
PM flubs chance to fix Tokyo ties

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Kevin Rudd should have helped Japan change the way it sees China, observes Hugh White

KEVIN Rudd had both a real diplomatic challenge and a big opportunity when he visited Japan this week.

The challenge was not just to soothe Tokyo's displeasure that he had not visited sooner, but to bridge the very serious gulf that is opening up between Australia and Japan over how we deal with China.

His opportunity was to start promoting a vision of our region's future that will serve Australia's interests in the complex strategic changes that are already under way in Asia. But he has failed the challenge, and squandered the opportunity.

Instead his visit focused on two strangely meaningless Big Initiatives: his idea of an EU for Asia, and the new crusade to rid the world of nuclear weapons. No one could disagree with these noble objectives, but no one seriously believes that such ill-considered and under-prepared announcements offer any hope of achieving them. They simply confirm that Australia's Government has not yet found its feet in foreign policy, and still fails to understand the difference between a real policy and a press release.

This jejune diplomacy makes us look silly, it irritates the serious players in Asia, and achieves the very opposite of the "middle power activism" to which Rudd committed himself a few months ago.

But the real loss is the missed opportunity to start a serious conversation with Japan about our future relationship.

He needed to tell Japan that Australia wants a vibrant, strategic relationship with a strong and active Japan, but we also want the same kind of relationship with China.

The Japanese would welcome the first part of this message, but not the second. They would prefer Australia to join them in resisting China's claim to a growing say in Asia's strategic affairs.

Japan sees China very differently from Australia. They are deeply anxious that China will use its growing regional influence to push Japan into a permanently subordinate place under China's strategic thumb.

China does nothing to assuage these fears. A recent mild warming in their diplomacy has not

changed China's fundamental disdain for Japan. However justified historically, Beijing's relentless evocation of Japan's wartime crimes suggests that they will never accept Japan as a legitimate regional power in its own right. Instead they seem to expect that as China's power dilutes and perhaps eventually eclipses US primacy in Asia, China will exercise some kind of hegemony over Japan. No one in Japan could accept that.

That is why Japan is keen to build, with America, a coalition in Asia to resist China's challenge to American primacy. It very much wants Australia to be part of this coalition.

In the competition for spheres of influence in the new Asia, Australia is seen as a bit of a prize. For some years, Japanese observers have been dismayed by Australia's growing enthusiasm for China. They were therefore delighted last year when John Howard moved sharply back in Tokyo's (and Washington's) direction, signing a security agreement with Japan, and welcoming closer security talks with Tokyo, Washington and even New Delhi. That is why Tokyo was always worried about the Mandarin-speaking Rudd. They see relations with China in zero-sum terms, and feared that Rudd's closeness to China would reverse Howard's recent rebalancing, and take Australia even further into the Chinese camp.

That is why they were concerned when Rudd went to Beijing in April without a counterbalancing gesture towards Japan. It seemed to confirm Rudd's tilt to China. They saw the same tilt in what they regarded as the anti-Japanese tone of Canberra's response to last summer's whaling controversy, which Rudd in populist mode seemed happy to continue in Tokyo yesterday.

The problems in Australia-Japan relations therefore go much deeper than petty scraps over travel plans or populist posturing over whales. Behind these lies a difference over the shape of the new Asia which could not be more serious, both for Japan and Australia.

Rudd needed to address this issue. He should have assured Tokyo that we see a strong, active, respected and responsible Japan as essential to the future peace and stability of Asia, and that, after 60 years of exemplary international citizenship, we believe Japan deserves to be trusted as a major power.

He should have said that Australia understands Japan's anxiety about how China might use its growing power. But he also needed to explain that, from Australia's perspective, Japan's approach to Asia's future seems untenable. Terrified that better Sino-US relations may leave them unprotected, Japan now believes that its security depends on suspicion and hostility between Washington and Beijing. But the US and China are also Japan's two biggest trading partners, and a peaceful and stable relationship between them is vital for Japan, as it is for everyone else in the Western Pacific, especially Australia.

Rudd needed to make clear that Australia sees things differently. For us, there is no alternative but to work towards a new political and strategic order in Asia based on the maximum convergence between Washington and Beijing. But that new order must also provide a substantial and secure place for Japan.

To reach that, Washington will need to concede some increased power and influence to China, and China will need to concede more power and influence to Japan.

It is far from clear whether this new order can be achieved, but it offers the best hope for a peaceful and prosperous Asian Century.

The alternative -- Tokyo's vision of a regional alliance to constrain China -- carries immense risks for all of us. But events are already trending that way. Without a major change of heart in Tokyo, Washington and Beijing, the drift towards a more divided and contested Asia may become unstoppable. This is the issue Rudd should have had at the top of his agenda this week. He flubbed it. Perhaps next time.

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