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Containing self-righteous U.S. behavior

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At this point it appears that the U.S. presidential election will remain a neck-and-neck race right down to the wire; however, it is interesting that both President George W Bush and Senator John Kerry share the same fundamental beliefs about America's role in the world, differing only on style. They are both wholeheartedly convinced that the United States, a hegemonic power, has the prerogative power to make judgements about right and wrong and to redress injustice to bring stability to the world.

Bush takes a unilateral approach while Kerry emphasizes bringing allies to the table (all the while emphasizing that the United States will never need a "permission slip" from anyone in taking military action). Both candidates believe a clear line can be drawn between good and evil.

Bush is a strong proponent of preemptive strikes against evil wherever it exists while Kerry prefers a measure of diplomacy, but is ready to drop the preemptive hammer if necessary. Both agreed military attack against Iraq. Bush actively promoted it, whereas Kerry supported, though reluctantly, a Congressional resolution that gave Bush the power to act militarily against Iraq only as a last resort. Now that U.S. troops are in Iraq, they both want to "win" (whatever that means), differing only on tactics and timetables for ending the occupation.

Both Bush and Kerry pledge to prosecute the "war on terrorism" vigorously. The pre-eminent goal, stressed more heavily by Kerry, is the elimination of Osama bin Laden. Indeed, it is natural for any victim to blame an assailant, but, as a world leader, the United States should have reflected deeply on its own misconduct and fallacy to find out reasons why the country was so abhorred. The United States lacks the right combination of strength and wisdom: Other nations, though they may fear U.S. military might, neither respect nor admire the United States as a natural leader whom they are willing to follow.

Bush and Kerry debate who has a better plan to bring security to the world. The threat to global peace and stability, however, comes not from Iraq, Iran or North Korea, but from the United States. Aggressive and unwarranted behavior by the United States, such as military attacks on Afghanistan in the absence of any internationally proven evidence about who was guilty, the ousting of Hussein without U.N. approval, and the dismal failure of its occupation of Iraq, are prevailing causes of current global instability.

Turning to the Asia-Pacific region, both Bush and Kerry reject Pyongyang's pursuit of nuclear weapons. Bush relies mainly on six-power talks, while Kerry offers a pledge of a bilateral dialogue. China, a growing power experiencing high-speed economic growth, now aims to transform a post-Cold War unipolar world dominated by the United States into a multi-polar world of which China would be counted a significant power.

Taking advantage of its influence over North Korea, China exerted its leadership to establish a six-power framework to deal with the crisis of that country's development of nuclear weapons. Moreover, China has been trying to exert positive leadership in the Asia-Pacific region, proposing, for example, to establish

several regional economic and security arrangements, such as China-ASEAN Free Trade Area, ASEAN plus One (China), ASEAN plus Three (China, Japan, and South Korea), and an East Asian Free Trade Area.

Japan's trading practices demonstrate that the United States is still unquestionably Japan's most important trade partner, but Asia as a region exports to and imports more from Japan than it does with the United States. The United States takes 29% of Japan's exports and sends it 17% of its imports, while Asia as a region takes 44% of Japan's exports and sends the same percentage in imports.

Moreover, the United States accounts for 37% and 47% of Japan's inward and outward direct investment respectively (as of 2002). If Australia is included, an even larger economic zone results, with Japan and China accounting for even more trade activity. It is clear that Japan's economic center of gravity is now shifting from the United States toward the Asia-Pacific region.

Japan has heavily relied on taking advice and direction from Washington ever since the end of World War II. Things may have changed, however, in September 2002, when Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi paid an official visit to North Korea to hold a historic summit with North Korea's leader Kim Jong Il.

Koizumi's act signaled that Japan was searching for a way to take an independent route in international affairs. Unfortunately, because of strong pressure from the United States to get back in line with the foreign policy pursued by U.S. policymakers, Japan's flitting experiment with brief deviating from subservience to U.S. interests came to an abrupt end.

No matter who wins the November U.S. presidential election, the next administration will continue seeking to make Japan heavily dependent on the foreign policy line taken by the United States. However, it would be encouraging if Japan could find the temerity to make a different contribution to promoting stability and peace in its own neighborhood, by cooperating with China and other Asia-Pacific nations in taking a first step to establishing a comprehensive economic and security regional arrangement that would aim over the long run to contain aggressive and self-righteous U.S. behavior.

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