

# Kevin Rudd's Asia hypocrisy

Tony Parkinson

Contrast and compare the grandstanding of the Rudd government over Japanese whaling to its relative quiescence on the human rights crackdown in Tibet.

Consider it from the viewpoint of Tokyo, and you begin to understand why there might be rising anxiety, if not anger, about the emerging priorities of Australian foreign policy in Asia under Kevin Rudd.

In one case, you have the raucous campaigning against Japan by Environment Minister Peter Garrett, the dispatching of a customs vessel to the Southern Ocean to monitor the activities of Japanese shipping, the much-trumpeted dissemination by Garrett of (disputed) footage suggesting the slaughter of a mother whale and her calf, and the threat by Australia to bring its key ally in East Asia before the international courts.

Measure that against the softly-softly statements of Foreign Affairs Minister, Stephen Smith, in his response to reports that more than 100 Tibetan protesters had been shot or beaten to death by paramilitary police sent in to quell demonstrations in Lhasa. If you listened hard enough, you might have heard calls on Chinese authorities to exercise 'restraint', and a respectful plea for Beijing to allow greater latitude for political dissent.

On March 17, Kevin Rudd finally broke his silence: 'These are significant developments, and therefore have been the subject of communications diplomatically between our two governments. I imagine those communications will continue.' He might just as well have stayed mute.

But the problem here was not so much that the Rudd government was being circumspect about unproven claims of atrocities against the Chinese security forces. The problem here was a truly dreadful juxtaposition.

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For if symbolism counts for anything in international politics (and Rudd has demonstrated, through the theatrics of his ratification of the Kyoto Protocol in Bali, that he believes it counts for plenty) what are we to make of the symbolism that sees the new Australian government adopt the most macho of megaphone diplomacy when it comes to expressing moral outrage over Japanese whaling while confining itself to the meekest of mouse-like protests when it comes to troops and tanks rolling into Lhasa?

This yawning disparity in the Rudd government's approach to the two major powers in East Asia has not been a good look, serving only to compound the worst fears in Tokyo about Rudd's decision to include China, but exclude Japan, as a destination for his first major overseas trip as Prime Minister.

For this reason, Kevin Rudd deserved to be under greater than usual scrutiny as he set off on his visits to Europe, the US and China. Every nuance of his every word and gesture on this trip would be studied intensely, in Tokyo and beyond, for what it said about how the new Australian government was recalibrating its strategic approach not just to the region, but to the world.

In Europe and Washington, NATO chiefs and the Bush administration would be taking careful measure of where exactly Rudd stood on his commitment to the challenges of Afghanistan and Iraq. These are momentous issues of global security and stability, involving life-or-death choices. It is not a debate conducive to the slick soundbites and pantomime heroics Rudd put on show in Bali in December, where he was all but canonised by a misty-eyed media and the cheerleaders of the global NGOs.

This time around, Labor's foreign policy credentials were to be exposed, for the first time, to a searching and rigorous road test.

For all his efforts to elevate climate change to the 'great moral challenge' of our time, the struggle to secure and stabilise Afghanistan was always going to be front-and-centre of Rudd's trip to Europe. There are tensions and divisions within the NATO alliance over who is, and who is not, pulling their weight.

As ever, the expectation internationally is that it falls to the Americans to do most of the heavy lifting. Not all of NATO's European member-states are shouldering their share of the burden. Apparently unbeknownst to Labor's defence minister, Joel Fitzgibbon, as he reinvents the wheel, this problem had been raised repeatedly by Australia within NATO for the best part of two years.

At issue are the caveats several NATO partners place on the deployment of their forces within Afghanistan. The effect has been to leave the US, Britain, Canada and the Dutch to do the bulk of the heavy fighting against the Taliban in the south—and, as a consequence, to suffer the bulk of the casualties. Australian special forces have also been at the sharp end, notably in Oruzgan.

As Australian prime minister, Rudd is entitled to urge a fairer distribution of responsibilities. He is entitled to make the point that

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everybody around the table at NATO, not to mention the Afghan people, would pay dearly if Afghanistan was ceded once again to chaos, violence and extremism.

But, in mounting such a case, Rudd has a credibility problem of his own making. The same man who remains committed to the struggle to defeat the Taliban and their al-Qaeda sympathisers in Afghanistan adopts a very different line on Iraq, where he has proclaimed the struggle to defeat Sunni extremists and their al-Qaeda sympathizers as 'the biggest foreign policy disaster since Vietnam.' In keeping with this rhetoric, he has ordered the withdrawal by mid-year of 500 combat troops from southern Iraq.

Australia has every reason to be proud of its commitment to the battle for the future of Afghanistan. But if Rudd is to ask others to do more, they might well turn to the new Australian prime minister and ask why he can't do more to bolster our current commitment of 970 troops? For as long as Australia was also fully engaged in Iraq, that question answered itself. Not so now.

This same debate resonates profoundly in Washington. Australia has been a valuable supporter and ally in these difficult, gruelling and harrowing struggles in Iraq and Afghanistan. Will it remain so?

Rudd has strong networks in the US, across the political divide, due in part to his extensive and long-standing involvement in the Australian American Leadership Dialogue. Up to a point, this buys him some wriggle room. It is also true that he has cleverly tailored his message on Iraq to placate different audiences at different times. When speaking to his political base in Australia, particularly the Labor left, he parades his decision to withdraw Australian combat troops as delivering on his so-called 'exit strategy'.

When he speaks to Americans, he

is more prone to emphasise that Labor policy does not represent abandonment by Australia of its allies. He has sought to reassure the US that he is not 'doing a Gerhard Schroeder on them'.

At home, of course, the new prime minister doesn't make a habit of advertising the reality of our troop deployments in Iraq. For the fact remains that, when combat troops are withdrawn, the Rudd government will leave roughly two-thirds of the Australian contingent in place in the Iraq theatre of operations. This will include the security detachment guarding the Australian Embassy, along with the naval frigate protecting Iraqi oil facilities in the Gulf waters. It's the withdrawal you have when you don't have a withdrawal.

In Afghanistan, Rudd is more full-blooded in his commitment. This is welcomed in Washington, although some in the US might be curious about the distinction Rudd draws between Iraq and Afghanistan. The truth is, the strategic effect of defeat in either would be just as bad for global security.

In opposition, Labor persisted with the bogus claim that Australia would be safer from terrorism if it got out of Iraq—yet the same principle did not apply to Afghanistan. In government, Labor is stuck with this flawed logic.

The global Islamist movement makes no distinction between Iraq and Afghanistan. From their perspective, the war front extends from one to the other. Just ask the Canadians, who have sent thousands of troops into Afghanistan since 2001 but not a single soldier into Iraq. Canada has lost 79 troops and a diplomat to violent attacks. Last June, a nest of 17 Islamist terror suspects was arrested in Ontario, on allegations of a major bombing plot, not to mention a plan to storm Parliament and behold the prime minister.

Australia, Britain, the US and the Dutch are among those who have been

active in both theatres. So, in its own way, has Japan. It has committed naval destroyers and supply vessels to refuelling operations in the Indian Ocean, in support of the struggle in Afghanistan. Slowly shedding the taboos of the postwar era, it also became a key contributor in Iraq. Indeed, one reason for continuing Australian troop deployments in southern Iraq was to protect Japanese reconstruction teams seeking to refurbish Iraq's battered and decrepit infrastructure. This tag-team effort represented a quantum leap not only for Japan, but also in military co-operation between the two countries.

Through its years in power, the Howard government sought deliberately to elevate the relationship with Japan from its traditional narrow focus on trade and commerce. Rather than just pocketing the benefits of huge export deals, it was critical to understand Japan's prominence in the strategic calculus of the Asia-Pacific, not just as a trading power but also as a security partner and a world leader in development aid. Japan is not only Australia's biggest customer (our \$36 billion of exports to Japan last year were half as much again as our exports to China) but also a leading democracy in our part of the world, a key voice in all of the important trade and security debates across the region, as well as a generous and active player in grappling with the development challenges of the island microstates of the Pacific. All this should mean Japan is deserving of respect, not ridicule.

Indeed, how well we balance our relationships with the key powers of the Asia-Pacific is critical to Australia's long-term security and prosperity. It is not just a question of how we relate to each of them individually. It also requires an adult appreciation of how they interact, or don't, with each other.

Over eleven years, the Howard government worked assiduously, and



successfully, to strengthen simultaneously all of the most vital relationships—the US, Japan, China, Indonesia and, increasingly, India.

Adding to the formal alliance with the US dating back to the Menzies government in 1951, the Howard government negotiated a free trade agreement with the world's leading economy. It also bequeathed to Rudd a strategic partnership with Japan, a strategic dialogue with China, and a treaty on security co-operation with Indonesia.

This was a solid and well-balanced edifice. It provided Australia with a framework within which it could work effectively with each of its key partners, and remain a valued and trusted friend to all. Kevin Rudd will tamper with this at his peril. Any hint Australia is into the business of picking winners, giving undue priority to one over another, would be contrary to the national interest.

Of course, there will be sporadic difficulties, whether Japanese whaling or human rights in Tibet. Australia is entitled to raise its concerns forthrightly. But, to keep things in balance, it must ensure its representations are proportionate.

Australian governments do not recognise Tibetan claims for independence. But nor should any Australian government be seen to give comfort to China's intolerance of internal dissent, or its use of force against civilians.

One reality of China's stature as the coming world power is its propensity to flex its diplomatic muscle in ensuring its interests and priorities are respected, particularly when it comes to international attitudes towards the hot-button issues of Taiwan, the Falun Gong and human rights in Tibet.

China can be prickly, if not bellicose, on all of these issues. This is tricky territory for Rudd. Amid questions raised about his dealings in opposition with a prominent Chinese telecommunications firm, he is coming under increasing

scrutiny over whether he is a little too accommodating of China's sensibilities.

All the more important, then, that Rudd raise strenuously at the highest levels Australia's dismay over China's handling of the unrest in Tibet. China won't like being lectured for one minute, whether in Mandarin, English or Swahili. But some circumstances demand a bit of backbone and plain speaking.

Rudd should be wary of over-indulging his Mandarin party trick. The strict practice of China's leaders is to deliver key statements in their native tongue (including Hu Jintao's speech to the Australian Parliament in 2003). They would expect any self-respecting foreign leader to do the same.

Formal statements of Australian policy should be put to China in concise English, so as nobody should be left in any doubt or confusion—here, in Beijing, or anywhere else—about the meaning or intent of Australia's position.

In fact, Rudd should consider putting much more effort into brushing up on Japanese language and culture. For, on current form, it is in Tokyo, not Beijing, where the new PM is in far greater danger of being misinterpreted.

The Rudd government's rough handling of Japan cannot be excused as a sin of omission or forgetfulness. Each of its controversial decisions—on whaling, on its abandonment of the quadrilateral dialogue between the US, Japan, Australia and India, and on the decision to bypass Tokyo on this major overseas trip—involve explicit, calculated policy choices.

All that being so, Japan is entitled to ask whether the Rudd government has made up its mind about how it sees Australia's future in Asia, and whether part of that design is to draw much closer into China's orbit than Japan's.

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