



Satisfying our next new buddy, Barack Obama

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Kim Beazley
October 27, 2008 12:00am

WE can be grateful for one thing at least in the election of the Rudd Government.

If [Barack Obama](http://www.barackobama.com/) (<http://www.barackobama.com/>) wins the presidency, we will not have to go through a demeaning process as our PM tries to convince the US leader that the institutional ties between our countries are so strong they can stand some mutual contempt at the top.

John Howard's spat with Obama in February last year was as spectacular as it gets.

It was entirely provoked by Howard when he said of Obama's proposal to withdraw from Iraq by March this year: "If I was running al-Qaida in Iraq, I would put a circle around March 2008 and pray, as many times as possible, for a victory for Obama but also for the Democrats."

With the coolness for which his campaign has become legendary, Obama responded that if Howard felt so deeply about it, perhaps he might like to provide an extra 20,000 Australian troops.

It's probably unrelated, but when [John McCain](http://www.johnmccain.com/) (<http://www.johnmccain.com/>) and Obama published think pieces in the authoritative journal *Foreign Affairs* (<http://www.foreignaffairs.org/>), Obama mentioned Australia not at all, whilst McCain did so effusively.

By the time [Kevin Rudd](http://www.pm.gov.au/) (<http://www.pm.gov.au/>) reached Washington this year, Obama noted that after Rudd's election he had reiterated his "strong commitment to the US-Australia alliance, a deep commitment to a partnership of equals that I share".

This underlines a new dimension in the 60-plus-year-old alliance -- the relationship between leaders.

Until the end of the Cold War it was the military-intelligence collaboration in the US extended deterrent system that counted.

It still does, but it is balanced and refreshed for day-to-day purposes by a coincidence of perspectives at the top level on key issues in global affairs.

For McCain, socialised on national security issues during the Cold War, Australia's contribution over the long, hard road is well-appreciated.

It's appreciated at a deep level by McCain because of his ancestral and personal commitment to the Pacific dimension of that struggle.

An Obama presidency is an altogether different challenge.

Both US and Australian leaders will be massively preoccupied by the global financial meltdown.

However, as former defence secretary [Don Rumsfeld](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donald_Rumsfeld) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donald_Rumsfeld) was fond of pointing out, in global or regional struggles "the other fellow gets a vote".

The "other fellow", overwhelmingly in the first few years of an Obama presidency, will be the Islamic fundamentalists on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

It is quite evident that on the range of international issues, from climate change to poverty and from the value of alliances to terror, Rudd and Obama share perspectives.

Shared perspectives are one thing but when the rubber hits the road, it is shared commitments that will count.

Obama is into problem-solving, not history. As a rational man, he is aware of what massive constraints US defence spending imposes on his budget flexibility, whilst he struggles to keep a fingertip touch with fiscal responsibility while priming the economy.

An international friend is one who lifts burdens in the here and now.

General [Colin Powell](http://www.whitehouse.gov/government/powell-bio.html) (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/government/powell-bio.html>), in his possibly decisive endorsement of Obama, described him as "transformational" in a domestic and foreign context.

Certainly, if he is elected, there will be a surge of goodwill among America's traditional friends.

There will be none from the Taliban and al-Qaida.

In fact, there will probably be a test.

Maybe the goodwill will revise withdrawal plans among NATO partners.

If it doesn't, a couple of years down the track Obama will regard his friends as those who help him out.

Australian troops in Afghanistan perform herculean tasks very well.

However, to a man who thought John Howard might ante up 20,000 Diggers for Iraq, Australian numbers in Afghanistan could look a bit boutique.

For Obama, it will be not "what have you done for me lately?" but "what will you do for me now?"

In a recent speech to the RSL in Townsville, Kevin Rudd made clear that Australian defence priorities revolved around the challenges posed by the increasing military capabilities of nations in the Asia-Pacific region.

McCain would easily empathise -- even if his support for measures such as quadrilateral security planning by the US, Japan, Australia and India appears to the Australian Government to be unnecessarily adversarial to China.

McCain's recent criticism of President [George W. Bush's](http://www.whitehouse.gov/president/) (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/president/>) removal of North Korea from the list of state supporters of terrorism suggests a harsher approach to Pacific security matters.

Obama would have none of this.

That is the upside for Australia.

The downside is that, with Obama, an excuse that our commitments to a broader sphere for a small nation dictate no additions to our small Afghanistan force won't wash.

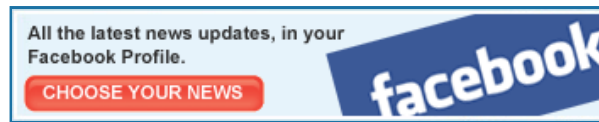
Sufficient force to back any political effort to resolve the Afghanistan crisis and deal with the insurgents in the interim is Obama's priority.

Support for that objective will be the least he would expect from an ally that, after 9/11, invoked ANZUS to back its commitments in the area.

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