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ANALYSIS

KEVIN RUDD AND THE U.S. ALLIANCE

Robert Ayson

In his first post-election press conference, Australia's new Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, informed the assembled media that he had received a congratulatory phone call from George W. Bush. Fresh from inflicting an overwhelming political defeat on the President's good friend John Howard, Mr. Rudd reported that he had relayed to Mr. Bush "the centrality of the U.S. alliance in our approach to foreign policy." In his acceptance speech before his Labor Party supporters the previous evening in his home state of Queensland, Rudd made specific mention of only one country apart from Australia. He did so by extending "greetings and thanks to our great friend and ally, the United States."

There are at least four reasons why Mr. Rudd found it necessary to assert his government's alliance credentials so quickly. First, he needed to preempt any unfavorable comparisons with the outgoing Mr. Howard, who had been an all-weather friend of the United States over the last eleven years. Second, he needed to put to rest any lingering memories of Mark Latham, the maverick Labor leader whose commitment to bring Australia's forces out of Iraq before Christmas of 2004 had brought the alliance into question and hastened a galling defeat at the polls that year. Third, alongside his colleagues in the powerful right-of-center faction of the Australian Labor Party, Mr. Rudd has a genuine belief in the importance of the alliance for Australia's security interests and for the future balance of power in Asia.

The fourth reason is the most intriguing. Mr. Rudd needed to balance his reputation as one of Australia's leading Sinophiles. As a former Australian diplomat who was posted to Beijing, Mr. Rudd speaks impeccable Mandarin. This fluency was put to most famous use during the September APEC Summit in Sydney with an address to China's President, Hu Jintao. But before he turned to the official language of the Middle Kingdom, Rudd made a striking comparison in English. While he called China Australia's "great friend and partner," he simultaneously referred to the United States as "Australia's great friend and ally." This was the very same attribution he was to use on election night two months later.

Mr. Rudd sees Australia's strategic future in terms of the maintenance of strong relations both with and between these two giants. The "between" part of this formulation is important because Rudd will oppose trends which force the United States and China apart in the Asia-Pacific. Australia's strong alliance commitments mean that Canberra is on Washington's side, but only if this does not mean siding against China. Yet these very commitments will be used to remind China that the Rudd government will not be tempted into zero-sum choices which favor the region's rising power over Australia's long-term ally.

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There is quite probably a fifth reason too for Mr. Rudd's speedy endorsement of the U.S. alliance on his election as Australia's 26th Prime Minister. Two of his earliest foreign policy actions distance Australia from the Bush Administration. The first is Australia's immediate ratification of the Kyoto Protocol. For many years, John Howard's Australia had held out as the only other industrialized country alongside the United States to withhold its support for the Kyoto targets. The United States is now even more isolated than ever on this issue. The second act of differentiation is not quite so instant. In line with a long-standing commitment made well before the election, Rudd's government will negotiate with the United States the withdrawal of Australia's combat forces from Iraq. This may sound thoroughly similar to the position which got Latham into such trouble three years ago. But Rudd has been careful to emphasize the consultation with Washington that will occur, the retention of many hundreds of Australian personnel in the broader Iraq theater, and his government's continuing commitment of forces to Afghanistan.

As a naturally conservative and careful politician, Rudd was criticized during the election campaign for adopting a "me too" approach by taking parallel positions with John Howard on taxation, monetary policy, and education spending. Washington will notice some important continuities in Australia's international relations as well from a Rudd government. Australia will continue to endorse the United States as Asia's necessary balancer. It will view the alliance relationship built around the 1951 ANZUS Treaty as a security policy cornerstone which supports Australia's defense self-reliance. The Rudd government will seek all the advantages allowed by close cooperation on intelligence, training, equipment, and alliance diplomacy with the world's leading power. And the United States can continue to count on Australia as an upholder of order in its near neighborhood where a number of weak states face significant stability challenges.

But the Bush Administration will not necessarily find that Rudd is a "me too" Prime Minister on foreign policy. There will be strategic issues where Australia's and America's enthusi-

asms may not be as evenly matched as they were under the Bush-Howard duet. A Rudd government will want to have less to do with missile defense and more to do with nuclear disarmament. A Rudd government will continue with the trilateral strategic dialogue with the United States and Japan which, amongst other things, affirms the latter's security normalization. But if Japan whispers hawkish views on China in Washington's right ear, Canberra will seek to balance this perspective in the other. Like the United States, the Rudd government will seek to build its strategic relationship with India, Asia's second rising power. But Canberra will oppose any sign of efforts to drag New Delhi into an alliance of maritime democracies, which will only encourage China into counter-moves. A Rudd government will take a more energetic line on the benefits of multilateral diplomacy and the need for a strong United Nations, even though it recognizes the limits of these mechanisms in an Asia-Pacific region that is dominated by great power politics.

John Howard's Prime Ministership coincided with America's post-Cold War hubris and the belief that common values rather than coinciding national interests were at the core of its alliance relations. The Bush Administration's costly adventure in Iraq gave loyal Australia a chance to boost its place in the alliance pecking order. But Mr. Rudd has taken office at a time when the phrase "coalition of the willing" has lost a good deal of its gloss, and where many of its principal architects have left the White House. The United States needs allies who can say no as well as yes when national self-interests and the health of the international system require them to do so.

This will not always be an easy distinction to make for Rudd's government. For example, should the United States seek Australia's military assistance in a violent Taiwan Strait crisis with China, all the answers are bad ones. But this only underlines Australia's interests in stable great-power relations in the region. And this is a common interest which Australia shares with the United States. This fact of strategic logic should undergird a strong alliance relationship between them for years to come.