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 THE STORY UNDERNEATH

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Stephen de Tarczynski

MELBOURNE, Nov 10 (IPS) - While change may have come to the United States -- as professed by president-elect Barack Obama following his election victory, a result largely welcomed here -- Australia's alliance with the superpower is likely to remain strong.

"Our alliance has truly prospered in the past and this alliance will prosper into the future," said Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, acknowledging Obama's decisive triumph.

Rudd echoed sentiments expressed around the globe by welcoming the first-ever African-American to be voted into the United States' highest office as "a message of hope for the world."

As was the case elsewhere, newspapers, television, radio and electronic media in Australia were quick to hail the 47-year-old Democrat's election win over the Republican Party's nominee and former prisoner-of-war, John McCain.

And while the media's role in reflecting public opinion must be balanced with its ability to form and mould that opinion, a survey conducted by the University of Sydney's United States Studies Centre (USSC) prior to the Nov.4 election indicates that most Australians will be happy to see Obama in the White House.

Undertaken by Prof. Simon Jackman -- a visiting academic from Stanford University in the U.S. -- the survey's almost four thousand respondents backed Obama over McCain by a margin of more than four to one.

While one third of respondents believed that the result would make "no difference" to Australia's interests, 49 percent said that an Obama victory would be better for Australia. This compares to just 11 percent who thought that the country's interests would be better served by a McCain presidency.

Prof. Geoffrey Garrett, the USSC's chief executive officer and dual U.S.-Australian citizen -- he is also a member of the influential Council on Foreign Relations, a New York-based think-tank -- says that Obama's victory "matters enormously for the Australian public."

"I think the reason for that was that the Australian public wanted desperately to turn the page on the [George W.] Bush Administration and Obama was the most definitive way you could possibly do that. McCain just looked a little too like George Bush on several dimensions," says Garrett.

But while the Australian public -- which, according to the survey, views Obama as "considerably to the left" of the Labor Party's Kevin Rudd and McCain "to be far to the right" of Malcolm Turnbull, leader of Australia's conservative opposition -- appears to overwhelmingly support the U.S. electorate's decision to oust the Republicans from office, Garrett argues that the result "matters less" for Australia's political leadership.

"The foundation of the U.S.-Australia relationship is so strong that it just doesn't make as big a difference as one might think," he told IPS.

Australia has had a particularly close relationship with the United States since the Second World War, with the two nations bound by the 1951 ANZUS (the Australia, New Zealand and United States) treaty, ostensibly a military alliance.

These close political ties have seen Australia play support roles in major U.S. military endeavours, including in Vietnam, Iraq -- in both the 1991 and 2003 invasions -- and Afghanistan.

And although Garrett opines that the bilateral relationship would have remained "rock-solid" had McCain been victorious, he sees parallels in the styles and personalities of Rudd and Obama which may serve to further cement the alliance between two of the Pacific Rim's liberal democracies.

"They're younger guys, they came to electoral politics somewhat later in life, they're problem-solvers not ideologues, they're multilateralists not unilateralists," he says.

But Garrett also points out similarities in the two leaders' policies.

During his acceptance speech, president-elect Obama "put a planet in peril and climate change right up there with the war on terrorism and America's economic problems as his three biggest challenges. I think that Prime Minister Rudd would have been very happy to hear that," says Garrett.

Like Obama, Rudd is seen as being more willing to implement measures to address climate change than his predecessor.

The Rudd government was quick to initiate the process to ratify the Kyoto Protocol after coming to office following the November 2007 election victory over the Liberal-National coalition led by John Howard, who had been Australia's prime minister since 1996 and had refused to ratify Kyoto.

Both Obama and Rudd want bigger cuts in their respective nation's greenhouse gas emissions than their more conservative counterparts -- Obama wants an 80 percent cut in US emissions by 2050, by which time Rudd wants a 60 percent reduction on 2000 levels -- while economically they are in favour of a more government-regulated financial system.

In 'war on terror' terms, both support a focus on Afghanistan. Obama has said that there "is no military solution" in Iraq -- the invasion of which he opposed -- and wants to phase-out U.S. troops from combat operations within 16 months of taking office.

The Australian government ended the nation's combat involvement in Iraq in June, and Rudd has been clear in committing Australian forces to Afghanistan for "the long haul."

"Both Kevin Rudd and Barack Obama have said that Afghanistan is the 'right war' rather than Iraq, so there's a lot to work with there," says Garrett.

But with continuing rumblings of discontent -- particularly from the U.S. and Australia -- over perceptions that some of the 41 nations contributing to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to Afghanistan are not accepting their share of the burden, Garrett expects Obama to request more from Australia.

He argues that with the U.S. military "running on empty" -- as well as the public's likely opposition to an increased involvement in Afghanistan -- and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) members Germany, France and the Netherlands not likely to boost troop numbers, a request to Rudd could well be made in 2009.

But in what is a potential sticking-point between the U.S. and Australia -- the largest non-NATO contributor to Afghanistan with around 1,100 troops in the country -- Rudd dismissed, last week, suggestions that Australia's commitment will grow.

"We have got no plans to increase [troops] in the future," he said.

(END/2008)