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Uncle Sam's foremost flunky

AUSSIE Prime Minister John Howard's message is chilling: He would order pre-emptive action in neighbouring countries to avert an attack "either of a conventional kind or a terrorist kind" on his country.

In his embrace of American President George W. Bush's unconscionable doctrine of pre-emption, he proposes the need for international law to "catch up with that new reality (international terrorism)", arguing that when the United Nations Charter was written, the idea of attack was defined in terms of interstate wars, not non-state actors or non-state terrorism.

It is a dangerous proposal, one that violates the two rules of international law: the doctrine of non-intervention, which bans external interference in the internal life of sovereign states; and the doctrine of self-defence, which allows the use of force only in clear-cut cases of defence or as part of a United Nations-mandated action to preserve international peace. Any change to these guarantees of independence and security will unleash anti-AAs (American and Australian sentiments on a global scale). There is little doubt that Asia and the rest of the world will unite to oppose any move to re-write the international constitution.

Yet, in keeping with the script written in the chambers of the White House, this seems to be the stand of the Howard Government. A prelude to this shift in Australia's foreign policy was last week's statement by Defence Minister Robert Hill that the doctrine of self-defence should be re-defined and that it's time for "a new and distinct doctrine of pre-emptive action to avert a threat". What would be the actions under this blend of Bush-Howard doctrine - extra-judicial killing a la the Hellfire extermination of al-Qaeda members in Yemen in, perhaps, Indonesia or Malaysia; or the sending of troops to Bali?

As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said, Howard should not let his arrogance run away with him. He ought to realise that the savage old days of shooting Aborigines like sitting ducks is over. There can be no return to such brutality.

More American than Australian, Howard's latest design is clearly intended to create an international legal environment that affords freedom and legitimacy of action for the US and its satellite states such as Australia in the prosecution of the war on terrorism.

The push for the inclusion of pre-emptive strikes as part of the repertoire of global peacekeeping and legal order reveals too nakedly the insincerity of a country which claims to be part of Asia. It shows Howard's ineptness in dealing with Asia. Aussie diplomacy has two languages: one line descending from Bush Jr's cowboy justice, the other from Howard's cant. The result is the kind of rationale that endorses pre-emptive action.

Howard's dismissal of criticisms from his own people indicates a "unilateral" premier in the making - a leader who abuses foreign policy to advance his popularity. Judging from the volley of protests from Asian countries, the question is: does this portend some larger rift between Australia and Asia? Howard should stop deluding himself; he is no Bob Menzies. Besides, this is the 21st century, not the "white Australia first" of the last century.