The 2007 Australian federal election and a ‘steadfast, straight-talking’ alliance

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In the 2007 federal election, Labor campaigned on a renaissance of its traditional three pillars of international engagement: vigorous support for the US alliance, together with a commitment to regional relations and multilateral negotiations. Pre-election polling revealed that while Australians duly supported the alliance with the US, they were increasingly concerned by Australia’s military involvement in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Moreover, their views of the US were detrimentally affected by their increasing displeasure with the Bush administration. In the 2007 federal election campaign, Labor successfully capitalised on the nuances of these preferences by robustly asserting their alliance credentials while simultaneously advocating a withdrawal from Iraq. Foreign policy could then be used as another branch of Labor’s strategy to promote fresh ideas. Principally, this article examines Labor’s promise to enhance US relations by taking a more mature, considered approach to the alliance. In focusing its resources on the region, it simultaneously offered Australians a foreign policy that prioritised areas of greater strategic importance and the US a more effective utilisation of its expertise. Additionally, Labor’s intent to reactivate Australia’s multilateral endeavours, as initially evidenced by signing the Kyoto agreement, consolidated both a successful election strategy and an attempt to reinstate Australia in a role as link player between developed and developing countries.

Some commentators have argued that foreign policy was marginalised in the 2007 Australian federal election campaign (The Age, 3 December 2007). Clearly, however, foreign policy was integral to an ALP campaign (which effectively began with the election of Kevin Rudd to the Labor leadership) that privileged ‘fresh leadership and fresh ideas’. As a casualty in 2001 and 2004 when the Coalition capitalised, respectively, on the terrorist crisis and Latham’s denigration of the Bush administration, Labor effectively neutralised these issues in the recent campaign and actively regained the running in key foreign policy areas. Assisted by the tragedy of neoconservative foreign policy failure in Iraq, and the realisation that the US administration’s unilateralist bent was eroding both the possibilities for global solutions with a simultaneous diminution of US power itself, Labor opted to affirm the alliance but depart from parallel policies. Its vow to partially withdraw forces from Iraq and ratify the Kyoto Protocol marked crucial and electorally successful differentiations. In addition to the maintenance of the US alliance as the first pillar of its approach, Labor offered the promise of reinvigorated regional and multilateral international relations diplomacy as its second and third stakes of foreign policy (Rudd 2007a). Despite the Coalition’s practical engagement with China, with Sinophile Kevin Rudd as Labor leader came an expectation that relations with China would be elevated and the ALP Asian narrative be reclaimed (Gurry 1998).

This article examines the variations in foreign policy positions; in particular it examines these three pillars of Labor foreign policy. It examines the contours of alliance relations and how Labor will manage this US relationship through its regional and multilateral engagement. It offers a guide as to what we might reasonably expect in the new Labor government’s foreign policy on this front and defines some of the primary challenges in an increasingly complex international environment.

US alliance credentials

After the 2004 election failure, Labor understood implicitly the need to assert its US alliance credentials and the historical continuity in this relationship, albeit with some important caveats. In February of 2007, Rudd broadcast a statement on the strategic importance of the US but also defined the alliance parameters:

Let me state unequivocally that America remains an overwhelming force for good in the world. Let me state unequivocally that America remains an overwhelming force for strategic stability in the region. These are among the reasons why the US alliance remains fundamental for the future – but for us, an alliance has never meant automatic compliance, nor will it ever mean automatic compliance (Rudd 2007a).
McClelland reiterated the point with a promise that Labor would ‘make the Australia-United States alliance even stronger... (but, it would be)... a steadfast, straight talking friend’, with a focus on the Asia Pacific (McClelland 2007a). Labor thus began with an assertion of the antecedents of its US policy predilection through a lineage commencing with ALP Prime Minister Curtin's establishment of the US connection in 1945 after the failure of British strategy in Singapore, to Bob Hawke's commitment to the 1991 Gulf War and Keating's implicit affirmation of alliance relations (Barton 2000). As opinion polling revealed, however, while Australians were proponents of the US alliance, they held much less favourable views of the Bush administration (US Studies Centre 2007). In particular, and from the outset, Australians were not supporters of pre-emptive military action in Iraq. This standpoint provided Labor with an opportunity to differentiate policy from a Coalition government committed to its military operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan on the basis of both its support for the US alliance but also as they were the key battlefronts in a pervasive long war on terror (Downer 2007a). In this respect, Labor's policy to partially withdraw from the extent of Australia's operations in Iraq, through the withdrawal of 550 troops from the Overwatch Battlegroup in southern Iraq in June 2008 represented both the departure from the Howard government's policy of staying the course with the US and Labor's sensitivity to public opinion. Nevertheless, the ALP was not promising a complete withdrawal of Australian forces. Air and naval assets would remain in the region, together with training and diplomatic security forces in Baghdad (McClelland 2007c).

Maintenance of forces in Afghanistan, although initially an easier deployment to sustain, was becoming increasingly difficult electorally. As the situation in Afghanistan deteriorated, Australians were less supportive of military action in Afghanistan (Lowy 2007). While the tragic deaths of three Australian soldiers during the campaign did not materially affect the election itself, the cumulative effect of an increasing casualty toll will be to exacerbate the Australian distaste for the deployment. Moreover, the Afghanistan military engagement is problematic for the ALP for at least two additional reasons. Rudd's ongoing support for the US in Afghanistan is crucial as a counterbalance to any refusal to back the US on another battlefront. As Labor intends to confirm its alliance relations but will not do so as a 'sycophant' (Rudd 2007a), the situation is presaged where the new Australian government will not provide limitless support for US global military operations (Rudd 2007b). Prior to the US National Intelligence Estimates (NIE 2007) statement suggesting that the Iranian nuclear program weapons programme had likely been halted, US intervention to curtail the nuclear program in Iran may have called upon Australia to assist (NIE 2007); depending on the source of possible conflict, a Taiwan Strait or Caspian Sea intervention may be others. As stated, Australia's Afghanistan deployment is constructed on wavering domestic support, yet Rudd may be committed to remain in Afghanistan to prevent the corrosion of alliance relations.

Another slant on prospective US operational commitments provides an alternative but no less complicating problem for a Labor government intent on withdrawal in Iraq but the status quo in Afghanistan. Australian defence analyst Hugh White argued on ABC news recently that if the US believes that it cannot win in Afghanistan and concurrently accepts that al Qa'ida can operate independently of Afghanistan then the US will be more likely to continue to deploy in the critical geostrategic centre of Iraq while staging an eventual retreat from Afghanistan (Dobell 2007). This strategy, of course, would be the reverse of Rudd's Afghanistan policy (Rudd 2007b). Either of the two scenarios posited: the Afghanistan as counterbalance scenario or the US exit from Afghanistan, will present significant challenges for the Labor government to manage in the future.

As for the broader plan for defence, both Parties indicated that they would commission a new Defence White Paper. Labor also announced that it would establish an Office of National Security with a National Security Statement to follow the White Paper which would stipulate the 'strategic rationale and capability requirements' for the defence agencies (Rudd 2007b). Both the Coalition and Labor were committed to the defence budget increase in real terms annually of three per cent, with Labor broadly agreeing to an Australian Defence Force (ADF) structure similar in nature to that proposed by the Coalition. Nevertheless, the reality for both Parties is that the ADF will experience difficulty in recruiting and sustaining a force beyond that of the 57,000 personnel currently employed. Howard has made much of his public support for the ADF; indeed he assumed many of the roles the governor-general formally exercised in this regard. Throughout its campaign, Labor studiously distinguished between its ongoing support for the ADF and a flawed mission in Iraq.

More generally, alliance relations will be affected by the extent to which the US can recover from the policy failures of the Bush administration 2000-06 and any contemporaneous attempts to redress the growth of global anti-Americanism (Harries 2007). In short, Labor
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More generally, alliance relations will be affected by the extent to which the US can recover from the policy failures of the Bush administration 2000-06 and any contemporaneous attempts to redress the growth of global anti-Americanism (Harries 2007). In short, Labor will be negotiating its international relations with a US under pressure. Assisting Labor in its endeavours should be an understanding of the profound effects on the US of the 12 September terrorist attacks and a comprehension that a new administration, Democrat or Republican, will likely continue many of the policies currently in place from 2006.

Though the Coalition argued throughout the campaign that their economic credentials were superior to those of Labor, they were also the beneficiary of prosperous global conditions. However, when the subprime mortgage crisis hit the US and marked the edifice of an ongoing stock market decline, the Coalition also maintained that their experience best prepared them for any resultant global economic instability. This US domestic economic crisis aggravates the international strategic adjustment process experienced in America's manufacturing heartlands and abrades against the twin budget and current account deficits for the US. Further, as the US dollar continues to fall, the financial costs of continuing hegemonic intervention become that much more expensive (Rogoff 2007). So, when new Labor ministers, including Minister for Foreign Affairs, Stephen Smith, visit Washington in 2008 (Sydney Morning Herald 3 December 2007), they will also encounter an America that is more protectionist, more inclined to international trade and foreign companies and more unsympathetic to immigration (Pew Research Center 2007). Certainly, Congress will remain responsive to these pressures but the extent to which a new US executive will attempt to shift allegiances internationally, particularly in greater burden sharing on the part of its allies, will affect the contours of Labor's attempt to maintain robust alliance relations. If alliance relations were one of the motivations evidently stated for Australia's Iraq deployment then the continuation of its wheat trade market in the Middle East remained unacknowledged.

Just if and how the US Congress may choose to pursue the AWB over its involvement in the oil-for-food scam, despite the US capture of much of AWB's trade in Iraq, remains an unknown. Nonetheless, Nixon announced his doctrine of greater burden sharing by allies after the US failure in Vietnam became apparent (Bell 2007). US isolationism is no option in 2007. Both the ALP and the Coalition comprehended, at least, the need for US engagement in East Asia. However, Australia's alliance relations of course will also be influenced by the degree to which US engagement in the region can accommodate the rise of China. Throughout Howard's tenure, the former Prime Minister maintained that Australia's 'strategic maturity' could be measured by its ability to simultaneously engage with both the United States and China (Howard 2005a). Within the margins of the capacity to the mid-size power, one of the most significant challenges for the Rudd government will be to manage its relations with both powers. Arguably, one of the reasons for the timing of the election in November of 2007 was initially for the former government to accelerate its fortunes from Howard's role as host of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting in Sydney in September. Much of the publicity, however, focussed on Bush's poor public performance and Rudd's address to President Hu Jintao in Mandarin. More importantly, if at least in language only, Rudd demonstrated his comprehension of the challenge to manage relations between Australia's 'great friend and ally' and its 'great friend and partner' (Ayon 2007, Rudd 2007b).

Regional demands
Refoecusing on the region remained as the second plank in Kevin Rudd's resurrection of Labor's three pillars of international engagement (Rudd 2007a).

Unquestionably, the ADF is stretched at present, however, the ALP may well expand on the Howard strategy of submerging ADF personnel in local regional engagements as it is a means to defuse US pressure to cosponsor UN operations. Yet, in an increasingly complex world with the rise of new and old powers through Northeast Asia, South and Central Asia, together with instability in the Middle East, prospectively Australia could be asked to contribute to expeditionary forces to combat these regional conflicts arising from the Taiwanese elections and the risk of the 'perfect storm' to emanate out of Pakistan are only two possible scenarios that may emerge to demand US and Australian attention in 2008.

Central to the variation in approach to defence will be in the selection and rationale for future deployments. While former Prime Minister, Alexander Downer, spoke of the importance of the Middle East in combating terrorism, his then Opposition counterpart, Robert McClelland chose to focus on Australia's role in the region as part of its contribution to the response to global terrorism (McClelland 2007b).

Further, McClelland also argued that Iraq had been a 'distraction from addressing the priorities in our region' (McClelland 2007b) of concern. In this way, Labor ultimately negated the amplification of the terrorist threat, as had worked against it in previous elections, with its strategy of reorienting resources to respond to local terrorist threats and by playing a dead bat in campaign provocations such as the Mohammed Haneef case.
Rudd’s regional re-engagement, which will include a review of an Asian languages programme domestically, may also re-examine DFAT’s regional assets and expertise that was depreciated over the Howard decade. If enacted, these changes could bolster Australia’s capacity to contribute to the alliance and its division of labour under its UKUSA obligations. Labor has expanded on Howard’s argument that the volatile South West Pacific, with civil unrest in Fiji, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, PNG, and also East Timor, ‘constitutes our arc of responsibility’ and thus demands a significant allocation of security resources (McClelland 2007c). While the US response to 11 September terrorist attacks diverted US attention from East Asia and more specifically from China’s rise, it will have some sympathy for Australia’s attention to the region, particularly given China’s recent soft power activity in the region.

Constructed on a set of recent visits, Australia’s intervention in the IMF’s Asian Financial Crisis package, tsunami aid and terrorist cooperation, the Coalition acted to alleviate the tensions in the Indonesian relationship post East Timor independence. It did, nonetheless, revive some of these wounds with the acceptance of West Papuan refugees. Though Labor has stated it will take a tough line on asylum seekers, the West Papuan independence quest, a sympathetic Labor left and elements of Australian civil society will grind away at Rudd’s determination to support ‘effective laws, effective detention arrangements (and an) effective deterrent posture vis-à-vis vessels approaching Australian waters’ (Henderson 2007). Perhaps most striking, and yet most noticeably under reported during Howard’s watch to date has been Indonesia’s relatively stable transition to democracy. India, absent from both the APEC forum and for much of Australia’s foreign policy history, is nevertheless progressively exerting its presence in the contemporary wash of Australian foreign policy.

Like Australia, India is endeavouring to maximise its opportunities in an increasingly globalised economy. Like Australia, India may have been selected to join the East Asian Economic Summit as a counterweight to China. Similarly, US interest in India in its strategic calculations of great power status and alliances also counts for Australia. If matters nuclear were judged by the Coalition to be too risky to discuss within the constraints of the electoral campaign, they will certainly arise within the context of Labor’s foreign policy relationship with India. Yet, Labor is likely to revisit the Coalition’s choice to sell uranium to India regardless that this decision was probably taken at the behest of the US. By doing so, Rudd will no doubt antagonise a relationship with a rising power it would like to promote and complicate arrangements for the US.

Multilateralism, the US and China
Contemplation of the sale of uranium leads into the broader question of the ongoing relevance of the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Rudd has stated that Labor will resurrect its traditions in multilateralism: the third pillar of its international relations strategy. Uranium sales to India remain controversial as India remains outside the NPT. Yet over the past decade arms control negotiations have wilted with critics arguing that presence of nuclear states outside the NPT makes for an irrelevant and ineffective forum (Wesley 2005). Multilateralists will expect that under Rudd’s leadership, Australia will revive its activity in this realm, possibly working with a new US administration toward a Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty or in the implementation of an agenda suggested by Keating’s Canberra Commission (Medcalf 2007).

Howard’s platform over the past decade has mostly eschewed this ‘good international citizen’ agenda in favour of a results oriented practical bilateralism. Rudd’s multilateral renaissance, however, will be cognisant of the electoral success of Howard’s ability to frame international relations as it is relevant to the domestic audience. Rudd will also know that in many of the international forums, attempts by Australia to lead and influence will not only be constrained by the exigencies of Australia’s international status but also by the increasing tensions between developed and developing countries. Through the 1980s and early 1990s, however, Australia’s archetypal negotiating position was as a link player between the two groups, with one of its most effective consensus building results observable in the services negotiations of the Uruguay Round (Capling 2001).

Labor could argue that Australia’s role in East Timor served the alliance better than its commitment in Iraq.

In this respect, two of Australia’s key bilateral relationships (the US and China) remain central to the success of its multilateral diplomacy. Without doubt, the multilateralist direction was best expressed in the election campaign through Labor’s intent to ratify the Kyoto Protocol. It marked a significant area of policy divergence not only from the Coalition and one that resonated positively in the electorate under a larger banner of ‘fresh ideas’ but also from that of the US. Howard had often sided with Bush’s unilateralism and supported the US on Kyoto but also Missile Defence projects for the region. Labor rightly judged that climate change concerns many Australians and although the Coalition campaigned in this policy area with its Asia-
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As a beneficiary of an open rules based system, Australia is also dependent upon the reconciliation of these development tensions in the world trading system. Whether Australia can exert any influence on a Doha Round of multilateral trade negotiations that is currently on life support and wracked by the divergence in the two groups' positions is highly unlikely. Yet a disintegration of world trade into rival trade blocs presents a scenario that Australia previously endeavoured to avoid with its 1989 APEC initiative.

As a diplomat during the terms of recent Labor governmental terms, the threat of civil war seemed paramount. Howard's practice of routing foreign policy increasingly through the Prime Minister's office. Just as he did in the campaign, it is reasonable to expect that Rudd will remain omnipotent in setting and executing the foreign policy agenda. Furthermore, Rudd may take a personal stake in a restoration of the DFAT bureaucracy and intelligence agencies such that future Iraq WMD and AWS political fiascos will be preempted.

Foreign policy presence
Despite the best efforts of the Coalition to minimise the targets for Labor criticism of its foreign policy position, from the defence of its Iraq intervention to the treatment of David Hicks who would return to Australia and the purchase of the Hornets to erase the possibility of a capability gap in Australia's air defence, Labor gained much from a limited aggression strategy. It offered a regeneration of the three pillars of international engagement as part of its 'fresh thinking' approach. Under this banner it argued the historical strength of its alliance relations together with a differentiated solution to Iraq. It argued that its regional focus ultimately served the alliance better. The irony of this position was that ultimately Labor could argue that Australia's role in East Timor served the alliance better than its commitment in Iraq. Ironically too, a more discerning approach to alliance relations may refresh the falling popularity of the US within Australia.

Richard Flanagan (2007) has argued that the legacy of the Howard years will have been the construction of an alliance with the US if it is to survive, and inasmuch as possible for a small to mid-sized power to make a difference internationally, Rudd's likely revival of Labor's multilateralism could provide considerable divergence from the Howard bilateralist exemplar. One challenge for the Labor partment, however, in a much more complex international security and economic environment, will be to manage its key relationships with the US and China directly but also as they are central players in the respective north-south groupings that are at the heart of the current international tensions.

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