



## **Condoleezza Rice's 'Unfortunate' Decision**

by Ralph A. Cossa

The decision by U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to skip the annual ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) ministerial-level dialogue later this month (July 29) in Vientiane represents a setback for U.S. efforts to persuade Southeast Asians that Washington really cares about their region. Secretary Rice has informed ASEAN that she plans to send her deputy, Robert Zoellick, instead. Zoellick is highly regarded in the region and had a very successful visit to six Southeast Asian nations in May, but the decision by the secretary to skip her first opportunity to meet face-to-face with all her ASEAN and other East Asian counterparts has still widely been seen, and reported in the Asian press, as "an unnecessary snub."

While reports of her being "the first secretary of state in 20 years to miss an ARF meeting" are inaccurate – the ARF was not established until 1994 and neither of President Clinton's two secretaries of state, Warren Christopher or Madeleine Albright, had a perfect attendance record – her immediate predecessor, Colin Powell, did attend all four ARF meetings held during his tenure in office, finding them "very, very useful," not only in promoting regional multilateralism but for the opportunity they provided for important side meetings. Powell several times used meetings with his North Korean counterpart to restore dialogue and used another side meeting to sign a joint declaration with all 10 ASEAN foreign ministers promising cooperation in the war on terrorism (in which Southeast Asia remains a vital "second front").

In a region already worried about how the departure of Secretary Powell and his Asia team – Deputy Secretary Richard Armitage and Assistant Secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs James Kelly – would affect U.S. Asia policy, the reaction to Rice's "snub" was predictable: "Condoleezza Rice: Too busy to care about Southeast Asia?" read one news service headline. "The country's top diplomat, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, apparently doesn't consider the region important enough to warrant her personal attention," read one news report, further opining that "for her to stay away in her first year as the top U.S. diplomat could even damage U.S.-ASEAN relations at a time when there are concerns about China's growing influence in the region."

ASEAN Secretary General Ong Keng Yong tried to put a positive spin on the news, stating that "Bob Zoellick knows the region well and he will do an excellent job." He acknowledged, however, that "the Lao hosts are still trying to persuade her to attend," further observing that her failure to appear "will be seen as unfortunate." Unfortunately, the prospects of a decision reversal seem slim.

One country that is no doubt delighted by the announcement is China. Rice's absence will make the shadow

cast by her Chinese counterpart all the larger and more significant. In contrast to Washington, Beijing has been conducting a diplomatic offensive in Southeast Asia. President Hu Jintao visited Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines in April and National People's Congress Chairman Wu Bangguo visited Singapore and Malaysia in May. Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing also meet with all his ASEAN colleagues at the Asia-Europe ministerial meeting in Kyoto in May and, earlier in the year, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited Indonesia, where he meet with ASEAN colleagues attending a special leaders meeting on tsunami relief efforts. Beijing, again unlike Washington, has also acceded to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), making China eligible to attend this December's first East Asia Summit in Malaysia.

By contrast, Secretary Rice made a quick 18-hour visit to Thailand to "to show how much the United States cares about Southeast Asia" during her early July swing through Northeast Asia. In Phuket, she was questioned repeatedly on her decision to skip the ARF meeting. She explained, to virtually no one's satisfaction, that she had "other essential travel . . . in roughly the same time frame." (While her schedule for the rest of the month has not been officially released, *The New York Times* reports that she has an Africa trip planned in the days before the ASEAN meeting but would be back in D.C. prior to Zoellick's departure for Laos.)

Southeast Asians are also still reserving judgment on the State Department's new assistant secretary for East Asia, Christopher Hill, who made his first official visit to the region in late May to attend the preparatory ARF Senior Officials Meeting. While the affable Hill was well-received and reportedly made a good impression with his Southeast Asian colleagues, many have expressed concern privately about his Northeast Asia and European orientation – he was previously ambassador to Poland and then South Korea and is currently dual-hatted as senior U.S. representative to the Six-Party Talks and thus chief negotiator with North Korea.

These concerns were reinforced, no doubt unintentionally, when Hill rushed off after the Vientiane meeting to Europe for an "EU-US Strategic Dialogue on East Asia" which focused, not surprisingly, on Northeast Asia issues. In response to a question about U.S. attitudes toward multilateralism and regional integration in East Asia (which implied the U.S. was not supportive since this "might reduce its bilateral leverage"), Hill asserted that "we are very, very much supporting multilateral structures in Asia." Southeast Asians would have appreciated this comment more, however, had it been delivered in Brunei rather than Brussels.

Some pundits are tying Rice's decision, in my view incorrectly, to continuing U.S. dissatisfaction with ASEAN's handling of the contentious issue of Myanmar's scheduled

assumption of the ASEAN (and, by extension, ARF) chair in mid-2006. (Laos, as current chair, will host the July 2005 ARF meeting in Vientiane before handing the chairmanship to Malaysia, which would host the summer 2006 meeting before yielding the chair to Myanmar, alphabetically next in line.) The U.S. has made it clear that it will not send senior officials to any meeting chaired or hosted by Rangoon. Informal discussions with ASEAN officials tell me that a deal has already been reached for Rangoon to announce its intention to skip its turn in the chair, but this is yet to be confirmed.

If Secretary Rice's decision to skip this year's ARF ministerial is aimed at putting pressure on ASEAN to culminate this agreement – and there is no firm evidence that it is – this is likely to backfire. Regardless of its intent, the decision by Rice not to go, if not reversed, may deflate the U.S. threat not to attend future meetings; it may also encourage wavering ASEAN members to reduce or retract their pressure on Myanmar. At a minimum, Secretary Rice's decision not to attend undermines the Zoellick/Hill message that the U.S. is committed to East Asia multilateralism and wants to stay engaged in Southeast Asia.

Instead, it reinforces a more negative image, typified by the following comment by a senior Singaporean security analyst: “Dr Rice's absence should not come as a surprise because President George W. Bush's unilateral-focused administration had downgraded the importance of multilateral forums like the ARF.”

In truth, during its first four years, the Bush administration was a strong proponent of and constructive participant in East Asia multilateral dialogues. Secretary Powell's perfect attendance at the ARF was matched by President Bush's perfect attendance at the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders Meeting, something his predecessor (who established the forum) failed to do. But in Asia, as elsewhere, perception frequently trumps reality, and Dr. Rice's ill-conceived decision to skip her first ARF meeting regrettably will reinforce all the wrong perceptions at a time when East Asians are seeking reassurance of Washington's continuing stabilizing role in the region.

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