

Regional diplomacy has new impetus

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Balances and trade-offs are required for the success of negotiations.

Kevin Rudd will arrive in Beijing with something like celebrity status - no previous Australian prime minister has had anything like the public profile in China of Lu Kewin.

China is central to his foreign policy experience. He studied Chinese history and language, was posted to the Australian embassy in Beijing and has worked in China as a business consultant. He regards China's rise, he told his biographer, as the first of the three or four big challenges facing Australia. And as the first Western leader to speak an Asian language fluently, Rudd in Beijing will be a world media event - a potent symbol that Australia stands at the forefront of the West's response to a rising Asia.

This is good news for us. The Prime Minister can communicate an image of modern Australia directly to the Chinese public. He can converse at the highest level without the artificial barrier of interpreters. As he showed in Washington, he brings to his job a sophisticated understanding of China. But the question for Australia (and the immediate foreign policy challenge for Rudd) is how this personal narrative can be harnessed for a broader and more difficult purpose: reshaping and giving new depth to the Australia-China relationship.

The need for this is urgent. When the prime ministerial plane lands in Beijing, it will mark the first time any Australian prime minister has visited both Washington and Beijing on the same overseas trip. This is a powerful illustration of how the weights in Australia's international relationships are changing. When China replaced Japan last year as Australia's major trading partner, we entered unfamiliar territory. For the first time in our history, the country on which we depend most heavily for our trade is not also part of our principal alliance network.

John Howard used to say that Australia did not have to choose between the United States and China. But that, alas, is unlikely to be a luxury we can enjoy - except, we must hope, at the most profound level. Choices are at the core of all foreign policy decisions. And for Australia, our interests in the new global environment make those choices more complicated.

The choices we confront in the new regional environment involve more than America and China. China and Japan eye each other jealously and on issues like access to our resources, Australia is already being drawn into their competition. We will have to help shape the relationships between the major powers in ways that help them deal with each other and which create the sort of regional environment that best suits Australia. Perhaps our biggest challenge is to persuade Washington, Beijing and Tokyo that it is not in the interests of any of our major partners to force Australia into a big, defining, either-or choice among them. The timing is critical too. Australia and China share important mutual interests, and because the forms of the emerging regional system have not yet been cemented, we may never have as good an opportunity over the next five to 10 years to help shape our future relationship with China and China's own role in the world.

Public opinion will have an important place in this process because it helps to shape the parameters within which Australian governments must operate. According to Lowy Institute polling, Australians see China in a largely positive light, as an opportunity rather than a threat. But it is likely that the public's views are shallow.

On China, we can't get away with policy by bumper sticker. Whether in our attitude to human rights in Tibet, or Chinese ownership of Australian resources, or the labour market dimensions of a free-trade agreement, or the price for Chinese co-operation on climate change, Australia has difficult balances to strike.

Balances and trade-offs are often messy, but they are required for the success of negotiations.

And they will be developed better and accepted more securely in an atmosphere where China's politics, its regional differences, the range of its problems, the nature of its public debate, are much better understood. It is, in part, just this depth of understanding that provides the stable foundation for our relationship with the United States.

We need, badly, to develop in Australia the same sort of broad comprehension of China. This will help us make informed choices in response to some very hard diplomacy challenges.

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