



The vision thing

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Next week's election is rightly regarded as the first presidential contest of the post-9/11 world, but it is also a larger referendum on the role of the United States in the post-Cold War era. Iraq has so dominated the debate that it's easy to forget that the security challenges of the 21st century extend far beyond Mesopotamia. Among them:

The "greater Middle East"

The most obvious difference between George W. Bush and John Kerry is over their interpretations of what we used to call the "global war on terrorism," but more recently and more properly is regarded as the political transformation of the Islamic world.

The term of art for this vast region, extending from west Africa to Southeast Asia, the "greater Middle East," is meant to encompass not only terror groups per se, but the governments which have

spawned them. John Kerry does not see Iraq as part of this larger problem, except insofar as American intervention there has exacerbated the problem of terror. At no time during the campaign has Kerry given any indication that he recognizes the region-wide pattern of illegitimate, corrupt, despotic, and collapsing regimes that have created the problem of Middle Eastern terrorism. Nor has he articulated anything resembling a strategy to respond. Kerry simply does not see a larger war.

China

Almost ignored since 9/11 has been the continuing rise of Chinese military power. Four years ago, President Bush described the People's Republic as a nascent "strategic competitor" to the United States, by way of contrast to the Clinton administration's hopes for a "strategic partnership." But the challenge from Beijing has not disappeared; we've

simply ignored it while concentrating on the Middle East. Moreover, the dimensions of the Chinese challenge are now more obviously global, even while tensions in East Asia--and particularly across the Taiwan Strait, where China is methodically building up its ballistic and cruise missile force to intimidate Taipei into a "reunion" with the mainland--continue to rise. The Chinese were happy to hide behind French threats of a U.N. veto in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq.

But in the case of Sudan, a source of the oil needed to fuel China's future economic growth, Beijing is willing to block any measures that would respond to the genocide in Darfur. In other words, behind the humanitarian crisis lurks a genuine great-power standoff. Again, Kerry has been entirely silent on his views about the prospect of such a competition with China or how the United States should respond.

American alliances

Candidate Kerry has pounded President Bush for his cavalier treatment of traditional U.S. allies in Western Europe--conveniently overlooking the central role Great Britain has played in both the invasion and reconstruction of Iraq. Yet, beyond a very brief and entirely pandering appeal to Indian-Americans, he has given no indication that he understands that new strategic circumstances may require new alliances.

Not only would Kerry keep the United States tied to past allies, like France, who

no longer share the American view of the world, he would keep us from developing the new partnerships--partnerships built upon military strength and a willingness to employ it when needed--required for the 21st century.

Rebuilding the U.S. armed forces

Kerry's oft-repeated promise to expand the Army comes with several caveats that serve to undercut the value of the pledge. Most notably, he says he won't send any of the new recruits to fight in Iraq, even while he criticizes the Bush administration for ignoring the need for a larger force there. But he also plans to pay for the increase in ground forces by cuts in missile defense programs. His budgetary arithmetic is suspect--Kerry wants to add 40,000 soldiers, which would cost at least \$4 billion per year, or roughly half of all current missile defense spending. But the greater problem of thinly stretched forces is a result not only of the commitment to Iraq but the larger phenomenon of post-Cold War defense cuts. The problems of "doing more with less" were hatched in the 1990s, in the Clinton years. Again, candidate Kerry has given no indication during the campaign that he realizes the underlying problem, let alone that he has a serious solution.

In sum, it's not just that Kerry was not changed by 9/11, but that he's not been changed by 15 years of post-Cold War experience. He seems poorly suited--if not exactly unfit--for the task of preserving America's superpower status.

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