

Looking good in New York, sounding good in Pittsburgh

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Last week was a good one for the UN, the G20 and for two leaders who are seeking to put these institutions to work – Barack Obama and Kevin Rudd.

It wasn't all plain sailing at the UN in New York. Among the heads of government to address the General Assembly was Muammar Gaddafi of Libya, King of Kings and temporary tenant of Donald Trump, who delivered a 90-minute rant in which he abused the Security Council (or, as he called it, the "Terror Council") and tossed the UN Charter over his shoulder. Gaddafi and Venezuela's Hugo Chavez are vying to replace the ailing Fidel Castro as the world's biggest buffoon, and I fear for Chavez's chances.

Like the big top, the General Assembly sometimes has a carnival atmosphere, complete with fire-eaters and clowns. Yet the UN's broad membership gives it unparalleled legitimacy when tackling global problems, as demonstrated by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's climate change summit last week. The summit brought forward commitments from countries such as Japan and a noticeable shift in tone on the part of President Hu Jintao of China.

Solutions to many of the world's problems require the involvement of the Chinese, so it was gratifying to hear Mr Hu acknowledging Beijing's global responsibilities rather than dwelling on its national prerogatives.

Then the Security Council lived up to its promise as a venue for creative statecraft. To dramatise his administration's commitment to the UN as an imperfect but essential institution, Barack Obama became the first president in history to chair the Security Council in person. He deftly secured the passage of an important resolution on nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament, with support from Russia and China. The debate around the Security Council table was a timely demonstration of why the Rudd government is campaigning for a seat at it.

If the subtext of the resolution was Iran's nuclear program, it soon became the main text, when the US, Britain and France revealed that Tehran had been caught red-handed in a covert attempt to enrich uranium. The Western response was all the more impressive because it came against the background of the discussions in the Security Council and the notably strong words from Russia's President Dmitri Medvedev.

Obama looked good in New York. His poll numbers have stabilised in recent weeks and he may very well pass a decent healthcare bill soon. Reports of the President's political demise have been vastly exaggerated.

From New York, world leaders travelled to Pittsburgh for the G20 summit. Pittsburgh produced several positive results but from Australia's perspective, the medium was the most important message. Obama's decision to replace the G8 as the world economy's steering committee with the G20 was undoubtedly the right one for the world. It also counts as his first gift to Australia. Do not forget that the two great institution-building ideas of Obama's rival for the presidency, senator John McCain, were a League of Democracies that would have excluded China, and the expulsion of Russia from the G8. It is hard to imagine McCain would have been as steady and effective as Obama on the global financial crisis, climate change, or for that matter the Iranian nuclear program.

It is equally difficult to believe that John Howard would have prospered in the Obama era of geopolitics. Kevin Rudd has thrived, however. The battlefield promotion of the G20 was not his doing, but he was one of the most persuasive voices arguing for it.

Australians are joiners by instinct and practice. We like the idea of belonging to international institutions and our leaders have done their share of institution building. Bob Hawke was primarily responsible for APEC; Paul Keating grafted the Leaders' Meeting on to APEC; and now Peter Costello and Kevin Rudd have played important roles in developing the G20.

Pittsburgh caps off an impressive two years for Rudd as foreign policy-maker-in-chief. The president of the World Bank, Bob Zoellick, told me recently that Rudd had "established himself as a catalyst for better multilateral policy-making. Much of this work was behind the scenes, a combination of smarts, humour and attention to personalities." Zoellick said that by bringing together three networks of leaders in the US, Europe and the developing world, Rudd increased Australia's influence.

Both Obama and Rudd are tough diplomats and hard-headed multilateralists. They believe their countries' national interests can often be pursued most effectively in concert with others and through international institutions such as the world's premier economic forum (the G20) and the world's premier security forum (the Security Council). For both these leaders, it was a good week of work.

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