

Rudd takes his eye off Pacific islands

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While Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd has been busy pursuing Australian foreign policy interests in North Africa and managing the consular response to the earthquakes in New Zealand and Japan, he is unlikely to have had time to keep an eye on the neighbourhood.

This is probably not helping to counter perceptions of gradual erosion of Australian diplomatic influence in the Pacific Islands region (despite very generous aid spending and a successful hosting of the Pacific Islands Forum in Cairns in August 2009). Even US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has found time to worry about the Pacific in the past month.

Nowhere is the decline of Australia's diplomatic influence in the Pacific more apparent than in Fiji, where Prime Minister, Frank Bainimarama is due to host the Melanesia Spearhead Group leaders' summit on March 31. It will be an occasion for Bainimarama to demonstrate regional leadership and thumb his nose again at Australia, which he blames for the delay in his taking the chair of the MSG.

The more interesting aspect of this particular leaders' summit is that both East Timor and Indonesia will participate as observers, and that Luxembourg has been invited as a special guest.

Indonesia's invitation has predictably frustrated the West Papuan independence movement, which is used to having its agenda pursued by Vanuatu at MSG meetings. An article in the Vanuatu Daily Post last week posed the question whether Indonesian aid had encouraged the MSG to invite Jakarta. Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono announced new areas for co-operation when he visited PNG in March last year but it's unlikely this is behind the MSG's agreement to grant Indonesia observer status.

Indonesia and East Timor at least have genuine interest in and sympathies with the members of the MSG, but the invitation to Luxembourg is a little odd. Luxembourg is the second-smallest member of the EU, but it does not hold the rotating presidency so is unlikely to be formally representing the EU.

Although Luxembourg is one of only five countries to spend more than 0.7 per cent of their GNI on aid, it does not appear to extend this largesse as far the Pacific Islands. If the lure of aid was the determining factor for an invitation, surely China, which funds the MSG Secretariat, would have merited an invitation.

Could it be that Luxembourg, a competitor for Australia's candidacy for a temporary seat at the UN Security Council, is seeking an opportunity to lobby for more votes? And is this really any stranger than Rudd speaking at the African Union?

The members of the Pacific Islands Forum (excluding Fiji) committed to support Australia's candidacy for a 2013-14 temporary seat at the UN Security Council in 2008 and reiterated that support last year. Canberra would hardly have been counting on Suva's vote, and an invitation to the MSG was never in prospect. But the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade might want to check that Port Moresby, Honiara and Port Vila remember their commitments. The strenuous efforts of the Parliamentary Secretary for Pacific Island Affairs, Richard Marles, in flying the Australian flag all over the Pacific are undoubtedly constructive and praiseworthy, but only partly compensate for the Foreign Minister's lack of attention.

Rudd is yet to visit any Pacific Island country as Foreign Minister. His last bilateral visit to the region - to PNG and Solomon Islands - was in March 2008 as prime minister. Other visits as PM included Niue for the 2008 Pacific Islands Forum and PNG for a special meeting on Fiji in January 2009.

Pacific Island governments could hardly fail to notice the absence of Australia's Foreign Minister from their shores while he pursues new friends further afield. They may conclude that courting new friends should be their priority, too.

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