

The Fate of the Freedom Agenda

By Ying Ma

No recent American President has promised to do more to combat repression than President George W. Bush. In his second inaugural address in January 2005, he pledged the United States to the goal of ending tyranny in the 21st century. His freedom agenda, formulated in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, seeks to combat not just 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 uneven progress. And the freedom agenda has remained notably hapless before challenges that lie outside the terror orbit, in particular in countries that pursue economic liberalization while stifling political reforms.

These countries 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 entrepreneurialism. As a result, millions of people are materially better off now than they have ever been before. Yet all the while, their governments manage to maintain a brutal grasp on political power.

China, the leading example of this model, has witnessed economic growth averaging approximately 10% each year since 1978. Meanwhile, the Communist government is not at all shy about imprisoning dissidents like Chen Guangcheng, a blind Chinese peasant activist, who is currently serving a four-year prison sentence for campaigning against forced late-term abortions and sterilization programs.

Vietnam, consciously following the model established by its northern neighbor, has also liberalized its economy and undergone an impressive economic expansion of its own. Over the past decade, the country's annual GDP growth has averaged 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."

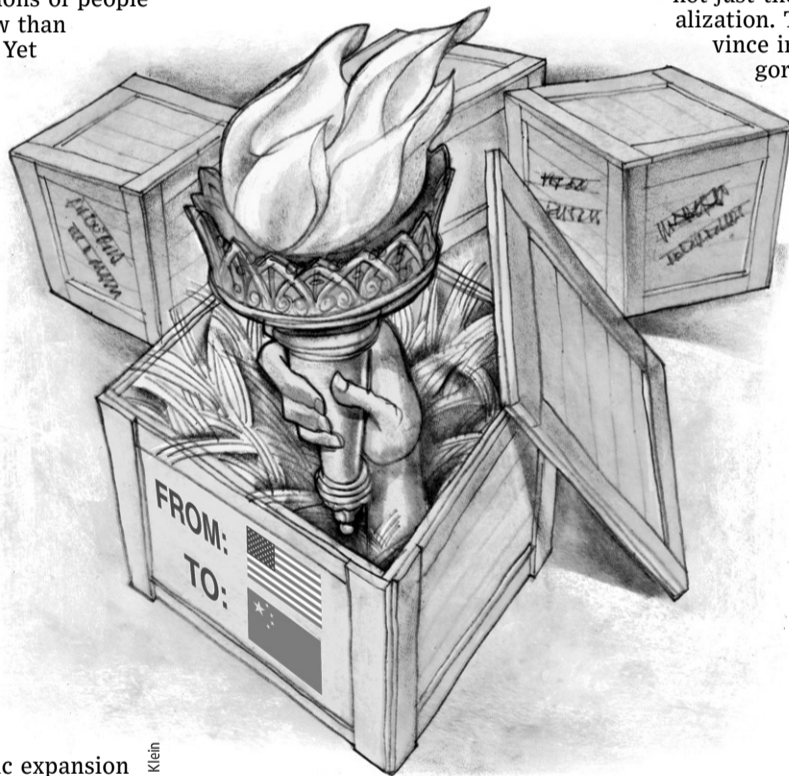
The promise of economic liberalization appears to be tempting even the rulers of Cuba, the island nation on which the U.S. has imposed a decades-long economic embargo for Communist intransigence. Ever since Fidel Castro relin-

quished power to his brother Raul last year, the country has started experimenting with bite-size economic reforms, such as allowing individual cell phone ownership and increasing farmer access to idle government land.

In these and other authoritarian countries, governments are keen to offer a fundamentally different bargain to their citizens than Islamic extremism to its terrorist converts: money on earth rather than virgins in heaven. In some ways, this poses a less imminent but more difficult challenge to freedom. While radical Islamists demand that people sacrifice their bodies to save their souls, authoritarians propagating state capitalism offer their individual citizens concrete goods, such as more food, better shelter, and their nations powerful promises, such as the chance to shake off economic backwardness or the hope of never having to relive a more horrific, totalitarian past. In return, citizens must render their political compliance.

The sweeping rhetoric of the freedom agenda, unfortunately, elides these distinctions. Rather, it calls on "every nation that stifles dissent to end its repression, to trust its people and to grant its citizens the freedom they deserve." The call

How to spread liberty in places like China?



David G. Klein

is a noble and necessary one, but when President Bush attends the opening ceremonies of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing next Friday, he will find his call unanswered. Instead, staring at him will be the resilience of a bifurcated authoritarianism and the national pride of a people who have secured unprecedented economic prosperity. Meanwhile, more and more places—from Russia to Dubai to Cambodia—are beginning to embrace the combination of political repression and economic excitement rolled into one.

Facing tough challengers in the battle for freedom, the U.S. has two options. It can continue to do what it has done so far under the Bush administration: Say one thing and do another. Despite pledging to defend freedom everywhere and at all times, the administration, to its credit, has not walked away from the promotion of economic freedom even when this has brought forth seeming contradictions. The administration supported Vietnam's entry into the World Trade Organization in 2006, and successfully lobbied Congress to lift trade restrictions against the country. And the Bush administration has maintained that vibrant economic ties to China are in the national interest, despite opposition from lawmakers who criticize both countries' human-rights records.

In fact, the Bush administration, observes democracy scholar Thomas Carothers, has launched an "all-out democracy crusade" grandly in rhetoric but at best modestly in policy. Critics consider this hypocritical or ineffective or both. Some, including those members of Congress who support the revocation of trade relations with China, would indeed prefer an all-out crusade under which the U.S. conditions its economic engagement with countries based on their political openness. It helps that the policy prescriptions dictated by such "freedom fighting" align with the more protectionist stance increasingly adopted by politicians for domestic political ends.

But perhaps a better alternative both to the administration's current hapless approach and to the unrealistic hate-free-trade alternative is to delineate the challenges to liberty more clearly. Economic and political freedoms are both worth defending, and the fight for liberty demands more than a one-size-fits-all solution and deserves the support of both American rhetoric and action.

To partially free countries like China, the Bush administration should employ a rhetoric more targeted to its audience. It should speak more often of the grit and persistence, the dreams and aspirations of those who pursue economic freedom, not just those who fight for political liberalization. The key is to do more to convince individuals in the former category that they too should be or

should support those in the latter. Understanding and identifying with the struggles of those involved may be the first step to persuasion.

Being more vocal in defending economic freedom may be the next. The Bush administration has actively promoted the spread of free markets, such as by seeking trade liberalization through the conclusion of the Doha Round of the WTO's trade negotiations and by seeking passage of trade agreements with Panama, Colombia and South Korea. In the rhetoric of the freedom agenda, however, the administration has often treated economic freedom as if it were political freedom's ugly cousin. At times, the achievements of ordinary citizens who have helped build vibrant economies from scratch have come across as

no more than a tool for America's wishes. Yet people's lives encompass both their political aspirations and basic daily needs. The U.S. should show that the freedom agenda could deliver both.

More important, the U.S. must recognize clearly the limits of its own influence. Freedom, much like the increasingly free marketplace in China and elsewhere, is about choices. The people of these countries will have to choose whether to risk losing the concrete goods offered by their authoritarian rulers to demand political dignity. In the years to come, they might say no. Regardless, the choice is theirs, and any viable U.S. effort to promote their freedom must be disciplined by their wishes, not the fervor of U.S. democracy promoters.

In Beijing next week, President Bush will have his last chance to address the Chinese people directly. They were not the original targets of his freedom agenda, but they are one of freedom's most coveted prizes. President Bush will no doubt bring with him the soaring, pro-democracy rhetoric that he has employed for the past seven-and-a-half years. Hopefully, he will also ask China's entrepreneurs, businesspeople and ordinary citizens to choose, at their own pace, the liberty that they are still denied.

Ms. Ma is a New York-based lawyer.

Japan's Return to Guadalcanal

By Benjamin Reilly

History has a funny way of repeating itself. In a little-reported development last month, Japan offered to contribute peacekeepers to the Australian-led stabilization mission in the Solomon Islands—the site of some of the fiercest fighting between Japanese and Allied forces of the Pacific campaign in World War Two.

While the prospect of Japanese troops returning to Guadalcanal may raise eyebrows 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 growing weight of China.

Japan's offer follows from the annual Trilateral Security Dialogue between the U.S., Japan and Australia, as well as the Joint Declaration on Security Cooperation between Australia and Japan signed in March 2007.

Help is certainly needed in the South Pacific. The Solomon Islands government collapsed in 2002, necessitating armed intervention from Australia and other neighbors. Fiji still has not recovered from its 2006 coup, Papua New Guinea remains volatile, and deep-seated problems of weak governance, conflict and corruption afflict much of the region.

For this reason alone, Japan's willingness to re-engage in the Pacific Islands should be encouraged. But there are other, longer-term reasons for Japan's renewed interest in the region.

A decade ago, Japan was the leading aid donor to the Pacific Islands, contributing more bilateral aid to the region—with the exception of Australia in Papua New Guinea—than any other country. But the relative weight of Japan's contribution has steadily declined, with Oceania receiving only 1.5% of Japan's aid budget over the past decade.

By contrast, China's engagement has grown considerably over the same period. In addition to its familiar pattern of building high-profile sports stadiums and government buildings in island capitals, China has expanded both its diplomatic network and its aid disbursements to friendly island governments, mostly in response to Taiwan's ongoing search for diplomatic recognition in the Pacific.

China has also expanded its military links in the region, inking military cooperation agreements with Fiji, Tonga and Papua New Guinea—the three Pacific states that maintain standing armies—and announcing future plans to train their senior military officers in Beijing.

China has also increased its political links, particularly with fellow non-democracies such as Fiji and Tonga. Beijing's increasingly close relationship with Fiji's military regime is a case in point. Shunned by Western donors, Fiji's interim government recently received a huge increase in grant support from China, with no hectoring about democracy and human rights.

An increased Japanese presence would offer an alternative partnership model for the Pacific Islands, one of a genuine Asian democracy working in close partnership with Australia and the United States. Indeed, the Trilateral Security Dialogue is predicated on the shared interests that these three key liberal democracies of the region have in working in tandem on Asia-Pacific security.

Whether Japanese peacekeepers will be welcomed in the Solomon Islands is ultimately up to the 16-member Pacific Islands Forum, which meets later this month in Niue. Accepting Tokyo's tentative foray into the turbid waters of the South Pacific would be a smart step towards this elusive goal.

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