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ALEXANDER DOWNER

Australia retreats from Asia

There has been much commentary about Kevin Rudd's role in encouraging NATO to intervene in Libya. The truth is, of course, Australia was but a vocal bystander. The countries which counted were the ones which were going to do the job: the United States, Britain and France. The French President and the British Prime Minister were particularly robust in their support for the no fly zone and, as one American diplomat told me recently, President Obama was prepared to go along with the plan out of respect for and loyalty to his allies, especially Britain. But Australia simply wasn't in the mix. Our government had a point of view but no doubt so did the Mexican and Argentine governments. Their views are respectfully listened to but that's all.

ALEXANDER DOWNER retired from politics in 2008 after a distinguished career spanning 23 years. He was Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs throughout the term of the Howard Government, from March 1996 until December 2007, and the Leader of the Opposition and Leader of the Parliamentary Liberal Party from May 1994 to January 1995. He is currently a partner in the strategic advisory business, Bespoke Approach, and the Secretary General of the United Nations' Special Envoy on Cyprus.

To have an impact on the international stage, Australia has to play to its strength: the politics, economics and diplomacy of the Asia-Pacific region. There is a perception in Europe and to a lesser extent the United States that the Australians are the people to talk to about Southeast Asia – especially Indonesia. Australia has the same values as the Europeans and the Americans but has geographic proximity and the political and economic links into the region which the rest of the West does not match.

Over the years, Australia's Asian reputation has grown. The Asian economic crisis, and the leadership role Australia played in helping Indonesia and Thailand in particular through that period, the emergence of democracy in Indonesia, the East Timor crisis and Australia's record of activism in institutions like APEC, the ASEAN Regional Forum and, since 2006, the East Asia Summit have all burnished Australia's regional credentials.

Australian governments now need to build on this reputation. The more Australia is seen in Europe and America as the country which gives the best advice on Asia, the more Australia is able to extend its global influence. When the Bush administration came to office, it sought the advice of the Australian government on how it should manage relations with China. President Bush himself had no prior interest in Indonesia, but Australia persuaded him to give Indonesia a priority in American foreign policy as both a newly emerged democracy and the largest Muslim nation on earth. He did as we asked, and that helped Australia too; the Indonesians, knowing we were behind America's Indonesia strategy sought the help of Australia with Washington.

There was no better example of this than in 2006 when the Indonesian government proposed – to the Australian government – sending a battalion of Indonesian troops to Iraq to assist with stabilisation there. The Indonesians asked us to take it up with President Bush personally, which I did over a private lunch with President Bush and John Howard during the APEC meeting in Hanoi. That President Bush was unenthusiastic about the idea was, for us, a little disappointing, but the fact the Indonesians used our links with Washington to conduct such delicate diplomacy makes a point about how powerful Australia's regional diplomacy can be.

But to maximise Australia's diplomatic leverage in and through the Asia Pacific, Australia itself has to be effective in the region. That requires two things: focus and deft diplomacy.

Australia has first and foremost to focus on its region. It can, of course, do more. After all, Australia as a G20 country is not just a regional power. It has a contribution to make to broader issues. But its region is its diplomatic heartland. The Australian government has to be front and centre of regional issues and not sally forth elsewhere leaving its home garden unattended. The past two months is a case in point. Australia has been vocal and busy talking about the need for a no fly zone in Libya. For Australia to have a view on the no fly zone is appropriate and natural. But Australia is never going to contribute to such a scheme and therefore was never going to be a key player in the decision to intervene. That was always going to be a matter for NATO and the United Nations Security Council.

During this same period, a country of central importance to Australian diplomacy – Japan – was devastated by earthquakes and a tsunami. Tens of thousands of people died. Certainly Australian emergency services were deployed to Japan and that was appreciated. Many other countries did the same thing. But helping the Japanese

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physically, diplomatically and politically should have been front and centre of Australian diplomacy during that period. Instead, the government was as focussed on Libya as we were on Japan. Perceptions are important, and there is no doubt the Japanese perceived we cared. But politics and diplomacy have a context: Japan has slipped down in Australia's diplomatic priorities over the past three years. We could have been a champion for Japan in the wake of the earthquake; instead, we were another part of the global response – important but not special.

When it comes to China, Australia has spent the past three years struggling with the relationship. We could have explained the complexity of the Tibet riots in 2008. Instead Australia's prime minister went to Beijing and scolded the Chinese government publicly – and in Mandarin. This made nice headlines at home, but it did nothing to extend Australia's influence in China itself. Nor did it convince America and Europe we had anything different or persuasive to say about China. This was followed by the unedifying Stern Hu saga, and it wasn't long before Australia's relationship with China was looking decidedly tatty.

Then there is Indonesia. Whenever I went to Europe or America as foreign minister, my interlocutors would always ask me about Indonesia. Our involvement there was respected and, in the case of the East Timor intervention in 1999, admired. In nearly 12 years, the Howard government built an edifice of relations with Indonesia which could sustain the inevitable buffeting of passing political issues in the years ahead. We built an intimate relationship with Indonesia to counter terrorism, we set up the Bali process to manage people smuggling, we negotiated the Lombok Treaty to underpin our bilateral security relationship and, together, we established the Asia Pacific Interfaith Dialogue. Our leading role in responding to the 2004 tsunami literally brought tears to President Yudhoyono's eyes.

Circumstances are different now, and Australia can't do all those things again. But to be brutal, the only feature of the bilateral relationship in 2011 of any significance is the people smuggling issue. Now, this was a major problem during the Howard years, but after a squabble between us in 2004 we learned to manage the issue. Australia set up the offshore processing centre in Nauru, we engaged in a joint program with Indonesia to disrupt people smugglers and we established the regional Bali process. The problem had been dealt with.

Now again it has become front and centre of the bilateral relationship. The decision by the Australian government to try to open a processing centre in East Timor is not only unpopular in Dili; it's unpopular in Jakarta. The Indonesian government doesn't want the relationship between Australia and East Timor to be destabilised. More importantly, it doesn't want a processing centre just across the border in little, poor East Timor; that's putting Indonesia at the front and centre of the issue. These days, this is the sum total of our political relationship with Indonesia.

If we are slipping from centre stage in Asia, then we should at least be able to hold our ground in the Pacific. Five years ago, Australia was leading a campaign to improve governance in the Pacific. We had RAMSI in the Solomon Islands, we had the Enhanced Co-operation Program in PNG and we had deployed teams to improve governance across the Pacific. RAMSI remains well and truly in place. But in PNG, the Australian government has bowed to the demands of the prime minister, Sir Michael Somare, and toned down the more aggressive aspects of the anti-corruption programs which formed part of the Enhanced Cooperation Program. I am very conscious that Sir Michael Somare likes Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard more than he liked John Howard and me. They are more benign about the chronic problems of PNG.

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As for Fiji, the Australian government has abandoned any real attempt to restore democracy there. We are in the worst possible position. We look weak because we can't do anything. In the meantime, Fiji is working diligently and effectively to undermine Australia in the Pacific and beyond. Fiji is working day and night in New York trying to sabotage our Security Council campaign. Rumour has it they are having some success.

Part of the narrative of the Australian political Left is that, in government, the Labor Party always shows more enthusiasm for Asia than the Liberals. Events of the past three years suggest otherwise. There has been almost no new initiative in Asia from the Australian government in four years, yet Australia has been aggressively vocal on issues of marginal importance to our country, like Libya. This has been a barren period for Australia in Asia and that, in turn, affects our standing and our leverage in Europe and America.

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