

## **Japan is crucial to our future**

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Nice timing. The weekend that China inches ahead of Japan to become the second-largest economy in the world, the Rudd government promised to take Tokyo to court over whaling in the Southern Ocean.

The timing makes perfect sense in Canberra: in an election year, the Environment Minister is under pressure over home insulation and climate change has become too messy to help the government. On other environmental issues the politics are messy – every win is also a loss for some pressure group or other.

The politics of whaling by contrast is simple and cheap. Everyone in Australia agrees that whaling is pointless and repugnant and no one in Australia stands to lose if it is stopped. And in Japan?

Our government apparently expects us to believe either that the Japanese won't mind, or that it doesn't matter if they do. But the government is way too smart to believe either of those things itself.

First, they know that this is a pungent issue in Japan. That's not because most Japanese enjoy killing or eating whales but because, like everyone else, they do not enjoy being pushed around. And like everyone else, the weaker they feel the less they enjoy it.

That is why, viewed from Tokyo, the timing of Kevin Rudd's threats could not have been worse. Japanese are intensely aware of how swiftly and completely Australia has shifted its focus to China – and they do not like it. Ten years ago, they know, Japan was unquestionably our most important partner in Asia. Today it seems only China matters to us.

Rudd's whaling policy amplifies this impression and gives it an edge: would we take Beijing to the world court, they wonder in Tokyo, if it was Chinese who were killing whales? The conclusion they draw is that we just do not care about Japan anymore, and they do not like it.

But why should we care? The answer separates politicians from statesmen. Politicians see no reason to worry. They assume Japan will do nothing that will make any difference to the re-election of the Rudd government.

But statesmen take a different view. They consider how our policies towards Japan today, and Japan's views of us, might affect Australia in 10 or 20 years' time.

Rudd has a statesman's strategic vision. He understands that Asia is facing swift and fundamental change as the balance between its biggest powers shifts. He knows the US-led order that has done so much to keep Asia peaceful and Australia safe will be replaced in the next decade or so by something different.

Rudd has ambitions to help shape this new Asian order and it matters a lot to Australia that he should succeed. Only when we start to imagine what it might be like to live in an Asia that is no longer dominated by American power do we understand what is at stake for us.

Japan is central to all this because it will remain one of Asia's strongest powers, so its views of Australia will do much to determine how well the new order works for us.

But it also matters right now. Japan will only help build a stable order if it expects to be given a respected place within that order.

This is where Australia's strident stance on whaling threatens real damage. It reinforces the sense in Japan that important countries in Asia – and yes, we are one of those in Japan's eyes – do not respect her. It gives the impression we side with China in its views of Japan.

The choreography of Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada's visit last weekend shows the government is sensitive to this. Okada's frosty sessions with Rudd and Foreign Affairs Minister Stephen Smith were balanced by a warm and well-publicised meeting with Defence Minister John Faulkner.

The message was crude: we may disagree on whaling, but Australia is on your side against China.

But this is fatuous, and dangerous. It does us no good to ameliorate an insult to one major power by a gesture that antagonises another.

Rudd's diplomacy will have succeeded in lowering Australia's credibility in Beijing and Tokyo, and probably Washington as well.

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