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## The Rise of Rudd and the Fall of Howard: Policy Implications for Southeast Asia

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*The rise to power of a Labor government in Australia bears some significant implications for Southeast Asia. Issues such as climate change and maritime security where clear common interests exist between Australia and the region will be priorities of the new prime minister.*

**KEVIN RUDD** was sworn in on Monday, 3 December 2007, a week after his Australian Labor Party (ALP) won a landslide victory in the federal elections on Saturday 24 November. Large swings to the ALP occurred in all states and territories, except Western Australia which is at the forefront of the current mining boom in Australia. This ended eleven years of rule by the conservative coalition government under John Howard, who also suffered the indignity of losing his own seat in Parliament.

Foreign and defence policy issues were not prominent during the election campaign. The exceptions were climate change and the involvement in Iraq which has increasingly lost public support in Australia. The focus of party campaigns was much more on domestic issues, particularly economic management, industrial relations, education and health. Nevertheless, there are significant implications of the change of government for Southeast Asia. These are both of policy substance and style. Issues such as climate change and maritime security where there are clear common interests between Australia and the region will be priorities of the Rudd Government, which will be more comfortable in the region than was its predecessor.

### Foreign Policy

The Howard years were initially uncertain ones for Australian foreign policy. The successful intervention in East Timor by Australia gave some confidence to the Howard Government, which was reinforced by events of 9/11, and concurrent problems on the home front with the *Tampa* affair and the influx of 'boat people' in northern Australia. These developments and participation in the "Coalition of the Willing" in Iraq and Afghanistan introduced clear directions in Australian foreign and defence policies that then prevailed throughout the remaining years of the Howard Government. They allowed John Howard to display "strong government" while playing on the "politics of fear".

The changes in foreign policy as a result of the change of government will be subtle rather than dramatic. Key areas of change will relate to Iraq, the environment, and nuclear issues. The Rudd Government will withdraw Australia's combat forces from Iraq but leave support forces in place. The commitment of over 1,000 Australian military personnel to Afghanistan will remain.

The alliance with the United States will however remain pivotal. Australia enjoys unique access to U.S. intelligence resources and technology, and an Australian Government is most unlikely to do anything that might seriously jeopardise that access. However, there will be some distance in the relationship with the Bush Administration and this might help pave the way for a closer relationship with the next U.S. administration. The left wing of the ALP has traditionally been opposed to American bases in Australia but this will not affect the Rudd Government, which will maintain all current basing agreements, including those made most recently by the outgoing Government.

Differences in approach towards China between Australia and the U.S. will be more obvious under the new government than with its predecessor. The Rudd Government will be markedly less supportive of any four-way relationship between Australia, India, Japan and the U.S. than the Howard Government appeared to be. It will also be bound strongly by its non-nuclear stance and is unlikely to approve uranium exports to India while India is not a party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. And the Japanese might expect a harder time from Australia on Antarctic whaling!

Climate change will be a key foreign policy issue under the Rudd Government. Climate change has been on the agenda since the 2nd East Asian Summit in January 2007 but no regional strategy has been developed yet to mitigate the risks and threats. With its vulnerability to drought, global warming and water shortages, Australia will seek to play a prominent role in the development of regional strategies to handle climate change. It has good credentials to do so, particularly after it has ratified the Kyoto Protocol. Senator Penny Wong, who is Malaysian-born, is to be the Minister for Climate Change and Water thus becoming the first Cabinet minister of Asian descent in Australia.

## **Defence Policy**

As evident from the defence policy document *Australia's National Security: A Defence Update 2007*, the Howard Government was increasingly following a "Globalist" school of strategic thinking that perceived Australia's security as primarily determined by global events. This approach saw defence in functional terms with security mainly about defending values and interests. It argued against geography as a primary strategic determinant. This emerging policy partly reflected a need after the event to justify defence decisions already taken, particularly the military commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan, and to expand the Australian Army and acquire C-17 Globemaster aircraft, Abrams tanks and large amphibious ships.

While these issues were not the subject of debate during the election campaign, the Rudd Government is likely to be far more circumspect than the Howard Government about global commitments. It will be focussed much more on events nearer to home. It will certainly not allow itself to be pressured by the US into joining "coalitions of the willing" unless Australia's national interests are clearly at stake.

Despite this possible change in direction with strategic priorities, the new Australian Government appears locked into the acquisition decisions already taken by its predecessor. However, we might expect close scrutiny of proposals in the pipeline, including participation in the U.S. Joint Strike Fighter programme. In its last year in office, the Howard Government had been on a defence spending spree, but the Rudd Government is likely to require tight budgetary restraint in Defence to support its social programmes, particularly education and health.

## **Implications for Southeast Asia**

Generally the change of government in Australia should be well received in Southeast Asia. Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yuhoyono is reported to have rung Mr Rudd personally to congratulate him on his success and to invite him to the forthcoming Bali Summit on Climate Change. Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, along with Southeast Asian leaders, sent messages of congratulations.

There are good grounds for Southeast Asia feeling more comfortable with the Rudd Government than with its predecessor. The 2007 Defence Update had rather a “hawkish” flavour to it that may have caused some discomfort in the region. It supported notions of power projection, expeditionary littoral operations, and interventionist capabilities. The political ethos of a Labor Government in Australia means that such a government will be much less keen on these notions.

Given the extent of Australia’s trade with Northeast Asia, Australia has a strong vested interest in the security of shipping passing through Southeast Asia. It has supported numerous capacity building initiatives to enhance maritime law and order in the southern Philippines and Indonesia. The likely establishment of an Australian Coast Guard by the new government will facilitate Australia’s support for maritime security initiatives in the region.

Apart from issues of policy substance, Southeast Asia may also see changes of style in the presentation of Australian Foreign Policy. Kevin Rudd himself, as a former diplomat and fluent Mandarin speaker, will be much more at home in Asia than was his predecessor. He will also expect his ministers to play more active roles in regional forums rather than relying on public servants to promote Australia’s position. This will be particularly the case with issues such as climate change and other environmental threats that have clear ramifications for Australia, and where Australia has a demonstrable common interest with Southeast Asia.

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