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Over the past few decades, it has become commonplace to speak of the trend in favor of democratic expansion in Asia. Now, however, there is reason to worry that Asia faces a ceiling on democratic development, and perhaps even retrenchment.

There are no doubt a number of factors that have contributed to this state of affairs. But chief among them is the problem of China, which is not only failing to democratize at home, but also increasingly projecting its influence abroad often in troubling ways.

Two events in the news illustrate this problem quite dramatically. One is Beijing's arrest of a Hong Kong journalist trying to get a hold of a book based on interviews with Zhao Ziyang in which Zhao is thought to espouse democracy. The other is Beijing's endorsement of the massacre of civilians by Uzbek troops in late May in Andijan and the warm welcome Chinese leaders gave to the Uzbek president Islam Karimov afterward.

The first illustrates the rigid resistance to domestic political reform by the Communist Party. The second, coming at a time when Beijing's dexterous diplomacy is winning itself credit for adopting the norms of international community, reminds us of just how weak these norms -- and the organizations that supposedly enforce them -- really are.

To guarantee a democratic future for Asia, and to help continue democratic expansion in the region, the US and its democratic friends and allies need to do two things.

- First, join together in an effort to protect, consolidate and expand Asia's democratic gains in a new project of democratic multilateralism.
- Second, devise a strategy toward China premised on an understanding that a non-democratic China is much more likely to be a source of instability and undermine democracy in the region than a democratic China.

I. Uniting the democracies and consolidating their gains.

Asia has not organized itself, as Europe has, on the basis of governance, i.e., that the democracies have something in common, and that their cooperation is desirable. In fact, the opposite is true. The region's multilateral organizations do not make democracy a priority. They emphasize consensus, despite their politically diverse memberships. They lack enforcement mechanisms and are not considered very effective.

There are all sorts of reasons this situation came about. After World War the region was not so clear-cut geographically or politically as Europe, and unlike Europe Asia continued to be the site of wars and insurgencies.

In response, the United States developed an approach to the region that emphasized discrete, bilateral relationships and alliances. Over time, it became common to dismiss the region's inability to create effective institutions on the grounds that the region was simply too diverse, and too divided by historical animosities.

Oddly, this approach persisted even after a wave of democratization transformed the region in the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and early in this century. And it has even persisted in the face of significant change in the way China operates in the region.

China has transformed itself as a regional actor, moving, as David Shambaugh writes, "in a relatively short period of time...from passivity and suspicion to proactive engagement in regional regimes and institutions." China has led the creation of the ASEAN plus 3, and we can expect that this group will expand its agenda to take on more and more issues.

China's effectiveness in these efforts has to force a reexamination not only of the conventional wisdom about its modus operandi, but also of its intentions. "China may promote multilateral security cooperation in Asia," writes Susan Shirk, "not only as a mechanism for reassuring its neighbors, but also eventually to replace the U.S.-centered system of bilateral alliances with a cooperative security architecture in which it plays a leading role."

Quite rightly, the Bush administration has come in for criticism for failing to respond to China's diplomacy, and for subordinating other issues to its counterterrorism concerns. However, there are signs of some new thinking from the Bush administration.

Visiting Tokyo in March, Secretary of State Rice hinted at a change in Washington's strategy. Speaking at Sophia University, she referred repeatedly to a Pacific community. She also began to refer to a Pacific community of democracies and praised the actions of a "core group" of democracies - Japan, Australia, India and the United States - for its quick and generous response to the tsunami.

A further indication of the administration's thinking came in April when, speaking to the Community of Democracies, Secretary Rice asserted, "the democratic character of states must become the cornerstone of a new, principled multilateralism." In the speech, the secretary rice endorsed the caucus of democracies of the United Nations.

It's not clear where this rhetoric is leading, but Washington's embrace of democratic multilateralism would be a clear break with the past. It would also bring the Bush administration's Asia policy into line with its central, defining philosophy: making democracy, and the character of states, the basis of its foreign policy.

Ironically, it was September 11, the very event that inspired this thinking on the president's part that brought about an opposite approach to Asia. Before the terrorist attacks, the Bush administration was updating its security strategy for the region. In the late 1990s and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, Pentagon studies identified Asia as the most pressing area of strategic concern for the U.S., and the most likely site of a future conflict involving U.S. forces. As Paul Dibb has pointed out, "Asia not the Middle East is the most dangerous area for the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction."

A number of historic changes were putting pressure on the arrangements that had guided U.S. policy for decades: China's military rise and the growing threat it poses to Taiwan; North Korea's nuclear ambitions and South Korea's gravitation toward Beijing and soft policy toward the North; and finally Japan's maturation and desire to break out of the constraints of its post-war pacifist identity.

In response, American strategists responded by staging war games, redeploying submarines and stepping up diplomacy with key allies like Australia and Japan. In fact, the Bush administration seemed poised to make a significant change in the way it approached Asian security. While campaigning for the presidency, George W. Bush told an audience that the U.S. should "work toward the day when the fellowship of free Pacific nations is as strong and united as our Atlantic partnership." This was an unmistakable reference to NATO, the European alliance that resisted the Soviet threat and maintained a difficult but effective unity among Europe's democracies throughout the Cold War, and beyond.

Regardless of any plans the president might have had to make that vision concrete, after September 11, everything changed. The president abandoned his view of China as a strategic competitor, and focused instead on enlisting Beijing as a partner in the war on terrorism and on North Korea. While insisting that democracy, freedom and liberty were demanded by all people everywhere, he suggested that China's people would be demand them only "eventually." President Bush also developed a critical view of Taiwan's democratically elected president.

As for the vision of a fellowship of Pacific democracies, nothing seemed to come of it, despite its being repeated by both the president and the vice president in speeches in Japan. A senior Bush administration official even threw cold water on a comparison with Europe: "We were allied together against a common enemy. East Asia's a very very different situation where the diversity of countries, the diversity of interest doesn't call for that kind of structure."

The truth is, Asia's problems, historical and contemporary, reinforce rather than undermine the need for a regional institution joining democracies according to a common set of principles and objectives. Take Japan and its inability to face up to its militaristic past is commonly cited as a barrier to regional cooperation. Membership in a caucus of democracies could help shape Japan's evolution into a responsible power. Former foes and colonial victims could be assured that its development would go forward according to a coordinated, monitored and transparent process. The attraction of belonging to a

regional institution of democracies could provide an incentive for a Japanese leader to make a complete atonement for Japan's past while demonstrating its contemporary bona fides as a democracy committed playing a responsible, humane role in the region and elsewhere. In fact, NATO could serve as an effective model in this regard. In the last two rounds of NATO expansion, leaders of former communist countries acknowledged that their new democratic characters required them to account for their wartime records, including collaboration with Nazi Germany.

While fears of resurgent militarism and conflict with China are the primary concern where Japan is concerned, at the other end of the spectrum, an alliance could exert a positive influence on South Korea, which is increasingly coming under China's sway. Seoul would be reminded of its obligations to its allies, much as West Germany was reminded of its obligations to the Atlantic alliance even as it felt the need to reach out to the East. Membership in a caucus of Asian Pacific democracies could also help blunt the anti-American sentiment that has been a by-product of the South Korean alliance with the United States.

An Asian Pacific organization of democracies could also serve as a magnet to attract countries in transition to democracy, much as the European Union and NATO have in Europe. Asia currently lacks any institution capable of playing this role.

European participation in a caucus of democracies could also help alleviate the European-American disagreements over China that blew up into a nasty, debilitating transatlantic battle over the EU's drive to lift the arms embargo it imposed on Beijing in 1989. In addition, European countries have valuable experience to offer an Asian caucus of democracies, and in particular, the newest members of the European Union and NATO could provide a powerful example to countries in transition and help aspiring members of an Asian caucus to transform themselves to meet the requirements of membership.

## II. Why organize the democracies?

This is a brief treatment and rebuttal of some arguments that might be made in opposition to the idea of democratic multilateralism in Asia. But why is democratic multilateralism actually needed?

There are many rationales for cooperation among democracies but the overriding one is that the region needs to consolidate the democratic advances in order to face the challenge of the rise of China. Quite simply, the theory underlying American and other policies toward China - that Beijing's integration into the world community would bring about constructive behavior abroad and political reform at home - has been called into question by recent events.

As the dust has settled on China's leadership transition, it has become clear that Hu Jintao is no reformer. In fact, Chinese intellectuals have expressed disappointment at Hu's record, and pronounced him "ideologically more conservative than Jiang Zemin." Certainly this assessment is born out by evidence of a political hardening include arrests

and intimidation of intellectuals, crackdown on the media and internet, and a stubborn insistence on treating Tiananmen as a counterrevolutionary disturbance and arresting those who would commemorate its victims or Zhao Ziyang.

There is also reason to be concerned about China's behavior abroad, where it has been willing to obstruct the ideals and objectives of the U.S. and Europe. The record includes Iran and Sudan, and closer to home, Uzbekistan, and Burma where ASEAN diplomats acknowledge that China's influence has played a large role in that organization's failure to deal with that regime 15 years after a thwarted democratic election. In light of China's growing influence, the character of the Chinese government takes on immense importance.

Deciding that democratization should be a priority of China policy would be a major change in the way the U.S. and its allies approach China. Even assuming, however, that U.S. policy adopts democratization of China as a goal, what could it, and other democracies in the region hope to achieve? In other democratic transitions in Asia, the U.S. had considerable leverage as a result of its alliances. Leaders in the Philippines, South Korea and Taiwan, were dependent on the U.S. A decision in Washington to withdraw support had considerable influence on helping the forces of democracy in these countries.

U.S. officials reflexively lament that the U.S. lacks leverage. To some extent they are right. Giving up leverage has been a central feature of U.S. policy to integrate China into the international community. Permanent normal trade status, the regular summits and other kinds of political capital have all been extended to China without achieving serious concessions, let alone systemic reform, in return.

Policymakers have been relying on top down change led voluntarily by the Chinese communist party. They have also largely bought into the idea that democratic progress will only occur after a certain level of economic development has been reached.

There are problems with both of these positions. First of all, even if one wanted to insist on a certain level of economic development, we could find parts of China that were ready on precisely those grounds. These would be Hong Kong, of course, and elsewhere in the coastal regions.

However, it's quite clear that the habits of democracy – if not democracy itself -- are being developed throughout the country and even in the poorer regions of China. This is the inescapable conclusion of reporting that has been done recently by writers like Ian Johnson who have chronicled the courageous and even sophisticated efforts of peasants and ordinary citizens to bring about just enforcement of tax regulations, to resist corrupt land transfers and organize labor protests.

In short, a plan to promote democracy in China has implications for the whole region, and calls into question a number of assumptions about the way the U.S. has operated in

Asia, and vis-à-vis China over many years. This kind of change ought to have come earlier, perhaps, but better late than never.

Finally, to anticipate the objection that is most likely to come up in connection with either the formation of a democratic caucus for Asia, or a conscious effort at promoting democracy within China, let me address the claim that to do either would alienate China and obstruct the goals of security, peace and democratic development they were intended to achieve.

There is already ample evidence that in addition to resisting political liberalization at home, China is willing to obstruct the ideals and objectives of the democratic community abroad. After decades of a democratic trend in the region, the signs are that an economically, militarily and politically rising China is a challenge to the region's institutions and democracies.

China's record is quite clear – on dealing ruthlessly with challenges to the Communist Party, on its pursuing its priorities in international relations regardless, and on its drive to take Taiwan. What's much less clear is how the international community recognizes that much more coordination and clear thinking is needed by Asia's democracies if the gains of the past few decades are to be consolidated and expanded.