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THE SECOND BUSH PRESIDENCY: PRIORITIES AND ISSUES FOR ASIA

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The reelection of President George W. Bush is indeed a record achievement of an incumbent who was facing a variety of foreign policy and security challenges in his first term. Under threat from almost invisible non-state actors with global reach, especially after the tragic events of September 11, the Bush administration shifted to a policy of pre-emptive defense which culminated in Washington's controversial engagement in Iraq. It went on the offensive to what it said forestall or prevent hostile acts by its adversaries and if necessary, to strike terrorists abroad so as to keep the homeland safe. Translated into strategy, this meant aggressive unilateralism, less importance to multilateralism and almost total neglect of international institutions. Not surprisingly, the policy earned him not many friends, both at home and abroad. Much of Bush's reelection campaign was defensive of the policies of the last term with little or almost no discussion about what his policies would be for Asia, if reelected. But given the stakes for the United States in terms of challenges and opportunities involving issues such as trade and terrorism, the region—home to half of world's population including a majority of Muslims, powerful and growing military establishments, and with several of the world's most dangerous geopolitical flashpoints—can only be ignored at great costs.

Bush's second term also has significant strategic implications for the Asian states. Ever since the end of the Cold War and especially in the new millennium the profile of Asia in the global policy agenda of the United States is on the rise. The United States emerging as a "hyper-power" unmatched in military affairs, commerce, information and leadership have put Asian countries in a strategic dilemma. Even Republicans like James A. Leach understand how many of its allies have been quite "uncomfortable with the manner in which the Bush administration has exercised America's extraordinary primacy in world affairs." Asians view

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Washington's Iraq intervention as reflective of "an increasingly violent culture." Nevertheless, the countries in the region recognize the necessity to take advantage of the American leadership and influence and simultaneously to contain its unilateralist ambitions. As Kurt M. Campbell of the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies put it "most Asian states appreciate and desire a degree of leadership from Washington, but not too much." This apparent contradiction in the attitudes of the countries in Asia toward the United States would be the most significant determinant of the direction of Washington's policy for Asia in coming years.

On broad issues of foreign affairs, Bush's policy would mostly likely remain much the same—unilateralist, perhaps less so than before, staying on the offensive, confronting threats to America before it is too late and "striking terrorists abroad" (so that the United States does not have to face the threat at home), and disrupting those who proliferate weapons of mass destruction. During the campaign, Bush promised to build a safer world and a more hopeful America. Now he expects nothing to hold him back. As one editorial put it recently, President Bush now has unlimited political power—strong Republican majority in both Houses of Congress—to pursue his policies at home as well as abroad. As Bush himself spelled out, "I earned capital in the campaign—political capital—and now I intend to spend it." As the Second Report of the House of Commons Select Committee on Foreign Affairs reflected, Washington would very much be on guard to what it says prevent a "nuclear Pearl Harbor, "and to "forestall or prevent hostile acts by... adversaries [and] ... if necessary, to act preemptively." Simultaneously, Bush would be under pressure at home to translate voter's expectations to get the United States lead not only on security issues but also on economics and trade. Republican Leach aptly reminded that "the second Bush administration needs to be more sensitive to the views of others; it also needs to inspire."

An area of concern has been what critics call the continuation of the influence of the neo-conservative discourse on the policies of Bush administration. The so-called "Neocons" disdain multilateralism and believe that all of Washington's foreign policy objectives—regime changes in rogue states, the democratic transformation of the Middle East, war on terror—can be achieved by the United States alone. According to them "America is so strong, it can safely ignore other nations' national interests and 'go it alone.'" There are however two different strands in the neo-con discourse in Bush administration. One is power oriented; they believe that the present moment is unique in time in power relations which the United States needs to take advantage of. Others take a more ideological perspective that goes beyond the power argument. They believe that the United States needs to reshape the present world order according to its ideological preferences—as, for example, transforming Iraq and by extension the Middle East. Both nonetheless share one thing in common; they tend to be very hard-nosed and are fairly black and white in their perceptions and approach. However, with the changes in the administration that Bush is bringing in and his experience with Iraq, it is likely that the influence of the neocons would decline or be more nuanced than before.

One of the indicators of change in US approach is its response to the tsunami disaster in Asia. It moved quickly away from its original arrangement of four nations (the United States, Australia, Japan and India) coordinating the global relief efforts (typical "coalition of the willing" framework) to open the space for the United Nations. This has brought multilateralism back as a tool for Washington's diplomatic engagement in international affairs.

From Washington's perspective, the end of the Cold War meant many strategic shifts in Asia. It understands that the policy of containment "just doesn't hold any water" in the post Cold War world politics. The end of the US-Soviet rivalry removed the most obvious rationale



for Sino-US cooperation and reduced the apparent significance of Southeast Asian states. Japan too has begun to reexamine its long-standing security arrangements with the United States and its own defense identity in Asia claiming greater assertiveness internationally. China is on the rise. Russia is slowly reemerging as an Asian power.

The Asia-Pacific has now emerged as a region of tremendous transformation in view of its enormous economic growth and potential and its strategic significance. The focus of the second Bush administration would be much on the issues such as emerging China, the Taiwan Strait, the Korean peninsula, South Asia under a nuclear competition between India and Pakistan and “war on terror.” These key issues in turn would determine Washington’s strategic and economic engagement with rest of the region. The challenge would be in crafting policies for each of the countries—expanding commonality of interests and at the same time, dealing constructively with areas of policy concerns, such as human rights issues (China, North Korea), outsourcing (China and India), and fundamentalism (Pakistan, Indonesia and Thailand).

1. China and Northeast Asia

There has been a growing perception that China’s rise and its emergent strategic and economic influence in the region have come much at the expense of the United States. Over the years China, with tactful diplomacy on many contentious global issues such as terrorism, nuclear proliferation etc and subtle approach in its interactions with its Asian neighbors, has managed not only to allay much of the misgivings over its intentions, but also to increase its influence substantially. The positive tenor in Beijing’s “new diplomacy” especially its performance in APEC and ASEAN Plus Three, have important implications for Washington’s policies for the region. Washington has now begun to accept Beijing as a major factor for long-term peace, stability and prosperity of the Asia-Pacific region. But it also remains concerned about the rising China. Its defense department is particularly worried about and remains hostile to China’s military modernization programmes. Bush was under attack from his electoral rival John Kerry, for growing trade deficit with China and resultant loss of jobs at home and for going soft on “China’s predatory currency manipulation, its violation of intellectual property rights and other unfair trade practices.” Many Americans feel that as the importance of securing Beijing’s cooperation on a range of international security concerns grew, Washington lost the initiative to react to its deteriorating terms of trade with China.

Under normal circumstances, Washington’s China policy would be to keep China engaged, enveloping it in multilateral institutions such as WTO and inducing Beijing’s respect for and adherence to universal commitments on issues such as trade, human rights, non-proliferation etc. From a Chinese perspective, having already learned to work with the “devil they know”, though not necessarily liking its policies, Beijing expects to build on the “candid, constructive and cooperative” tenor in Washington’s approach that has brought Sino-US relations to its “best since 1972.” It is not a coincidence but a relatively stable and mature Sino-US framework which took shape during Bush’s first term that explains how the Chinese leaders have now come to establish close working and even personal relations with key members of the Bush administration. Both the countries have begun to cooperate on non-traditional security issues such as terrorism and nuclear proliferation. “Given its religious and ethnic diversity, China shares (Washington’s) concern for destabilizing religious extremism.” It is in this context that Chinese President Hu Jintao found the possibilities of a “healthy and stable relationship” developing between the two countries on the basis of the “cooperative”



engagement for which the Bush administration remains committed. According to some commentators, “China benefits” from the United States continuing to be the “ring-holder” in regional security affairs in East Asia especially in the context of an increasing manifestation of Japan’s desire to acquire a great power status in the region through military buildup.

However, the threshold for a dramatic shift in policy would be the developments concerning Taiwan. If cross-straits relations worsen to a military flash-point, Washington’s commitment to ensure Taiwan’s security would really be put to test. Though Bush administration supports a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue and emphasizes “One China” policy, China may find a second Bush administration more defensive of Taiwan. The priority here would be, as Secretary of State Colin Powell during his recent visit to East Asia implied, to maintain the status quo that would deter Chinese aggression and restrain Taiwanese assertions for independence. Powell was rather candid when he said “Taiwan is not independent. It does not enjoy sovereignty as a nation.” Powell also maintained that, “political pride and philosophical passion must not blind peoples to the necessity of rational restraint.” Washington recognizes that pro-independence adventurism would “precipitate a catastrophic and unwinnable conflict between the mainland and the island.” As the United States does not want to be drawn into a conflict it can do without, Bush administration needs continue to play a stabilizing role in the cross-strait issues. Though it remains firmly committed to the obligations under the Taiwan Relations Act, it needs to exercise its leadership and diplomacy to make Taiwanese leaders understand mainland’s resolve on the issue and to ensure that any unilateral attempt by either side to change the status quo is nipped in the bud. The developments in the Taiwan straits would have significant implications for the security of the entire region.

Though Bush put North Korea in his “axis of evil” paradigm, he did not move beyond rhetoric and adhocism in dealing with the North Korean nuclear threats because of his preoccupation with Iraq. His preference for dialogues and engaging Pyongyang in multilateral negotiations so far has gone nowhere. Nevertheless, to the extent that Russia, Japan South Korea and China now share Washington’s common and vested interests in the peninsular stability, the current round of multilateral initiatives in respect of North Korea have not been entirely unrewarding as alleged by Bush’s electoral rival during the campaign. The stabilization of the Korean peninsula would entail greater Japanese-South Korean involvement and the facilitation role of China. It would be in Washington’s interest at present to use the framework of the six-party talks to “test whether Pyongyang is willing to abandon its march toward nuclearization,” and recognize advantages of a diplomatic solution. The recently enacted “the North Korean Human Rights Act of 2004” is a useful framework in promoting “international cooperation on human rights and refugee protection, and increased transparency in the provision of humanitarian assistance to the people of North Korea.” Ultimately however, any failure to deal effectively with the North Korean nuclear crisis would have grave implications for non-proliferation issues especially as Iran continues with its nuclear research programmes and a “multiple rogue-states” are sitting at the threshold of a “nuclear breakout.”

Washington’s global force posture review, which includes scaling back and repositioning of its military deployments in East Asia, especially in South Korea and Japan, provides it with a strategic leverage vis-à-vis North Korea eventually to deal with it by force if necessary. One implemented, this would also remove an irritant for Washington in terms of domestic South Korean reactions to the presence of foreign troops on its soil and pave the way to reaffirm and move forward “a mature, respectful, and value-based partnership with Seoul that is supportive of the Korean people’s desire for national unification.”



During past few years, Japan has engaged in an overdrive to modernize its military building maritime, ballistic missile defence capabilities to counter the North Korean missile threat and in effect a real Chinese threat. Washington sees a growing activism on the part of Japan in international security affairs especially useful as Japan can supplement US in its global commitments. Consequently, Bush administration would like to see Tokyo continue to transform both its institutions of governance and outlook on world affairs.

2. Southeast Asia

For Washington the ASEAN region is extremely important to the United States, in both strategic and economic terms. Economically it is Washington's fourth largest trading partner with a three time growth in two-way trade between the United States and ASEAN over the past decade. From a US perspective, the economic ties with Southeast Asia would remain a priority. An equally important focus of the Bush Administration would also be to strengthen its long-term counterterrorism policies and strategies, even as the region gravitates towards a new spiral of violence and reprisals in Southern Thailand. There has been considerable ambivalence about the US involvement in the region's anti-terrorist strategy because of the political sensitivity of the issue among both mainstream Islamic and secular nationalist groups and its impact in the domestic politics of the countries especially Indonesia and Malaysia. Malaysia, expects Bush to consider opinion of other world leaders and other organizations on vital security issues especially on terrorism and be more mindful of the Palestinian and Iraq issues. Jakarta has already pledged to work closely with US under the reelected President as countries that have fallen victim to terrorism. Thailand expects continued cooperation on economic and security matters. Bush would like to strengthen and boost the existing cooperative arrangements such as commitment of troops and equipment to the Philippines, and counter-terror cooperation including intelligence sharing, joint investigations, training in border and immigration controls with Indonesia. Washington understands and endorses both the diversity in the region and the common desire for economic progress under accountable governance. The expected continuity in Washington's policies—supporting institutional reforms and strengthening the organic capacity of respective governments—would help the region immensely.

The Bush Administration has conferred the non-NATO ally status to Philippines and Thailand in view of their importance and role in its global "War on Terror." The United States also has substantial bilateral understanding and agreements with Singapore and Australia, using their facilities and logistics in the operations in Iraq, working together to ensure safe navigation in Southeast Asian waters, which is the lifeline for international trade and commerce. Singapore has been able to successfully engage the Bush administration both strategically and economically often using its leadership and diplomacy to moderate Washington's stand on many vital strategic issues including on its policy on terrorism, which has significant implications for the region. The Bush Administration would deepen these ties its economic engagements. Continued US presence is what Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsein Loong said, the "lynchpin for stability and security" in the region. Washington's task here would be to balance bilateral arrangements such as free trade agreements and economic and military assistance programmes with multilateral commitments that would resonate well with the regional sensitivities about sovereignty and non-interference. Asia in general and the ASEAN region in particular welcomes the nomination of current US Trade Representative Robert Zoellick to replace Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage. One of the architects of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, Zoellick helped negotiate the US-Singapore



Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and was instrumental in getting China and Taiwan into the World Trade Organisation in 2001. He is also involved in the negotiations for FTAs with Thailand and Malaysia. His induction into the state department would mean more focus on the region than what it was in the previous administration.

3. South Asia

In South Asia, there is no indication that policies of Bush in a second term would be substantially different. Though India and Pakistan vie for primacy in Washington's South Asian policy initiatives, the imperatives of geopolitics dictate that the United States continues to deal with both India and Pakistan as delicately as it is doing now. South Asia has now become the inevitable principal focus of the US-led global anti-terror campaign. Washington has now established bases and access rights not only in Central Asia but also has been offered and used such facilities in both Pakistan and India. In this scenario, the role of Pakistan has been rather substantial, with Pakistani forces continuing to coordinate and collaborate in Washington's operations against the remnants of Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Washington has conferred non-NATO ally status on Pakistan as a reward for its help. Importantly, it has successfully encouraged Pakistan to hold dialogues with India to resolve all bilateral problems with India, including Kashmir. "Never before was Washington able to have non-zero-sum relations with New Delhi and Islamabad." The administration would like to keep India and Pakistan at relative calm, pushing and prodding both to settle their most contentious issue—Kashmir—through negotiations and to move ahead or at least maintain status quo on nuclear proliferation issues.

The United States has used its presence to extend its influence onto other parts of the region—supporting Kathmandu's fight against the Maoists, coaxing and prodding the LTTE in Sri Lanka to move ahead with the peace process and nudging and encouraging the government in Bangladesh to monitor and rein in the extremist groups. This has catapulted the United States into an unprecedented level of strategic engagement in the entire region, something to which Washington always aspired but never achieved, since Cold War days up until September 11.

Beijing's strategic modernization programme with inevitable enhancement of its military capability is an important indicator of China's rise. As Chinese military power enhances in quality and sophistication with an emphasis on force projection capabilities, there would be increasing concerns in the region on possible adventurism in Chinese strategic behavior. This would entail a desire by the regional states for a stabilizing role and presence for the United States.

India's increasing strategic and commercial engagement in the region coincides with Washington's desire to cushion the impact of rising China. US would partner with India along with Japan and Australia in the interest of regional stability. From the Chinese point of view this could be an overt alliance buildup against its rising power. The United States then would have to expend its diplomatic capital and strategic leverage not only to balance out emerging power differentials but also to manage intra-regional security concerns.

The latest tsunami disaster across Asia has given the United States a two-pronged strategic opportunity. Washington gets the opportunity to enhance its presence and engagement in the region through its contribution in relief and rehabilitation efforts.



Washington has sent the *USS Abraham Lincoln* and its 6 escort ships along with *USS Bonhomme Richard*, a helicopter carrier, to conduct search and rescue operations and for relief operations. For the next six months, the US Marine Corps would have its teams of engineers and technical personnel to assist in the rehabilitation and reconstruction operations in Indonesia. At the same time, it now has the chance to repair its image across the region especially among the Muslims. Its image nosedived after the invasion of Iraq. It can now demonstrate that it is using its economic wealth and military capability to bring aid to Indonesia, the largest Islamic country (in terms of population) in the world.

In sum, it would make immense sense for the Bush Administration to shift to a balanced strategy that would temper the unilateralist instincts even as it continues to assert its primacy in the region. Ultimately, the effectiveness of US power and influence in the region and its ability to manage any crisis would depend on Washington's ability and willingness to build and sustain alliances—both bilateral and importantly multilateral—in the region.

4. War on Terror

Iraq now has emerged as the new epicenter for international terrorism. The US engagement in Iraq has seriously jeopardized the global terrorism campaign and further radicalized the Muslim world against America. The magnitude of the resistance in Iraq against US-led forces has completely overturned Washington's strategic calculus for the Middle East, which saw regime change in Iraq as a precursor for a strategic transformation of the Middle East. How the United States responds to the challenge in Iraq will be a major test of US resolve and willingness to meet the challenges of being the sole superpower. Bush expects that with the emergence of a "free and self-governing Iraq," terrorists would be deprived of a base of operation. It would "discredit their ideology" and "give momentum to reformers across the region." The manner of the US disengagement from Iraq will be a critical determinant shaping the future challenges from radical Islamist terrorism. If the United States undercuts its Iraq commitments and retreats under threats, this would embolden the terrorists that they have succeeded in defeating the world's sole surviving super power with very adverse consequences all over the world.

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