How Much of an Axis, and How Evil?

by Raymond Tanter **(/experts/raymond-tanter)**

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Brief Analysis

President George W. Bush's reference to an "axis of evil" in his State of the Union address accurately captures the ties among Iran, Iraq, and North Korea. The president also usefully highlighted the overlap between proliferation and terrorism. In the end, there are more benefits than costs in using such confrontational language.

How Much of an Axis?

President Bush's remarks on the "axis of evil" bring to mind the Axis powers during World War II -- Nazi Germany, Italy, and Japan -- as well as President Ronald Reagan's description of the Soviet Union as an "evil empire." Conventional wisdom following the State of the Union address criticized Bush for unjustifiably comparing Iran, Iraq, and North Korea with the historical Axis powers. This view contends that the analogy breaks down because those in the axis of evil have neither the same convergence of goals nor the same degree of cooperation as the Axis powers. In fact, the Axis powers in World War II had formal pacts but very little coordination and cooperation. In their degree of cooperation in arms sales, Iran-North Korea and Iraq-North Korea have been at least as close as were Germany and Japan during World War II; even the cooperation between Hitler and Mussolini was strained, more akin to the Roosevelt-Stalin relationship than the close and warm ties between Roosevelt and Churchill.

Iran-Iraq

Despite the strong residue of hostility from the 1980-88 war between Iran and Iraq, the two countries have cooperated to some extent in the pursuit of common interests. For example, Iran has become hostile to the UN sanctions on Iraq. Following the visit to Baghdad by Iran's foreign minister Kamal Kharazzi in the fall of 2000 -- the first such trip in a decade -- Iranian state television said that the international embargo against Iraq was over. Iraqi foreign minister Naji Sabri al-Hadithi reciprocated by visiting Tehran last month, and the Iranian media reported that the two sides had reached an agreement to limit the Iraqi opposition's operations in Iran, and vice versa.

Aside from ministerial visits, Iran and Iraq cooperate in oil smuggling. Small tankers and barges ship crude oil down the Shatt al-Arab waterway along Iranian shores. These vessels then stay near the coastline within Iranian territorial waters -- averting the American naval patrols searching for smugglers and sanctions-busters in the Gulf -- until they reach ports sufficiently distant that the oil can be sold without drawing attention from U.S. sanctions enforcers. In 2000, the commander of the U.S. Fifth Fleet, Vice Admiral Charles Moore, estimated the smuggling at $500 million or more per year.

Iran-North Korea

Pyongyang sells scud-B and C missiles to Tehran in return for cash. The countries also collaborate on the development of long-range missiles. Indeed, Iran's long-range Shahab missiles use technology similar to North Korea's Nodong and Taepo-Dong missiles. The cash-for-arms arrangement between Iran and North Korea is an instance of each exploiting its comparative advantage: Iran as the richer country (from oil exports), and North Korea as the more experienced producer of arms.

Pyongyang lowers the costs of its own missile production via the sale of technology to Tehran, and also uses the cash to prop up its regime, which teeters on the brink of bankruptcy. With that money, North Korea can purchase technology to improve its missile development, further raising the threat it poses to stability in northeast Asia. In this regard, it is troubling to see the following statement in the most recent CIA report on proliferation: "In April 2001, Pyongyang signed a Defense Industry Cooperation Agreement with Russia, laying the groundwork for potential arms sales and transfers to North Korea."

Iraq-North Korea

In August 2000, according to ABC News, the U.S. intelligence community reported that Iraq was financing the construction of a scud-missile assembly plant in Sudan with North Korean assistance. Pyongyang was to build, staff, and operate the plant, and the assembled scuds were to be held in Sudan for Iraq's future use. Iraq would foot the bill and provide Sudan a substantial fee for its role. This comes against the background of reports suggesting Sudan has colluded with Iraq. As with Tehran, Pyongyang's goal regarding Baghdad would presumably be to earn hard currency from North Korea's number-one source of foreign revenue -- scud-missile exports.

Confrontational Language

Another characteristic of Bush's State of the Union speech was to combine proliferation and terrorism as threats against which he pledges action. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice have since elaborated on the theme that those nations seeking missile technology and nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons overlap with regimes that harbor international terrorists. Treating proliferation and terrorism together in selecting targets for Phase II of the campaign against terrorism produces different results than addressing the dangers separately. For one thing, the focus on proliferation gives reason to emphasize the threat from rogue nations and hostile regimes, as distinct from amorphous terrorist entities that may not have clear connections to a state.

Bush emphasized the common character of the threat that the United States faces from Iran, Iraq, and North Korea, irrespective of the degree of collusion among them. Indeed, the three share the characteristic of being the countries most likely to develop not only weapons of mass destruction (WMD) but also the means to deliver them against the United States. Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet notes that, "As outlined in our recent National Intelligence Estimate on the subject, most Intelligence Community agencies project that by 2015 the U.S. most likely will face ICBM threats from North Korea and Iran, and possibly from Iraq."

The president's "evil axis" language evolved well after September 11. Prior to that date, he alternated between using "rogue nation" language -- and a less provocative term favored by his diplomats, "least-responsible states" -- to describe regimes that acquire and/or proliferate WMD, especially nuclear arms and long-range missiles. Even in the aftermath of September 11, Bush continued to use rogue-state language and added "hostile regime" to his repertoire of descriptors. Following the State of the Union address, it seems that the rest of the administration is falling in line with this trend. The Bush administration official who had least used the term "rogue state" -- Secretary of State Colin Powell -- has since employed it often and has also defended the term "axis of evil."

There are costs and benefits in considering "rogue state," "hostile regime," and "evil axis" as general categories. A major disadvantage of "evil axis" language is to delay engagement when it is timely and warranted. The principal

advantage of categorizing countries as evil is political mobilization of domestic populations, bureaucracies, and allies against such regimes. Mobilization serves to obstruct policies of unwarranted and premature accommodation. After September 11, U.S. gains from the axis-of-evil classification outweigh the losses -- such language reinforces the administration's emphasis on the threat from WMD as well as terrorism.

Professor Raymond Tanter, a recent visiting fellow at The Washington Institute, authored Rogue Regimes: Terrorism and Proliferation (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

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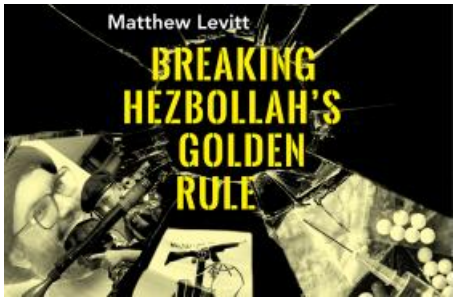

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