

## **Rudd erodes diplomacy**

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The Australian  
18 March 2009  
P. 14

Australia has not confronted a more turbulent world since the Depression. So what can we do? The best place to start is by ensuring that the Australian Government is well placed to understand what is happening, can develop effective policy responses and get other governments to take actions we favour (or avoid taking those we do not) by marshalling arguments, developing ideas, crafting compromises and putting together coalitions of support.

This is the work of diplomacy. It is especially important to Australia. Our economy and community are deeply integrated with the world. Exporters provide one in five Australian jobs, we are heavily dependent on overseas investment, about one million Australians are overseas at any one time and our near neighbours are from the developing world. But no one will be looking out for us if we do not do it ourselves. We have no large regional bloc similar to the European Union to back us up.

Nations have two broad ways of shaping the world: by coercion or persuasion. Coercion works when you have effective armed forces and other resources that can deter and, if necessary, defeat potential adversaries or, more subtly, lead others to accommodate your interests. During the past 20 years, since the end of the Cold War and even more intensely after the terrorist attacks of September 2001, an international debate has been raging about these instruments of national security policy. In almost every Western country, military forces and domestic security agencies have been reshaped and their roles redefined. Many have received increased funding.

But until recently there has been no similar debate about the instruments of persuasion, the role of diplomacy. This is odd. Military equipment is very expensive (just wait for the defence white paper); diplomats are cheap. The budget of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is little more than one-twentieth the size of the Defence Department's \$22billion.

Of course defence forces and diplomats don't do the same things, and both are important. Still, each exists to advance the same national strategy.

A blue-ribbon panel convened by the Lowy Institute has uncovered worrying evidence of how this country's international policy tools have rusted. We have 20 per cent fewer foreign affairs officers than in 1996. Their language skills are deteriorating. Of 30 developed countries, only Ireland, New Zealand, the Slovak Republic and Luxembourg have fewer diplomatic missions than Australia. Iceland outranks us. We do not have enough embassies in the emerging growth areas of Asia and the Middle East. Forty per cent of our overseas posts are tiny (three or fewer DFAT officers).

Our public diplomacy is nowhere near the world's best. And great chunks of the time and resources of Australian officials overseas are spent in the consular work of looking after Australians who get themselves into trouble abroad.

These resources have been declining through many years, at precisely the time that globalisation has made the job of protecting Australian interests more difficult. Diplomats need to influence not just governments and foreign ministries but the powerful networks of non-government organisations, media, corporations and public opinion that increasingly shape the foreign-policy decisions of governments everywhere. And they need to do this in new ways, using information technologies. This is not special pleading for diplomats. In fact diplomacy should be seen not so much as a profession any longer as a set of skills that many people, inside and outside government, will draw on for part of their careers.

The floodwaters of recession eventually will recede but they will leave behind an international landscape scoured and remade. If Australia is to adapt as well to the new environment as to the one we have known for the past 50 years, there is no more important time to begin a discussion about how to refurbish the tools of Australian diplomacy.

Allan Gyngell chaired the Lowy Institute's blue-ribbon panel on the instruments of Australian foreign policy.