China reacts sharply against US proposal for Asia security forum

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US Secretary of State Colin Powell has just completed a five-nation tour of Asia, which was billed as the means of easing tensions with China and smoothing the way for a visit to Beijing by President Bush later in the year. The trip concluded, however, with the unveiling of a provocative plan to forge closer US military ties with Japan, Australia and South Korea—a move that China immediately attacked as a NATO-like alliance aimed at Beijing.

The proposal for a four-power defence forum, which was announced in Canberra following Australian ministerial talks with Powell and US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, has been dressed up with the usual diplomatic camouflage—it is described as "tentative" and "in the early stage". But the purpose is clear. Far from backing away from its aggressive posture towards Beijing, Washington is seeking to haul its major allies in the region into line in preparation for any future confrontation with China.

Harvard University academic Robert Blackwill floated the idea last year in a study entitled *America's Asian Alliances*. Blackwill warned that: "Taiwan and China may well be on a path of military confrontation in the mid-term... If the mainland were to use force against Taiwan, it is probable that the US would help Taiwan defend itself. Is there any doubt that in those dire circumstances the US president would seek tangible support from its allies: Australia, Japan and South Korea?"

The problem for the Bush administration is that US allies in the region are caught in a bind. Australia, while maintaining its traditional strategic ties with the US, has substantial economic ties in North East Asia, including China, and so has sought to maintain cordial diplomatic relations with Beijing. Japan and South Korea, which also have major trade and investment links with China and would be on the front line of any military confrontation, have not been keen to alienate Beijing.

Blackwill made clear, however, that Washington should use its influence to bring its allies into line. According to an account in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, he thought it "prudent for the four allies to begin now to build enhanced patterns of co-operation and co-ordination, lest they be forced to do so in the midst of a crisis". The meetings of the four nations should encourage Japan to play a greater defence role, engage North Korea but "prepare for the worst" and "harmonise" policies on China. Significantly, Bush has recently appointed Blackwill as ambassador to India, where the US administration is seeking to establish a closer strategic relationship.

It is no accident that Powell left the unveiling of the proposal to the end of the trip—after he had visited Beijing where he sought to allay fears over the Bush administration's National Missile Defence plan and increased US arms sales to Taiwan. In an interview on Chinese TV, he told his audience that, "Washington is not in a confrontational mode," and commented throughout the trip that China "is a nation that need not be seen as an enemy".

Powell's remarks appeared to take the edge off Bush's statement, repeated throughout last year's election campaign, that the US had to deal with China as a "strategic competitor not a strategic partner". Others in the administration take a tougher line. Rumsfeld, for instance, pointedly gave an interview to the right-wing *Washington Times* just as Powell was about to arrive in Beijing, calling for a greater focus on long-range military capability for Asia. In response to a question about how to deal with China, he said: "I have always felt that weakness is provocative, that it kind of

invites people to do things they otherwise wouldn't think of doing."

The divisions within the Bush administration reflect differences within ruling circles as a whole. Against those layers who are seeking to "contain" China or use it as a pretext to justify a far stronger American strategic position in the region, some of the largest US corporations are concerned at any disruption to lucrative trade and investment opportunities in China.

The limits of Powell's more moderate approach soon became evident in Australia. Ostensibly the proposal for closer four-nation security discussions came from the Howard government, conveniently leaving Canberra holding the bag if the plan should prove to be an embarrassing failure. Significantly, however, it was Powell who leaked the details to the media. In answer to a question, he said that "since [the four nations] have such common interests [we thought] it might be wise to find ways to explore them".

Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, purportedly the architect of the plan, was left floundering. Realising the potential to alienate China, he insisted that the proposal was not "an arrangement which would be a broader strategy of containment of China or anything like that." He added rather defensively: "It would not be worth doing if it was going, at the end of the day, to cause enormous regional consternation."

Powell's choice of Canberra as the venue to make the announcement was not simply that it came at the end of the trip. Prime Minister John Howard's government has proven to be one of the most amenable to the Bush administration's aggressive, unilateral line. At the ministerial meeting, Australian ministers politely chided the US over its refusal to sign the new biological weapons protocol but have quickly fallen into line on virtually every other issue. In the final communiqué, the Australian government dutifully expressed "its understanding" of Washington's plans to build a National Missile Defence.

Beijing reacted quickly and sharply to the proposal. A comment in the *People's Daily* accused US and Australia of engaging in containment toward China and said Australia was "dancing to the tune of America's pipe". It went on to urge that Australia "think more about its alliance". A subsequent article in the *Ghangzhou Daily* stated: "Washington wants to build a small Asia-Pacific NATO in order to protect American interests in the region." It referred to Australia as Washington's *maqianzu* —a traditional foot soldier with the responsibility of protecting generals on horseback.

Mindful of the potential to damage relations with China, the response in Australian ruling circles has been cautious and divided. Former ambassador to China Ross Garnaut described the plan as "a really bad idea". "It is hard to see what value it would add to ANZUS [Australia's existing military alliance with the US]... Adding more players, it becomes a tangle," he warned. "The only certain consequence would be an increase in China's defence spending, and the strengthening of military elements in China's polity."

The response was just as unenthusiastic in Tokyo and Seoul. Japanese Foreign Ministry spokesman Akio Miyajima indicated that Japan was "positive about the idea of increasing dialogue," then continued: "But at this stage we believe this is in the very early stage; nothing has yet been discussed and nothing has yet been decided."

A South Korean defence analyst told the *Australian Financial Review* that the full implications of the Australia-US talks were unclear. "Korea is very concerned about the impact on China and any suspicion this may be a ploy to contain or isolate China which could destabilise Korea's own situation."

The hesitations in Japan, South Korea and Australia are, however, likely to receive short shrift in Washington. As on other matters, from National Missile Defence to the biological weapons protocol, the Bush administration has shown that it intends to plough ahead with its military plans regardless of the objections of even its closest allies or the destabilising consequences.