The Fate of the Freedom Agenda

By Ying Ma

No recent American President has promised more to end the global contest against terrorism than President George W. Bush. In his second inaugural address in January 2005 he pledged to the United States to the goal of ending tyranny in the 21st century. He again redoubled this commitment at the end of his term, when he formulated the wake of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, seeking to hold back the forces of Islamic extremism but also all states that keep their people unfree.

But today, nearing the end of its second and last term, the Bush administration struggles with the promotion of democracy in Iraq and Afghanistan, proud of notable accomplishments but chastened by the tragic sacrifices exacted and the slow and sometimes un-even progress. And the freedom agenda has remained notably hopeless before challenges that lie outside the terror orbit, in particular in countries that pursue eco-nomic liberalization while stilling politi-cal reforms.

Countries that do not fit neatly into the freedom agenda’s framework of good versus evil, free versus unfree. They promote economic growth, liberalize trade and investment and strengthen enterpre-neurialism. As a result, millions of people are materially better off now than they have ever been before. Yet all the while, their gov-ernments manage to maintain a brutal grasp on political power. In China, the leading example of this model, has witnessed economic growth averaging approximately 10% per year since 1978. Mean-while, the Communist government has not at all shied about imprisoning dissidents like Chen Guangcheng, a blind Chi-nese peasant activist, who is currently serving a four-year prison sen-dence for campaigning against forced late-term abortion and sterilization programs.

This economic, consciously following the model established by its northern neighbor, has also liberal-ized its economy and under-gone an impressive economic expansion of its own. Over the last decade, the country’s annual GDP growth has aver-aged around 7.5%, but much like China, Vietnam continues to suppress free speech, restrict religious organization and arrest prominent activists for “spreading propaganda against the state.” The promise of economic liberaliza-tion appears to be tempting even the rulers of Cuba, the island nation on which the U.S. has imposed a decades-long eco-nomic embargo for Communist infrasen-"nomic embargo for Communist intransi-tency. Even since Fidel Castro relin-

quished power to his brother Raul last year, the country has started experiment-ing with bite-size economic reforms, such as allowing individuals to open cell phones and increasing farmer access to idle government land.

In these and other authoritarian coun-tries, governments are keen to offer a fun-damentally different bargain to their citizens than Isl-amic extremism to its ter-

rorism. Rather, it calls on “every nation to respect its own citizens and the citizens of other nations, and to protect the human rights of all who seek freedom.” The call for freedom, the U.S. has two options. It can maintain the status quo, or it can promote freedom. The latter. Understanding and identifying with the strug-gles of those involved may be the first step to persua-sion.

Being more vocal in de-fending economic growth, the Chinese government may be the next. The Bush administration has actively promoted the spread of free markets, such as by seeking trade liberalization and the conclusion of the Doha Round of the WTO’s trade ne-gotiations. In return, citizens must renounce the freedom they deserve.” The call to promote their freedom must be disci-plined and deserves the support of both administra-tions.

To partially free countries like China, the Bush administration should rem-pel a rhetoric more targeted to its audience. It should promise more to the Chinese citizens and their aspirations and basic daily needs. The U.S. should show that the freedom agenda could deliver both.

More important, the U.S. must recog-nize clearly the limits of its own influ-ence. Freedom, much like the increas-ingly free marketplace in China and else-where, is about choices. China, and the rest of the world, will have to choose whether to risk losing the concrete goods offered by their authoritarian rulers to make the transition to a freer one.

The Bush administration has focused on the diplomatic and political dimension, on making the transition to a more free polity, and its aid disbursements to friendly is-land governments, mostly in response to their political compliance. More important, the U.S. must recog-nize clearly the limits of its own influ-ence. Freedom, much like the increas-ingly free marketplace in China and else-where, is about choices. China, and the rest of the world, will have to choose whether to risk losing the concrete goods offered by their authoritarian rulers to make the transition to a freer one.

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Japan's Return to Guadalcanal

By Benjamin Reilly

History has a funny way of repeating it-self. In a little-reported development last month, the United States’ main counter-keepers to the Australian-led stabilization mission in the Solomon Islands—the site of the fiercest fighting between Japanese and Allied forces of the Pacific campaign in 1942—have rejoined the Pacific theater. While the prospect of Japanese troops returning to Guadalcanal may raise eye-brows on both sides of the Pacific, this is a positive development: It signals Japan's willingness to cooperate with Australia and other liberal democracies in securing regional stability—and to balance the grow-ing weight of China.

The U.S. and Australia have invited troops from the annual Tri-lateral Security Dialogue between the U.S., Japan and Australia, as well as the Joint De-}