

# A post-Iraq America's implications for Japan

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We do not yet know how America's Iraq adventure will end. But, as Republicans defect from U.S. President George W. Bush while the public turns against the war, we can see that the U.S. occupation has reached its terminal phase. A "post-Iraq America" is on the horizon, with important implications for Asia.

To understand what this will entail we need to grasp the cost of the Iraq invasion for Asia. Operation Iraqi Freedom, coupled with Washington's failed policies toward Iran and the Israeli-Arab conflict, has forced the United States to scale back its ambitions in East Asia while Southwest Asia consumes a growing share of American military and political assets.

For example, there are very few U.S. ground forces available in case war or the collapse of North Korea were to require reinforcements on the peninsula. American soldiers are focusing on counter-insurgency to the detriment of other war-fighting skills that are more relevant to East Asia.

Diplomatic resources are being diverted to Iraq to staff the elephantine U.S. embassy in Baghdad. Recent reports quoted Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice as ordering that assignments in Iraq be given priority over all other staffing decisions. Arabic has become the most important language to learn in U.S. diplomatic

and intelligence agencies, even though few would argue that there are enough American officials and analysts who have mastered Japanese, Korean, and Chinese.

The six-party talks illustrate this imbalance. They affect America's key Asian allies (Japan and South Korea, and indirectly Taiwan), set the tone for the U.S.-China strategic relationship and are supposed to solve the North Korean nuclear crisis while opening the door to a new Asian security framework.

But while the secretary of state and her top deputies devote all their energy to the Middle East, the six-party talks are handled by an outstanding but fairly junior assistant secretary.

Neither Bush nor Rice, overwhelmed by Iraq, have seen it fit to accept invitations to ASEAN-led summits, thus handing China an opportunity to increase its influence in these fora and depriving Japan of the presence of its American partner.

The United States' withdrawal from Iraq will improve its position by extirpating it from a hopeless struggle. But, for the United States, the catastrophic outcome of the demise of Saddam Hussein will continue to haunt the region for years.

First, the burden of sustaining some sort of regional security system in the Persian Gulf region will continue to swallow large amounts of U.S. resources.

By destroying the Hussein regime, America set in motion a chain of events that its withdrawal will mitigate but not reverse completely. In particular, Iran has been empowered by the destruction of



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Baathist Iraq. Given that many Americans, Democrats and Republicans alike, support military action against Tehran, the next chapter of U.S. adventurism in Southwest Asia could be a debilitating—for the United States—clash with Iran.

Second, the U.S. willingness to intervene overseas might diminish. Unable to distinguish between useless and useful interventions, Congress, which blindly supported the Iraq war for several years, may curtail all foreign commitments, including those to Japan and on the Korean peninsula.

Third, as a reaction to the waste of taxpayers' money during the Iraq war, Congress could well cut the U.S. defense budget.

Consequently, Japan will continue to suffer from a dearth of U.S. commitment to East Asia. China and North Korea will take advantage of this situation. Fortunately for Tokyo, Beijing probably does not want to

throw the Americans out of the region. A possibly confrontational relationship with Japan without the stabilizing influence of the United States is not what China needs. As for North Korea, poverty and the need for foreign aid together limit its power.

Nevertheless, the partial eclipse of American power from Asia calls for remedial action on Japan's part. The most important step now is to set up a security architecture that takes into account the enfeebled state of American power.

This in no way means excluding the United States from Asia, if only because even a weakened America remains a very powerful global and regional actor. But it requires that Japan develop relations with China, South Korea, Taiwan, and to a lesser extent ASEAN, Australia and Russia, and if possible North Korea, that will better serve its needs.

In particular, it is necessary for Tokyo to minimize the prominence of the abductions issue—and Japan's understandable hostility toward North Korea—for the sake of greater Japanese involvement in the six-party talks and ancillary discussions about East Asian security.

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