

“AN ODD MAN IN” – AUSTRALIA’S ROLE IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

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“An odd man in” – this still hits close to the mark in describing Australia’s role in the international system of today. It took the election of Kevin Rudd in 2007 to finally show the world that Australia also wants to play an active role in many international structures and processes. Support for global institutions and involvement in the G20, the stimulation of renewed efforts toward nuclear disarmament, participation in the negotiations on a climate deal before the Copenhagen summit, a troop contingent in Afghanistan, the push for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council from 2011 and, most recently, a bid to stage the soccer World Cup in 2018 or 2022 – all this serves to underscore Australia’s newfound presence on the international stage.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd is the driving force of Australian foreign policy. As a former diplomat he has a particular affinity for the issues of international politics. The fact that he studied and taught in China and speaks fluent Mandarin makes him the first Australian prime minister to have a global perspective clearly influenced by the growing importance of China. However, to really understand his foreign policy activities and ambitions two further elements must be noted. In keeping with the tradition of the Labor Party, Rudd places special emphasis on multilateral processes and institutions. As a practicing Christian he has repeatedly stressed the influence that German theologian Dietrich Bonhöffer has had on his faith. This contributes to the fact that his foreign policy is also characterized by normative elements. His admiration for Bonhöffer represents a special strand in his relationship to Germany, a relationship that he would like to cultivate more intensively.

Three key pillars have shaped Australian foreign policy for many years: the close alliance with the US, the energetic cultivation of relations with Asia and the advocacy of an effective system of global governance with the twin emphases on the United Nations and an international trade system with clearly defined rules. Notwithstanding changes in political style brought about by changes of government – Conservative governments have tended to place somewhat more emphasis on bilateral relations whereas the Labor Party has favored multilateral cooperation through the United Nations and other international organizations – these policy pillars have kept their significance for many years due to the country’s geographical location, the structure of her economic resources and the values on which the state is founded.

These three pillars have also remained central to the foreign policy of the government led by Prime Minister Rudd. Changes in the international system have given rise to some perceptible shifts in the positioning of Australian

policies in these areas. Of key significance is the emergence of a new role for Asia in the new international system. Rudd sees it as an inalienable fact that the coming decades will see Asia, and China in particular, playing a more important role. Accordingly, he sees it as his central task to prepare Australia for the "Asia-Pacific century", to "maximize our possible options, minimize any threats to us and make our own active contribution to ensuring that this Asia-Pacific century will be peaceful, prosperous and sustainable for all of us."¹ The future relationship between the US and China is of key importance for Rudd in this context. One of the tasks of Australian policy, as he sees it, is to support the process of rapprochement between the two. As Rudd studied and taught in China and speaks fluent Mandarin he appears to be more sensitive to developments in that country; he knows China and enjoys easy access to the leadership. This does not, however, exclude the possibility of differences of opinion or even conflict that have more recently come up between Australia and China.

There are worries in Australia about the dwindling importance of the US as a guarantor of security in Asia.² The May 2009 white paper on Australian security policy stresses that the strategic stability of the region will best be served by the continued presence of the US. The economic growth of other powers, especially China, will inevitably lead to a transformation in the balance of power and the conditions for regional security. "The decisive relationship, both regionally and globally, will be that between the United States and China. The way the relationship between Washington and Beijing is managed will be of decisive importance for strategic stability in the Asia-Pacific region."³ Against this backdrop, Australia sees its role as a builder of bridges between a Chinese dominated Asia and the US. Such defence policy aspects are a key motivating factor behind Australia's Asia-Pacific initiatives.

The close economic ties and China's new role in the international system are capturing much attention in Australia. Some politicians and political observers have even been concerned that Prime Minister Rudd's affinity with China might have exercised undue influence on him. Rudd's own positions and the development of mutual relations in the past few years have, however, proved this concern to be unfounded.⁴

¹ Quoted from Gyngell (2008), p. 5.

² Cf. Australian Government: Department of Defense, *Defending Australia in the Asia Pacific Century: Force 2030*, May 2009, at http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper/docs/defence_white_paper_2009.pdf [20.12.2009]; Rod Lyon and Andrew Davies, "Assessing the Defense White Paper 2009" (Barton: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, May 7, 2009):

³ Eric Sayers and Walter Lohman, "Australia Surveys Asia's Future" (Heritage Foundation, WebMemo No. 2449, May 15, 2009).

⁴ Rudd's university degree thesis was on dissidents in China, an indication of his ability to view the country critically.

At the same time, Kevin Rudd is convinced that China's rise to global power status will have considerable consequences for the international system. These will relate to trade and finance, climate policy and questions of democracy and participation as well as the use of modern communications technology. In an April 2008 address in Beijing, Rudd called for a partnership that would be based not just on short-term gain but would also take the form of real friendship with open dialog on important issues.

All in all, Australia's most important trading partner and foreign investor is the European Union. With a value of around 56 billion Euros, the EU's share of Australian trade in goods and services amounted to some 16.4 percent of the total. Australia's most important exports to Europe are coal and gold. The United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Germany are Australia's main export markets in the EU. Conversely, the UK and Germany are her most important European suppliers. Because the crisis has hit Europe harder than Australia and China, the international economic and financial crisis may change the EU's position as trading partner. The year-end figures will shed more light on this. For Australia, the EU is also an important political partner. The new partnership treaty of October 2008 created a new framework for cooperation, which emphasizes above all the following issues: defense policy, multilateralism, climate change, the promotion of democracy and human rights, and cooperation in development aid to the South Pacific.

Since 2001, Australia and the EU have been cooperating closely in matters of defense policy.⁵ It isn't all just consultation: since 2003 Australian troops have been stationed in southern Afghanistan alongside a Dutch contingent. In 2008 in Bucharest Kevin Rudd became the first Australian prime minister to take part in a NATO summit, at which he advocated stronger European support for NATO operations. He repeated this demand during a visit to Washington in March 2009.

German-Australian relations are in good shape. After the United Kingdom, Germany is Australia's biggest European trading partner. Traditionally, however, there has always been a trade deficit in favor of Germany, which exports higher-value finished goods to the fifth continent whilst principally importing raw materials. More than 300 German firms do business in Australia. In the scientific sector as well there has traditionally been a good relationship. It must be said, however, that Chinese is now a more popular foreign language choice than German.

At the political level, Prime Minister Rudd made it clear during his July 2009 visit to Germany that he was very interested in intensifying cooperation and

⁵ Cf. Nina Markovic, *Courted by Europa? Advancing Australia's relations with the European Union in the new security environment* (Canberra: Parliament of Australia, Department of Parliamentary Services, Research Paper, July 14, 2009).

together with Chancellor Angela Merkel has announced some cooperative projects. The two heads of government meet regularly at G20 summits and other international occasions.

Australia has become an active player on the international stage. On the one hand, this is in line with Prime Minister Rudd's own inclinations. On the other, it reflects the increasing clout of the Australian economy and its integration with other regions, in particular Asia.

Regarding important international and security policy questions, German and European Union positions correspond closely with those of Australia. Both parties subscribe in principle to the same values and pursue the same interests in the international system. Australia's integration into Asian processes and structures has made the country very familiar with operations and developments in Asia. This could be profitably exploited by Germany and other European states. Geographical distance is no longer a barrier to the maintenance of political dialog, less still to the pursuit of economic ties. It has to be said, however, that the opportunities for Germany which would arise out of closer cooperation have not been fully recognized. The fact that there are no correspondents working for German newspapers, TV or radio stations in Australia is a tell-tale sign. For this reason, stereotypes have on occasion been disseminated all too quickly. A more intensive involvement with Australia would, however, bring great advantages for Germany in the political, economic and development aid spheres. Down Under, such initiatives would be welcomed with open arms.

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