

America is pursuing a grand design in Asia

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Asia's strong states will shape the future of international politics more than the weak states and terrorists of Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon. But China's continuing authoritarian rise, like Thailand's descent into military dictatorship, suggests that the quality of democracy within Asian nations will be important in determining the course of the emerging Asian century.

Recognising this, the Bush administration - anticipating a future Chinese challenge to American primacy - is pursuing a grand design in Asia as ambitious as its campaign to transform the Middle East, and as bold in its use of military power and democratic values as strategic assets.

Conventional wisdom holds that the US is a status quo power in Asia - and that a dissatisfied China seeks to undermine the US-centric regional order. But this assumption inverts both countries' roles in a period of dynamic change. China can rest content with the status quo: its rising wealth, power and influence naturally erode American preponderance. As one Chinese analyst put it: the US, not China, stands at a strategic crossroads as a consequence of China's rise.

That is why Washington - not Beijing - is pursuing the revolutionary design in Asia, cultivating new centres of power that will shape the emerging international order as much as China's ascent.

The centrepiece of President George W. Bush's Asia policy is encouraging Japan's normalisation as a great military power - a historic break from Japan's post-1945 tradition of pacifism. Similarly, Washington's intensifying partnership with New Delhi reflects America's determination to accelerate India's rise to world power - and India's aspirations for greatness. In India and Japan, the US is fuelling the strategic ascent of countries that intend to face China as equals.

The US is also cultivating the emerging regional powers of Indonesia and Vietnam. Like India and Japan, they share a historical wariness of Chinese power and an interest in countering Chinese influence in south-east Asia.

Lastly, the US is nurturing a strategic community of democracies in the shadow of Chinese autocracy. America and Japan have formalised trilateral defence co-ordination with both Australia and South Korea and are exploring a trilateral strategic dialogue with India. America wants Nato to develop military interoperability with leading Asian democracies.

America's Asian design is more interesting than a crude effort to contain China. Rather than a neo-conservative plot to prolong US dominance, Washington is actually diffusing its preponderant power by encouraging the rise of friendly Asian partners to help manage a future multipolar order.

America's strategy has costs. Japanese nationalism alarms neighbours such as South Korea, undermining Tokyo's leadership ambitions. Australia is torn between its US military ally and its Chinese trading partner. US-India nuclear co-operation risks a countervailing effort by China to strengthen Pakistan's nuclear deterrent. Closer US ties with Hanoi may empower Vietnam's autocracy rather than encouraging its liberalisation. By fuelling Chinese insecurity, measures by America and its friends to hedge against a potential China threat may help bring it about.

China's sponsorship of authoritarian leaders in Burma and North Korea demonstrates the risks of democratic rollback in Thailand - and the strategic importance to the Asia-Pacific democracies, led by America, Japan and India, of standing up for democracy in their backyard. Together, these powers should launch a campaign for democratic reform and renewal across Asia - starting in Bangkok.

The US must encourage Japan to resolve the controversy over the Yasukuni shrine honouring Japanese war criminals, in a way that makes Japan a more attractive partner to its neighbours. A US-South Korean free-trade agreement would help restore frayed relations with Seoul. Washington should abandon its scepticism and embrace Asian regional organisations led by the Association of South East Asian Nations, which promote pluralism, enhance Japanese and Indian leadership and socialise China as a responsible neighbour.

These steps would reassure the many Asian governments that, unlike countries in some other parts of the world, want more American leadership in their unsettled region - not less.

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