



U.S.-North Korea: "Axis of Evil" Revisited by Ralph A. Cossa

Those of us who comment on U.S. foreign policy are deeply indebted to President George W. Bush for his State of the Union reference to North Korea, Iran, and Iraq as an "axis of evil." Never before have three simple (if not simplistic) words spawned so many editorials, fed so many talking heads, and inspired so many protest placards. The only thing missing thus far is an associated scandal, which would of course be immediately dubbed "evil-gate."

It may be time for a ceasefire, however, since the attacks against the use of this slogan are now creating as much confusion and misunderstanding as the original phrase. When learned former ambassadors like Morton Abramowitz and James Laney claim (as they did in a recent Washington Post editorial) that President Bush "implicitly threatened to destroy North Korea or force it to modify its behavior [and] implied the time was sooner rather than later," it may be time to stop and re-listen to what the president actually said.

What I heard President Bush say in his State of the Union address (and on multiple occasions since) was this: If states (like North Korea, Iran, and especially Iraq) that are pursuing weapons of mass destruction place those weapons in the hands of terrorists who would be willing to employ them against the United States, they will be held accountable. He was, in the president's own words, "putting them on notice." Given the hard evidence that al-Qaeda was seeking such weapons and the assumption that the terrorists would use them if acquired (which requires no great leap of faith, given al-Qaeda's past track record), the message itself appears appropriate, perhaps even necessary. I continue to believe that there were more effective ways to get this word across (and that the destruction of the Taliban had already delivered this message more effectively). But the message itself was pretty straight-forward.

Bush was not signaling that North Korea was the next Afghanistan; nor did he indicate he was itching for an opportunity to attack, either sooner or later. Since North Korea claims to be firmly against international terrorism (and I am willing to give them the benefit of the doubt on this one), Bush is not even asking Pyongyang to modify its behavior, but merely to live up to its word.

Rightly or wrongly, President Bush sees the war on terrorism in black and white terms: "The way I view this is we are fighting evil," he said recently, "and I don't see any shades of gray." This view is unsettling to those of us who would argue that foreign policy exists in the realm of the grays. But it does reflect Washington thinking and is the prism through which the current administration's words and actions must be interpreted. Those commenting on the "axis of evil" phrase have a responsibility not

to add to the problem by reading more into the statement than what is there. Inflaming South Korean sensitivities and increasing North Korean paranoia contribute little to the debate.

To his credit, President Bush has gone to great lengths to explain that branding North Korea as "evil" does not rule out dialogue, reminding us that President Ronald Reagan - clearly Bush's role model - made significant progress in arms control and other negotiations with the Soviet Union while still branding it an "evil empire." He even proclaimed, while in Seoul, that neither South Korea nor the United States had any intention to attack North. This constitutes one of the most direct security assurances ever offered to Pyongyang by an American president.

So, where do we go from here? As far as the Bush team is concerned, the next step is up to Pyongyang. Bush repeated Washington's willingness to begin a dialogue with North Korea "any time, any place, without preconditions" throughout his Asia trip and even publicly asked Chinese President Jiang Zemin to help deliver this message to North Korean leader Kim Jong-il. If North Korea remains too suspicious of Bush to engage directly - all U.S. overtures to date (both before and after the "axis" comment) have been swiftly rejected - it can always agree to a resumption of the Four-Party Talks (involving the two Koreas, the U.S., and China). Or, it can stop stalling and re-engage with the South. President Bush, during his Seoul stopover, tried to breathe new life into ROK President Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy of engagement with the North, while making it clear that the road to Washington continues to run through Seoul.

One can argue whether Bush's black-and-white approach is helpful - the administration claims (rightfully) that it has gotten the North's attention, but to what end? Nonetheless, the real problem continues to be not Bush's words but Pyongyang's actions - or inaction, when it comes to North-South dialogue. Time is running out both for President Kim and for his Sunshine Policy; campaigning for this December's presidential elections will soon begin in earnest, making North-South overtures more difficult and more politically charged. Meanwhile, the ball remains in Pyongyang's court. Will it be smart enough to return it before the game is declared over?

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