

Going All the Way, But Why?: the Howard government's foreign policy

Hiroya Sugita

[Kanagawa University, Aoyama Gakuin Women's Junior College]

In many ways, Australia is at the crossroads. Since his election to the office in March 1996, Prime Minister John Howard has, incrementally but steadily, transformed Australia into something very much to his liking.

Since the mid 1960s, Australia has experienced considerable degrees of change. Multiculturalism, as a concept and practice, enriched Australians' quality of life. Reconciliation with indigenous people through non-Aboriginals' commitment and apology gained a certain momentum. In a sphere of foreign policy, the focus was shifted from the US towards North and Southeast Asia. These changes had enjoyed bi-partisan (multi-partisan if the Australian Democrats are included) support. There had been a tacit agreement not to make "race" an election issue. All these advances, which had made Australia more generous and tolerant and thus more likeable, attractive and respectable to the eyes of outside world, especially to those of its close neighbours in the Asia-Pacific region, are now in jeopardy as a result of the Howard government's policies.

In terms of Australia's foreign policy, there are two tendencies. One is to place the bilateral relationship with "the Great and Powerful Friends", the UK and the USA, as paramount. Another tendency is to pursue more independent foreign policy as a middle power through multilateral diplomacy. In recent times, such an independent foreign policy manifests itself as "Engagement with Asia".

Since the late 1960s, Australia has, while balancing between two tendencies, more or less pursued the latter course with a considerable degree of success. Nevertheless, Howard appears to have shifted that balance towards close, almost indistinguishable, alignment with the US. Australia's enthusiastic support for and participation in the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq and finalising the Free Trade Agreement with the USA are two very clear and recent examples. This paper argues that Howard is doing this not because of any perceived national interests but rather because of his ideological commitment to the US alliance and desire to score domestic political points against his political opponents.