

AUSTRALIAN VOTERS' GUIDE TO INTERNATIONAL POLICY

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Australia's alliance with the United States is one of the most prominent features of our political and policy landscape. In political terms it generates huge public interest and helps to inform what voters think about the political parties' suitability for office. In policy terms it is important to our security and prosperity: furthermore it is a prism through which we approach other foreign policy issues. Sometimes it is a proxy for the general character of foreign policy which a government will run.

The next Australian Government will need to consider a number of issues relating to the US alliance, the first being the overall tone to strike. The forthcoming federal election *will not* determine whether Australia remains a close ally of the United States: a century of consistent diplomatic and military practice tells us that it will. Australia is arguably Washington's most reliable ally: the only country to fight beside the US in every major conflict of the 20th and 21st centuries. Both major Australian political parties agree on the advantages Australia derives from the alliance: the promise that we would be protected from a strategic threat, unlikely though that may be; the interactions with US military forces and their technologies that keep the ADF sharp; and privileged access to American intelligence and thinking.

However, although the election will not affect the health of the alliance it may affect its temperature. Leaders come and go, and their passage informs their country's bilateral relationships. The new British Prime Minister Gordon Brown has already telegraphed that his government will conduct its relations with Washington in a more businesslike, arms-length fashion than under his predecessor Prime Minister Tony Blair. Similarly a change of government, or of leader, in Canberra would likely change the atmospherics of our own alliance with the US.

The Australian prime minister will also need to consider how to manage that alliance in light of shifts in Australian public opinion. The 2007 Lowy Institute Poll indicated that President George W. Bush himself causes 69% of Australians to have an unfavourable opinion of the United States. More worryingly for those who support the relationship (as

opposed to those who like this particular president), support for the US alliance appears to have waned slightly in recent years: although 63% believe it is very or fairly important for Australia's security, this number is down from 70% in 2006 and 72% in 2005. In last year's poll, 69% of respondents felt that Australia takes too much notice of US views in our foreign policy.

The election may illuminate the limits to Australian support for the use of force by the United States. The Bush Administration is now running a much more orthodox, even multilateral foreign policy than it did for most of its first term. Nevertheless there are still circumstances in which Washington would use force to achieve its foreign policy objectives, and in that case it would probably look to Australia for material or moral support. Quite apart from our deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, then, which are considered elsewhere in this guide, Canberra would need to decide whether to extend its support to any new operations, which would of course depend on the costs and risks of the operation.

The election of a new US president in November 2008 will probably produce a global sigh of relief. However, it will also pose challenges for the Australian Government. The alliance has achieved an unprecedented intimacy over the past half-decade. With the arrival of President Bush's successor, the relationship will lose some of its current emotional resonance. It may become less 'special'. Canberra will need to think about how to retain its current level of access in Washington if the new president is, for instance, an anti-war Democrat who has no tender feelings about Australia's participation in the Iraq war and is more interested in renewing ties with disillusioned European allies.

Australians may also need to consider how to react if the new president is intent on satisfying his or her protectionist colleagues in Congress. There is a new protectionism in the air in Washington, and several presidential candidates are running against free trade. The Australia-US Free Trade Agreement should provide us with some insurance against backsliding. However, if the broad consensus in favour of free trade were to collapse Australian economic interests could be threatened.

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Finally, the rise of China will increase the level of difficulty for Canberra. In recent decades Australia has enjoyed a congenial situation in which its biggest trading partner, Japan, is itself an ally of our strategic ally, the US. However, given the clip at which China is currently growing and the complementarity of the Chinese and Australian economies, China will soon overtake Japan. Then Australia's largest trading partner will actually be a peer competitor of Australia's principal ally.

The changing relativities do not just apply to trade, either: China's growing confidence, diplomatic dexterity and military power would, if plotted on a chart, produce a growth curve that is just as impressive as its economic results. Beijing's influence is growing in the oil-rich regions of Latin America and the Middle East, at the United Nations in New York and — most importantly for us — in Northeast and Southeast Asia and the Pacific. One of the next government's principal tasks, then, will be managing the US-China-Australia 'strategic triangle'. If that triangle turns toxic — for example in a dispute across the Taiwan Strait — the choices for Canberra could be excruciating.