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"Axis of Evil": Impact on U.S.-Korean Relations

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President George W. Bush’s use of the phrase “axis of evil” in his 2002 State of the Union speech before the U.S. Congress to characterize three states—Iraq, Iran, and North Korea—as backers of terrorism and threats to world peace proved to be controversial. That phrase has been the subject of much debate in the United States. Most of that debate focused on its salience for expanding the United States’ post-September 11, 2001 war on terrorism to the Middle East. However, the inclusion of North Korea in the “axis” also drew sharp criticism as well as expressions of strong

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support. Whether one agrees with the pro or con interpretation of President Bush’s way of bringing North Korea into the United States’ framework for conceptualizing a broader war on terrorism, it is evident that this approach is likely to have consequences for U.S. policy toward both South Korea and North Korea.

Prior to President Bush’s use of the “axis of evil” expression, U.S. policy toward the Korean Peninsula’s security and diplomatic agenda had experienced a striking evolution during the last years of the Clinton administration and the first year of the George W. Bush administration. The Bush’s administration’s much harder line on inter-Korean issues caused considerable anxiety about realizing the hopes generated by President Kim Dae-jung’s June 2000 summit with Kim Jong-il in Pyongyang. This also renewed concerns about the United States’ long-term commitment to the inter-Korean peace process. As important as those broader themes are for U.S.-Korean relations, usage of the expression “axis of evil” with regard to Iraq, Iran, and North Korea also could have important direct consequences that may have an impact on U.S.-Korea relations. This analysis shall address the possible spectrum of those consequences, ranging from a worst-case scenario to some promising alternatives.

In the wake of President Bush’s State of the Union speech critics in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia have questioned its accuracy and the wisdom of using the expression. The countries singled out

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have sharply denounced it. For example, North Korea’s Korea Central News Agency (KCNA) labeled it “sophism” and Rodong Shinmun blasted it as “loudmouthed” in ways that received major media attention in the United States. Perhaps most important to Washington, the speech elicited profound anxiety from two key sets of countries—those that might be the proximate regional targets of the “evil” states and those presumed to be part of a wartime coalition against these states. Some are in both categories. South Korea, of course, was a prime example of a country that plays both roles and one that reacted negatively to the speech. All of this was exacerbated by the possibility that the United States might be amenable to launching preemptive strikes against terrorists and their perceived state supporters. As serious as all these issues are, they could become far more ominous were the three states to transform the “axis of evil” metaphor into a geopolitical reality by creating a genuine strategic axis among the three. This could have disastrous consequences from one end of the Eurasian continent to the other. It clearly constitutes a worst-case scenario.

These three countries do not have much in common in terms of their internal systems. Two—Iraq and Iran—waged a bitter war against each other from 1980 to 1988 that left a lasting legacy of enmity. Moreover, they represent different ethnic, linguistic, and sectarian traditions—the Iraqis being of Arabian and Sunni heritage, while Iranians are of Persian and Shi’a lineage. Moreover, while many Americans lump them in the same Muslim extremist category, the reality is quite different. Iraq’s Baath leadership differs greatly from Iran’s post-Islamic Revolution leadership. North Korea is even further removed from the two Southwest Asian states with which it

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shares no societal or political bonds. The Kim Jong-il regime pursues its own peculiar brand of failed autarky in an erratic Northeast Asian garrison state that is formidably well armed. In short, at times these three countries—figuratively speaking—do not even seem to be dwelling on the same planet.

To be sure, there are overlapping themes that loosely warrant lumping the three of them together as dangers to the international community—namely their interests in weapons of mass destruction and delivery systems for WMD, a readiness to participate in proliferation, and a legacy of bitterness toward the United States stemming from past tensions and conflicts. Each theme deserves attention. Iraqi and North Korean attempts to acquire nuclear, chemical, and biological WMD and the means to deliver them have been widely publicized as a result of each being closely scrutinized and put under pressure via the United Nations to reveal what they have done and what they possess. Each is well known for resisting international efforts to expose its WMD programs. Both are notorious for their reputed readiness to utilize such weaponry. The major difference between Iraq and North Korea in this regard is the degree to which Baghdad and Pyongyang were adept at using diplomacy to cope with external scrutiny. In this regard, the timing of the Gulf War, shortly after the end of the Cold War, diminished Iraq’s efficacy and benefited North Korea, which had an opportunity to learn from Iraq’s mistakes and avoid replicating them in 1992-94 as Pyongyang pushed the limits in its nuclear brinkmanship diplomatic tactics. In doing so, North Korea managed to maximize its geopolitical leverage, whereas Iraq mismanaged its ability to maneuver internationally. Of the three “axis” states, only Iran has been able to maintain a relatively low profile regarding WMD and the degree to which it is perceived as reckless. Nonetheless, it is also a member of


the club. Although all three countries' proclivities in that regard are a legitimate cause of concern, the United States' reasons to focus on them as dangerous are strongly shaped by their virulent dislike of the United States. Iraq under Saddam Hussein strongly resists the ways the United States intervened with an international coalition into a regional conflict to roll back what the regime considered legitimate Iraqi territorial expansionism.\textsuperscript{12} A post-Gulf War decade of sanctions has exacerbated Baghdad's rejection of U.S. policies. Iran's enmity is more deeply entrenched in terms of its resentment of U.S. involvement under the Shah in socioeconomic programs seen as undercutting Iranian traditional values and manipulating Iran for U.S. purposes. U.S. negative attitudes toward Iranian Islamic fundamentalism intensified Iranian rejection of U.S. policies.\textsuperscript{13} Still more hostile is North Korea, which sees the United States as the incarnation of what Pyongyang would deem to be "evil" in world affairs and as an enormous threat to North Korea's existence.\textsuperscript{14} Collectively, this overlapping hatred of the United States does engender in these three states a similar willingness to stand up to the United States and do what each can to undercut U.S. power.

Whether those overlapping interests constitute authentic "evil" is a matter for debate, but—if they do—then a number of other countries may warrant inclusion. How many other countries openly and bluntly disdain what the United States represents in the world—and continue to do so amidst President Bush's "you're either with us or against us" dividing line in the war of terrorism,\textsuperscript{15} with its attendant


\textsuperscript{13} See: Gary Sick, All Fall Down: America's Tragic Encounter with Iran (New York: Random House, 1985).


\textsuperscript{15} The phrase was used by President Bush in a post-terrorist attack speech to the U.S. Congress on September 20 where he outlined what subsequently became known as the "Bush Doctrine" when he declared to the world: "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." For coverage of reactions to the phrase, see: Karen De Young, "With Us or With the Terrorists?" Washington Post (Weekly), October 22-28, 2001, p. 17; and Michael J. Jordan, "With or against us' war irks many UN nations," Christian Science Monitor, November 14, 2001, p. 7.
risks of being targeted? This list would be very small—probably only Cuba. However, that list would grow substantially if non-state actors that back various revolutionary movements that threaten either U.S. interests or U.S. friends and allies were included. Virtually all of these would warrant inclusion on lists of terrorist organizations. More important in terms of the broader implications of the “axis of evil” concept, there may well be many other countries that resent the United States’ level of hegemonic power sufficiently that they feel compelled by necessity to stand publicly with the United States in its war on terrorism when they would rather either abstain in ways reminiscent of the Cold War’s non-aligned movement, or send Washington the message that they are ambivalent about what the United States and its normative values system represent internationally. This moral uncertainty might fit the bill as “evil.”

What the three countries explicitly labeled as the “axis of evil” do not share internationally is any tendency toward cooperating with each other, or with any of the other countries that might sympathize with the three states put in this category by the United States, in armed conflict against a common adversary. There does not seem to be any indication that such a coalition was ever contemplated by the three of them. In that sense, the putative “axis” is a misnomer at best and illusory at worst.

Unfortunately, that could change as a result of Washington lumping them together in a de facto axis. If the leaders in Baghdad, Tehran, and Pyongyang begin to expect the United States to eliminate their regimes one by one, it does not take much imagination to visualize the Iraqis, Iranians, and North Koreans trying to build a formal transcontinental axis of targeted powers as a way to deter the United States from taking military action against any or all of them. Moreover, if Washington knew that an attack by American forces or a U.S.-led coalition against any one of these countries would precipitate a counterattack by the other two on the United States and its friends, allies, and interests in the regions concerned, might not Washington think twice? Such reasoning with regard to the United States’ probable reaction could draw these states into a mutual

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defense system.

For example, if such an axis really functioned formally or de facto as the basis of their collective security, and the United States then launched an attack on Iraq, what could the other two do? Iran could help to defend Iraq and counterattack whatever U.S. bases in the Middle East, Southwest Asia, and the NATO states were being used. And it could counter-attack against any of the countries aligned with the United States in the region, most notably Israel, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and other Gulf states. The United States’ positions in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Central Asian “stans” also could be vulnerable. For its part, North Korea could lash out at U.S. and allied forces in South Korea and Japan as well as civilian targets in those two countries. Pyongyang would know full well that U.S. involvement in a widespread Southwest Asian war would severely stretch the United States’ capability to cope with North Korea simultaneously. Both countries also could do their utmost to extend their counter-attacks to the U.S. homeland as well.

As the war on terrorism moves beyond its initial phases, conventional wisdom holds that Iraq is the most likely of the axis states to be targeted by the United States. Many in the United States look forward to this as an opportunity to tie up the loose ends remaining from the Gulf War by finally removing the Saddam Hussein regime. It also could provide an opportunity to deal with adjacent extremist groups in the region that carry out terrorist attacks on Israel. Despite much speculation about the likelihood and timing of such a conflict, both remain uncertain. However, many are convinced it is just a matter of time. If this proves to be accurate, it also will provide an opportunity for the other two axis states to consider their options amidst an evolving war on terrorism.

Importantly, such speculation is virtually non-existent regarding a U.S. attack on Iran. And, it is exceedingly rare with regard to a pre-emptive U.S. attack on North Korea.17 During President Bush’s February 2002 summit with South Korea’s President Kim Dae-jung, the

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United States tried to discourage such speculation and the anxiety it created in the region.\textsuperscript{18} Nonetheless, as the controversial Nuclear Policy Review (leaked in March 2002) made clear,\textsuperscript{19} both countries—along with Russia, China, Libya, Iraq, and Syria—are deemed potential targets by the United States.

Of the lot, North Korea stands out for its anxieties about the United States possibly taking decisive military action against it. American officials disavow any intention to do so. And, their disavowals should be taken at their word because among the last things the United States needs amidst its worldwide war on terrorism—that may well expand into Iraq—is reignition of the Korean War with its daunting attendant costs and casualties. Neither does South Korea want its role in support of the United States’ war on terrorism to lead to such an outcome.\textsuperscript{20} Nonetheless, North Korea is enough of a loose cannon that it is not unthinkable that some unanticipated accidental incident could escalate out of control, unleashing precisely such a conflict. Were this to occur, concurrent with the United States’ war on terrorism in diverse theaters, how might the other two axis states—especially Iraq—react to the opportunities this turn of events would provide? Given the presumed likelihood of a U.S. military move against Iraq, it does not take great insight to imagine Baghdad taking advantage of the United States becoming preoccupied in a two-front war—one against terrorists, the other against North Korea—by striking out against its adversaries in the Middle East. Iran might also be tempted to join in the fray.

In effect these three maligned states might well react instinctively as though an “axis” truly existed. Moreover, they might go further down that geopolitical path. Could a genuine transcontinental axis be built by the three labeled members of a figurative but—so far—non-existent entity? Absolutely. All they need is the motivation, which they now have been provided via the Bush Doctrine’s focus on them. Furthermore, if this axis really began to


\textsuperscript{19} William M. Arkin, “Nuclear Warfare; Secret Plan Outlines the Unthinkable,” \textit{Los Angeles Times} (latimes.com), March 10, 2002.

function effectively as a form of deterrence-based collective security for countries that feared becoming the target of U.S. actions, one could visualize some other countries being tempted to join the transcontinental axis to enhance their security. Interestingly, two prominent neo-conservatives—Robert Kagan and William Kristol, writing in the *Weekly Standard*—praised President Bush’s efforts during his February 2002 Asian tour in a peculiar way. They suggested “the Bush Doctrine could help undo dictatorships not only in Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, but also in, for example, China...” 21 If Beijing took that notion seriously, perhaps nudged by China’s inclusion on the United States’ revised list of nuclear targets and by the United States’ anti-missile plans at least partially geared toward the PRC’s potentials 22—that intriguing prospect could lead to a truly daunting pan-Asian axis from Southwest Asia to East Asia.

Facing this possibility emerging as a perversely ironic unintended consequence of a line in the State of the Union speech, does it truly make sense to deal with Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as a putative “axis of evil”? Should it be expanded to China? Perhaps so, if one is willing to run the dire attendant risks across Eurasia. There is virtually no likelihood that the United States—and, perhaps equally important, its allies across the Eurasian continent—are ready to run those risks. Nonetheless, raising this worst-case scenario has heuristic value in that it illustrates what not to do and implicitly suggests the need for alternative ways of dealing with these three states. For present purposes, possible alternatives vis-à-vis North Korea shall be addressed.

In an odd way, North Korea’s inclusion within the “axis of evil” provides North Korea with another level of leverage in its relations with both South Korea and its U.S. strategic backer. Despite North Korea’s initial post-September 11 efforts to disassociate the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) from the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and the United

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States’ welcoming those efforts, the United States kept North Korea on the U.S. Department of State’s list of terrorist states—with the encouragement of some American conservatives. Inadvertently, this enhanced North Korea’s ability to take advantage of Seoul and Washington’s threat perceptions of the DPRK by utilizing each’s anxiety about the irrational qualities inherent in Pyongyang’s approach to world affairs. Even if the DPRK’s policies are, from a North Korean perspective, totally rational in light of the threats it perceives, it still is useful to Pyongyang to be able to make use of its adversaries’ anxieties in a calculated and manipulative manner.

Beyond such relatively routine utilization of the “axis of evil” and its potential worst-case ramifications for psychological bargaining purposes, there are other alternatives that should be considered. In contrast to the worst-case characteristics of the scenario suggested above, these alternatives range from the relatively benign to potentially very positive. One way Pyongyang might well make use of being labeled part of the “axis” would be to turn South Korean unease to North Korea’s advantage by playing to South Korea’s concerns about getting dragged into a broader global conflict, being compelled to respond to the Bush Doctrine’s “with us or against us” choices even if the merits seem unfounded, and fears of undermining many of the accomplishments achieved in ROK-PRC relations aimed at reinforcing the inter-Korean dialogue. Depending upon


24 For an example of that support, see: Balbina Hwang, “North Korea Deserves To Remain On U.S. List of Sponsors of Terrorism,” in The Heritage Foundation, Backgrounder, No. 1503, November 19, 2001.


27 South Korea’s recent record in bolstering its ties with China to support Seoul’s inter-Korean agenda is assessed in Samuel S. Kim, “China, Japan, and Russia in Inter-Korean Relations,” in Kongdan Oh and Ralph C. Hassig, eds., op. cit.
how North Korea were to utilize such a tactic, it could either be perceived as a device to draw North and South Korea closer together vis-à-vis a U.S. policy position, or as means to drive yet another wedge into the U.S.-ROK alliance. Either could be plausible. Precisely how such a maneuver might be perceived would largely depend upon how well enmeshed the U.S.-ROK alliance remains in the United States’ global war on terrorism. If South Korea stays strongly committed, then the “wedge” version will likely prevail. However, if South Korea develops second thoughts about the risks of the war on terrorism becoming too severe, then North Korea might be able to play an unorthodox card successfully.

Were North Korea to be still more innovative vis-à-vis the “axis of evil” concept, Pyongyang might pursue one of two options tied to the DPRK being labeled part of the “axis.” One option would be to cautiously acknowledge that there may be merit in the Bush administration’s characterization, while tangentially indicating the ways that the “axis” states could constitute a form of collective security that would endanger U.S. interests in ways not intended by the original use of the phrase “axis of evil.” This would provide the framework for North Korea to try to cut a deal with the United States—offering to abstain from any movement toward a genuine “axis” in exchange for greater readiness on Washington’s part to engage in a more productive U.S.-DPRK dialogue that would be supportive of ROK-DPRK reconciliation and coexistence. Whether North Korea possesses the diplomatic skill to pull off such a nuanced maneuver and whether the United States might be responsive to such an effort are both doubtful.

The other option open to North Korea vis-à-vis the “axis of evil” would entail far greater creativity on Pyongyang’s part. Pyongyang would not have to acknowledge that there is any accuracy in the label “axis of evil,” but as a way to demonstrate that—from a North Korean vantage point—it should never have been applied to the DPRK, North Korea could offer to overtly side with the United States in its war on terrorism by providing Washington with useful assistance. In short, North Korea could seek simultaneously to demonstrate that it warrants being taken off the State Department’s list of terrorist states and to prove that it does not deserve to be lumped together with Iraq and Iran by offering to share with the
United States substantial information about terrorist activities of third parties. Admittedly, the fact that North Korea, by doing so, would thereby confirm U.S. suspicions about the DPRK's ties to states or groups the United States deems to be terrorist would prove to be awkward. However, that confirmation would be more than offset by constituting a concrete example of North Korea overtly declaring that it is "with" the United States in its war on terrorism rather than "against" it. Were North Korea to actually make such a move, the United States should be flexible in its responses as a way to reinvigorate the U.S.-DPRK dialogue process and help broaden the United States' readiness to engage North Korea in a process of mutual incentives.28

It is, of course, questionable whether North Korea could accept either bold option as part of its decidedly tenuous foreign policy. Nonetheless, such an option could be productive if pursued skillfully. South Korea naturally would play a major role in whether either option might seem feasible. If Seoul signaled its readiness to entertain such a step by North Korea, that would serve a catalytic role. Conversely, if Seoul appeared reluctant to sanction any such change, its prospects would be still more problematic—if not bleak.

The fact that such possibilities can be contemplated—even in a hypothetical context—is indicative of the impact the "axis of evil" concept has had on U.S. policy toward Korea. Equally important, the high profile the "axis of evil" has had within the United States’ war on terrorism resonates within overall U.S. policy toward Korea. While there is nothing new about the United States being distracted or preoccupied by larger issues in world or Asian affairs as it shapes American policy toward the two Koreas, witness the influence of U.S. interests in Japan shaping the Cold War's impact on the Korean Peninsula, the magnitude of the war on terrorism's impact on U.S. policy is staggering. That struggle distorts U.S. priorities in all tangential realms—including Korea. In this sense, the "axis of evil" is symbolic of the way the war on terrorism overshadows U.S. policy.

28 The author explores in greater detail the rationales for the United States to expand its policies toward both Koreas en route to facilitating the long delayed goal of national independence for the entire Korean nation in his Toward Normalizing U.S.-Korea Relations: In Due Course? (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, October 2002), forthcoming.
toward Korea. In some respects this could be positive in that it pro-
vides both Koreas with a surrogate for the now defunct Cold War,
thereby creating a new strategic paradigm within which to shape
each Korea's policy toward the United States and toward each other.
On balance, however, both Koreas would be better served by not
having the United States distracted by this larger agenda and more
dispersed to focus on Korean issues on their intrinsic merits.

While it is clear that North Korea—as the Northeast Asian
member of the “axis of evil”—is under the greatest pressure to cope
with the United States' larger priorities, and is directly endangered if
it fails to devise an appropriate response, South Korea too is at risk
because of the ways the war on terrorism skews U.S. policies toward
inter-Korean issues that are of manifest concern to Seoul. This raises
a range of questions about how South Korea can cope with the
impact the war on terrorism will have on long-term U.S. policy
toward the Korean Peninsula. Should South Korea acquiesce to,
adapt to, attempt to modify, resist, or reject the consequences of
these larger priorities for the United States as it deals with Korea?
Seoul need not be precipitous in reacting to the new geopolitical
environment the war on terrorism has imposed on it. It is prudent
for South Korea to bide its time to get a more comprehensive sense
of how the United States will cope with its 21st century security con-
straints. However, as those constraints evolve, and as larger U.S. pri-
orities become more entrenched, South Korea would be well
advised to review its own options as it deals with the impact of larger
U.S. policies on North Korea, the Northeast Asian region, and the
world at large.

Precisely what the United States does regarding these larger
strategic priorities is well beyond the scope of this analysis. It is the
subject of a growing debate in the United States and should be care-
fully noted in both Seoul and Pyongyang. For present purposes, the
conclusion one can draw with regard to U.S. policy toward the “axis
of evil” centers on three options. The United States can pursue the
axis states vigorously in order to either transform or eliminate them.
Despite the attendant risks cited here, this remains the most likely
U.S. course of action, albeit a policy that may be modified by evol-
vring circumstances. The United States also could pursue derivative
alternatives, such as those suggested here. Most desirable in terms of
U.S. overall policy and that policy's impact on the Korean Peninsula, the controversial "axis of evil" expression can be discreetly but explicitly dropped, to be replaced by another strategic metaphor that harbors fewer dangers of being turned against the United States. This does not mean that the United States and its strategic partners in Southwest and Northeast Asia should cease dealing with the threats posed by these three countries, or others such as China, but it can be done diplomatically and militarily by means that do not implicitly suggest a viable institutional counter-measure. Were the United States to do this, the larger U.S. priorities in the war on terrorism could be far more smoothly integrated into U.S. policies toward Korea.