

US focus on strengthening long-term bonds with the Asian region

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Barack Obama's visit to Australia this week will attract some frenzied reporting. We will hear about Obama's limousine, his body man and his Blackberry. There will be reports on the wingspan of Air Force One and the number of Secret Service agents in the travelling party. Twitter will go nuts.

Meanwhile in the American press, no Australian cliché will be left behind.

Beneath the glitter, there are four pieces of good news to consider during the presidential visit.

First, it marks the sixtieth anniversary of Australia's alliance with the United States. Both sides see value in the alliance: Washington gets a reliable ally; Canberra gets a powerful one. There will be significant announcements on closer military cooperation, but the historical fact is just as important.

Second, Obama's presidency has strengthened Australians' regard for the alliance, which sagged badly during the Bush administration.

Australians supported Obama's election in 2008 by a ratio of nearly five-to-one, and our esteem for him has now spread to the alliance with his country. This year's Lowy Institute Poll found that 82% of Australians say the alliance is very or fairly important for Australia's security – up 19 points since 2007.

Trust in the United States has also risen. 83% of Australians now say they trust America "a great deal" or "somewhat" to act responsibly in the world – up 23 points since 2006.

The atmospherics of the Australian debate have also changed since Obama's inauguration. Alliance bashers no longer argue, as they did until recently, that the US is a "rogue state" or "the world's most dangerous nation." With George Bush out of the picture, we can see the United States – with all its strengths and weaknesses – more clearly.

Perhaps the relationship at the summit is not quite as close as it was a few years ago. But that is no bad thing. You can love an alliance to death; respect and affection are more appropriate mindsets for sovereign states.

Third, Obama has been a prudent commander-in-chief. Given Australia's record of fighting beside America in every major conflict of the last century, this is very good for us.

Future historians will shake their head as to why, during a period of remarkable global change, Washington decided to invade an Arab country for no obvious reason and spend a decade occupying it. The same historians will despair that Australia went along with this folly, without so much as a peep of official protest.

The Obama template for projecting American power has proven vastly superior to the Bush template.

For example, the raid on Osama bin Laden's compound was a patient, intelligence-led, lightning operation against an enemy that had done America enormous harm. It was the opposite of the Iraq operation, which was an instinctive, military-led, lingering invasion of a state that had nothing to do with the 9/11 attacks.

Obama's approach to Libya was also, in its own way, an anti-Iraq. Working in synch with Arab states, NATO countries were able to topple the regime in a way that maximised Libyan ownership of the victory and minimised the risks and costs to the west.

No-one believes these models can simply be applied to future challenges. But they point to a new approach that is heartening for an ally such as Australia, which invariably gets involved in America's fights.

Finally, the Obama administration is proving attentive to the region in which we live. Leaving aside the stop-start nature of the president's visit to Australia, he and his officials have been highly conscientious about spending time in the Asia-Pacific. They recognise that the United States has been too focused on the Middle East and that their country's future – like ours – will largely be won or lost in Asia. Now the administration is doing its best to extricate itself from the former and concentrate its energies on the latter.

So sit back and enjoy the stories about President Obama's exercise regimen and his teleprompter. Don't bristle at the Crocodile Dundee references which are already appearing in American publications. In a bad-news world, the Australia-US alliance is a good-news story.

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