

How Rice is learning to play a weaker US hand

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Published: April 22 2007 19:39 | Last updated: April 22 2007 19:39

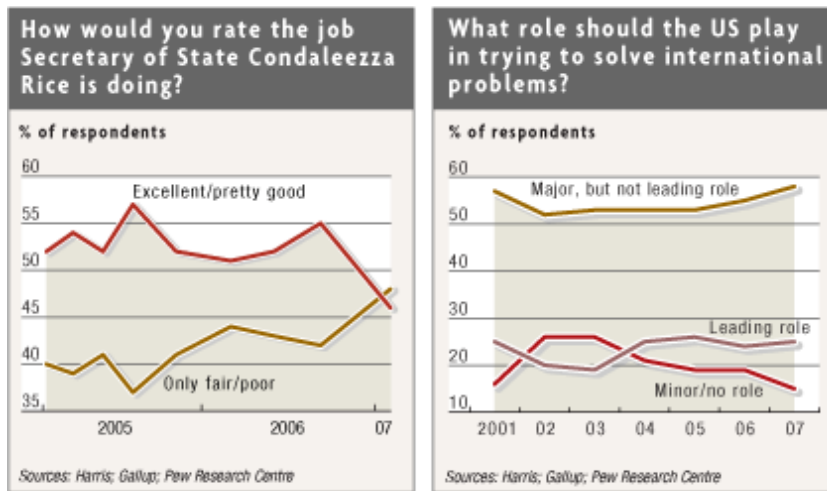
Shortly before our appointment with Condoleezza Rice, Henry Kissinger was spotted slipping into the state department building. As the chief architect of American foreign policy in the late 1960s and 1970s Mr Kissinger remains an icon of the "realist" school of diplomacy so pilloried by Ms Rice's current and erstwhile neoconservative colleagues in the Bush administration. A brilliant – if cynical – operator who was able to further US interests from positions of apparent weakness, particularly after humiliation in Vietnam, Mr Kissinger meets the current secretary of state regularly, according to an aide.

There may be lessons to learn in the present day from this experience as America faces a similarly disastrous war in Iraq and, as a result, a dramatically weakened position abroad.

Under Ms Rice, the change in circumstances has led to a shift in the US approach to foreign relations. This has made her a target for criticism by former colleagues such as John Bolton, who stepped down as the US ambassador to the United Nations in January, and Richard Perle, who played a key role advising the Pentagon during the first Bush administration. They see Ms Rice as having betrayed the principles that she had helped to frame as national security advisor to Mr Bush between 2001 and 2005, such as the use of "pre-emptive force" against rogue states.

Their case file on Ms Rice is getting steadily thicker. Whether it is Ms Rice's willingness to talk to North Korea, with whom she struck a controversial six-party deal in February, or her offer last year of talks with Iran on condition that it first agree to suspend uranium enrichment, gone are the days when the Bush administration tended to shoot first and ask questions later. The career diplomats at the state department, who in the first Bush term were largely ignored, are back centre-stage.

"[Under Secretary Rice] the permanent bureaucracy is reasserting itself," says John Bolton. For believers in pre-emptive force, there can be few more damaging criticisms than this. But there is an alternative, equally plausible, way of interpreting Ms Rice's record so far, which is at variance with the neo-conservative charge sheet.



Far from having a road-to-Damascus experience in which she has embraced the merits of realism, Ms Rice has been forced by America's drastically compromised situation in Iraq into making changes from a position of weakness. "When you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail," said a former senior diplomat in the Clinton administration. "But because of Iraq, these guys don't have much of a hammer any more."

Dressed in a light beige suit, Ms Rice received us in an upholstered reception room framed by a large portrait of Dean Acheson – perhaps her most illustrious predecessor.

Now 52 and having served Mr Bush for more than six years, Ms Rice remains the most glamorous member of an ageing administration. During an extensive interview, Ms Rice declined to acknowledge explicitly that she is effecting what many see as a course correction in US diplomacy. Nor, in spite of recurring invitations, did Ms Rice set out an overarching philosophy of diplomacy that would either repudiate or embrace the much-derided neo-conservative approach that she is so widely presumed to have jettisoned.

But in her careful choice of vocabulary, Ms Rice struck more of a multilateralist than unilateralist tone. We asked whether she would reconsider the message of her famous article in *Foreign Affairs* in 2000, in which she derided the Clinton administration's proclivity for nation-building: "There is nothing wrong with doing something that benefits all humanity but that is, in a sense, a second-order effect," she wrote then. Seven years on, humanity gets a more prominent billing.

"I have spent a lot of time at the department in something that we generally call transformational diplomacy," said Ms Rice "It really is kind of fancy term for something which is quite simple, which is that the civilian side of our national security establishment has to be more capable in helping to prevent and, if necessary, repair failed states through helping to build governance structures."

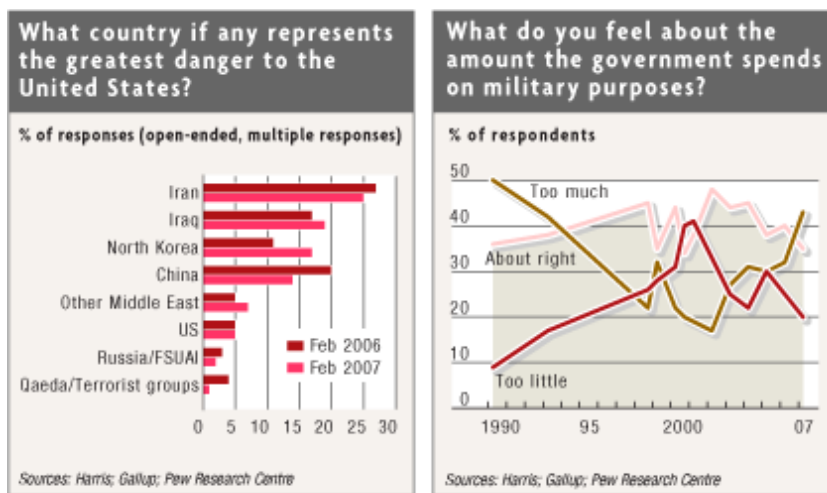
The point of her article in 2000, she said, had been to argue against the deployment of the US military in nation-building exercises. Ms Rice said that David Petraeus, the general who is spearheading Mr Bush's "new way forward in Iraq" and the 30,000 troop surge, was involved in counter-insurgency operations – not in nation building.

"We are all involved in one way or another in what is really a continuum between war and peace," she continued. "It is not a matter that you end the war and begin the peace, but rather that you have in many places – whether it's Afghanistan or Iraq or Haiti – that you are simultaneously trying to deal with the sources of insecurity and the violent forces that are trying to destabilise at the same time that you're trying to build healthy forces. Now if you want to call that nation-building, that's fine, but I think that it is a continuum."

And what about the three “axis of evil” states that Mr Bush identified in his January 2002 State of the Union address? Now that Pyongyang has agreed to dismantle its nuclear-weapons facilities – although it has yet to fulfill its side of the bargain following the unfreezing of \$25m worth of bank accounts earlier this month – should North Korea be dropped from the list? Ms Rice weighed her response carefully.

“The North Koreans are about to demonstrate, I hope, that they have made an important strategic choice,” she said. But had “axis of evil” been a useful phrase? “It was a descriptive phrase,” she replied, somewhat unconvincingly. “I do think it was descriptive.”

Ms Rice’s detractors, including David Frum, the former Bush speechwriter who helped coin the phrase “axis of evil”, argue that the secretary of state’s six-party deal with North Korea proves beyond doubt her multilateral leanings. Critics point out that the deal is little different from the 1994 framework agreement that Mr Clinton negotiated with Pyongyang, which the Bush administration unceremoniously abandoned in 2002.



Ms Rice rejects the comparison between the February 13 agreement and Mr Clinton’s bilateral approach to North Korea – again, without much conviction. “What we have been able to do is to join forces with all of the really directly interested parties in the region – and say directly interested because we’re really talking about the neighbours – to get incentives and disincentives properly aligned to come to a solution,” she said.

“In 2003, it was still very much the view that this was a North Korea-US problem. And what people really have come to realise is this is a regional problem of which the US is one of the powers. And with that recognition we have been freer to engage the North Koreans bilaterally, because no one is asking us to engage the North Koreans bilaterally to achieve denuclearisation on our own.”

Nor have Ms Rice’s neo-conservative detractors forgotten that it was she who persuaded Mr Bush to agree last year to the creation of the bipartisan Iraq Study Group led by James Baker, the former secretary of state (another arch-realist) and Lee Hamilton, the former Democratic lawmaker. Although Mr Bush ignored many of the ISG’s 79 recommendations last December, much of its agenda is appears to be creeping in via the back door.

Their greatest fear is that Washington is preparing to talk directly to Iran – although there are few signs Ms Rice is preparing to unleash the “aggressive regional diplomacy” that Mr Baker urged. The fact that Tony Blair had authorised senior-level talks with Syria, for example, left her unfazed. “Great Britain did talk to the Syrians,” she said. “I haven’t seen much in the way of change in Syrian policy.”

Yet Ms Rice did invite both Syria and Iran to a regional conference on Iraq in Baghdad earlier this year and said she hopes and expects that both will attend the next round in Sharm El Sheikh next week. Manouchehr Mottaki, Iran's foreign minister, has not yet said whether he will be there.

"It will be a missed opportunity if he doesn't, but obviously it's up to the Iranian government," she said. "We have diplomatic relations with Syria. And it is not a matter of having an allergy to talking to certain states. But we have the neighbours' conference coming up. We'll have a chance to, in a sense, test the proposition that Iraq's neighbours have more to lose from an unstable Iraq than to gain from it."

Perhaps the low point of Ms Rice's tenure at the state department was her widely criticised handling of the Israeli bombing of Lebanon last July following the kidnapping by Hizbollah of Israeli soldiers. In the midst of an aerial pounding of Beirut and southern Lebanon that earned Israel widespread condemnation, Ms Rice said: "What we are seeing here, in a sense, is the birth pangs of a new Middle East and whatever we do we have to be certain that we're pushing forward to the new Middle East, not going back to the old one."

Ms Rice's comments helped solidify Iran's growing regional clout in the Middle East and the popularity of the Shia Hizbollah. Since then, however, Ms Rice has embarked on what many believe to be a quixotic "parallel" talks process with the Israeli government and the non-Hamas elements of the Palestinian coalition government. Mr Bush, meanwhile, has ordered a second US aircraft carrier to the Persian Gulf as well as the interdiction of Iranian operatives who were allegedly assisting sectarian terrorist groups in Iraq.

Many see the fingerprints of Dick Cheney, the combative vice-president, on this new and more assertive posture towards Iran. But Ms Rice, who is thought to have outmanoeuvred Mr Cheney over the North Korea deal and over last year's offer of conditional talks to Iran, described it as a "rebalancing" of America's stance towards Iran rather than a change of course.

Ms Rice seized on the chance to deny that the US planned regime change in Iran. "It [regime change] was not the policy of the US government. The policy was to have a change in regime behaviour. It is very clear in the package of proposals that were put forward would open up some possibilities of economic and political dialogue, even advantage. We removed our WTO objection so that Iran could apply for WTO membership. I think [America's stance] is perfectly clear."

Whether or not, as Ms Rice insisted, Iran is now beginning to feel the effects of the targeted sanctions that others including Russia and China signed up to at the UN, Ms Rice implicitly conceded that last year's Israel-Lebanon war had helped to prompt this "rebalancing" of US policy towards Iran.

"It [the rebalancing] means that I think after Lebanon, perhaps there were questions about whether and how the United States could defend its interests," she said. "And in recent months I think we've established first of all that indeed we will defend our interests and our allies in the Gulf."

This brought us to the third neo-conservative criticism of Ms Rice's tenure – that she has abandoned the robust democracy-spreading agenda that was broadcast in the national security doctrine Ms Rice assembled after the 11 September attacks. In a widely-cited speech in 2005, Ms Rice warned Egypt's president, Hosni Mubarak, to hold a free and fair presidential election.

"For 60 years, we often thought that we could achieve stability without liberty in the Middle East and ultimately, we got neither," she said. "Now, we must recognise, as we do in every other region of the world, that liberty and democracy are the only guarantees of true stability and lasting security."

However, it soon became clear that the true beneficiaries of democracy in the Middle East

are none other than the Islamist groups. In January 2006 Hamas scored an electoral victory in the Palestinian territories, and following that came the participation of Hezbollah in Lebanon's democratically-elected coalition. With Iran's growing clout in the region, America appears to have set aside its scruples about the lack of democracy in countries such as Egypt, which staged a blatantly rigged election, and Saudi Arabia, which does not even make the pretence of democratising, in a familiar quest for allies to help to counteract Iran's growing influence in Iraq and beyond.

Had Ms Rice therefore abandoned the democracy agenda (something a realist such as Mr Kissinger would counsel)? Apparently not. "I still believe that the speech that I gave in Cairo is, for me, one of the most important statements that I possibly could have made. After [Egypt's] presidential election, in which there was front-page criticism of everything about the president, I don't think you're ever going to have another presidential election in Egypt that looks like the old-style election," she said.

Nor, she said, had the Palestinian election been a mistake. "I think that the Palestinian people had to have the opportunity to express their preferences. There are certain responsibilities that come with governing and that Hamas has not lived up to those ... But under no circumstances will this president or this administration turn its back on what we believe to be the essential fact about the Middle East, which is that without reform and democratisation you're going to have a false stability which will continue to give rise to extremism."

In spite of repeated pressing, Ms Rice strongly rejected the view that America's moral standing has been damaged around the world. Much of the cause of that damage, such as the indefinite detention of terrorist suspects at Guantánamo, remains in place. On this, Ms Rice sounds little changed from before.

"The president would close Guantánamo tomorrow if someone could answer the question: And what will you do with the dangerous people who are there?" she said. "Most people who go to Guantánamo will tell you that the conditions are humane."

Likewise, the September 11 terrorist attacks remain central to Ms Rice's worldview. "I remember when I testified before the 9/11 Commission that I said at one point that my greatest fear was that as the attacks faded in memory, and we want them to fade in memory, that people would also forget the kinds of things that we were talking about that might have prevented the attacks: better intelligence, the ability of domestic and foreign intelligence to work together, the ability to share intelligence across borders, the kind of failed state that Afghanistan was, that people wondered why didn't we do something earlier, why wasn't there a prevention of the place where terrorists could train? We have to remember that this kind of war we're in is a race for prevention. And when they have to be right once and we have to be right 100 per cent of the time, that's a pretty tough fight."

With more than 20 months remaining of Mr Bush's term, Ms Rice will have plenty of opportunity to demonstrate whether there is philosophy behind her diplomacy or, as others maintain, merely an ad hoc management of the consequences of America's quandary in Iraq that Ms Rice helped bring about. Unlike some of her predecessors, however, Ms Rice was struck coy by the suggestion that she comes up with a foreign policy blueprint – a Rice Doctrine, perhaps. "I need a doctrine?" she said laughing. "I think we'll skip that part."

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