

Alliance would get a fresh coat of paint under Rudd

Michael Fullilove

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A good deal of copy has been written about the US-Australia alliance in the past few years, but almost all of it has described the alliance under its current stewardship by conservative leaders in Canberra and Washington. However, the political constellations are shifting. There is a reasonable chance that the alliance will soon be in the hands of a Labor prime minister - and that within 18 months the alliance will be conducted between progressive governments in both capitals. How would the ALP manage this critical bilateral relationship? What does Labor's alliance DNA look like, and how would it manifest in government?

There is no question that Australia would remain a close and reliable ally of the US. Every Labor prime minister since John Curtin has supported the alliance and sought to use it to Australia's advantage. In the past quarter-century it has emerged, for very sound strategic and political reasons, as a core feature of Labor foreign policy. Everything we know about Kevin Rudd's background and instincts indicates there would be powerful continuities in alliance management under his prime ministership. Australia would still look to America.

Labor's approach to the alliance would differ from the Coalition's, however, in two important respects. First, the limits to Australian support for the use of force by the US would be clearer. Australia would participate in most foreseeable American-led coalitions: a century of Australian diplomatic and military practice tells us that. However, if the Bush Administration abandoned its new-found and prudent multilateralism and initiate another risky military operation, without clear provocation and in the face of strong opposition in the international community and the United Nations Security Council chamber, then Washington would be unwise to assume Australia would participate.

In another sense, though, Labor may move Australia closer to the US, especially if a Democrat is elected president next November. We could see a renewed emphasis on influencing Washington, not only on events close to our shores but also on the global issues of the day, such as climate change and nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, all of which require American engagement. When Labor leaders talk about the alliance, they typically emphasise the advocacy of Australian interests and the quality of Australian ideas, rather than the familiar catechisms of Australian loyalty. Paul Keating compared himself to a travelling salesman, with a sample bag full of ideas. Of course, sales is a tough business. You need to know your customers: you need to be in their ear and, sometimes, in their face. Under Labor, Australia would be a busy ally.

Reconceiving the relationship in this way would help Labor to persuade its skeptical supporters of the alliance's value. It is always harder for Labor governments than Coalition ones to make the case for the alliance. Because conservative voters are, by and large, supporters of America's role in the world, Coalition governments which act in concert with Washington are pushing on an open door. When Labor is in power, public debates about US actions tend to develop in a more hostile fashion. In the '80s Bob Hawke and his defence minister Kim Beazley addressed this problem by reframing the debate on the joint facilities around nuclear deterrence and arms control agreements and developing the doctrine of "self-reliance in an alliance context". A Rudd government would need to put in similar intellectual and policy grunt work in order to explain the alliance to its supporters.

Next year's presidential election will pose a second alliance challenge for Labor. Whichever combination of the political Rubik's cube clicks into place - whether it's Howard-Clinton, or Rudd-Romney, or even Costello-Obama - the alliance will remain strong. There are risks, however. The alliance has achieved an unprecedented intimacy over the past half-decade of conservative rule in Washington and Canberra. Once the Vulcan mind meld between President Bush and Prime Minister Howard is broken, the relationship will lose some of its current emotional resonance. It will become less "special". We will need to work out how to retain our current level of influence if Bush's successor is an anti-war Democrat who has no tender feelings about our participation in Iraq and is more interested in renewing ties with disillusioned European allies and satisfying his or her protectionist colleagues in the Congress.

On the other hand, Labor has one important advantage on the alliance: its likely approach would be consistent with Australian public opinion. Last year's Lowy Institute poll found that although more than two-thirds of Australians believe the alliance is very or fairly important to our security, a similar number believe we take too much notice of the US in our foreign policy. The appearance of total association with an ally, even if it is a misperception, can be dangerous for an alliance. No one wants to live in an echo chamber. If Labor could balance Australia's reliability with new ideas and a more independent bearing, it would do the alliance an important service.

This is an extract from a public lecture to be delivered today at the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library in Perth.

Michael Fullilove directs the global issues program at the Lowy Institute for International Policy