



Fed: Afghanistan to test Aust relations with new US president

By Sandra O'Malley, Diplomatic Correspondent

CANBERRA, Nov 2 AAP - The Rudd government would welcome a greater emphasis on Afghanistan by the next US president but experts say it could be the first real test for Australia and a new administration in Washington.

Americans go to the polls on Tuesday to choose between Democrat Barack Obama or Republican John McCain as the next US president.

Australia, a steadfast ally of the US, enjoys a close relationship with the current Bush administration and Foreign Minister Stephen Smith expects that to continue whomever is the next American leader.

"We've been working very well with the United States and we expect that to continue," Mr Smith told the Nine Network.

"The first priority will be to ensure that the alliance ... continues in good shape and good order. We expect that to occur.

"The second most important thing is to encourage the United States to be engaged in our region in the Asia Pacific."

Mr Smith said the government intended to "hit the ground running" to cement its relationship with the new president, flagging a visit by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to meet the new leader in the first quarter of next year.

There was also the possibility Mr Rudd may meet the new leader when he is in Washington later this month for the G20 leaders' meeting to discuss the global financial crisis on November 15.

"Certainly we want to hit the ground running so far as our formal relationship or contact with the new administration is concerned," Mr Smith said.

"The prime minister will be there in the middle of November, (which) does present that opportunity and I'm sure he'll try and take advantage of it."

And he welcomed an expected stronger focus by both Obama and McCain to stamp out the Taliban-led insurgency in Afghanistan.

"When you look at what both candidates have said it's clear there'll be a greater emphasis as far as the US is concerned on Afghanistan and Pakistan and that is something we'll obviously welcome," Mr Smith said.

But foreign policy experts believe that Afghanistan - where the US will expect more support from its coalition allies - will be the first major test of the relationship.

Geoffrey Garrett, chief executive of the United States Studies Centre at Sydney University, believes Australia will continue to face tough questions on how it supports the US even with the Bush administration out of the picture.

"I would imagine the next US president is going to be asking Rudd to deliver on his commitment of more Australian support and I imagine that probably means more Australian troops in Afghanistan," he told AAP.

"Don't expect the foreign policy agonising over how and whether to support the US war on terrorism agenda to go away just because there is a new president in 2009."

Michael Fullilove, program director of global issues at the Lowy institute, says both McCain and Obama saw Afghanistan as under-resourced and needing an injection of troops.

"I think they'll be looking at allies to shoulder a greater burden and I think allies around the world are steeling themselves for request in that regard," he told AAP.

Last month, Mr Rudd categorically stated Australia wasn't planning to boost its troop numbers in Afghanistan any time soon.

"We have no plans whatsoever to provide any additional troops to Afghanistan," he said at the time.

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