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WE DON'T NEED A FORMAL LEAGUE OF DEMOCRACIES¹

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«[...] a loosely confederated, or republican, security community»
Henry Nau²

I was asked to elaborate on the foreign policy mindset of Barack Obama and John McCain. In order to complete this task, I've summarized six ideas that I think are crucial to understand not just McCain and Obama, but also America as a geopolitical actor.

(1) The first topic is a previous consideration that serves any discussion about American foreign policy; it does not only comply with our purposes in this presentation, but it is actually fundamental to every argument regarding the strategic mindset of the USA.

A classical metaphor might help in illustrating this point: America is like *Janus*, the Roman god with two strikingly different faces. Similarly, we can see two faces in

¹ *Communication presented to the Portuguese Atlantic Youth Seminar, held at the National Defense Institute, August 7th, 2008*

² Henry Nau, *At Home Abroad, Identity and Power in American Foreign Policy*, Ithaca, Century Foundation Book/Cornell University Press, 2002, p. 7.

America. While one is facing the Atlantic (and the European powers), the other is facing the Pacific (and the Asian powers). The image is helpful since we, Europeans, tend to forget that America is also a nation that borders the Pacific Ocean. In our minds, we tend to see America only on the margins of the Atlantic. And ultimately this is a huge analytical mistake. For instance, one cannot understand Barack Obama, a man who was born in the Pacific, without taking into consideration this transpacific dimension of American foreign policy.

(2) Secondly, we must acknowledge that there is nothing radically new in both McCain and Obama. Academics and critics have repeatedly been discussing the topic of a *new American foreign policy* in the analysis of the forthcoming new American President. The debate has been focused on the possibility of a new paradigm in foreign policy. Actually, as we see it, American Strategy has not changed in any significant way. And it will not change in any foreseeable future. In fact, its most distinguishable feature has been *continuity*, rather than *change*. The main ambition in the American foreign policy has been the establishment of an international liberal order. How has this order been established? This purpose has been achieved through the linking of America with the democracies of Europe and with the democracies of Asia. Obama and McCain are going to continue this American project, which consists basically of an informal network of free nations.

(3) Thirdly, instead of pursuing a simplistic – and deeply prejudiced – critique of George W. Bush, one rather needs to draw the focus to the work of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Both candidates are expected to follow up her political initiatives, adding to a greater sense of *continuity*.

Between 2000 and 2008, the epistemic community of international relations has overlooked the relations between USA and Japan, Australia, and India. These relations have most often been undervalued, while other issues have been considered priorities – Iraq and the Middle East have made the headlines for most of this period. But Iraq and the Middle East are not the center of the world and should therefore not be the sole center of academic research. In the course of this same period, the Asia-Pacific region has been experiencing major changes. One might argue without major difficulties that the Asia-Pacific– the transpacific world – is the most powerful region in the world. The basis for this argument relies upon factors such as demographics, economics, and military power. The United States have responded to the challenge, unlike most academics and experts on international relations, blinded by the Iraqi question. Aside from dealing with the so-called War on Terror, Condoleezza Rice has been doing a great job in what will soon be recognized as the issues of the 21st century power politics.

Sixty years after WWII, Japan has finally become a “normal” state in terms of its political options (and obviously in terms of its attitude towards military force). Hence, it has finally been acknowledged as a normal ally of the United States, like every other liberal democracy. Rice conducted this process very smoothly, but at an accelerated pace. We can say that a *little strategic revolution* has taken place: Japan *is back* as a major power. Simultaneously, Rice elevated India (a traditional American opponent) to the status of “American friend”. This is not a discreet revolution, compared to the normalization of Japan. India is not only a big Asian power but the biggest democracy of the world – and, for the first time, this country seems to stand side by side with the USA. This rising strategic partnership between India and America is probably the *greatest strategic revolution* of our time.

McCain and Obama are going to pursue the Bush Administration on these issues. Why? (1) Globalization *speaks* Chinese and Hindi; (2) China is the long-term rival. Thus, the top priority of the next President is centered on one particular aim: to rebuild and to reinforce the American ties with the transpacific democracies in order to respond to the Chinese challenge.

(4) The fourth point is about Barack Obama. Obama’s biography stands as clear evidence for this transpacific face of the American Strategy. He was born in Hawaii; he was raised as a child in Indonesia. In his book (*The Audacity of Hope*), he is very clear about his transpacific outlook: the foreign policy chapter opens and ends with one issue – Indonesia. In his global worldview, Europe appears only as a secondary issue.

Obama has stated that Washington needs to rebuild its system of alliances in order to find new friends. Translated into more transparent political terms, this means that the US will look forward to finding new allies in the Asia Pacific region. He also stressed that the US needs to reform the big international institutions. Barack Obama wasn’t just referring to the never-ending debate on the United Nations reform. He was specially addressing a reform within the IMF and the World Bank. The new rising giants (China, Brazil, India, etc.) deserve a seat at the table. They are no longer decision-takers. They want a share in the decision-making process at the highest level of the international order.

(5) John McCain’s major proposal is the so-called *League of Democracies*. This proposal (a formal League of Democracies) is a huge political mistake, but it illustrates the same transpacific outlook or post-Atlantic mindset. Ten or fifty years ago, speaking about NATO was virtually the same as speaking about a *Free World*. Nowadays, NATO is just a part of a much larger *Free World*. There are other members of this once closed club in the rest of the world.

Among Europeans, one can find a deeply entrenched but strange idea: Europe and America are the only democratic actors of international politics. In fact, some even say that the European countries and the United States are the only democratic actors with the legitimacy to speak in the name of the *Free World* or *International Community*. This is wrong, both in analytical and in strategic terms. To the American eye, the non-European democracies are as important as the Europeans democracies. Japan is as important as France. India is as important as Germany. Naturally, Europe doesn't appreciate this moral equivalence between European and Asian democracies, because it leads to a loss of European leverage over Washington. However, this moral equivalence is a proven fact in America. It is not open to discussion.

(6) Our sixth and final point is about the concept of *League of Democracies*, proposed by the McCain candidacy. And one might add that Ivo Daalder – one of Obama's advisers – is the main advocate of this idea, which accounts for some bipartisan agreement on the issue. What should be our response? Well, we should say that we don't need a *formal league of democracies* (i.e., an international organization like the UN), but that the next American President should support *the informal league of democracies* (i.e., the *international liberal order* based upon the political alliances between Washington and Asian and European democracies).

The fact is that the *League of Democracies* is already a reality of international politics. The American system of alliances is indeed an *informal league of democracies*. And let us go to back to *Janus*. Due to its double face, *Janus* was also regarded as the god of all gates or the god of all doors. Hence the name of the first month of the year: *January* is the door between an old year and a new year. The metaphor sticks even further because America is the gateway that interlinks the *transpacific democracies* with the *transatlantic democracies*. It balances both oceans. It stands between its democracies, making them closer. There are already strong examples to this mediator position: In Afghanistan, Australian troops are fighting alongside NATO troops. Even India is a player in this war, having compromised itself with the reconstruction effort; the Japanese navy played an important strategic role in the Indian Ocean. And, in the last couple of years, a new political actor has emerged: the *Quadrilateral Initiative*, the informal alliance between the transpacific democracies (USA, Japan, Australia and India). All these examples add to the fact that an *informal League of Democracies* is already a given fact.