

The Nuclear Dimension of “Axis of Evil”: Different Strategies for Different Threats

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Introduction

In his State of the Union Address of late January 2002, US President George W. Bush coined the phrase “axis of evil,” which has since become a common figure of speech. In discussing the need to prevent regimes that sponsor terror from threatening the US or its allies with Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), Bush made brief but pointed reference to North Korea, Iran, and Iraq. Bush maintained that “states like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger.”

Not only were the three states grouped together on a so-called axis, but the broadly sketched US strategy for responding to the challenge they pose was formulated in general, across-the-board terms: “We will work closely with our coalition to deny terrorists and their state sponsors the materials, technology, and expertise to make and deliver weapons of mass destruction. We will develop and deploy effective missile defenses to protect America and our allies from sudden attack. . . . The

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regimes to threaten us with the world’s most destructive weapons.” Significantly, in the National Security Strategy published in September 2002, the grounds were laid for taking preemptive action against enemies armed with WMD, to prevent them from striking first. Such anticipatory action was presented in the document as lawful defense, with “imminent threat” adapted to include “the capabilities and threats of today’s adversaries.”

In the January 2003 State of the Union Address, there was a very different formulation of the problem of WMD threats, as well as the

strategy of response. First of all, the language of the axis was gone. More importantly, while the same three states were named in the context of “outlaw regimes that seek and possess nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons,” in this address Bush maintained unequivocally that “different threats require different strategies.” Indeed, the text related differently to each of the three states. As to North Korea, Bush noted its attempt to blackmail the world with its nuclear program; the solution he suggested was to work together with the states of the region to find a peaceful solution. Regarding Iran, Bush noted the threat briefly, but directly pointed out that Iranians have a right to choose their government and determine their destiny, and that the US supports these efforts. For Iraq, a lengthy case for war was presented.

The discussion that follows begins with the point reached by Bush in the 2003 State of the Union address – namely, “different strategies for different threats” – and develops the idea that this is the accurate depiction of US approaches toward the so-called “axis of evil” states. Although these states presented a broad-based common denominator in terms of

their aspirations and activities in the realm of WMD development, there were important differences among them. Each of these three states in fact posed or continues to pose a very different challenge for the US in the context of its overall attempt to deal with the implications of WMD in the post-Cold War world.

In considering how the Bush administration has chosen to deal with these newly redefined WMD threats, rather than censuring the US for an unbalanced or inconsistent approach, attention should be directed to certain positive aspects of the present administration's tendency to recognize and act upon these differences, through its focus on inter-state relations.

Attention to inter-state relations and the need to cultivate them, albeit in different ways, can also be the basis for a US reevaluation of the somewhat negative approach that it has lately taken towards the arms control regime. Rather than marginalize arms control and risk diminishing the value of this important regime, the US administration would do well to reemphasize the *relations-based* aspects of these agreements, as opposed to their purely weapons-based features. Such an approach would also help underscore the need for a regional dialogue on arms control in the Middle East, especially in the aftermath of the war in Iraq.

North Korea, Iran, and Iraq

The examination of the "axis of evil" countries will highlight differences among them in three major respects:

the presumed stage of development; each state's declaratory position regarding its own program and its attitude toward arms control treaties and inspections; and the approach that the US has adopted toward each of the three states. The discussion will focus on nuclear weapons, as they are the most relevant to recent developments in both North Korea and Iran. With regard to Iraq, clearly it was the general WMD profile that

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was targeted by the US, and Iraq's posture of denial evolved largely in relation to the chemical and biological weapons Iraq was suspected of possessing and developing. Yet for comparative purposes, it is the nuclear realm that is highlighted here.

WMD: Determination and Development

There are clear indications that all three states have shown determination to achieve nuclear capability, although they vary in terms of their presumed stage of development.

An indication of just how advanced North Korea's nuclear

program is surfaced in October 2002. US Assistant Secretary of State James Kelley confronted North Korea with evidence that it was pursuing a uranium-enrichment program, in violation of the agreement concluded between the two countries in 1994 following North Korea's threat to withdraw from the NPT. North Korea first denied the claim, but acknowledged the next day that it had in fact renewed its nuclear weapons program. North Korea has demonstrated over the past decade its determination to produce nuclear weapons, and current estimates are that its uranium enrichment program is only months away from completion. Moreover, through its plutonium production program at Yongbyon, North Korea will be able to produce a number of nuclear weapons within a few months, if activity continues unhindered. Some US officials thought that North Korea already had one and perhaps two nuclear bombs, which was lately confirmed by North Korean diplomats.

With regard to Iran, Western intelligence services have argued for quite some time that the Iranian nuclear program aspires to achieve nuclear weapons. Until recently the focus of international attention was directed mainly to the light water nuclear reactor at Bushehr (built with Russian assistance), and reflected US concerns that this reactor may be a cover for military activity. However, recent revelations, beginning with the Iranian opposition report dated August 2002, have shifted attention to

additional sites and activities. New information touches on the import of uranium gas from China, the mining of natural uranium in Iran, progress in mastering the complete fuel cycle, and the discovery of two nuclear sites previously unknown to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), at Natanz and Arak. Dr. Mohamed ElBaradei, Director General of the IAEA, confirmed during his February 2003 visit to Iran that the Natanz site serves as a centrifuge uranium-enrichment plant; the Arak site is claimed to be a heavy water plant, which can be used to separate plutonium.

This information combines to suggest a comprehensive, sophisticated, and intensive Iranian nuclear program that is difficult to explain merely as an additional potential source of energy, especially since Iran is one of the major oil producing states. Taking into consideration its intensive ballistic missile program, estimates are that Iran is well on its way to achieving the necessary infrastructure to become a nuclear power in the region.

Iraq's nuclear program suffered a setback as a result of the 1991 Gulf War. Between the end of the war, when UNSCOM was given the mandate to carry out inspections in Iraq, and 1998, when UNSCOM was ordered to leave, Iraq's nuclear program was under close scrutiny and inspection. However, between 1998 and 2002 no inspections took place, leaving the status of the Iraqi nuclear program somewhat unclear. US intelligence services argued that Iraq continued to

develop its program in this period, and the charge was partly the basis for calling upon Iraq to readmit inspectors, to declare its WMD programs, and to disarm. A portion of the case was based on Iraq's acquisition of aluminum tubes that the CIA claimed were intended for building uranium-enrichment gas centrifuges, although this argument has been challenged by experts both in the US and abroad.

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The lengthy report submitted by Iraq on December 7, 2002 avowed that there was no nuclear program. The IAEA's report submitted by ElBaradei to the Security Council on March 7, 2003 concurred with this statement. In that report ElBaradei concluded that "there is no indication of resumed nuclear activities in those buildings that were identified through the use of satellite imagery as being reconstructed or newly erected since 1998, nor any indication of nuclear-related prohibited activities at any inspected sites." He added that "there is no indication that Iraq has attempted to import aluminum tubes

for use in centrifuge enrichment."

Of the three "axis" states, therefore, North Korea is the most advanced, followed, according to most recent reports and revelations, by Iran. Estimates are that Iraq is presently furthest from such development, although it was viewed – certainly under Saddam Hussein – as being highly motivated in this regard.

Positions on Arms Control

Each of the three states has chosen a different path in its attempt to handle and especially to ward off international pressure directed at its WMD programs. Until recently, all three were signatories to the NPT. North Korea has gone furthest in terms of its direct opposition to this treaty. In 1993 it threatened withdrawal from the treaty, but then came to an agreement with the US that left its signature intact. In the context of the present crisis, it followed through on the threat. In late December North Korea ordered the IAEA inspectors to leave, and in January 2003 announced its decision to withdraw from the treaty. Significantly, however, it also suggested that there was still room for negotiation on the subject of the NPT.

North Korea prefers direct negotiations with the US as the means to resolve the current nuclear crisis and rejects international intervention, although it recently indicated its willingness to consider negotiations in a multilateral format. What it seeks from the US in return for discontinuing its nuclear development project are security assurances and economic assistance.

Iran has pursued a different route. It has presented itself not only as consistently in compliance with its international obligations, but cooperative with international agencies as well. Since the early 1990s, Iran has steadily maintained a three-pronged message when relating to its nuclear development: first, and contrary to North Korea, Iran insists that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only; this is claimed with regard to Natanz and Arak as well. Second, Iran maintains that it is in full compliance with the terms of the NPT, and, contrary to Iraq, it welcomes international inspection. In late 2002, after initially canceling a planned inspection by the IAEA at the new sites, Iran was quick to reschedule this visit for February. Still, Iran has so far avoided signing the Additional Protocol to the NPT, which allows surprise inspections at declared and undeclared sites, and even during his February visit, ElBaradei failed to convince Iran to sign it. However, Iran did agree to negotiate this issue further, and stated that in the future it will give notice as to new nuclear sites it intends to build. Finally, Iran maintains that if the international community is set on identifying nuclear proliferators, it would do well to direct its attention away from Iran (a signatory to the NPT, and a state that is open to international inspections) and toward Israel, an undeclared nuclear power.

Iran has chosen a unique and sophisticated method of dealing with international conventions regarding WMD in general and nuclear

capabilities in particular. By selectively cooperating with international institutions and selectively revealing information, it has so far defeated the effectiveness of international controls. Iran has disclosed enough information both to demonstrate a positive attitude and to deflect international wrath, but then has concealed enough activities to pursue its nuclear program.

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Over the past 12 years Iraq took the path of denial. It consistently denied that it possessed weapons or technologies that were in violation of agreements it had signed or the terms of resolutions passed against it. Yet numerous accounts over the years 1991-1998 in which the inspectors were present in Iraq related repeated instances of "cat and mouse" games that Iraq played with the inspectors, doing everything in its power to resist cooperation and compliance. Saddam Hussein's behavior during the years of inspections created a strong impression that he had something to hide (backed up by instances where

such attempts at concealment were uncovered); but he repeatedly pleaded innocence in the face of accusations directed his way. Saddam's record over these years also followed a pattern whereby only under the threat of force did he respond to international demands for cooperation. This pattern surfaced again in the months leading up to the war: while the US engaged in advanced preparations for war, Iraq grudgingly complied somewhat with the inspectors.

US Approaches

Against this background, the US approaches to the three states can be outlined. With regard to Iraq, the US placed major emphasis over the past year and a half on what in its view most strongly characterized the Saddam Hussein regime: its ongoing record of defiance and deceit. As was made clear in Secretary of State Colin Powell's speech to the UN in February 2003, Saddam was accused of lying, of deliberately attempting to deceive, and of resisting any form of cooperation. The US administration saw Saddam Hussein repeatedly abuse the chances he was given to cooperate with the international community. The resulting suspicion of Saddam reached such overwhelming proportions that the option of cooperating with him was no longer viewed as viable. For the present administration, there were no deals to be cut with Saddam. The prospect that the US might have to deal down the road with Saddam if he managed to achieve nuclear weapons was

daunting. It is thus not surprising that the choice was made to employ massive force in dealing with Iraq. The case for preemptive action, laid out in the National Security Strategy, provides the justification for this preemptive strike.

Regarding Iran, the US officially continues to maintain its state of national emergency. It has been active in uncovering information on the Iranian nuclear project, and it has pressured Russia to limit cooperation with Iran in the nuclear field. At the same time, however, no new steps have been taken against Iran since it was assigned to the "axis of evil." In fact, the US has had some positive interaction with Iran, concerning the Afghanistan campaign and the crisis in Iraq.

On the basis of the principle embedded in the case for preemptive action spelled out in the National Security Strategy, namely "the greater the threat – the greater is the risk of inaction," one might have expected to find a harder line taken toward Iran; however, this has not been the case. The administration has commended the Iranian people for their support for democracy. While US officials have expressed great concern regarding the latest nuclear revelations, the State Department position reflects an unwillingness to take action against Iran:

We'll continue to look to other governments to cooperate with to prevent Iran from going in this direction. It's a matter that we hope the Iranians will cooperate with Dr. ElBaradei

and his team...and we look forward to seeing his report and we'll continue to work with other governments on this matter. (February 10, 2003)

It seems that Iran's basically non-confrontational attitude, together with the hopes the US holds for democratic reforms in this country, have engendered a policy that at this stage might best be characterized as "hands off." While the relative

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paucity of attention to Iran in recent months must also be viewed in the broader context of US preoccupation with Iraq, there are grounds for concluding that this less severe attitude has deeper roots in terms of US policy. The US will likely take a more active stand on Iran down the road, but it will probably be one that favors engaging Iran diplomatically, rather than confronting it militarily.

As to North Korea, the administration was until recently least certain as to how to proceed. While most advanced in its nuclear weapons program, North Korea's intentions, or what it is trying to achieve through

the program, are unclear. US officials are divided over the question of whether North Korea views such capabilities in the context of its overall security conception, or whether nuclear weapons development is viewed primarily as a bargaining chip in the context of negotiations with the US. The US is also not sure to what degree it has been deceived, namely, whether North Korea was planning all along to cheat on its nuclear obligations. While the US can complain that North Korea reneged on the 1994 agreement, the US itself did not live up to its commitments either. It promised to supply North Korea with two light water reactors, but was way behind schedule on delivery. Moreover, North Korea had hoped to achieve normalization of relations with the US, but the Bush administration came into office with a highly critical attitude, which was later underscored by the inclusion of North Korea on the "axis of evil."

Military action in North Korea is considered problematic on several grounds: the conventional threat posed to Seoul and the objections voiced by the surrounding regional states that are allies of the US; the fact that North Korea might be past the nuclear threshold which could mean a nuclear threat to the US and surrounding states such as Japan; and US preoccupation with the war in Iraq. Following North Korea's withdrawal from the NPT, the US favored referring the issue to the Security Council. It also suggested multilateral negotiations, which North Korea rejected until recently.

Unlike Iran, North Korea is *demanding* to be dealt with; moreover, it seeks direct negotiations with the US. The US has resisted negotiations until North Korea terminates its nuclear weapons program. However, initial trilateral talks have recently begun between the US, North Korea, and China.

Assessing the US Policy

The initial impulse of the Bush administration, as was the tendency of previous governments, was to focus on the weapons per se as the basis for grouping Iran, Iraq and North Korea as “axis of evil” states. It seems, however, that this approach has not been maintained. Interestingly, when surveying how nuclear weapons have been dealt with in the past on the global level, it is clear that the issue was never solely one of weapons per se. Nuclear states committed themselves in the framework of the NPT to reducing their nuclear arsenals, but they were not forced to do so. Thus, while an international regime was set up to deal with nuclear proliferation on the basis of the weapons themselves, i.e. equally across the board, it did not come at the expense of implicitly acknowledged differences among nuclear and non-nuclear states. This was further underscored with regard to India and Pakistan — which were not labeled as rogue states or part of an “axis of evil” — and is reflected also in US attitudes toward Israel.

In a recent contribution to *Foreign Affairs*, George Perkovich adopted a stance that strongly rejects the NPT on

this very basis. He argued that the NPT is flawed precisely because it does not religiously adhere to the principle of targeting weapons. Accordingly, as long as some states continue to possess nuclear weapons legitimately, others will want them. In these terms, “the proliferation threat...stems from the existence and possession of nuclear weapons...not merely from the intentions of today’s ‘axis of evil.’” But while nuclear

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weapons cannot realistically be expected to be eradicated from the world any time soon, additional nuclear proliferation is nevertheless a serious challenge for the short term, and the NPT is severely limited in the face of a determined proliferator.

So, how are potential proliferators to be dealt with? The Bush administration has been criticized for adopting a differential approach to the different states named on the “axis of evil.” Yet complaints against the US for adopting a seeming double standard are not particularly useful for dealing more effectively with the threats. On the contrary, in light of the

limitations of the non-proliferation regime, it should be strikingly clear that dealing with a proliferator, actual or potential, must take into account the nature of the state, its nuclear stage of development, its nuclear intentions, its positions on arms control and previous agreements, and its relationship to other states, including the US. In its desire to apply the international non-proliferation regime to three very worrisome states, the Bush administration has come to the realization that it must deal with states and their attitudes, rather than solely with their weapons as such. The differences among these states come together to make the case for a differential response on the part of the US to each.

Conclusion

The focus of the Bush administration on inter-state relations as the basis for determining policy in the non-conventional realm is not only an outgrowth of previous international tendencies, but has evolved over the past year in light of stark international realities. Most importantly, it could provide the basis for potentially more effective policies that focus not only on WMD, but on inter-state relations.

There is still a question of how the US is likely to proceed after Iraq, especially in light of the principles set out in the National Security Strategy. Will this strategy create a strong incentive to use preemptive measures against additional states, once Iraq is off the agenda? If the US continues to apply “different strategies to different threats,” there is no reason to assume

that this will be the case, as evidenced by the example of Iran.

But where does this leave the National Security Strategy? What then is the status of preemption in this document? In this regard, it is crucial to consider carefully the wording of both the September 2002 document, as well as the “National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction,” published in December. It is quite clear from these documents that the US is justifying recourse to preemptive action, but only when deemed necessary. It is not advocating such action in all cases. The September document states most clearly that “to forestall or prevent...hostile acts by our adversaries, the United States will, *if necessary*, act preemptively. The United States will not use force in all cases to preempt emerging threats” (emphasis added). In the more detailed December document, we find that counter-proliferation is only one of three pillars of the national strategy to combat WMD; the other two are strengthened nonproliferation and consequence management. Furthermore, preemption is mentioned as part of one element in the context of the first pillar: “Because deterrence may not succeed...US military forces and appropriate civilian agencies must have the capability to defend against WMD-armed adversaries, including in appropriate cases through preemptive measures.”

Finally, implicit in the overall argument presented here is a policy recommendation for the administration, as far as its commitment to arms control. The perceived limitations of the non-proliferation regime, due to evidence of nuclear proliferation within signatory states, have increased US skepticism regarding arms control generally. However, this assessment actually rests on a particular understanding of arms control: one

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that equates arms control with its *disarmament* prong, namely, the attempt to eliminate entire categories of weapons. But arms control has an additional most important tradition – that of *stabilizing* the relations among states that possess WMD. It is here that inter-state relations play the most significant role. The importance of influencing (and hopefully improving) these relationships is a keystone of stabilization.

The Bush administration must take care not to throw out the baby with the bathwater, in other words, not to undermine the importance of the arms control regime as a whole due to the disillusionment with certain arms control agreements. Thus, all possible efforts should be made to improve the non-proliferation regime, with particular attention to the accompanying measures of verification. Equally as important, however, it should be kept in mind that arms control *dialogues* have a significant role to play in improving inter-state relations.

This final insight has implications for the Middle East. Even following a successful war in Iraq that significantly cripples Iraq’s WMD developments, states will need to pursue arms control and security talks in a regional framework. These will necessarily have to include both Iran and Iraq, and they will have to be oriented to the needs of the participating states. They will have to focus on the easing of tensions, the stabilization of relations, and the creation of accepted rules of the game for living with whatever weapons remain in the hands of regional states in the interim period, until more comprehensive regional arms control agreements can be mutually negotiated and reached.