

A rising China tests Australia's ties with the US and Japan

Hugh White

The Age

18 March 2006

P. 11

Alexander Downer is in for a tough day. He sits down this morning for the first ministerial-level tripartite talks with the US and Japan. Top of the agenda is the complex and vital issue of the rise of China. And Downer will be in a minority of one against our major ally and our biggest trade partner.

These 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 growing too close to Beijing.

From their perspective, Washington and Tokyo are right to be worried. Australia does take a different view of China from both the US and Japan. In public Downer and Condoleezza Rice have played down the differences, but they are clear.

Of course we all agree that China offers big opportunities. It has already underwritten economic growth in many parts of the world, and in doing so has become central to the prosperity and stability of the global economy. That is why talk of "containment" is really beside the point. We could not contain China even if we wanted to, because we all rely too much on it to try to isolate it from the rest of the international system.

But the risks from China's growth are also obvious. As its power grows, China might start to throw its weight around, trying to impose its will on others. Washington and Tokyo think this is already a problem. They point to China's rapid military build-up as evidence. They emphasise these anxieties in talking of their relationship with China, as we have seen from Rice this week.

Australia takes a different view. John Howard and Downer describe our relationship with China much more optimistically, as "good" and "mature". This is partly because Canberra thinks, as Downer said last weekend, that China has been using its growing political weight "responsibly" in recent years.

These differences in tone point to a much deeper difference in our thinking about how to handle China's rise. America instinctively expects China, as it grows, to adapt itself to a regional order in which the US makes the rules. China expects much more: that as its power grows, it will have a role in setting the rules, not just following the US rules.

Australia tends to be more sympathetic to China's aspirations, and more worried about what China might do otherwise. Downer thinks we should reward and encourage China's responsible conduct. And Canberra is alive to the risk that if we do not give the Chinese a role in setting the rules, we may drive them towards trying to overturn them.

But to share power with China is a big ask in Washington. 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".

Thus, while Americans sometimes talk as if they are willing to work with China, it remains clear that they will only do so on America's terms. And by that they mean changes to China's internal politics as well as its foreign policy. No wonder the Chinese are edgy.

Tokyo supports America's tough view. China has deep historical animosities towards Japan, and the Japanese fear that the more power China has, the more Japan will suffer. So they will be keen to support Rice's proposal this week that the three countries should work together to "produce the conditions in which the rise of China will be a positive force in international politics, not a negative force".

Whatever that means. The record of the Bush Administration leads one to be cautious about vague, grand concepts without clear implementation plans. There are real doubts whether the US and Japan any longer have the power to shape China's rise. Some Americans may think they can use economic pressure, compelling China to behave as the US wants by threatening its access to the US market. They are a good five years too late. Economically, America now needs China as much as China needs America. Neither side can afford to use this vital link as a political lever.

Others, including Rice, seem to think that America can compete effectively with China for the allegiance and support of China's Asian neighbours. Again, they are five years too late. Especially since 9/11, China's diplomacy has trounced America's everywhere in Asia except Japan. Unless Beijing starts behaving badly, it is too late to start building an anti-China coalition now. Not even John Howard and Alexander Downer will join them.

That leaves Downer with a big job: to persuade the US and Japan to take a more moderate, constructive approach to China. Not easy, but very important.

Hugh White is a visiting fellow at the Lowy Institute and professor of strategic Studies at ANU.