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**Howard must risk his interests for the sake of the nation's**

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Like everything else in his prime ministership, John Howard's foreign policy is a study in discipline and focus — and the focus is domestic politics. That is the strength of his leadership and its weakness. He has shown great skill in riding the current of public opinion. But if there is more to political greatness than winning elections, Howard has to show he can lead public opinion in new directions.

Howard's international objectives have been defined and pursued within a framework set by his sense of electoral opinion. He never allows his international ambitions to slip the constraints of his domestic agenda. He has never been prepared to spend political capital at home to achieve diplomatic objectives abroad.

In this, Howard is unusual. All his significant postwar predecessors have pursued foreign policies which went beyond the concerns, and the comfort zones, of the voters. Detractors call it strutting the global stage, supporters call it visionary leadership. Usually there is a bit of both. Paul Keating had his fervid engagement with Indonesia. Bob Hawke led the region into APEC, and maintained an intense personal interest in the Middle East. Malcolm Fraser browbeat the Commonwealth on Rhodesia and apartheid. Whitlam was into everything.

Even Menzies, while he soothed the voters with talk of Britain, allowed his two outstanding foreign ministers — Percy Spender and Richard Casey — to set the pattern of relations with the US and Asia which still define the parameters of Australia's international posture.

Howard has done none of this. He has never knowingly adopted a foreign policy position that was out of phase with Australian opinion. Even his controversial decision to support the US invasion of Iraq was taken early on, when he believed the operation would be quick, easy and popular.

That was a rare slip. Mostly Howard has found it relatively easy to frame responses to regional and global events in ways that have met the national mood, even if they have not always served the longer-term national interest. Howard's relative coolness towards Asia seemed vindicated by the economic crisis of 1997. His response to the East Timor crisis of 1999 played to a nascent fear of Indonesia, our increasingly overt nationalism and the associated reconsecration of the army as a central national symbol. And Howard's early support for the US over terrorism played to our enduring commitment to the alliance notwithstanding our grave doubts about George Bush.

At times, Howard has seemed deliberately to sacrifice Australia's interests and standing abroad to appeal to xenophobic undercurrents at home. The controversies over Pauline Hanson and pre-emptive strikes in neighbouring countries come to mind. Howard has perfect pitch for the modulations of Australian public opinion, but a tin ear for the cadences of diplomacy. I think he genuinely did not understand how Hanson's views played upon memories of White Australia and European colonialism in Asia. But deliberate or not, some damage has been done.

Of course there is sometimes more to Howard's foreign policy than political calculation. Where he has seen important opportunities that could be seized without political cost he has been

happy enough to take them. In many ways Howard's biggest diplomatic achievement is the consolidation of our relationship with China. But it has taken place quietly, below the radar of public opinion, except when it has paid spectacular — and popular — economic dividends. His policy of closer engagement in the South Pacific has also been an important new departure, for which he deserves credit. But again, the political cost was negligible.

At one level, Howard's highly politicised foreign policy must be counted a success. When he became Prime Minister, Howard was uncertain and uncomfortable in foreign affairs. He had no expectations that it would become one of his key electoral strengths. But since East Timor it has become central to his leadership. It has contributed handsomely to this week's sweet succession to the honoured second place behind the unmatched Sir Robert.

What now, though? Can Howard meet Australia's most pressing foreign policy priorities without drawing on some of the political capital he has so carefully amassed over the past three terms of Parliament? Three issues will pose a real test. The first is the need to build a stronger relationship with the new, democratic Indonesia. Only a prime minister willing to lead public opinion on this most complex and critical relationship can hope to leave a lasting achievement here.

The second is the need to re-engage effectively in the burgeoning regionalism of Asia. At the ASEAN summit in Vientiane last month, Howard showed both the scope and the limits of his regional diplomacy. He can fairly claim that we are now, after many years, back in the game. But unless he is willing to lead Australian opinion on issues such as the Treaty of Amity and Co-operation, we will not get far.

The third big issue is the future balance of power in Asia, and especially the critical relationship between the US and China. Australia has a real interest in a peaceful integration of China into the regional and global system. That won't happen without some pressure on Washington — something that won't come naturally to the Australian public. We will need to be led. Is John Howard willing to do that?

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