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## **Rudd needs a clearer idea to stem growing disarray**

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A foreign policy white paper would help the Government to articulate priorities and bring order to its chaotic agenda, advises Russell Trood

THE Howard government issued two foreign policy white papers during its term of office: one in 1997 titled *In the National Interest* -- the first issued by any Australian government -- and a second, *Advancing the National Interest*, in 2003.

While the preparation of the two papers was time consuming, they served at least two invaluable purposes: they forced the government to think about its policy priorities in a disciplined way and they provided the electorate, and the international community, with a clear statement of policy direction.

There is a manifest need for the Rudd Government to do both of these things: it should begin immediately to prepare and issue its own foreign policy white paper. The paper should be developed in conjunction with the forthcoming defence white paper and complement the soon to be released national security statement.

Timing the release of a white paper is not easy as international relations is always a movable feast, but white papers justify themselves in any one of three circumstances: when there has been a significant shift in the main trends of international affairs; after elections when political change foreshadows a substantial reorientation in government policy; or when existing policy has become so incoherent and devoid of clarity and purpose that a restatement of its principles and direction are needed.

All three apply to the Rudd Government. While the world has certainly changed since 2003, it is the Rudd Government's increasingly incoherent and confused approach to Australia's foreign relations that makes the case for a new white paper so compelling.

The ALP went to last year's election with a so-called three pillars approach to foreign policy and a commitment to Australia being more active on the world stage. The three pillars emphasised the need for Australia to maintain a strong bilateral relationship with the US, engage more fully with Asia and seek to play a more active part in the UN.

This was a dubious approach to foreign policy from the beginning because it did little more than state a few policy priorities. They were never articulated within the context of a rigorous assessment of Australia's national interests and, among other things, were always likely to be mutually inconsistent. Kevin Rudd's commitment to multilateralism (the UN), for instance, challenges his belief in the fragility of bilateralism (Australia-US relations) as a form of international engagement.

Since the election, the incoherency in the Rudd Government's approach to foreign policy has become only more obvious. On Asia, the desire for closer engagement has morphed into an ill-conceived, ill-timed and ill-prepared plan for an Asia-Pacific community, while several key relationships, notably Japan and India, have become hostage to bad management and indifferent diplomacy.

The place of bilateralism in the conduct of Australian foreign policy has become unclear since Rudd emphasised the brittleness of this form of diplomacy in several of his recent speeches.

In addition to the Asia-Pacific community idea, a set of fresh initiatives has emerged: the Government's pre-election interest in non-proliferation has become a quest, though this is not entirely clear, for nuclear disarmament, a very different policy aim; engaging the UN has transformed into a determined (and likely expensive) campaign to win a non-permanent seat on the Security Council; events in Afghanistan are of such seriousness as to demand a greater strategic investment than previously expected; and Europe, conspicuously not one of the pillars, is slated as a focus for deepening co-operation and engagement.

On the trade side of the foreign affairs portfolio, the Government's policy strategy is hardly any clearer. As prospects for a successful multilateral agreement in the Doha round steadily disappear, the prosecution of what should be a determined bilateral free trade agenda is being jeopardised by a cutback in the funding of bilateral negotiations with Japan and China.

Australia's policy on the sale of uranium to India is in suspension awaiting, it seems, international events, and confusion reigns over the future of the Export Market Development Grants Scheme.

Finally, the increasing dysfunction of the Government's approach to foreign affairs is underscored by its mystifying attitude to the funding of the foreign affairs portfolio. Australia, Rudd proclaims, is to become a practitioner of "creative middle-power diplomacy" on the world stage, an enterprise that will see it more actively engaged in world affairs. With such an expansive policy agenda, this cannot help but require a substantial increase in the foreign affairs budget.

Yet one of the Rudd Government's first acts was to cut funding to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, withdraw 25 diplomats from posts abroad (including from Europe) and fail to make any significant additional resources available in its first budget.

There are other issues that highlight the Government's messy struggle to bring coherence and a clear set of policy priorities to its strategic outlook. Not the least is its approach to counter-terrorism, the way it intends to build "rules-based international order" and the priorities in the Pacific partnerships program.

Elsewhere, policy paralysis is affecting some key decisions: when, for example, will a new Australian high commissioner to Britain be announced?

To date, the shortcomings of the Rudd Government's foreign policy can be seen in a penchant for big ideas poorly conceived and unconvincingly argued; adventurous diplomacy lacking clear focus or rationale; and grand policy visions under-funded and under-resourced. This is no way to run a foreign policy railway. It puts excessive pressure on Australia's modest foreign affairs bureaucracy, it results in policy dysfunction and incoherence, it undermines Australia's

diplomatic credibility and it gnaws at the professionalism of Australia's foreign service.

Ideally, this Government should abandon some of its policy ideas. Failing that, the only way to begin to address this growing disarray is a foreign policy white paper.

It should aim to do several things: explain Australia's understanding of the key trends in contemporary international affairs; articulate Canberra's policy priorities and the way they interact with each other; clearly articulate the means by which they will be pursued; and, finally, outline a program to better align Australia's policy aspirations with the resources necessary to support them.

Only with these measures can the Rudd Government hope to restore some order, coherence and credibility to its foreign policy.

Russell Trood is a Liberal senator from Queensland and deputy chairman of the Senate foreign affairs, defence and trade committee. He is the author of *The Emerging Global Order: Australian Foreign Policy in the 21st Century*, published recently by the Lowy Institute for International Policy.