



Nuclear Games. Iran and North Korea[±]

By Robert Matthews*

Wherever the standard of freedom and Independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will her [the United States of America's] heart, her benedictions and her prayers be.

But she goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy.

She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all.

She is the champion and vindicator only of her own.

John Quincy Adams, U.S. Secretary of State, (and president 1825-1829) in a speech to the U.S. House of Representatives on July 4, 1821, in celebration of American Independence Day.

The heart of "National Security Strategy" (NSS) unveiled by the Bush administration in September 2002 was the so-called Doctrine of pre-emptive wars. Earlier that year the administration had identified an "axis of evil" consisting of the "rogue states" of Iraq, Iran and North Korea. The NSS document reinforced the previous language regarding these states and the threat posed specifically by Iraq, Iran and North Korea. It announced the principle of preemptive military action to neutralize any danger to US security. At the time there were those who thought the U.S. might become a species of international serial killer. While the notion of pre-emption carried the aura of a doctrine at this time, the administration in subsequent statements made clear that its application was only to the axis of evil countries. The connection between the three countries is their pursuit of nuclear weapons-- although the inclusion of Iraq in that regard has pretty much been discredited a justification for the war. As regards the issue of terrorism, there is also no evidence that North Korea has exported any weapons of mass destruction (WMD) material or expertise.

It became increasingly apparent in 2003 that the new preemption principle of U.S. foreign policy applied only to Iraq where, among the three, the arguments about harboring (WMD) and abetting terrorism were weakest, but more importantly, whose military was also the weakest. The tough words uttered in 2002 were not matched by serious attempts to disarm the progenitors and purveyors of WMD by rogue states and enemies.

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The Bush administration in fact, has all but ruled out force against North Korea and declared that "the doctrine of preemption...applies to only one of the three 'axis of evil' states." In fact the "Axis of evil" rhetoric, was a careless and irresponsible phrase, a speech writer's glib jibe rather than considered policy. (1) . While right-wing ideologues in the executive branch and the Republican Party call for regime change in Iran and North Korea, the administration is not seriously considering another country to target for preemption. The last two State of the Union addresses have not even mentioned the "axis of evil" phrase.

Is the war against Iraq a lesson for recalcitrant states like Iran or North Korea (as well as others like Syria, Libya) or is a dangerous diversion-- a "weapon of mass distraction" from real threats to U.S. and regional security? Is Iraq an example to avoid repeating or the opening salvo in on serial targets in the name of fighting terrorism? The Bush administration and its supporters are currently crowing about the success of its muscular foreign policy and the example of Iraq. They cite the new accommodating initiatives from Libya and Iran, Syria's recent invitation to negotiate with Israel, and even the current diplomatic track with North Korea. Referring to Libya's recent decision to abandon unconventional weapons programs and admit inspections, conservative New York Times columnist William Safire announced smugly, "Colonel Qaddafi took one look at our army massing for the invasion of Iraq and decided to get out of the mass-destruction business" and added that these developments prove that "what we have been doing is strategically sound as well as morally right." (2) .

Others observe that Libya's decision was based more on practical considerations that would have obtained regardless of the U.S. military posture in the region: Libya's program was too underdeveloped to warrant pursuing in defiance of world opinion; it been moving in this direction for some time and had needed the economic benefits that would come from a removal sanctions. Moreover, its success could just as easily be attributed to the skillful diplomacy employed by the U.S. and Great Britain in discussions with Colonel Muammar al-Qaddafi over the past year. Others, citing offers of concessions made by Libyan agents to U.S. private citizens, believe that the U.S. could have achieved all this over a decade ago. (3) Even if Bush's foreign policy is responsible for Libya's decision, it is questionable whether Iran and North Korea can also be disarmed so easily. These countries represent much more of a test of the validity of Bush's unilateral militarism than Iraq. (4)

There are also indications that the war in Iraq has had serious negatives for foreign policy in the region and elsewhere-- especially the loss of credibility of the U.S. in failing to substantiate its stated reasons for going to war. For example, the U.S. War College has just published a report that concludes that the war in Iraq is not only not solving the problem of terrorism; it constitutes an obstacle to addressing that threat effectively. Syria, despite Bush Administration neo-conservative ideologues who have been urging regime change in Damascus for years, had been an important source of information on terrorism in the region. But Seymour Hersh in an article last summer in The New Yorker revealed that Syrian intelligence sources had dried up after the war in Iraq and a corresponding tough line on Syria. One Syrian foreign-ministry official said, "There is no security relationship now. It saddens us as much as it saddens you. We could give you information on organizations that we don't think should exist. If we

help you on Al Qaeda, we are helping ourselves." The issue of administration hard-liners subordinating practical measures to fight terrorism to the war angered officials in the State Department and CIA. One operative said that his colleagues were extremely upset that a great channel at Aleppo had been closed. The Syrians were a lot more willing to help us, but[Rumsfeld and his colleagues] want to go in there next." (5)

To complicate matters, in late 2003, reports surfaced of Pakistani nuclear scientists transferring nuclear technology to Iran, Libya and other countries. This raised the question of whether Pakistan, a U.S. ally and WMD producer, led by the fragile government of Pervez Musharraf, and with a military and intelligence service heavily influenced by Moslem extremists, was not in fact more of a proliferation concern than any of the "axis of evil" countries.

In terms of the issues defining the Manichean notion of an "axis of evil," both North Korea and Iran should be considered considerably more dangerous than Iraq, which was viewed a weaker stand-in for the other two. However, U.S. relations with these first two "axis of evil," countries, Iran and North Korea, perhaps offer the best opportunity to assess the efficacy as well as the pitfalls inherent in current U.S. foreign policy, centered as it is on hard-line rhetoric, unilateral moves, and the military adventure in Iraq. Is the war against Iraq a lesson for recalcitrant states like Iran or North Korea (as well as some others like Syria, Libya) or is it a dangerous diversion-- a "weapon of mass distraction" from real threats to U.S. and regional security? Is Iraq the opening salvo in an attack on serial targets in the name of fighting terrorism or an example to avoid repeating? And finally, is the war on Iraq counterproductive in the sense that it may have caused a country like North Korea to intensify its production of nuclear weapons to defend itself against a country which has made its clear its hostility to the regime?

Washington reconsiders the role of Iran in the "axis of evil"

For the most part the Bush administration has adopted a confrontational approach to Iran with which the U.S. has not had diplomatic relations since the U.S. embassy hostage crisis of 1979. Washington has three problems with Iran: its nuclear program, its links to both regional (primarily Hezbollah and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad) and global terrorism (Some Al Qaeda members fled Afghanistan to Iran after the U.S. invasion of 2001, but recently the Iranian government arrested 225 suspects and will try some of them in court)) and its hostility to Israel. But it is Iran's nuclear program (the issue that was shared by all three "axis of evil" countries) which has captured the attention of the Bush administration as it focuses on non-proliferation in an age of global terrorism.

The first question raised with regard to the current U.S. relationship with Iran is whether it will be next on the administration's hit list of countries to be attacked militarily-- a question considered absurd only a couple of years ago. Just after the end of organized resistance to the U.S. invasion in Iraq in May 2003, a series of stories

appeared, especially in right-wing publications, that Iran was the next target for regime change.

Like North Korea, Iran provoked intense debate between hard-line militarists and advocates of a more conciliatory diplomatic approach. And the nuclear issue is the most bitterly contested, with hard-liners supporting a confrontational policy ranging from taking the issue to the UN Security Council in order to consider applying sanctions to regime change through military action. Iran has been a particular project of the right-wing ideologues. Recently, Richard Perle and David Frum argue in a combative new work, An End to Evil. How to Win the war on Terror, (6) The two argue that U.S. should blockade North Korea and force regime change in Syria, isolate France and pull out of the UN. They declare that Iran is the world's least trustworthy regime and that "the regime must go." It would be one thing if they were simply a couple voices on what used to be called "lunatic fringe" of U.S. politics but Perle is a former assistant secretary of defense member of the Defense Policy Board (a private committee that advises the Pentagon) and a key member of the Project for a New American Century and Frum was Bush's speech writer and coiner of the phrase "axis of evil." Both still have the president's ear.

Shortly after the collapse of formal military resistance in Iraq in the spring of 2003, there was growing talk in the Bush administration of regime change and possible military action in Iran. The arguments included the above long-standing complaints as well as some evidence (later deemed doubtful by the CIA and State Department) that al-Qaeda agents based in Iran had been involved in terrorist attacks against US and foreign targets in Saudi Arabia on May 12. Tehran immediately denied any involvement. (7)

Hard-line neocons in the Bush administration, particularly Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith favored using Iranian rebel groups based in Iraq to wage covert operations inside Iran or as the centerpiece of a military expedition to overthrow the government. In addition to aiding the Lebanese-based Hezbollah group and accelerating their nuclear program, these neoconservatives or "neocons" as they are called, believed that Teheran is infiltrating its agents into Iraq and manipulating the majority Shiite community in order to create problems for the U.S. occupation. (8)

Reactions in Congress included the drafting of a bill May called the "Iran Democracy Act." Introduced by Senator Sam Brownback, a Republican from Kansas and Christian Right ally of the neo-conservatives, the bill promotes the policy goal of "an internationally monitored referendum to allow the Iranian people to peacefully change their system of government." Brown also declared that the U.S. should not "coddle this terrorist regime," but "stand firm and support the people of Iran - who are the only ones that can win this important battle." (9)

Ultimately, this was mere wishful thinking by neoconservatives given the ongoing political and security problems (once referred to as a bit of untidiness by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's phrase) in Iraq, the size of Iran (more than three times

larger than Iraq in geography and population) and the fact that Iran's democratic reform movement makes invasion and regime change a harder sell. Moreover, unresolved problems with other states in the region mentioned above, the example of successful diplomacy in Libya, and the deployment of one third of US active duty combat troops in Iraq, all make singling out Iran as a military target or subjecting it to military pressure very complicated if not implausibly foolhardy. (10)

Moderates note that coercive, unilateral options are undesirable and often counterproductive. Successful military strikes against Iran would be difficult against that country's dispersed and relatively advanced nuclear sites and would only reinforce the hard-liners' promotion of nuclear weapons. At any rate, another military engagement at this point looks increasingly unrealistic. The current U.S. lack of credibility with domestic and international public opinion because of intelligence failures that undermined the stated justifications for going to war against Iraq has two consequences: 1) It jeopardizes U.S. claims against Iran's real nuclear challenge and 2) prevents gathering the kind of bipartisan support obtained in 2002-3 for the Iraq war (preemption after all, requires pristine intelligence for it to have any legitimacy).

The experience of establishing control in Iraq, by far the weakest of the three so-called "axis of evil" states, has to give pause to any would-be Pentagon planners of future military operations. It would now be more difficult to convince the US public that the targeting of these countries would be advancing the war on terrorism, given the criticism of Iraq policy on that score and the evidence that the societies of our allies Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, as well as an unsettled Afghanistan, may represent a graver threat in promoting global terrorism. If a year ago the possibility that the doctrine of preemptive attack would be applied to Iran and North Korea in the immediate future was remote, then it is even more so now given these changed circumstances.

The Bush administration, for its part, suspended its talks (high-level but unofficial) with Teheran. These included Afghanistan, where Iran has supported U.S. military operations, among other regional concerns. But it has not permanently cut off the talks and the threat of military action, covert or otherwise, receded by the fall of 2003. Some, like Reuel Marc Gerecht, a former CIA officer and a fellow at the conservative think-tank, the American Enterprise Institute, now argued that the U.S. military presence in Iraq alone would trigger the necessary regime change in Iran. That the U.S. may be modifying or even abandoning its unilateralist doctrine of preemptive war is even more apparent in the diplomatic game the U.S. is playing with North Korea, the most serious nuclear threat to U.S. security.

Iran's Nuclear Program

In December 2003, the world learned that for two decades now Iran has been covertly developing the capability to make nuclear weapons--in particular, developing the wherewithal to produce separated plutonium and highly enriched uranium (HEU). (11) Iran is a signatory to both the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which Teheran

signed in 1970, and the Additional Protocol signed in (1997) allowing inspections. But officials of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the U.N. organization charged with monitoring the world's nuclear energy, discovered last year that Iran had been processing plutonium and enriching uranium for weapons-grade fuel. Citing Iran's failure to disclose various nuclear materials, facilities, and activities, on June 19 a "Chairwoman's Statement" summing up the meeting of the IAEA Board of Governors criticized Iran for its failure to fulfill its safeguards obligations under the NPT. (12) Unlike North Korea, Iran's immediate reaction was to reject the charge that it had a nuclear weapons program, maintaining that it only engaged in a range of peaceful nuclear activities. Iran wants a U.S. commitment to stop its attempts to block Iran's acquisition of nuclear power reactors from Russia or elsewhere and access to all peaceful technology, including sensitive fuel-cycle facilities like enrichment plants and plutonium separation facilities.

According to IAEA estimates Iran could possibly have a nuclear weapon by the end of 2005 and the problem needs instant attention. Once the program is well underway, it will be politically difficult for the regime-- especially under pressure from conservative clerics-- to change course. Defying the IAEA's conditions, could result in economic sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council. This situation could result in destabilizing the region as neighboring countries seek nuclear parity. (13)

The Pakistan Connection

The situation with Iran became more complicated in late December 2003, when it was discovered that Pakistani nuclear scientists had been transferring nuclear technology to other countries, including Iran. In fact, Pakistan has emerged as "the intellectual and trading hub" of a loose network of hidden nuclear proliferators. Iran obtained basic centrifuge designs capable of producing weapons-grade uranium--from Pakistan (as well as from North Korea) and equipment for Iran's pilot uranium enrichment plant, mainly during the 1980s, when Pakistan was the U.S.' chief ally in the region fighting the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. During that time the U.S. practiced what Noam Chomsky calls "intentional ignorance" toward Pakistan, weighing concern about atomic bombs against US strategic interests. (14)

The tenuous position of Pakistani President Musharraf, the Islamic fundamentalist element influencing the military and intelligence service, and the willingness of the country's scientists to transfer nuclear technology to other nations (Libya was also among the recipients) and potentially to terrorist groups may be rendering obsolete the old "axis of evil" alarm. (15) Notwithstanding George W. Bush's reference to Musharraf and Pakistan as a "trustworthy ally," it is also a factor in modifying Washington's belligerence toward Iran. The serious question of nuclear proliferation is looming as a much larger problem than the exaggerated and now revealed as false concerns about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. For example, Mohamed ElBaradei, director general of the IAEA, has estimated that 35-40 nations now have the know-how to build nuclear weapons. (16)

Teheran's Nuclear Concessions

After long resisting international efforts to control Iran's nuclear ambitions, in late October of 2003, the government of Mohammad Khatami reached an agreement with three member of the European Union (France, Germany and Britain) and unexpectedly accepted strict inspections of its nuclear facilities and agreed to suspend production of enriched uranium. For 18 years Iran had managed to hide its centrifuge operations from IAEA inspectors. A month later Washington reluctantly agreed with Europeans to submit an IAEA report that deplores Iran's nuclear program without taking it to the Security Council for possible sanctions. (17)

In response to the new conciliatory position of Iran the US Department of State (Foreign Office) assured Teheran that Washington did not support overturning the Iran's government and indicated a disposition to dialogue over differences. Deputy Secretary of State Richard L. Armitage emphasized to Senate Foreign Relations Committee that "regime change was not U.S. policy toward Iran." (18) Washington praised Teheran's October decision to allow nuclear inspections; however, the U.S. considered Iran's pledge to suspend its uranium enrichment program insufficient. The Bush administration wanted it dismantled.

Indeed, Iran is much more likely than North Korea, which probably already has nuclear weapons, to emulate the Libyan example and end its nuclear program. But it has not responded simply to U.S. intimidation and it will demand economic and political benefits in return. (19) In fact, Iran's recent conciliatory attitude may well be seen as an attempt by Iran's conservatives to take pressure off themselves from the U.S. and Europeans while they consolidate power and coopt the reformers agenda "making Iran less isolated internationally." It may also be a part of an opening by Iran to estranged neighbors like Egypt and Turkey (20) At a diplomatic level Iran's recent nuclear posture has borne little fruit. Despite nuclear concessions, its earlier support for the ouster of the Taliban in Afghanistan, and its pledge of aid for the reconstruction of Iraq at the Madrid donor's conference, Teheran feels it has reaped only the Bush administration's boast that its hard line has made Iran malleable. (21)

The Bush administration has chosen to view Iran's new accommodating stance as evidence that its tough measures and military action in Iraq have sent an unambiguous message to states like Iran. Colin Powell wrote in an opinion piece on New Year's day 2004: "Iran has felt our sustained pressure and that of our allies to come clean on its nuclear weapons program, and has begun to do so." (22) And conservative commentator William Safire declared: "the presence of 130,000 U.S. troops near the border was not lost on the despot-clerics in power..." Safire adds confidently, "the example of freedom in neighboring Iraq will help cause another part of the axis to fall." (23) Likewise, the recent political Iranian crackdown on reformers is seen as a sign of the regime's weakness rather than a perceived need to tighten political control in the face of U.S. military presence in the region.

Iran accepted U.S. help following the quake in December 2003, that killed more than 30,000 people in the ancient city of Bam, but it turned down a US proposal for more aid to be brought in by a high-profile team led by Senator Elizabeth Dole, wife of former Republican presidential candidate Robert Dole. US Secretary of State Colin L. Powell indicated that Iran's acceptance of U.S. aid after the Bam earthquake had created opportunities for a new dialogue between the foes, although we should not expect a quick rapprochement. Iran, on the other hand has accused Washington of playing politics with the aid without altering its position on the differences that separate them. "What is important is mutual respect and the principle of equality, in a healthy atmosphere without violence," Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi said. "For this to happen, the United States must change its policy toward Iran." (24)

By the end of the year Washington, influenced by the instability in Iraq and Iran's conciliatory stance on its nuclear program, signaled that it was prepared to talk again. But now Iran balked at a renewal of the U.S. dialogue. In early January 2004, Iran rejected a U.S. overture for talks between the estranged nations, saying that Washington must first end its hostile policy toward the Islamic state. The Bush administration expressed interest in discussing Iran's nuclear program, human rights conditions, and links to terrorism. But Kharrazi said the Iranians weren't swayed by what they view as a lopsided proposal. "Right now there are no plans to commence a dialogue," (25)

At the same time President Khatami adamantly rejected the Bush administration's claim that Iran is seeking nuclear weapons. He also dismissed Washington's assertion that Iran opened up its nuclear facilities to inspection because of pressure from the Bush administration. He refused to consider meeting with vice-president Dick Cheney at the Davos World Economic Meeting, stating that the first requisite to any dialogue is the mutual respect between the two parties.... we have not sensed that on the U.S. side." (26)

A Dangerous Dance Continues

Iran's response at the moment seems to be at least in part generated from President Bush's penchant for clumsy diplomatic bluster. In December the US ordered a temporary easing of trade restrictions to speed flow of aid to earthquake victims. But on January 1, Bush declared that Iran still had to sever its ties to terrorists, kill its nuclear weapons programs and democratize its political system before relations could improve. (27) Iran's influential former president, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, said Bush's repeated accusations against Iran had undermined a possible thaw. "Our initial analysis [after the earthquake] was that they wanted to pave the way for negotiations and resolving the problems," Rafsanjani said on state radio. "Their main mistake was that Mr. Bush started to repeat the old allegations about Iran and weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, human rights, and the Middle East conflict." (28)

Iran, also like North Korea, has frustrated the administration with apparently inconsistent behavior--- sometimes supporting US policy, but simultaneously backing

Islamic militants and a nuclear weapons program. On the other hand, the U.S. needs Iranian cooperation in the war on terrorism, and assuring the cooperation of the Iraqi Shiite population over which Shiite Iran wields influence.

Among U.S. observers, there is a growing suspicion that the Bush administration stumbled badly on Iran. It failed to capitalize on the opening after September 11, 2001, when Iran not only supported many aspects of the U.S. war against terrorism, including its toppling of the Taliban, but internally, moderates were in the ascendant. But four months later, when Bush branded the country part of its "axis of evil," he undercut the reformers (we are seeing this underscored today), and quashed the hope of reconfiguring U.S. diplomatic relations with Iran. (29)

Indeed, even after adopting a more accommodating position regarding inspections in October, Teheran quickly declared that it would not share intelligence with the U.S. on Al Qaeda or deliver Al Qaeda suspects to the U.S. authorities. It would resume a dialogue with the Washington only after Washington showed good faith for its part. A spokesman for the government declared, "You cannot threaten from one side and freeze assets from the other side; level accusations from one side and then request dialogue from the other side; we need to see America's practical steps. (30)

An Exit Strategy for Iran?

A strategy of regime change is certainly fraught with risks and no guarantees. Such a policy could easily lead to a new government that also seeks nuclear weapons. David Albright and Corey Hinderstein feel the United States should decouple any proposed solution to the nuclear problem from regime change efforts and preventive military strikes. The United States, in cooperation with its allies--particularly the EU, Japan, and Russia--needs to develop a set of incentives to entice Iran away from developing nuclear weapons capabilities. There are a wide variety of items that could be put into an incentive package--lifting economic sanctions, high-technology assistance, assurances of a nuclear fuel supply for the Bushehr nuclear reactor, and other energy or economic assistance. (31)

Such an exercise in geopolitical realism avoids the apocalyptic scenarios of right wing ideologues while addressing the broad security concerns of the U.S. and the need for regional stability. At this point however, neither U.S. military action against Iran nor diplomacy rooted in long-term realism can be expected in any time soon. The unfortunate prospect for the remainder of the Bush administration is for a continuation of knee-jerk belligerence grounded in the moralistic rhetoric of a war on terrorism and sustained faith in the ultimate triumph of U.S. ideals through the exercise of its unprecedented economic and military power. Perhaps it is simply that the size and reach of the power itself that has corrupted its use-- that such power in any country's hands would constitute a dangerous geopolitical imbalance and foster hostility.

There are already cracks showing in the hegemonies façade of the U.S.: the Iraq problem appears not to be so easily resolved by conquering Baghdad. Iran, while interested in

dialogue, does not appear to be willing to engage solely on Washington's terms or be particularly intimidated by the U.S. military occupation next door and its tough language. Moreover, anti-Americanism is at an all-time high; an astonishing number of people, including those in countries historically allied with the U.S., view this global hyperpower as a greater threat to world peace than Al Qaeda. There is the growing suspicion that the U.S. "war on terrorism" as currently conceived is a counterproductive and will only leave the country more vulnerable to terrorist attacks. And Washington seems willing to confront only militarily weak regimes and then overpower them in a kind of video-game warfare, in order to intimidate others. But the game is much more complicated than those played with a video control stick. The solutions to terrorism and nuclear proliferation reside more in complex formulations requiring multilateral cooperation--especially on police and intelligence work, subtle diplomacy, a deeper understanding of non-western cultures, greater appreciation of the internal political dynamics of Islamic nations and serious attention to their social and economic conditions.

ENDNOTES

1. Robert Matthews, "La proyección del poder de los Estado Unidos," Tiempos Dificiles Guerra y Poder en el Sistema Internacional (Anuario CIP 2003), Barcelona: Icaria Editorial, 2003, p. 55.
2. Safire claims this "phased array of fallout to our decision to lead the world's war against terror makes the case that what we have been doing is strategically sound as well as morally right. "Spinning Into Control" The New York Times, January 12, 2004 p. A19.
3. Former U.S. senator and presidential contender, Gary Hart, wrote , "I have never felt the need to discuss these events before, I do so now because they relate to the argument being made by supporters of the current Bush administration that Libya has abandoned weapons of mass destruction as a direct result of the United State's preemptive invasion of Iraq. My experience of 12 years ago suggests a missed opportunity to curb Libya well before Iraq." "My Secret Talks With Libya, And Why They Went Nowhere," The Washington Post, January 18, 2004, p. B-5.
4. See the discussion of this issue in Michael R. Gordon, "Giving up those Weapons: After Libya, Who is Next?" New York Times, January 1, 2004. p. A10.
5. Seymour Hersh, "The Syrian Bet: Did the Bush Administration burn a useful source on Al Qaeda?" The New Yorker, July 28, 2003. Washington has also deferred to its regionally ally Saudi Arabia in not pursuing too vigorously that state's links to Al Qaeda and other Moslem extremists. See Robert Baer, Sleeping with the Devil. How Washington Sold our Soul for Saudi Crude, NY: Crown Books, 2003; Kevin Phillips, Aristocracy, Fortune and the Politics of Deception in the House of Bush, NY: Viking: 2003; Craig Unger , House of Bush, House of Saud: The Secret Relationship Between the World's Two Most Powerful Dynasties (forthcoming March 2004)
6. New York: Random House, 2003. The rest of the book is an overwrought recipe for unilaterally dealing with the world's problems. See also Michiko Kautani, "A Confident

Prescription for Foiling the Terrorists, book review in The New York Times, January 13, 2004, p. A1; "Hawks tell Bush how to win war on terror, "By David Rennie in Washington (Filed: 31/12/2003) <http://www.telegraph.com>.

7. "Nazila Fathi, "Iran Demands Concessions from the U.S. in Return for Cooperation," The New York Times, October 30, 2003, p. A7.

8. See Jim Lobe, "Neo-cons move quickly on Iran, "Asia Times May 28, 2003. For evidence of U.S. covert operations, the increasing military tensions with Iran after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and the ideological push to force a regime change in Teheran see Richard M Bennett, "US wages war from within" Iran," Asia Times, June 18, 2003.

9. Jim Lobe, "Neo-cons move quickly on Iran, "Asia Times May 28, 2003.

10. The New York Times noted recently that this military overstretch has pushed "peacetime armed forces toward their limits; if a sudden crisis were to erupt in North Korea or Afghanistan the U.S. would be hard-pressed to respond." The editorial added that the White House must recognize that its unilateralism is debilitating the Army and it must "change course before the damage becomes harder to undo." Editorial: "The Thinning of the Army" The New York Times, December 29, 2003.

11. The biggest obstacle in making a nuclear weapon is not the warhead design, but getting the right fuel to create an atomic explosion. This is obtained by 1) extracting plutonium from nuclear reactors and reprocessing it, creating a fuel cycle; or 2) extracting uranium from the ground and enriching it.

12. David Albright and Corey Hinderstein, , "Iran, player or rogue? The deadline is now. Will Iran come clean about its nuclear doings?" Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, September-October 2003, pp. 52-58.

13. Ibid. p. 52.

14. William J. Broad, David Rhode, and David Sanger, " Inquiry Suggests Pakistanis Sold Nuclear Secrets," New York Times, December 22, 2003. p. A1.

15. The two attempts on President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan have raised the question of both the political stability of this critical U.S. ally and more disturbing, the security of its nuclear arsenal should the country be thrown into chaos. (It was estimates three years ago that Pakistan had enough weapons-grade uranium to manufacture 40 nuclear arms). See Amy Waldman, "The Tightrope is Fraying Under the President of Pakistan," The New York Times, December 30, 2003,p. A3; David Sanger and Thomas Shanker, "A Nuclear Headache: What if the Radicals Oust Musharraf?" The New York Times, December 30, 2003,p. A3; and David Sanger, and William Broad, "From Rogue Nuclear Programs, Web of trails Leads to Pakistan," The New York Times, January 4, 2004, p. A1.

16. El Baradei warned recently that the system of nuclear monitoring and control has ruptured. It is therefore a more dangerous world than during the Cold War because the information is all over the place. David Sanger and William Broad, "From Rogue Nuclear Programs, Web of trails Leads to Pakistan," The New York Times, January 4, 2004, p. A1.
17. Steven Weisman, "U.S. Acquiesces to Allies on New Iran Nuclear Resolution," The New York Times, November 25, 2003. Broad, William J. "Sleuths Patrol Nations for Nuclear Mischief," New York Times, December 30, 2003. p. F1
18. Steven Weisman, "U.S. Takes Softer Tone on Iran, Once in the 'Axis of Evil,'" The New York Times, October 29, 2003, p. A-3.
19. See the opinions of Gary Samore, senior fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London and a former member of the National Security Council in Bill Clinton's administration in Gordon in Michael R., "Giving up those Weapons: After Libya, Who is Next?" New York Times, January 1, 2004. p. A10.
20. See Nazila Fathi, "Iran Leader Delays Ruling on Exclusion of Reformists," The New York Times, January 13, 2004, p. A11.
21. Iran also supported the formation of the Iraqi Governing Council. Steven Weisman, "U.S. Takes Softer Tone on Iran, Once in the 'Axis of Evil,'" The New York Times, October 29, 2003, p. A-3].
22. Powell also credits Bush administration's "robust" counterproliferation [policy and bold Anglo-American diplomacy for Libya's supposed about face. "What We Will Do in 2004," New York Times, January 1, 2004. p. A25.
23. William Safire, "Spinning Into Control" The New York Times, January 12, 2004 p. A19.
24. Ali Akbar Dareini, "Iran not ready to open dialogue with U.S .," The Boston Globe, January 11, 2004.
25. Ibid.
26. Mark Landler, "Iran's Leader Mixes Hope with Defiance in Davos Talk," The New York Times, January 22, 2004.
27. Weisman, Steven R., "Iran Turns Down American Offer of Relief Mission," The New York Times, January 3, 2003,p. A1.
28. Dareini, "Iran Not Ready..."
29. See for example the argument of John Newhouse in his Imperial America. The Bush Assault on the World Order, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.

30. "Nazila Fathi, "Iran Demands Concessions from the U.S. in Return for Cooperation," The New York Times, October 30, 2003, p. A7.

31. Albright, president of the Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) in Washington, D.C. and Hinderstein, senior analyst at ISIS, write in "Iran, player or rogue? The deadline is now. Will Iran come clean about its nuclear doings?" Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists September-October 2003, pp. 52-58.

A DEADLY DANCE: THE U.S. AND NORTH KOREA

Of the three "rogue" states comprising the so-called "axis of evil" North Korea, with its overt development of nuclear weapons and defiance of the U.S., is clearly the most serious and dangerous case. North Korea is a bigger problem because it actually has weapons, would most likely use them if attacked, and no one in the region supports an aggressive or confrontational posture to resolve the stand-off. Pyongyang's trumpeting of its nuclear weapons program in the face of U.S. bellicosity constitutes a glaring exception to the Bush administration's claims of positive results from its militant power projection in the Middle East (e.g. the supposed new pliancy in Libya, Iran and Syria). There is no indication North Korea would follow Libya's example. North Korea's leader, Kim Jong II, appears to have drawn a very different lesson from the Iraq war; i.e., the best protection against a similar fate is a nuclear arsenal, "the bigger, the better." In fact, inherent in the world view of the Kim Jong II is a perception that weapons of mass destruction (WMD) are essential for his regime's survival. To this end, Pyongyang, rather than conceal its nuclear weapons program, has advertised it to the world. (1)

The regime of Kim Jong II has called Washington's bluff and destroyed the notion that the principle of preemption applied against Iraq in 2003 is a universal doctrine of U.S. foreign policy. Given the current overextension of the U.S. military and remarks from Bush and others in his administration, it is clear that as regards North Korea, the U.S. talks loudly but carries a small stick. (2) U.S. options remain limited. Although Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld announced dramatically in the spring of 2003, that the U.S. was capable of fighting a war on two fronts, North Korea will not be a candidate for preemptive invasion any time soon. Moreover, Security Council sanctions against North Korea are not practical because China would veto them. More disturbing, North Korea has indicated that it would consider sanctions an act of war. (3)

It is a bizarre irony, increasingly characteristic of Bush's foreign policy, that an administration which denounced Iraq's non-existent nuclear program to the world has virtually denied the dangers of Kim Jong Il's nuclear weapons and stressed the path of diplomacy-- a word that was considered almost treasonous when mentioned in regard to Iraq. Yet Bush refuses to negotiate directly with North Korea as it pursues a program that could produce several dozen warheads per year. (4) Washington wants North Korea to dismantle its nuclear program but is reluctant to offer anything first for fear of appearing to "reward" or "recognize" them and thus appear to be succumbing to nuclear blackmail. Pyongyang says it is willing to suspend work on its programs but only with a commitment from the U.S. to recognize the regime, guarantee its security and resume supplies of fuel and food. (5)

Rhetorical excess and threats have characterized U.S.-North Korean policy under the Bush administration. At first, the Bush administration refused to deal with the North Korean issue, even after being briefed by the outgoing Clinton administration on North Korea's importation of uranium-enriching technology. The new administration's attitude was that Clinton's program of economic rewards for suspending nuclear production was a form of appeasement and submission to North Korean blackmail.

But after mid-2002, when it became apparent that nuclear enrichment facilities were under construction, the administration adopted a confrontational line. From the beginning Bush personally adopted an antagonistic position toward North Korea. In an interview with Washington Post journalist Bob Woodward in 2002, Bush said he had a "visceral reaction to this guy" and referred to Kim Jong Il as a "pygmy" and "loathsome." (6) The Bush administration reneged on Clinton's promise to provide two nuclear reactors for domestic energy needs and opposed South Korea's "Sunshine" policy of reconciliation with the North. The U.S. then ended negotiations citing the North's nuclear enrichment program even though Kim Jong Il offered to halt the program in exchange for a non-aggression pact with the U.S. After Bush included North Korea in his "axis of evil" formulation, he announced the "Bush Doctrine" of preemptive war. In the Pentagon's 2002 Nuclear Posture Review, North Korea was included among those nations subject to a preemptive nuclear attack-- a unique departure from past nuclear policy. As war with Iraq loomed in early 2003, Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld loudly announced that the U.S. military is capable of fighting two wars at once.

Not surprisingly, all of this belligerent bombast on the part of the U.S., as well as its preparation for a U.S. military intervention in Iraq, convinced the North Koreans that Clinton's assurances of non-aggression were now a dead letter. Taking a leaf from Bush's own 2002 National Security Strategy, Kim Jong Il decided that the best defense is a good offense. In late 2002, the North Koreans expelled international inspectors (from the International Atomic Energy Agency-- IAEA), renounced the 1994 U.S.-North Korea Agreed Framework accord signed with the Clinton administration and revealed a previously clandestine uranium enrichment program. The regime also began preparations to restart nuclear reactor plant to extract plutonium at Yongbyon which violated the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. (NPT) and other agreements with the US. Then Pyongyang withdrew from the NPT. In 2003, North Korea announced it had been making nuclear bombs. (7)

Another hallmark of U.S. policy has been inconsistency. Bush in 2001 changed Clinton's policy from what the new administration called "vacillating rapprochement" to seeking the collapse of

the regime. In part this was fueled by a North Korean defector who claimed that Kim regime would soon fall. Experts were skeptical but ideologues jumped on it to support their hard-line position-- since it supported what they wanted to believe and they passed it up the line to Bush. The report hardened the position of the government . (8) But by late 2002, tough talk was not accompanied by like-minded firmness in U.S. policies. Contrary to its previous position on North Korea and in stark contrast to its Iraq stance, the White House downplayed nuclear developments on the Korean peninsula, only cutting off shipments of fuel oil shipments, hardly a commensurate response. The administration, increasingly consumed with its war on Iraq, claimed that the problem was amenable to diplomacy and negotiation. In fact in early 2003, Bush pledged that "we have no intention of invading North Korea"; Washington took the same wait and see attitude in late January when spy satellites detected activity indicating that North Korea was preparing to produce roughly a half dozen nuclear weapons. (9)

The message couldn't be clearer. Without nuclear weapons you get invaded. Obtain nuclear arms and the Americans will become more reasonable. The sting of the scorpion will keep the U.S. at bay. Even the U.S. National Missile Defense program would not affect this threat because the weapons need only to reach South Korea. The Wall Street Journal editorialized that "since the North's nuclear threat is the only reason it has any claim on world attention, we doubt Kim Jong Il will ever give up his secret programs." (10) War on the Korean peninsula would be a calamity and Pyongyang knows this. Furthermore, no regional ally will support a policy of reckless confrontation as was the case with Iraq. Moreover, the U.S. lacks military muscle with a third of its active army in Iraq. There simply is no coherent alternative to multilateral engagement in Korean peninsula that would not risk catastrophic war.

U.S. policy has thus created clear incentives for North Korea to maintain its nuclear program. There's no point in playing nice -- it will bring neither aid nor security. It need not worry about American efforts to isolate it economically -- North Korea hardly has any trade except with China, and China isn't cooperating. The best self-preservation strategy for Mr. Kim is to be dangerous. So while America is busy with Iraq, the North Koreans are busy reprocessing plutonium, enriching uranium and building themselves some bombs. If negotiations yield economic and political benefits to Pyongyang in exchange for a verifiable dismantling of its nuclear programs, it will occur because it possessed WMD.

Some parallels with U.S. policy toward Iran are interesting. Both policies are characterized by certain counterproductive rhetorical flourish. There are inconsistencies that reflect an ongoing struggle between accommodationists (mainly in the State Department, the U.S. foreign office) and hardliners (mainly in the White House and the Pentagon)-- between those who believe in modifying the behavior of the regime through multilateral diplomacy and those who are committed to nothing short of regime change. (11) There is also a problem with increasingly fragile relations between the U.S. and its respective U.S. allies in the two regions -- Pakistan and South Korea-- the former over its ties to Al Qaeda and terrorism and the recent revelations of its abetting Iran's nuclear program; the latter over the rising anti-Americanism in the population and its markedly divergence from the U.S. on North Korea policy.

For starters, South Korea, is possibly the most anti-American democracy on earth today. After Roh Moo-Hyun was elected president of South Korea to succeed Kim Dae-Jung in December 2002, relations between the US and South Korea grew more estranged. There are frequent street demonstrations calling for all American forces to leave the country. It is probable that in the near future South Korea will ask the US to retire its 40,000 troops as Saudi Arabia is moving toward a request to close U.S. bases there. (12)

The unilateralist posture of the Bush administration has taken its toll on the US relationship with Seoul as well as putting Washington on a possible collision course with Pyongyang. South Korea has been unhappy with Bush administration efforts to destabilize the north. South Koreans say Seoul did not ask for the policy, was not consulted on the "axis of evil" rhetoric aimed at the north in 2002 and is almost as bothered by it as Pyongyang. Seoul feels that the U.S. approach undermines the government's "sunshine policy" of building bridges to the North. In short, Seoul resents being taken for granted. (13)

There is a strong current of South Korean public opinion that believes US policy has been hijacked by policy hawks who see Kim Jong Il's regime as degenerate pariah state and are working for its collapse and that the US is as much an obstacle as North Korea to resolving crisis. South Korea believes it cannot survive a sudden collapse of the North Korean regime. "We are not West Germany and cannot afford to absorb the North as West Germany absorbed East Germany." (14)

Conclusion

Many observers feel that the regime of Kim Jong Il cannot be trusted and has cheated on its obligations under the Agreed Framework. But the U.S. has also reneged on its commitments. Moreover, it is arguable that the Bush administration's clumsy and inconsistent diplomacy-- in particular the failure to pursue Clinton's attempt to offer economic incentives for a nuclear freeze-- magnified the problem and created a crisis. (15)

In early January of this year North Korea agreed to stop testing and relinquish all aspects of its nuclear program, not just the weapons program. This went a bit further than recent statements in that Pyongyang agreed to suspend nuclear energy programs, which experts believe are a front for weapons production. Although both the U.S. and North Korea have insisted that other side make the first concessions before talks resume, the six-party talks with North Korea are scheduled to resume on February 25 of this year. The U.S. is relying particularly on China, in addition to the other "quartet members," Russia, Japan and South Korea, to orchestrate the diplomacy. (16) The focus of the regional powers is on getting North Korea's nuclear program "suspended," while the Bush administration has said that it cannot accept merely a suspension or freeze. The U.S. administration reiterated its demand that it wants a "complete, irreversible and verifiable" dismanteling of its nuclear weapons program. (17) After North Korea accepts this goal, US might consider offering concessions. North Korea, for its part, wants recognition, security guarantees and aid in the form of fuel and food staples. And there matters stand-- with the administration hoping for the best when the talks resume February 25. But then hope is a not a substitute for serious policy.

END NOTES

1. Gary Samore, senior fellow at International Institute for Strategic Studies in London, says, "In the case of North Korea, the Libya model is unrealistic. It is not plausible that the North Korean regime, given their perception of the world, will give up their missiles, chemical, biological and nuclear programs in exchange for better relations. They view them as essential for their survivability. Michael R. Gordon, "Giving up those Weapons: After Libya, Who is Next?" New York Times, January 1, 2004. p. A10.
2. Teddy Roosevelt referring to the countries in the Caribbean had famously declared at the turn of the 20th century that it behooves the U.S. to "walk softly but carry a big stick."
3. Malone, David M. and Yuen Foong Khong, Unilateralism and U.S. Foreign Policy. International Perspectives. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2003. p.395.
4. Some observers estimate that North Korea may be able to produce up to 200 atomic weapons by 2010. Nicholas Kristof, "Wishful Thinking on Korea," The New York Times, January 10, 2004, p. 13 The main question for U.S. intelligence at this moment is how much of the spent fuel at Yongbyon has been processed into weapons-grade plutonium and did reprocessing of nuclear rods take place there?
5. Colin Powell wrote in a recent opinion piece in the New York Times, "We seek peace and reconciliation in the Korean peninsula, but we will not reward threats from Pyongyang or provide incentive for blackmail "What We Will Do in 2004, " January 1, 2004. p. A25.
6. Matthews, p. 63.
7. For background on the nuclear situation in North Korea and U.S. Korean relations under Clinton and Bush up to 2002, see Robert Matthews, "La proyección del poder de los Estados Unidos," Tiempos Dificiles Guerra y Poder en el Sistema Internacional (Anuario CIP 2003), Barcelona: Icaria Editorial, 2003, pp. 62-66.
8. But there was and is no evidence of an impending coup. Informed observers admit that the chances are the regime will last into the near future because 1) There is no hint of a popular uprising now; many people still believe in the father and son cult; 2) the population is anti American and Kim is seen as a Korean nationalist defender against US imperialism. 3) there is a slow rebound in the North Korean economy; living conditions are improving in the countryside and are much better in the capital. Compare the evidence that Iraq exiles (Chalabi etc.) fed the administration inflated claims of Iraqi weapons programs and wildly idealized reports about the enthusiastic response the U.S. would receive upon liberating Iraq from Saddam Hussein.
9. David Sanger and Eric Schmitt "Satellites Said to See Activity at North Korean Nuclear Site," The New York Times, January 31, 2003 p. A8) Even Clinton, much criticized by Bush took a tougher line in 1994, augmenting U.S. forces in the area and threatening to intervene militarily.

10. editorial, Wall Street Journal, December 22, 2003, p. A. 14.
11. One writer observed that a recent joke is whether administration infighting between these two groups is more fierce than that between their counterparts in Teheran. Steven Weisman, "That Continual Matter of Iran," The New York Times, February 8, 2004, Sec. IV, p. 38).
12. David M.. Malone and Yuen Foong Khong, Unilateralism and U.S. Foreign Policy. International Perspectives (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2003), pp. 394-5
13. Clyde Prestowitz, Rogue Nation. American Unilateralism and the Failure of Good Intentions (New York: Basic Books, 2003), pp. 2246-247; Malone and Khong, p. 395.
14. Prestowitz, pp. 9-10.
15. Bruce Cummings, "North Korea: The Sequel," Current History, April 2003, p. 50.
16. China understands that a nuclear-armed North Korea would result in advanced missile defenses (and perhaps the start of nuclear deterrent programs) in Japan and Taiwan, and thus challenge China's regional hegemony.
17. Steven Weisman, "Powell Hails North Korea for New Step," The New York Times, January 7, 2004, p. A11.