

Will North Korea Become Another Libya?

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Three years ago President George Bush made his famous “axis of evil” speech. He linked Iraq, Iran, Libya and North Korea together and labeled them the greatest threat to the security of the United States and to world peace. Authoritarian regimes, he emphasized, ruled each nation and were developing, or already had developed weapons of mass destruction. He also asserted that this “axis of evil” promoted the spread of nuclear weapons and international terrorism.

Much has changed since Bush made that speech. No longer is Iraq and its strongman Saddam Hussein a threat. US military forces overwhelmed Iraq. They rendered Hussein powerless. Despite a long, intensive search, no weapons of mass destruction (WMD) have been found. President Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell, using Central Intelligence Agency intelligence, they exaggerated the size and danger of Iraq’s alleged WMD arsenal. As we now know, the United Nations had peacefully compelled Hussein to dismantle his WMD arsenal by 1995. Nor has any convincing evidence been found to link Hussein to international terrorism.

We also have learned since Bush’s speech that he failed to mention the central link in the “axis of evil,” Pakistan. But by January 2001, Pakistan had become Bush’s ally in the war on terrorism. He needed its cooperation to end Taliban control of Afghanistan and to capture Al Qaeda’s leader Osama Ben Laden. But Pakistan for years had spread WMD technology to Iran, Libya, and North Korea. Only a few days ago, the United States admitted this and the Pakistani government fired its top nuclear scientist.

On the positive side, Iran and Libya now appear much less threatening than they did in 2001. Both have declared their intention to end their WMD development programs. They have also allowed the International Atomic Energy Agency, the United Nations nuclear inspection organization, and joint US-British weapons inspection teams to inspect their secret nuclear and weapons research centers. In exchange, Iran and Libya rightfully expect the international community’s respect and the economic benefits that accompany membership in the world community.

President Bush and Britain’s Prime Minister Tony Blair rushed to claim credit for Iran’s and Libya’s decision. They jointly announced that their tough rhetoric and hard line tactics, which include the “pre-emptive” threat and use of military force, had compelled Iran and Libya to give up their WMD ambitions. That may be true, but it is presumptuous of Bush and Blair to claim this before the leaders of Iran and Iraq have had a chance to explain their decisions.

The “axis of evil” appears to be crumbling. But did it ever really exist, or was it merely the creation of a White House speech writer? Given what we now know about the poor quality of CIA intelligence, Bush’s “axis” probably was the product of political wishful thinking and somewhat dubious intelligence. The “axis” existed, in other words, more in the Bush Administration’s mind than in reality.

Also, Bush and Blair’s claim of credit for Libya’s and Iran’s decisions may also be more politically motivated wishful thinking. Libya and Iran had made diplomatic overtures to

the international community long before Bush became president and the US invaded Iraq. Libya has worked for years to normalize relations with the international community by turning over to an international court the men suspected of having blown up a U.S. civilian airliner over Britain fifteen years earlier. Iran at the end of the Clinton Administration had sought to engage the United States in diplomatic dialogue. But the Bush Administration instead labeled it a member of the “axis of evil.” Iran turned to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and Russia.

Bush Administration “hard liners” now predict that North Korea will follow Libya’s example. They contend that North Korea’s Kim Jong Il, hoping to save his regime from the US military’s awesome might, will inevitably give in to United States pressure and voluntarily disarm like Libya.

But is this a realistic or another politically motivated hope? Can North Korea really be expected to become another Libya?

There are profound differences between Libya and North Korea. An oil rich nation, Libya has much to gain by being able to sell its oil in the international market. It has been working for years to resolve outstanding issues with the international community. It has conducted mostly secret diplomatic negotiations with international agencies and the British government. Before any agreement was reached, Libya came to understand that it would be rewarded with re-admission into the international community. Also, Libya has not been the focus of the US military since President Reagan bombed it in 1986. This greatly diminishes Libya’s desire to maintain a huge arsenal.

North Korea’s situation is entirely different. It is an impoverished nation with few natural resources that is on the verge of bankruptcy and famine. Since North Korea’s primary benefactor the Soviet Union collapsed in 1990, Pyongyang has turned toward the international community in the hope of obtaining resources needed to modernize its economy. Some success followed when it “froze” its nuclear program in 1994. Growing distrust between the Clinton Administration and Pyongyang, followed by the Bush Administration’s refusal to “reward its nuclear blackmail” restarted a spiral of escalating tension on the Korean Peninsula.

Unlike Libya, North Korea sees itself as the bull’s eye for the awesome US military presence in Northeast Asia. North Korea’s threatening posture toward South Korea and Japan justify the forward deployment of US military forces in the region. But at the same time, Pyongyang uses this presence to justify its desire for WMD.

Failure to reach a diplomatic solution to the continuing impasse with North Korea could result in a second Korean War. Such a war would occur in one of the world’s most densely populated and economically dynamic regions. North Africa, on the other hand, is a lightly populated desert area of relatively limited economic significance. War in Northeast Asia would cost hundreds of thousands of lives and disrupt the global economy.

The Bush Administration is willing to grant Libya diplomatic and economic inducements, but not North Korea. Offering North Korea economic benefits in exchange for discarding its WMD programs would seem to improve prospects for a peaceful diplomatic solution. Also the cost of a peaceful diplomatic deal would be less than the price of war and reconstruction. But the Bush Administration rejects this strategy.

This suggests that Washington may have different objectives regarding these two nations. President Bush possibly is willing to do business with Libya in the future, after it has given up its WMD ambitions, but prefers to avoid doing anything that might perpetuate Kim Jong Il's regime. Maybe this is way Pyongyang is holding out for multilateral security assurances and insisting on a gradual phasing out of its WMD programs before agreeing to resume the Six Party Talks.