

# Rice returns empty-handed from North East Asia

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US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's four-day visit to Japan, South Korea, China and Russia last week to press for action over North Korea's nuclear test on October 9 has proved to be another demonstration of the crisis of American foreign policy.

At each stop, Rice pressed for tougher sanctions against North Korea under the US-drafted Resolution 1718 pushed through the UN Security Council on October 14. However, with the exception of Japan, which is pursuing a more aggressive stance in North East Asia for its own purposes, Rice was rebuffed in all the capitals amid warnings about the dangers of raising regional tensions.

Rice also championed the reconvening of stalled six-party talks, which include the four countries plus the US and North Korea. But on this issue, the US remains heavily dependent on China to use its political and economic influence to force Pyongyang to accede to Washington's demand for the resumption of talks "without preconditions".

The collapse of the six-party talks since the last round in September 2005 is a further indication of the incoherence of US foreign policy. The US initially hailed the negotiations as a great success, after a broad framework to end the confrontation over North Korea's nuclear programs was agreed. While Rice backed the talks, hard-line sections of the Bush administration led by Vice President Dick Cheney intervened. They support "regime change" in Pyongyang and are deeply hostile to any deal with North Korea.

The talks were effectively scuttled when the US Treasury took action in the same month against the Macau-based Banco Delta Asia, eventually forcing the bank to freeze North Korean funds. The Pyongyang regime took the US actions, which threatened to cut its limited access to the international financial system, as a sign of bad faith and refused to return to talks unless the sanctions were reversed. A North Korean missile test in July, followed by this month's nuclear test, constitute a rather desperate attempt by Pyongyang to push Washington to make concessions.

Rice made her strongest statements against North Korea in Tokyo. She reaffirmed Bush's pledge, made hours after North Korea's nuclear test, that "the United States has the will and the capability to meet the full range—and I underscore the full

range—of its deterrent and security commitments to Japan". The "full range" clearly included the potential use of US nuclear weapons against North Korea.

As well as menacing Pyongyang, Rice's statement had a second purpose. By re-emphasising Washington's willingness to defend its formal allies in region—Japan and South Korea—she undermined a developing discussion in Japan about the need to develop its own nuclear weapons. Such a step, which would make Japan less dependent on the US military might and trigger a regional arms race, cuts across US plans to maintain its strategic dominance in the region.

Before Rice's arrival, Japan's foreign minister Taro Aso cautiously called for a serious public discussion about developing a nuclear arsenal. Later that day, however, Aso assured Rice at a press conference that Tokyo "has no position at all to consider going nuclear". Aso said: "We do not need to acquire nuclear arms with an assurance by Secretary of State Rice that the bilateral alliance would work without fault."

Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe then declared the nuclear debate was "finished". However, pressure for a more independent Japanese foreign policy continues. On the same day, Ichiro Ozawa, leader of the opposition Democratic Party of Japan, criticised Abe for being a "yes-man" of the US, and urged him to think about "what kind of [independent] role Japan intends to play in the international community to protect world peace as a whole".

Rice's visit intensified the dilemma facing the Japanese ruling elite. On the one hand, Abe is under pressure from sections of big business not to alienate China and South Korea. Earlier this month, he visited Beijing and Seoul as part of efforts to rebuild ties with the two countries. On the other hand, Abe has taken a hard-line stance toward North Korea as a means of stirring up right-wing nationalism at home and building Japan's own military power.

The Japanese government strongly backed the US resolution in the UN Security Council and has imposed its own additional sanctions on North Korea. Tokyo has also indicated its support for the provocative interdiction of North Korean vessels in international waters under the US-led Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). At the same time, Abe is looking over his shoulder toward China and South Korea, which are opposed to

any aggressive steps against North Korea.

Symptomatic of Washington's weak position was the fact that Rice emphasised that she was not dictating terms. She played down the significance of the PSI, which she said "conjured up in people's minds the Cuban missile crisis". Rice said the searches of most North Korean ships could take place in ports rather than on the high seas.

In South Korea, Rice was openly rebuffed by President Roh Moo-hyun, who declared that his country would not participate in the interception of North Korean vessels. Roh also refused to block South Korean involvement in two major joint projects with Pyongyang—the Mt. Kumgang tourist resort and the Kaesong economic zone—which are part of the so-called Sunshine policy of opening up North Korea as a cheap labour platform. He agreed only to "review" the two projects.

Significantly, even though South Korea is a longstanding US ally, Roh visited Beijing on October 13 to discuss the North Korean crisis with Chinese leaders. Like China, the South Korean government is seeking to defuse the confrontation with North Korea in order to open the door for closer regional economic cooperation, which has been constantly disrupted by the US confrontation with Pyongyang. Within South Korea, one poll indicated that more people blame the US for the present crisis than North Korea.

At her joint press conference with South Korean foreign minister Ban Ki-moon, Rice claimed she was not trying "to dictate to governments what they ought to do in response to [UN] Resolution 1718". She held a special three-way dinner conference with Ban and Japanese foreign minister Aso to clarify the "misunderstanding" in South Korea about the PSI. Seoul, however, has not altered its opposition.

Likewise, China has categorically refused to take part in the interception of North Korean ships. In Beijing, Rice sought to push Chinese leaders to use their influence to force North Korea back to six-party talks "without precondition"—that is, without the lifting of financial sanctions. But she left without any guarantees. Rice told reporters: "Let's just wait and see what China will do."

Amid claims that North Korea may be preparing a second nuclear test, China sent a high-level delegation to Pyongyang to oppose such a step. Beijing was outraged over the first test because it fears providing a pretext for Japan to build atomic weapons. Rice's diplomacy in Tokyo was in part to reassure China that the US would prevent its regional allies from building a nuclear arsenal if Beijing reined in Pyongyang.

China's special envoy Tang Jiaxuan told Rice his trip to North Korea "had not been in vain". But there is little evidence that Tang achieved any breakthrough. Chinese officials have denied media reports that Tang extracted an apology from North Korean leader Kim Jong-il and a guarantee of no further nuclear tests. North Korea's proposal to return to six-party talks is still conditional on the US ending its financial sanctions.

China is searching trucks crossing its border with North Korea. During Rice's visit, four major Chinese state-owned banks and the British-owned Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC) announced a block on financial transfers to North Korea. But Beijing has quietly demonstrated that it will impose punitive measures on North Korea in accordance with its interests and will not be dictated to by Washington.

Rice's efforts to put a positive spin on the trip to China only underscore the shift that has taken place in the Bush administration's policy. After arriving in Moscow, she emphasised the cooperation between China and the US, saying she saw "some data points" suggesting that Beijing was becoming more of a partner on issues of importance to the US. During the 2000 US presidential election, Rice engineered Bush's foreign policy plank of declaring China to be a "strategic competitor" rather than a strategic partner.

There is no doubt the US still regards China as a long-term economic rival and threat. The Bush administration's ability to throw its weight around and dictate terms has been seriously undermined by the deepening crisis facing the US-led occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. Without in any way minimising the potential for Washington to launch dangerous new military adventures, US rivals in Europe and Asia are seeking ways to counteract US influence and threats.

Rice's visit follows Bush's trip to North East Asia last November, which turned into a debacle. Beijing bluntly turned down Bush's demand to free "political prisoners" and did not even televise his speech on "religious freedom" in front of a Chinese church. South Korea cut troop numbers in Iraq just after Bush praised Seoul as a firm partner in "war on terror". His only warm reception was in backward Mongolia.

The final leg of Rice's trip, in Moscow, confirmed the pattern. Rice criticised Moscow over the lack of democratic rights, referring to the recent murder of journalist Anna Politkovskaya. She urged Russia to de-escalate tensions with neighbouring Georgia, which is increasingly under US tutelage. However, on the two major issues, securing Russian backing to pressure North Korea and Iran to abandon their nuclear programs, she came up empty-handed. In the wake of her visit, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov reiterated Moscow's stance, pointedly declaring that all participants—that is, including the US—should "not take steps to aggravate the situation" on the Korean peninsula.



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