

We need to tell Condi some blunt truths

Alan Dupont
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When peripatetic US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice sits down with her Australian and Japanese counterparts in Sydney this week for the first ministerial level trilateral dialogue, she ought to think long and hard about its ultimate purpose.

What initially seemed like a useful deepening of an established alliance is fast developing into a prototype security relationship of the worst kind. One which is exclusive rather than inclusive, risks needlessly alienating China and looks increasingly like the forerunner to an old-style, Cold War alliance.

If this seems undeservedly harsh, consider the view from Beijing. When Foreign Minister Alexander Downer first mooted the dialogue in 2001, he attempted to pre-empt criticism by asserting that it was not an Asian NATO, which, of course, prompted immediate speculation that it was. Downer soothed Chinese anxieties by averring that the dialogue was merely a forum for discussing security issues of mutual interest. It was not directed at China and in any event would only be conducted at senior official level.

Yet five years on, the dialogue has suddenly been elevated to ministerial level without a compelling rationale, and Rice has set the tone for the inaugural meeting by indicating that it will focus on China's rise, including the pace and reach of its military build-up. Despite Downer's denials there is disquiet in Beijing and a growing perception that the dialogue is part of a new push by administration hawks to contain China, aided by a willing Japan and a compliant Australia. While this is certainly not Downer's intent, nor hopefully Rice's and Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso's either, perception is everything in foreign policy.

Given the delicate state of Sino-Japanese relations, anti-Chinese sentiment in the US Congress and rumblings from Australian traditionalists about the dangers of China's military modernisation, the last thing the region needs is an outbreak of China-related fear-mongering. This would only serve to reinforce China's insecurities and fuel anti-Western sentiment.

Part of the problem is that the Bush administration is profoundly ambivalent about China, oscillating between praise for its co-operation in the war on terror to stark warnings about its military build-up and the need for greater transparency.

Aside from its incoherence, US pronouncements on China are often marked by a grating didacticism. Yes, China is not a paragon of virtue but neither is the US. So publicly lecturing the Chinese on their perceived deficiencies and gratuitously taking on the responsibility for ensuring that China will be a positive rather than a negative force in international politics is offensive to the Chinese.

Imagine the reaction in Washington if China's foreign minister announced it is Beijing's self-appointed role to ensure the US behaves itself and steers by China's foreign policy compass.

Rice might draw some inspiration from her own deputy's approach to China. In remarks last year, Robert Zoellick made two crucial points. For 50 years the US tried to fence in the Soviet Union. But China is not the Soviet Union. It must be drawn out rather than kept out and encouraged to become a stakeholder in the international system.

Second, it is an exercise in futility to contain China's power by establishing a coalition of opposing states in a throwback to the distant balance of power politics of 19th-century Europe. We are simply too interconnected. And other Asian countries are not interested in holding China at bay, or initiating and terminating ties based on an old model of drawing room diplomacy. Which brings us back to the dialogue. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with the US, Australia and Japan talking about matters of mutual security concern. But it should be done in a low-key way without specifically naming China.

If the dialogue is to continue then care should be taken not to further institutionalise it. At the same time, China ought to be invited to participate, along with other countries, to allay their fears and to create the circumstances for enhanced security co-operation on a more open and inclusive basis.

Now that the damage has been done, in the spirit of the same transparency which the US urges on China, the respective foreign ministers should spell out clearly what value their dialogue adds. After all, there is a multiplicity of multilateral and bilateral arrangements for discussing regional security issues and there would seem little need for another one, certainly at the level of foreign minister.

If this seems unreasonable then ask yourself this question: what would be the response in Washington, Canberra and Tokyo if China were to announce a trilateral security dialogue with, say, Russia and Malaysia and declare that the three countries have a joint responsibility to ensure that the US does not become a negative force in international politics?

Alan Dupont is a senior fellow at the Lowy Institute for International Policy in Sydney.