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Rudd's vast foreign engagements

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It usually takes a while for a new Australian Prime Minister to develop a foreign policy agenda, let alone the confidence to pursue it. Not so with Kevin Rudd. He has hit the ground running with a successful debut at the UN climate change conference in Bali followed by lightning visits to Iraq and Afghanistan.

In 2008 we are likely to see more of the same as diplomat turned Prime Minister Kevin Rudd navigates what promises to be an interesting year for Australia internationally.

First item on the agenda will be managing our military efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. All signs are that the promised withdrawal of Australia troops from the South of Iraq in June will occur without damaging the Australia-US alliance.

While our great and powerful ally is no doubt privately miffed at this visible withdrawal of support for the Iraq venture, even the Bush administration is smart enough not to cause a rift over a mere 500 soldiers. Especially as sufficient Australian forces will remain in and around Iraq to give substance to Australia's continuing political support to the US led coalition – which is all that ever mattered anyway.

The danger inherent in the Iraq withdrawal is that it will lead to a compensating escalation in our commitment to Afghanistan. Although an increased commitment might eventually be justified, it would be a mistake to do so now. With the coalition effort inadequate to defeat the Taliban at present, and NATO nations wavering in their commitment, great caution is needed. Any boost to Australia's effort in Afghanistan should be contingent on others doing likewise.

Before the election Rudd invested a lot of political energy attacking the Howard government for diverting resources from Afghanistan to Iraq, arguing that it was in Afghanistan where the real terrorist threat had to be met. The message was clear: Afghanistan – good war, Iraq – bad war.

While this may have been good pre-election politics, it has created the expectation that a Rudd government will do more in Afghanistan. It is an expectation that has only grown following Rudd's bold talk of being "in it for the long haul" during his visit to the troops in Uruzgan Province.

We can only hope that the situation on the ground in Afghanistan improves during 2008. If not, Rudd will have to explain how stalled prospects of success nevertheless justify risking the loss of further Australian lives.

Closer to home, Rudd will need to make some early progress on his promise of an Asia Pacific Partnership for Development and Security. Too many of

Australia's neighbours are fragile states with poor governance, endemic poverty and limited economic prospects.

And, like it or not, from East Timor to Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and elsewhere in the South West Pacific, Australia bears de facto responsibility for human security. If we don't sort things out, no one else will.

So far, Rudd's plan is scant on detail. Turning around the prospects of our immediate neighbourhood will take more than the promised increase in foreign aid and the establishment of an Asia-Pacific Centre for Civil Military Cooperation in the marginal seat of Eden-Monaro.

The deep seated problems in Australia's near region demand a coordinated whole-of-nation effort to build a sustainable future for the countries concerned. Hopefully, 2008 will see concrete action from the Rudd government in this area.

Arguably, Rudd's most ambitious foreign policy goal is for Australia to mediate between the United States and China. This is a laudable aspiration; Australia's economic and strategic security is acutely vulnerable to disruptions in great power relations to our north.

To have any hope of moderating strategic competition between the United States and China, Rudd will have to do two things. First, he must establish Australia's credentials as an honest broker by making clear that our emerging security relationship with Japan is not part of a broader US scheme to contain China. This will not be easy given Howard's less than subtle handling of the issue.

Second, Rudd must find a way into the big league of North Asian security. This will be no easy task for a middle power like Australia situated on the periphery of Asia, though it might not be as hard as it sounds.

The Bush administration is eager to establish a permanent North Asian security forum as an off-shoot of the Six Party talks over the North Korean nuclear program. If this happens, the timing of the US presidential election means that it will be during 2008. Herein lies an opportunity.

Given Australia's good relations with the three principle players — China, Japan and the United States - there is a chance that we might rate a seat at the table. Not because we are a power player in North Asian security, but for the reason we would hope to be invited; that we are a trusted interlocutor. Still, if Rudd manages to secure a voice for Australia in North Asian security it will be a triumph of diplomacy over geography.

Then there is the important but glacial process of trade liberalisation. Discussions are already underway between Australia with a number of nations including our two largest trade partners China and Japan. Measured progress towards a Free Trade Agreement with both countries is possible in 2008, although the reality is that neither is likely to be of much economic consequence.

Just like the US-Australia agreement in 2005, the eventual outcomes will be more symbolic than substantive. As with climate change, while broad statements of principle are easy to achieve, actual concessions and

commitments are severely constrained by the reality of domestic politics.

It is the prerogative of an Australian Prime Minister to set a vision for Australia's place in the world. Initial signs are that Kevin Rudd's vision is for a more independent Australia than John Howard's, but an Australia no less engaged with the affairs of the world. Hard work lies ahead to begin delivering on this vision in 2008.

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- **David :**

10 Jan 2008 1:07:23am

Mr Rudd has tickets on Australia if he sees us as a potential mediator between China and the USA. In my recent travels through the US, Europe and China, Australia (let alone the PM) rarely gets a mention. In world terms, we are minnows. In my view, China and the US recognise the interdependence of their relationship and to suggest they need a mediator is some what patronising and naive. The best Australia can do is to lever off our relationship with both super powers, and get a bigger shake on the trade front.

Reply Alert moderator

- **Happy Riches :**

02 Jan 2008 9:38:19pm

I think Rudd has surprised many people by his ability to appear statesman-like. Irrespective of political leanings, one has to admit that Rudd does not appear to be a clone or puppet of anyone. So far, he appears to be in control of his destiny.

Foreign affairs was supposed to be Rudd's forte, not economics or education or health or being "Prime Minister".

Unfortunately for many in the Labor Party, Rudd might be too right winged in his views. He claims he is a Christian (anathema to many) and he is married to a successful multi-millionairess (no communist ideology there).

Reply Alert moderator

- **El Conquistador :**

02 Jan 2008 11:56:05am

I'm glad this article was written to simply highlight the fact that Australia risks economically becoming a vassal of Asia, in the same way culturally we have become a dominion of the US.

I think Rudd really needs to be suspect when trying to mediate (which is laughable) between the 2 Super powers, instead we should turn to nations and continents in similar predicaments like our South