation exercises within the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit around Chinese-administered islets in the South China Sea.

Significantly, as well as proposing that Australia join the US in provocations against China, Beazley poured cold water on Rudd’s UN bid. Pointing to the push in the UN for a woman and someone from the Eastern Europe, he said: “I don’t know if it would be a sensible thing to stand against that and force through a candidate.”

The US Vice President Joe Biden was also in Australia last week for an unplanned visit following The Hague ruling to press the government to undertake freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea. It is certainly not beyond the bounds of possibility that in his discussions with Turnbull and Bishop that Biden let it be known that Washington frowned on Rudd’s campaign to become UN secretary general.



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