

Trilateral Congregation - Condi Rice's attempts in "Containing" China?

Recommended Citation

"Trilateral Congregation - Condi Rice's attempts in "Containing" China?", APSNet Policy Forum, March 16, 2006, <https://nautilus.org/apsnet/0607a-lim-yeo-html/>

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This article originally appeared on the [South East Asia Peace and Security Net](#) (SEAPSNet).

Introduction

Yeo Lay Hwee and Lim Tai Wei of the Singapore Institute of International Relations argue that after US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called on its Pacific allies to help "produce conditions in which the rise of China will be a positive force in international politics, not a negative force". Rice's comments are seemingly at odds with those of Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer's and seemed to have given Australia's game away. It remains to be seen how China's suspicions of Australia's security role would affect Australia in the context of latter's increasing economic dependence on China."

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Essay: Trilateral Congregation - Condi Rice's attempts in "Containing" China?

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has warned that China could become a "negative force" in the Asia-Pacific region and urged the US, Australia and Japan to form a common position on how to engage the Asian economic powerhouse.

She was speaking to Australian journalists in Washington ahead of her visit to Australia next week. Rice squarely said that Beijing's military and economic rise would be the focus of upcoming trilateral security discussions with Australia and Japan. "And I think all of us in the region, particularly those of us who are long-standing 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 force," The Weekend Australian quoted Rice as saying.

These comments have given Australia's game away. Eager to host the region's major powers - the US and Japan - Australia has volunteered to host what was argued by Australia to be bilateral and trilateral talks on issues other than China. Australian Foreign Minister Downer has repeatedly said it was not a meeting for China's containment. Rice's comments are seemingly at odds with those of Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer's and seemed to have given Australia's game away. It remains to be seen how China's suspicions of Australia's security role would affect Australia in the context of latter's increasing economic dependence on China.

Rice's agenda for the meeting totally flies in the face of Mr Downer who commented last year when the new format was announced that the trilaterals had little to do with China. "It's not to be looked in the context of China one way or another," he told journalists then. "It's not really the point of it." "I don't want to disappoint the Chinese and give them the impression that we are not thinking a lot about them but it's really not. This is to talk not just (about) regional issues but dialogue to talk about global issues as well." A spokesman for Mr Downer declined to respond yesterday to Dr Rice's comments on China, saying only that the dialogue was an opportunity to "discuss regional and global security issues".

Condi Rice's "negative force" comment came at a time when Chinese defence budget is set to rise by more than 14 per cent next year. At around S\$60 billion a year, China's defence expenditure is still dwarfed by that of the US itself. But, other powers suspect that a large portion of the budget remains hidden in other Chinese ministries, or is not reported at all.

While some Australian media reports have succeeded in sensationalizing Rice's remarks, other international media were careful to add in Rice other comments at the same press conference to make sure that the wrong message does not get through in terms of a Washington confrontation with China. "We need together to recognize that China is going to improve its military but we need to make sure that this improvement is not out-sized for China's regional ambitions and interests," Rice said. This indicated that Washington was seeking a defensive rather than offensive posture against China's rise. Rice also added: "That's why it [Rise of China] is a challenge, but it's an opportunity because when you have a billion-plus people who are as active and dynamic as Chinese people and an economy that has the potential to be a real driver of economic growth in the international system, that's an opportunity".

While Australia tried to hide the true intention of its proposed trilateral, Rice has enunciated a clear position, what about Japan? There is no sign of a thaw in China-Japan tensions, and the current

Japanese leadership seemed clear about its "America first" policy. Japan's position against China continues to harden with recent events over "inappropriate" remarks by Chinese Foreign Minister about the stupidity of leaders who visited the Yasukuni Shrine. Chief Cabinet Secretary Shinzo Abe reacted angrily to Mr Li's remarks. 'It is inappropriate, on diplomatic protocol grounds, for a person in the top position in foreign affairs to talk about the leader of another country using such undignified expressions as 'stupid' and 'amoral', ' said Mr Abe. Compounding the problem, China's ambassador to Japan ignored a summons to go to the Japanese Foreign Ministry to receive a verbal protest over 'inappropriate' remarks made by the Chinese foreign minister. It would be interesting to see how an infuriated Japanese foreign ministry would contribute to a "frank conversation and dialogue" at the trilaterals in Australia.

In all the above, perhaps the only consolation for China was US' open expression of disapproval of Taiwanese President Chen Shui Bian's decision to scrap the National Unification Council. Senator John Warner the powerful chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee was quoted as saying 'If a conflict with China were to be aided by inappropriate and wrongful politics generated by the Taiwanese elected officials, I am not entirely sure that this nation would come full force to their rescue.' He also described Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian's decision to cease operations of the National Unification Council (NUC) as 'one of those unfortunate incidents that seem to continue to arise'. While Mr Warner supported strengthening Taiwan's defences in the face of a Chinese military build-up, 'but at the same time they've got to learn how to...tone down their heated politics'. Something surprising given that conservative Republicans tend to be supportive of protecting democratic Taiwan from the communist mainland.

Former US deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage who visited Taipei this week as a 'private citizen' told Mr Chen point blank that such politicking can do nothing to promote stability. The White House has also used other informal channels to convey similar messages. Yet the biggest setback for Mr Chen came from Senator John Warner - long considered an old friend of Taiwan. One of course could also interpret the Senator's remarks as putting pressure on Taiwan to purchase more arms from the US.

Information about the authors

Dr Yeo Lay Hwee is Executive Director and Senior Research Fellow of the Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA). Her most recent publications include "Asia and Europe: The Development and Different Dimensions of ASEM", Routledge (2004); and "The Eurasian Space: Far More than Two Continents" (with Wim Stokhof and Paul van der Velde), Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) (2004).

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