

Gillard channels her inner Howard

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This is doubtless a relief for her advisers after the Prime Minister's ill-judged revelation that she lacks a passion for foreign policy. Indeed, Gillard's trip to Asia marks a return to many of the key tenets of former prime minister John Howard's foreign policy.

Despite Paul Keating's gibe that Asian leaders would never deal with him, Howard left office with an enviable record as a statesman. He achieved his aim of revitalising the US alliance while strengthening our most important regional relationships, particularly those with Japan, India, China and Indonesia.

This grid of bilateral partnerships formed a solid platform for regional multilateral successes, such as securing Australia's inclusion in the East Asia Summit and the formation of the Bali Process to counter people-smuggling.

This week, Gillard turned to the Howard foreign policy playbook. Her itinerary was constructed to avoid her predecessor Kevin Rudd's error of bypassing our oldest and most important regional partner, Japan, in his enthusiasm to visit China.

The timing of her visit to Japan was serendipitous, coming just as the country starts to return to a semblance of normality and making Gillard the first foreign leader to make a substantive visit following the earthquake and tsunami disaster.

In my two days of talks with Japanese officials and scholars, many were genuinely touched by the Prime Minister's gesture of support in visiting the scene of the disaster, an event that received extensive coverage in the Japanese media.

The Japanese government was initially reluctant to accept outside help, but there is real appreciation in Japan of Australia's rapid assistance, which included a seasoned disaster relief team and three military transport aircraft. Operating out of US air bases, these have played an important role in ferrying much-needed equipment and supplies to the disaster areas, a tangible dividend from three-way strategic links initiated in 2002 and a bilateral defence relationship that started to accelerate after Australian and Japanese military forces operated together in southern Iraq.

Even before the earthquake, Japan was an anxious nation, unable to throw off more than a decade of economic stagnation and political sclerosis and increasingly spooked by China's growing economic and military muscle. Japan has an even bigger mountain to climb following the disaster. But Gillard's visit provided important reassurance to a friend at a time when it was much needed.

In opposition Labor dismissed the bilateral free trade agenda of the Coalition government, yet the most substantial policy outcome from Gillard's stop in South Korea was her agreement with President Lee Myung-bak to wrap up a bilateral agreement by the end of this year. It was unfortunate that foot-dragging on the part of the South Koreans meant that it was not possible to finalise the negotiations before the visit.

But Gillard's pragmatic focus on bilateral trade and security co-operation and her strongly expressed solidarity with South Korea in the face of the North's belligerence were clearly appreciated in Seoul.

It was in Beijing, though - which loomed, after a spate of recent bilateral difficulties, as the toughest leg of Gillard's tour - that the return to a more modest and realistic foreign policy approach was most evident.

The Howard government got off to a bumpy start with Beijing after firmly backing Washington in a military stand-off over Taiwan and cancelling a development assistance program, and after Howard met the Dalai Lama.

It was only when the then prime minister met then Chinese president Jiang Zemin in Manila in the margins of the 1996 APEC leaders meeting (described in Howard's recent memoir as one of the most consequential meetings of his prime ministership) and laid out a clear and durable conceptual framework for the bilateral relationship that strains between the two nations started to ease.

In essence, Howard told Jiang that Australia wanted a constructive relationship, with a particular focus on the enormous potential of the economic relationship. But he made clear Australia had different values and institutions and would not compromise on those or on vital strategic interests, such as the US alliance.

Howard's tacit understanding with the Chinese leadership provided the political foundation for the explosion of trade that has seen China overtake Japan as Australia's largest trading partner, accounting for one-quarter of all Australian exports.

Gillard's China visit this week seems deliberately modelled on the visit made by Howard in 1997. The Prime Minister came to Beijing bolstered by having already visited the US, Japan and South Korea, Australia's most important strategic partners.

She reportedly told Premier Wen Jiabao that Australia would retain its strong links to the US as well as pursue a constructive relationship with China. The business leaders were there again, as they had been in the 1997 tour, to highlight burgeoning commercial links between the nations.

And when Gillard rightly raised Australia's legitimate concerns about human rights with Chinese leaders she reportedly did so frankly and directly but privately and in a measured way.

An unnamed Australian official, who briefed journalists on the talks, stated explicitly that she did so more in the mould of Howard than Rudd.

Gillard's visit could scarcely have marked a more sweeping renunciation of Rudd's China policy. Gone, apparently, is the romantic conceit that Australia can form a special relationship with the Middle Kingdom. Gone are the mixed messages and the disappointed expectations on both sides. Gone, too, is the notion that political, cultural and strategic differences can be brushed over and that a sustainable relationship with China can be based on anything other than a sober, hard-headed assessment of Australia's long-term strategic and economic interests.

Yet the Prime Minister cannot afford to rest on her newly acquired foreign policy laurels. She can build on her success by remaining clear-eyed in her dealings with China: there will be further tests, whether on foreign investment, human rights or China's military muscle-flexing.

Her dealings with China will be reinforced, rather than impeded, if she continues to develop the US alliance and further strengthens defence and security links with Japan and South Korea.

She should press ahead to conclude free trade agreements with both countries as soon as possible. She also has to find a way through the uranium impasse with India, which is holding back Australia's engagement with Asia's other rising power and the world's largest democracy.

She also needs to make sure her Foreign Minister is fully behind her agenda rather than pursuing his own, which may be her hardest foreign policy test of all.

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