

Michael Fullilove  
**Australia will benefit from new diplomacy**  
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The cancellation of Condoleezza Rice's trip to Australia this week was really too bad.

A visit by a Secretary of State is always much sought-after, particularly a diplomatic rock star like Rice. For a close US ally such as Australia, though, Rice has a special attraction: she has helped to preside over a shift in Washington's strategic direction that is very much in our favour.

In his first term as president, George Bush pursued a muscular grand strategy to impose America's will on the world. His administration – in which Rice served as National Security Adviser – largely eschewed the twentieth century tradition of projecting influence not only via hard power but through allied nations and multilateral institutions. Instead US policy was marked by unilateralism, pre-emption and regime change through the use of force.

The president lectured the United Nations while his Defence Secretary dissed 'Old Europe'. Multilateral agreements were binned. The world was divided into men of steel and evildoers. Iraq was invaded and occupied despite the failure to obtain the Security Council's support. The administration's boosters glowered that Syria and North Korea were next.

Australian commentators from left and right disagreed violently on the merits of this approach, but most assumed it would define Bush's second term as surely as it did his first.

Only a year or so after his victory over Senator John Kerry, however, it is clear that this assumption was wrong. The Bush Doctrine, supposedly America's new strategic posture for the ages, did not survive a single presidential election.

Diplomacy has become the comeback concept. Washington worked closely with Paris in order to get the Syrians out of Lebanon, and then to pursue those Syrian officials allegedly implicated in the assassination of Rafik Hariri. It joined forces with Beijing, Moscow, Tokyo and Seoul in order to reach agreement with North Korea, presumably still a member of the axis of evil, over its nuclear program.

The policy shift was accompanied by movements in the Washington influence game. The State Department has retaken some of the policy territory previously annexed by the Pentagon. Many of the formerly dominant neoconservatives and assertive nationalists have been stripped out of Washington's policy-making processes and now find themselves in the private sector, in international organisations, or in court. Rice herself has quickly replaced Donald Rumsfeld (described by President George Bush as a 'matinee idol' only a few years ago) as the administration's most prominent international spokesperson.

Rice has played an important role in this recalibration, but there have been much larger factors at work. The first was the failure of foreign policy adventurism in the first term. America's inability to create a stable democracy quickly in Iraq discredited the role of ideology in the eyes of many policy-makers. The lack of weapons of mass destruction undermined faith in the reliability of US intelligence, making pre-emption harder to sell. Much of the US military – and much of Bush's historical legacy – is now tied up in Iraq. The struggle to avoid failure there imposes serious limits on Washington's freedom of movement elsewhere.

Domestic woes are another factor. Increasingly George Bush looks like a victim of the 'second term curse' which has struck so many recent US presidents. Harry Truman's second term was marred by the Korean War; Lyndon Johnson was emasculated by Vietnam; Richard Nixon resigned over Watergate; Ronald Reagan suffered the Iran-Contra scandal; Bill Clinton was impeached over the Monica Lewinsky matter.

George Bush's sorrows are coming not as single spies but in battalions: the Iraq imbroglio; Hurricane Katrina; the botched nomination of Harriet Miers for the Supreme Court vacancy; the domestic spying drama; the indictment of Republican enforcer Congressman Tom DeLay and the corruption saga of lobbyist Jack Abramoff. All this is leaching away the president's support and his political prestige.

Of course, it's far too early to write off such a formidable political operator as George Bush, whose second term still has longer to run than the whole of John F. Kennedy's presidency.

Furthermore the degree of the foreign policy shift should not be overstated. The US is not retreating into isolationism or adopting Scandinavian pacifism. America's power projection capacity still greatly exceeds that of any other country, and Washington remains the only capital with a truly global foreign policy.

It would still use force to achieve its core national interests – including, perhaps, to prevent the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran. So far, Washington has been notably cautious and consultative on the question, allowing European capitals to take the lead in negotiations with Tehran and even supporting the proposed compromise that would allow Iran to enrich its uranium offshore.

However the Iranian situation develops, though, the notion of an 'America rampant', lately lauded by the right and feared by the left, is yesterday's story.

The pursuit of a more moderate international course by the US makes diplomatic life much simpler for Australia – a point we should remember even in Condi's absence.

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