

Gillard's diplomatic skills tested during north Asia visit

Rory Medcalf

The Sydney Morning Herald

23 April 2011

P. 13

Usually when an Australian leader commemorates Anzac Day overseas both the battlefield and the adversary are ones we will never face again. But on Monday Julia Gillard will mark the 60th anniversary of the Battle of Kapyong, in which Australians and their allies held back a massive Chinese force during the Korean War.

Unlike Japan, Germany or Turkey, China cannot be ruled out as a conceivable future foe for the Australian military. And after two acts of North Korean belligerence last year, a security crisis on the Korean peninsula - which could drag in China, the US, Australia and others - remains a real possibility.

Yet right after paying tribute to the veterans of Kapyong, the Prime Minister will fly to Beijing for businesslike talks with what is now Australia's largest trade partner.

It would be hard to draw a more piquant illustration of the diplomatic balancing act Australia faces in north Asia, a region critical to our economic and strategic future. Gillard flew north a few days ago to devote a week to proving her credentials as a foreign policy prime minister in Tokyo, Seoul and Beijing.

It is unfair simply to call this a repair job after her predecessor's tumultuous time. Much about the three relationships is in good shape, not least because they are among Australia's top export markets. Her immediate agenda seems constructive and modest: trade, investment, disaster relief, and climate change.

The aftermath of the recent catastrophe in Japan has become an opportunity for Australia to reaffirm support for this troubled but important partner. In South Korea Gillard will have a chance to strengthen bonds with a like-minded middle power. A business forum will be the centrepiece of the China visit. In all three countries, she aims to nudge along trade agreements to diversify Australia's economic links beyond the resources boom.

But Gillard will be unable to evade the big questions of diplomacy and strategy on which the region's, and Australia's, security rests. Some of her answers are already emerging. When Kevin Rudd first visited north Asia as prime minister in 2008 he brought baggage. The Chinese had exaggerated notions of the unique kind of friend he would be. This compounded the shock when he offered straight talk, in Mandarin and publicly, on human rights and security.

Meanwhile Tokyo's misreading of Rudd's China policy, and its more accurate view of Labor's anti-whaling fixation, put needless discomfort into Australia-Japan ties. Yet Asian expectations are fast forming about Gillard too, thanks to her recent promise in Washington to intensify the alliance with the US.

Australia's fellow US allies Japan and South Korea will be eager to understand what this means for Australia's defence ties with them and for its stance on the armed tensions in their neighbourhood. The past two years have brought serial assertiveness from China and acts of war from its dangerous little brother North Korea. Chinese ships and aircraft have harassed Japanese vessels in disputed waters.

In March last year North Korea sank a South Korean warship, the Cheonan, an attack that Beijing still refuses to attribute to Pyongyang. Eight months later the North bombarded a South Korean island, seemingly to shore up the military credentials of Pyongyang's heir apparent. A Chinese ban on military talks with the Americans, prompted by arms sales to Taiwan, made it harder to manage crises.

As if anticipating Asia's new uncertainties, John Howard's government crafted a security declaration with Tokyo in 2007, and Rudd did the same with South Korea in 2009. It would be timely for Gillard to add further substance to these agreements, for example bringing South Korea to the level of partnership Australia is pursuing with Japan in logistics, intelligence and surveillance. Here Rudd has laid good foundations. Australians investigated the Cheonan attack and have worked with the South Korean military on training to intercept nuclear and missile shipments.

Of course, in firming up security relations with fellow US allies, Gillard will have Chinese anxieties to manage. Here she will probably look to a modified form of Howard's pragmatic approach, by stating that Australia can have an alliance with the US - and other security partnerships of its choice - while deepening its trade and diplomacy with China. Whether or not this line is sustainable, she will be in no rush to discard it.

On human rights she should hardly be silent, but is likely to focus on confidential talks. But her political values and emerging diplomatic skills might be sorely tested if stark new evidence of Beijing's repression were to emerge during her visit, especially any new case involving an Australian. Gillard is probably hoping for a straightforward week of business, diplomacy and remembrance. But from the battlegrounds of Korea to the more subtle minefields of Beijing, she will have plenty of reminders that Australia's strategic enmeshment with north Asia is far from history.

Rory Medcalf is the program director for international security at the Lowy Institute.