

We'll have to vie for Obama's attention

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It turns out that John Howard was not just impolitic when he said last year that al-Qa'ida should pray ``for a victory not only for Obama but also for the Democrats". He was also dead wrong. Far from giving succour to America's enemies, the election of Barack Obama to the White House has greatly widened the circle of America's friends.

In many parts of the world -- including those where security threats against the West coalesce -- people are now looking at the US in a different light.

It is good news for Australia, of course, when our strategic ally is well-liked. But Obama's global appeal is only one reason why the election result furthered our national interest.

President-elect Obama is likely to run a foreign policy that is deliberate and prudent. He promises to return to the post-World War II approach of working through institutions and allies to project American power. He will buck up the American people and remove some of the self-doubt that has accrued with the Bush administration's failures.

His foreign policy advisers are knowledgeable and practical. They display none of the ideological tics of the characters who surrounded President George W. Bush in his first term. Obama will not turn a blind eye to bad behaviour by America's competitors, but neither will he fetishise it: he knows that Washington needs to work with Moscow and other capitals to solve global problems.

John McCain and Hillary Clinton can both attest to Obama's toughness. Yet he is also likely to be a cautious commander-in-chief: no small blessing for Australians, because a century of military practice indicates that our forces will be entangled in any major conflict in which the US is involved. It will be difficult for the world to strike a bargain on climate change next year, but the chances are improved by Obama's win. Finally, given that Australians supported Obama's election by a ratio of nearly five to one, the result will be good for the health of our alliance with the US, which had been drooping in popularity.

However, from Australia's perspective, Obama's victory also has the defect of its quality. America's new-found popularity means that Australia risks getting lost in the crush, something that was never likely during Bush's ill-starred presidency.

Obama's Washington will present the most competitive diplomatic environment since the days of John F. Kennedy's New Frontier. The whole world will be reaching out to the new president, and many other countries have stronger claims on his time than we do. Obama is less alliance-focused than Bush or McCain, at least when it comes to Asia. Furthermore, he does not have conspicuously close ties to Australia.

The old friendships we enjoy with Republicans and Clinton administration veterans (not to mention the Clintons themselves) will be useful. But because of the creative destruction wreaked by the US political appointments system, we will also need to build thick relationships with Obama's new picks and with younger officials from the

Clinton era who are stepping up into big jobs.

How can Australia prevail in the Darwinian struggles for access and influence that will shortly unfold in the US capital? We certainly cannot rely on the familiar catechisms of Australian loyalty that were a feature of the Bush-Howard era. Being a close and reliable ally will get us in the door: then we need things to say.

To succeed, we will need sharp elbows and pointy ideas. Sharp elbows means nimble representation and energetic advocacy, directed not just at the US executive and Congress, but at the new class of influence-wielders to whom the administration will listen. Pointy ideas means high-quality perspectives, and sometimes proposals, on the great regional and global issues of the day.

One advantage we have is that Prime Minister Kevin Rudd is likely to be in sync with Obama. They are very different people, but both are pragmatic problem-solvers from the centre-Left. The Australian Government's work on climate change and the PM's much-maligned initiatives on nuclear disarmament and Asia-Pacific architecture may give us a head start on issues likely to interest Obama.

The new US president will want to hear what Rudd has to say on China. Canberra would also be well advised to open up an early discussion on how we can assist further in the fight against the Taliban, on which Obama has promised to refocus America's energies. Notwithstanding speculation in the Australian media about an imminent request for combat troops, this may entail other forms of assistance. In any case, we shouldn't wait for Washington to initiate the conversation.

The Rudd-Obama relationship got off to a good start with the first conversation between the two leaders. Obama's advisers report a high degree of satisfaction with the call. To maintain this early momentum, though, we will need to be a busy ally.

In March 1942, John Curtin, another Labor prime minister with a strong alliance record, told parliament that his government had insisted on having a direct voice on equal terms with its allies on decisions relating to the Pacific. "The weight and authority which that voice might command," he cautioned, "are for ourselves to ensure." Curtin's warning applies equally today.

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