

Citation for The Hon. Alexander Downer

Alexander Downer served as Australia's foreign minister for an unbroken eleven and a half years, from March 1996 to December 2007, exceeding by three years the previous Richard Casey record.

In Alexander Downer's period, Foreign Affairs turned out to be one of the most challenging portfolios.

Within a short period the Asian Financial Crisis shook the region and led to new forms of specifically Asian regional cooperation. Minister Downer put the case for the damaged Asian economies to the international community and Australia joined Japan in the IMF rescue package. Indonesia in this period saw the collapse of President Suharto's rule and a weakening of Jakarta's control of East Timor. Then the phenomenon of jihadist terrorism burst out in many places to horrifying effect.

These eleven-plus years also saw the emergence of China as a giant economic force, acquiring the military power to pose an incipient challenge to America's post-1945 dominance of the Western Pacific. These challenges, above all else, required diplomacy.

Diplomacy has many definitions. For Alexander Downer the characteristic guiding principle might have been get what you want for your country and broader humanity, with the least damage to your own national interests. Ideally with the other parties thinking it was all their own idea.

This approach is evident in the handling of the Timor crisis in 1999. With signs of the Indonesian military attempting to undermine a peaceful process, and many calls for international intervention, Alexander Downer, pursued a line of "adroit diplomacy" that held Jakarta, if precariously, to its guarantees for a plebiscite. The Interfet security operation that followed was broadened with the involvement of Malaysian, Singaporean, Thai and other forces to lessen the loss of face for the Indonesians. It is an extraordinary achievement that within four or five years of this tense period, Minister Downer was able to steer Australia into membership of the new East Asia Summit, built upon the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations. He brought Australia into this regional body without the animosity that has often occurred with other institution-building exercises in Asia.

This involved diplomacy at both ends. In Southeast Asia, it meant convincing people that Australia and New Zealand were genuinely and permanently aligned with the region. At home, Alexander Downer had to overcome fears that joining the East Asia Summit could restrict Australia's traditional alliance ties.

Joining the East Asia Summit meant entering an Asian regional grouping that did not then include the United States. That was an important sign of independent thinking and an abandonment of old fears, for which Minister Downer and his colleagues deserve credit.

The Howard-Downer partnership also deserves respect for balancing Australia's two potentially conflicting relationships: with the United States and China. In 2003, we had the powerful symbolism of the Chinese leader and the American president each addressing the Australian parliament. The government worked successfully to convince Beijing that Australia was a reliable economic partner; one also ready to deepen ties across areas including human rights and education.

Minister Downer remarked in 2004 in Beijing that the ANZUS Treaty did not mean that Australia would automatically enter a US-China war over Taiwan. This is an episode that continues to attract the attention of foreign policy analysts. Alexander Downer might be seen here to have invoked the Menzies view that Australian interests were not always the same as American interests – and in 1956 Menzies had actually cited the Taiwan issue as an area where Australia and the United States might have to agree to differ.

We note too Alexander Downer's appreciation of the value of Track Two diplomacy and of the need for deeper understanding of underlying trends, including the nature of Islam in Southeast Asia. Throughout his eleven-plus years, Alexander Downer was recognised as a foreign minister who moved constantly around Asia, building relationships not only with governments but also with social, academic and religious figures. At home too he was generous in his willingness to engage in numerous forums, including with many young people. He was open to argument and was ready to forgive and forget differences.

He was the true diplomat foreign minister, the professional in the job. Given his striking record as Foreign Minister, and his success in building respectful relationships in our region and globally, Alexander Downer's legacy will serve as an inspiration to future generations.

Our nation must benefit enormously from his continued efforts to further Australia's engagement in the Asian region.