

Condoleezza Rice visits Australia and Indonesia to tighten US ties against China

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Coming just weeks after US President George Bush's trip to India and Pakistan, the visit by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to Indonesia and Australia last week was aimed at further strengthening Washington's key alliances throughout Asia—directed against China in particular.

Central to Bush's trip was the consolidation of what the White House views as a crucial strategic partnership with India. The American president signed a battery of agreements in New Delhi, most notably a deal to assist India's civilian nuclear programs despite India's 1998 nuclear tests and its refusal to sign the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). In return, as well as greater access to the expanding Indian economy, Washington is seeking to exploit New Delhi as a strategic counterweight to China.

The focus of Rice's visit was a tripartite meeting in Sydney last Saturday with Australian foreign minister Alexander Downer and Japan's foreign minister Taro Aso. The talks were billed as the inaugural meeting to establish an ongoing high-level strategic dialogue between the three countries on "contemporary security issues" in the Asian region. Both Australia and Japan have formal military alliances with the US.

Prior to the Sydney meeting, Rice made a number of pointed remarks directed against China. The previous week she declared that the tripartite talks would concentrate on China's military and economic expansion. "All of us in the region, particularly longstanding allies, have a joint responsibility and obligation to try and produce conditions in which the rise of China will be a positive force in international politics, not a negative one," she said.

Of course, Rice's comments were in coded diplomatic language. The US administration has shelved, temporarily at least, Bush's rhetoric during the 2000 presidential elections that China was "a strategic competitor". Beijing's acquiescence in Washington's bogus "war on terror" and the invasion of Iraq, as well as its assistance in pressuring North Korea have proven useful to the US. Washington's long-term strategy remains, however. While US officials talk about "strategic relationships" with India, Japan, Australia and even Pakistan and Indonesia, no one in the US administration is suggesting China as a strategic ally.

In fact, during the past five years, the Bush administration has deliberately strengthened its strategic position in countries on China's borders. In the lead up to the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, the Pentagon established military bases and

agreements for the first time with a number of Central Asian republics that were formerly part of the Soviet Union. Washington has also forged closer military ties with Japan and India, as well as the Philippines, Pakistan, Nepal, Singapore and Thailand.

The main purpose of Rice's visit to Indonesia was to reinforce its "strategic partnership" with Jakarta, and in particular with the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI), on which the US relied as a key regional prop during the Suharto dictatorship. The Bush administration has already partially lifted restrictions on relations between the Pentagon and the TNI, imposed following the Indonesian army's murderous activities in East Timor in the 1990s. While few details were released during Rice's trip, the US military is to begin training 40 Indonesian officers, help "modernise" the TNI and assist in counter-terrorism, maritime security and disaster relief.

As for Japan, Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi has been playing the China card to whip up nationalist sentiment and justify a more aggressive Japanese military stance in North East Asia. His foreign minister Taro Aso has been particularly provocative, declaring last December that China was becoming "a considerable threat". Prior to the tripartite meeting in Sydney, Aso echoed Rice's comments, calling for China to be "more transparent" about its military spending.

The Australian government, however, confronts a basic dilemma over China. To garner US backing for Australian interests in Asia, Prime Minister John Howard has been the most fervent supporter of the Bush administration's "war on terror" and committed troops to the US military interventions in both Afghanistan and Iraq. The ANZUS alliance between Australia, the US and New Zealand has formed the cornerstone of Canberra's strategic policy ever since World War II, when the Australian ruling elites switched their allegiances from London to Washington.

At the same time, the political fortunes of the Howard government have rested heavily on its claims to have brought continuous economic growth. A major reason for the relative buoyancy of the Australian economy has been a vast expansion in the export of raw materials to the expanding Chinese economy. Just 15 months ago, for instance, Australia signed a deal to sell natural gas worth \$25 billion to China—its largest ever export contract. In its efforts to further expand the sale of natural gas, iron ore, coal and other Australian commodities, Canberra has been cautious not to offend Beijing. Its room for manoeuvre, however, has increasingly narrowed as Washington has tightened its

strategic noose around China.

In a bid to undercut Rice's comments on China, Foreign Minister Downer declared in an interview prior to her arrival: "Our message is that we don't support a policy of containment of China... I think a policy of containment of China would be a very big mistake." The tripartite talks, he said, "should not in any way be construed as hostile towards China". At their joint press conference, Rice played down the issue, declaring that "containment," along the lines of the Cold War, was not on the US agenda, but reiterated the demand for Beijing to be "more transparent" on its military budget. Undoubtedly, the discussion was blunter behind closed doors.

In a comment in the *Age* newspaper, Australian strategic analyst Hugh White noted that Saturday was going to be "a tough day" for Downer. "These [tripartite] talks are not routine diplomacy. The US Secretary of State and the Japanese Foreign Minister have gone to a lot of trouble to be here together for today's session. They have a serious purpose: to arrest what they see as Australia's drift towards China. They worry that, dazzled by China's economy and seduced by its diplomacy, we are going too close to Beijing."

White also summed up what Rice means by China playing "a positive role" in international politics. "Even 'pro-China' Americans find it hard to imagine ever treating Beijing as an equal partner in managing regional affairs. They think it's up to China to choose whether it is going to play by America's rules, or face America's wrath. That is what the Pentagon means when it says China is at a 'strategic crossroads'," he explained.

Canberra faces a similar problem. All of the Howard government's manoeuvring has been to avoid making a painful choice between Australian economic ties with China, and more generally Asia, and its strategic alliance with the US. As David Zweig, director of the Hong Kong-based Centre on China's Transnational Relations, observed: "The Australians are in a pickle."

The tripartite talks produced no diplomatic fireworks. The official joint statement emphasised the points of agreement on issues at the top of Washington's agenda. It expressed "grave concerns" over Iran's nuclear programs and the need for "concerted action" by the UN Security Council over Tehran's alleged breaches of the NPT. The three ministers also called on North Korea to immediately return to six-party talks over its nuclear programs.

Significantly, the statement also stressed "the importance of reinforcing our global partnership with India" and welcomed the US nuclear agreement with India as "a positive step towards expansion of the reach of the international proliferation regime". The US-India deal does precisely the opposite. By making an exception to the NPT for nuclear-armed India, while simultaneously treating Iran and North Korea as international pariahs, the Bush administration is effectively undermining the entire previous framework for preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

The emphasis on India marks it out as a possible future partner in a US-sponsored "security dialogue" in Asia. The prospect of lucrative sales of uranium to India is an added inducement to

Canberra to toe Washington's line. Howard, who visited India hot on Bush's heels, was virtually amending Australia's policy on uranium sales on the flight into New Delhi. While in India, he indicated a way would be found to sidestep the previous Australian ban on selling uranium to countries like India that refuse to sign the NPT.

On the key issue of China, the statement was almost silent, commenting only that the participants "welcomed China's constructive engagement in the region". Hugh White told the *Financial Times* that the "sparse" language probably meant that "the US and Australia could not agree on harsher language and in the end found it easier to virtually keep China out of the statement".

The statement's language also indicates that Rice, who is quite capable of being blunt and provocative, did not come to Australia to deliver an ultimatum. Rather, she sought to establish a framework, within which to apply pressure to Canberra to fall into line when the need arises, and, in this, she succeeded. When push comes to shove, Canberra will be compelled to choose between its relationship with China, and its ties with Washington and Tokyo, which remains Australia's largest trading partner.

How Beijing reacts to Washington's latest steps to encircle it with strategic allies is yet to be seen. Foreign Minister Downer was at pains to stress on Saturday that China should not feel that the US, Japan and Australia were "entering into a conspiracy" against it. But he may not have too long to wait to find out the Chinese leadership's real feelings about Canberra's involvement in Washington's plots—Chinese Premier Wen Jia-bao is due in Australia next month to sign a highly profitable deal to buy 10,000 tonnes of uranium a year.

The Bush administration's aggressive moves to maintain US economic and strategic preeminence in Asia are having a profoundly destabilising influence. Following Bush's visit to South Asia, the Pakistani regime has already publicly hinted that it may look to China if Washington continues to relegate it to a second-class status behind longtime rival India. By steadily backing Canberra into a corner over China, Rice is inevitably heightening tensions not just in Australia-US relations, but throughout the region as a whole.



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