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## Rudd's Asia Agenda

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835 words

10 June 2008

The Wall Street Journal Asia

p. 12

SYDNEY -- Kevin Rudd has made much of his diplomatic abilities and his knowledge of Asia -- including his fluency in Mandarin. So it's a sign of how seriously he's run off course in only six months in office that he finds himself in Tokyo and Jakarta this week trying to patch things up with Australia's most important regional partners, one of which happens to be the world's second-largest economy.

Mr. Rudd is trying to dispel the growing impression around the region that his government is deliberately tilting toward China and away from Australia's democratic partners. That such an impression exists at all is a symptom of Mr. Rudd's surprising diplomatic clumsiness. The most glaring example came in February, when Canberra renounced the embryonic quadrilateral dialogue between Australia, the U.S., Japan and India. The group had met only once, in May 2007, to discuss disaster relief cooperation. But China didn't like it. Mr. Rudd axed the initiative, and Australia's foreign minister made the announcement with the Chinese foreign minister looking on approvingly beside him.

A worrying drift has been visible in other, more concrete, ways. The only attention the Rudd government has given to Japan has been to rail against Japanese whaling, whipping up populism at home and stirring up resentment in Japan. The result is that concessions from Japan are less, rather than more, likely. Mr. Rudd's decision to rule out selling uranium to India to help meet its surging energy demand and cut its greenhouse gas emissions defied logic and unnecessarily offended New Delhi. India is a rising democracy with an excellent non-proliferation record and the potential to make a major regional and perhaps global contribution. As a result of these missteps, Mr. Rudd has fed Japan's acute strategic anxiety and set back prospects for a strong Australian strategic partnership with India, as well as leaving the rest of Asia guessing about what he really intends for the region.

Further muddying the waters, Mr. Rudd last week proposed the establishment of an Asia-Pacific Community by 2020. Little detail was provided about what such a group would actually do; about the only thing we know for sure, following media questioning, is that he isn't proposing a single regional currency. It could well be a pie in the sky suggestion, but the mere fact that the government is suggesting such a thing has potential diplomatic ramifications.

The problem is not just that Mr. Rudd's grand regional vision lacks detail and smacks of policy made on the fly. And it certainly isn't that the region's existing multilateral institutions are so well-designed and on top of the challenges facing the region -- whether financial meltdowns, natural disasters or security flashpoints -- that there's no need for enhanced cooperation.

Rather, it is that Asia's stability and prosperity -- and a successful Australian foreign policy -- continue to be underpinned by strong bilateral relationships. It is democracies such as Australia,

the U.S., Japan and India that work together in partnerships to provide the overwhelming majority of the region's "public goods" -- as they did after the 2004 tsunami. The best way to ensure the Asia-Pacific region remains peaceful and continues to prosper is to work with our democratic partners in particular to ensure these sinews of regional cooperation are kept in good repair.

The Rudd government's clumsy early diplomacy has set back this agenda. There is a place for selective, well-considered multilateral diplomacy and for improving the efficiency of existing organizations, particularly the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation association. But even though Mr. Rudd has already shown at home that he is a master of political symbolism, the last thing the region needs is more grand visions, envoys and international conferences. The brand of "activist middle power diplomacy" he espouses is more likely to succeed if he leaves the gesture politics at home and concentrates on first earning the trust and respect, and then perhaps the support, of Australia's natural partners.

If he gets that right, Mr. Rudd can have it all: a robust alliance with the U.S.; strong strategic partnerships with Japan, India and Indonesia; a burgeoning economic relationship with China; and respect around the region and beyond. That, after all, is the formidable foreign policy legacy former Prime Minister John Howard left him. Mr. Rudd likes to denigrate the Howard government's strong record of achievement in Asia and engage in the same facile conceit as some of his Labor predecessors -- that his party "owns" Australia's engagement with Asia. The reality, though, is that he's got some catching up to do -- starting with this week's trip.

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