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China vs. U.S.: Democracy Confronts Harmony. Stay Tuned.

By ROGER COHEN

HANOI The American-dominated unipolar world that emerged from the abrupt end of the Cold War is already history. In retrospect, it will be viewed as the 17-year interlude that produced the Iraq war and much disquiet before the emergence of a new bipolar world whose centers are Washington and Beijing.

Those centers are unequal for the moment, U.S. power being greater, but the China of President Hu Jintao has now come far enough on the road to superpower status and the articulation of how its muscle will be used to establish a new bipolarity. Countries once again have options: the American road or the Chinese.

At the 21-nation Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit meeting here, this new world was apparent. President George W. Bush was largely hidden from view for security reasons while Hu set out his vision of "peaceful development." His speech dwelt heavily on "harmony," a Chinese buzzword, and called for an increase in "official development assistance with no strings attached."

We all know what the American "strings" are: democracy, freedom, human rights, the rule of law - the whole Iraq-tarnished lexicon of the luminous "city upon a hill." When the West offers money or simply its embrace, it wants these things in return.

China has no such preoccupations or scruples. If the Washington consensus is ideologically interventionist, the emerging Beijing consensus looks ideologically agnostic. It prizes peace, development and trade. It cares not a hoot what a country's political or economic model is, so long as oil and raw materials are flowing.

In this regard, the APEC speech of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was interesting. She inveighed against the governments of Myanmar and North Korea for having "chosen to reject the path of cooperation."

Hu mentioned neither country. China, of course, has undercut American sanctions on Myanmar, designed to prod the government to free the opposition democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi and recognize her victory in 1990 elections, and is investing heavily in oil and gas. Beijing's economic support keeps the nasty and now nuclear-armed North Korean regime of Kim Jong Il afloat.

The ideological differences in the new bipolar world are not as great as those of the Cold War chasm between Washington and Moscow. Foreign investment of \$72.4 billion in

China last year, much of it American, is one measure of how interlinked a once-fractured world has become. But they are increasingly clear.

The United States has waged war in Afghanistan and Iraq in the past five years. By contrast, "China's primary strategic objective today is not conflict, but the avoidance of conflict," as Cheng Li, a professor at Hamilton College, has put it.

Hu's accent on peace, part clever marketing in a world that disparages America-the-bellucose, is above all a long-term strategic bet on the fruits 10 percent annual growth will bring. It also reflects the scars of conflict in China, scars also evident in Vietnam, another fast-growing Asian country more interested in money than painful memory.

China is not in the business of exporting war, development models or political blueprints. **It wants to do business, morality be damned.** Democracy, in its world view, comes in a very distant second to growth - if it comes in at all. The kindest view of the Chinese position is this: Growth solves most problems, and no problems, be they of poverty or enslavement, are solvable without it.

Nowhere have the Chinese differences with Washington been clearer than in Africa. While the leading industrial nations of the G-8 tie aid for Africa to democracy and "zero tolerance for corruption," China does energy deals of the kind cemented at the recent China-Africa forum in Beijing.

"African countries can now play to multiple audiences," said Jeffrey Herbst, the provost of Miami University and an Africa expert. "The G-8 has been eclipsed and the big losers are **Bono and Jeffrey Sachs and the charity crowd.** The Chinese are not interested in the internal governance or human rights affairs of African states."

The Chinese approach has the merit of seeing potential rather than cause for conscience-salving charity in Africa; it has the drawback of helping thugs like Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe. As in Myanmar, it diminishes American influence by standing in opposition to it.

In general, the Chinese have tried to wield their new power discreetly. But the recent election in Zambia, where China has made major investments in copper, suggested the limits of that policy.

When the opposition candidate, Michael Sata, denounced Chinese labor practices and expressed support for Taiwan, China made clear Zambia would pay a heavy price if Sata won. He lost.

China was a hot Zambian election issue in the same way Bush's America has been in recent European elections. A discreet superpower is an oxymoron. Harmony may be the goal but disharmony is part of the global burden any superpower must confront. Over time, Beijing will discover that.

Meanwhile, Washington is discovering how many roads lead to Beijing. After Bush met Hu here, Christopher Hill, the chief American negotiator with North Korea, was dispatched to China in search of a deal believed to involve economic incentives to Pyongyang in exchange for a North Korean commitment to dismantle some nuclear facilities and admit inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency.

That was a good summation of the new bipolar, American-Chinese world. In the push to the Iraq war in 2003, the Bush administration was dismissive of the IAEA and global opinion generally. IAEA inspectors left Iraq and North Korea the year the war started. Good riddance was America's response.

But the 17-year unipolar age is dead and the United States now knocks with deference at the Chinese door. "A very important nation" is how Bush describes China. Iraq has shown the limits of America the all-powerful.

The era of struggle between democratic capitalism and one-party capitalism has begun, a fight between Washington's banner of multiparty freedom and Beijing's banner of no-strings-attached growth.

Democracy confronts harmony. Stay tuned.