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Analysis

Bush's 'Axis of Evil' Comes Back to Haunt United States

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By [Glenn Kessler and Peter Baker](#)

Washington Post Staff Writers
Tuesday, October 10, 2006; Page A12



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Nearly five years after President Bush introduced the concept of an "axis of evil" comprising Iraq, Iran and North Korea, the administration has reached a crisis point with each nation: North Korea has claimed it conducted its first nuclear test, Iran refuses to halt its uranium-enrichment program, and Iraq appears to be tipping into a civil war 3 1/2 years after the U.S.-led invasion.

Each problem appears to feed on the others, making the stakes higher and requiring Bush and his advisers to make difficult calculations, analysts and U.S. officials said. The deteriorating situation in Iraq has undermined U.S. diplomatic credibility and limited the administration's military options, making rogue countries increasingly confident that they can act without serious consequences. Iran, meanwhile, will be watching closely the diplomatic fallout from North Korea's apparent test as a clue to how far it might go with its own nuclear program.

"Iran will follow very carefully what happens in the U.N. Security Council after the North Korean test," said Robert J. Einhorn, senior adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

"If the United Nations is not able to act forcefully, then Iran will think the path is clear to act with

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impunity."

Michael E. O'Hanlon, a Brookings Institution scholar and co-author of the new book "Hard Power: The New Politics of National Security," said the U.S. response to North Korea will have ripple effects. "Iran will certainly watch what happens. North Korea watched what happened with Pakistan and decided that the world didn't punish Pakistan too hard or too long," he said. "Iran will certainly notice if North Korea gets treated with kid gloves."

Political strategists debated the domestic implications of the North Korean test with midterm elections four weeks away. Some Republicans predicted it would take the focus off the Mark Foley congressional page scandal and remind voters that it is a dangerous world best confronted by tough-minded leaders. Some Democrats argued it would be seen as another failure of Bush's foreign policy and moved quickly to try to pin blame on the Republicans. "Is this going to help Republicans?" asked Jim Manley, spokesman for Senate Minority Leader Harry M. Reid (D-Nev.). "The answer to that is absolutely not. This is another significant foreign policy failure for the administration."

In Bush's 2002 State of the Union address, a speech designed to shift the political debate from a battle against al-Qaeda to a possible confrontation with Iraq, the

Photos



**North Korea Nuclear Test
Condemned**

North Korea declared Monday, Oct. 9, that it had conducted its first nuclear test, asserting a claim to be the world's newest nuclear power and drawing strong international condemnation.

Tuesday, Oct. 10, at noon ET

**U.N. Security Council Condemns North Korea's
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president mentioned North Korea, Iraq and Iran and declared: "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. . . . In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic."

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All three issues came to a head in 2003: The United States invaded Iraq and discovered no weapons of mass destruction; North Korea began to obtain weapons-grade plutonium from fuel rods that had been under international observation; and Iran disclosed that it had made rapid progress with a previously secret uranium-enrichment program.

In contrast to its handling of Iraq, the administration has tried to resolve the North Korean and Iranian nuclear breakouts with diplomacy. But progress has been slow, in part because the United States has been reluctant to hold bilateral talks with either country except within the context of broader talks with other nations.

Former senator Sam Nunn (D-Ga.) faulted the administration for focusing on Iraq first, when greater threats loomed in North Korea and Iran. "We started with Iraq in the 'axis of evil' side, when we thought they did not yet have nuclear weapons, and that sent the signal to others that they better get them quick," he said. "I think we started on the wrong end of that."

The administration launched a full-court press yesterday at the Security Council, proposing elements of a tough resolution that would call for imposing an arms embargo and a series of legally binding U.N. financial and trade sanctions. The United States also called for international inspections of all trade in and out of North Korea to enforce the sanctions.

U.S. officials yesterday were focusing especially closely on the reaction of China, long North Korea's main benefactor. The Chinese government publicly denounced the test in unusually strong language, and a senior U.S. official said the private comments of Chinese officials were equally strong. While China has been reluctant to pressure North Korea, fearing a collapse of the government and mass refugees on its border, "the question is whether a chaotic North Korea is worse than a nuclear North Korea," the official said, speaking on the condition of anonymity because of the diplomatic sensitivities.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice appears likely to make a trip to the region soon to further build support for a tough response by China, Japan and South Korea. Several experts predicted that although China's leadership is angry enough to support some sanctions, it always will stop short of putting enough pressure on Pyongyang to force its collapse. "Full-up sanctions I don't see happening," said former White House Asia expert Michael J. Green, now at CSIS.

James B. Steinberg, President Bill Clinton's deputy national security adviser and now dean of the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin, said the North Korea test will raise a larger question that echoes Ronald Reagan's most famous 1980 campaign line -- "With respect to the axis of evil," Steinberg said, "are you better off today than you were four years ago? . . . It's clear that the answer is we're worse off with respect to the nuclear proliferation problem in both North Korea and Iran than four to six years ago, and I would argue we're worse off in our overall security because of the situation in Iraq."

Staff writer Dafna Linzer contributed to this report.

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