

RESEARCH NOTE

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After Iraq: A Military Solution in North Korea?

The commencement of military action to forcibly remove the regime of Saddam Hussein raises the question of whether to apply a similar solution to North Korea.

North Korea and Iraq Linkage

Linkages between Iraq and North Korea were drawn widely in the lead up to a definitive decision to remove Saddam Hussein.

The Bush administration put forward the most articulate linkage between Iraq and North Korea. The two nations are both original members of the 'Axis of Evil', their leaders share the personal loathing of George W. Bush, and both are regimes that, in Bush's own words, could use weapons of mass destruction 'for blackmail, terror, and mass murder'.¹

Most notable in the current debate was the statement by British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, that North Korea will be considered after Iraq. When challenged in Parliament Blair stated: 'After we deal with Iraq we do, yes, through the UN, have to confront North Korea about its weapons program'.²

Australian Prime Minister, John Howard stated that failure to disarm Iraq would 'weaken our capacity to discipline North Korea'.³

North Korea is not Iraq

A successful regime change in Iraq will inevitably raise calls for its application to North Korea. However, there are very strong arguments against drawing parallels between the two situations:

- North Korea has a standing army of approximately 1 million, compared to Iraq's 400 000. Reserves bring the North Korean military to a massive 5 million. North Korea, despite deteriorating military capabilities due to economic mismanagement, still retains a military capability which would ensure any conflict remained 'unparalleled in US experience since the Korean War of 1950-53'.⁴
- The North Korean military, people and leaders have been in active preparation and planning for a US attack since the Korean War. More than two thirds of its military remain poised to strike within 130 kms of the demilitarised zone, dividing North and South Korea. The majority of this force is housed in underground facilities, accessed by an intricate tunnel network. It includes an array of artillery capable of killing 'literally millions' in the South Korean capital, Seoul, within minutes.⁵

- North Korea possesses a formidable ballistic missile capability. The *Nodong* series of ballistic missiles with a maximum estimated range of 1500 kms directly threatens all of South Korea, and limited areas in central Japan. The *Taepo dong* series of ballistic missiles, such as that fired over Japan in 1998, are estimated to be able to reach Alaska, Hawaii and consequently northern Australia, without further testing. US intelligence estimates consider the hypothetical extension of the *Taepo dong* series could reach the continental United States, and consequently the entirety of Australia.⁶
- South Korea and Japan are strongly opposed to initiating any conflict which would inevitably primarily endanger them. Further strong opposition could be expected from key regional players China and Russia.

It was these facts that deterred President Clinton from proceeding with plans for a military strike on North Korean Yongbyong nuclear facilities during a similar stand-off in 1994.⁷ The 1994 crisis was resolved through negotiations leading to the Agreed Framework, which called for the freezing and eventual dismantlement of the North's nuclear program in return for the normalisation of relations, increased North-South cooperation and the supply of alternative fuel sources until the construction of safer Light Water Reactors.

Osirak: A Strong Comparison?

In June 1981 Israeli air force jets flew 1100 kms across Jordan and Saudi Arabia to successfully destroy the French built 'Osirak' nuclear facilities in Iraq, which had been identified by Israeli intelligence as nearing a nuclear weapon capable stage. The pre-

Iraq and North Korea Compared

	Iraq	North Korea
Navy Personnel	2500	60 000
Total Naval Craft	19	820
Air Force Personnel	30 000	110 000
Fighters	180	870
Ground Force Personnel	400 000	1 000 000
Tanks	2500	3 800
Field Guns	2100	12 500
Ballistic Missiles		
0-1500 km range	unknown	500-600
1500 + km range	unknown	unknown

Source: ROK National Intelligence Service and Israeli Defence Forces Website

emptive strike was defended by Israel as legitimate self-defence under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter. The strike has since been considered as a strong precedent for the legitimacy of pre-emption.

The elements essential for success in the Osirak strike in Iraq do not exist in the case of the Yongbyon nuclear facilities in North Korea.

Firstly, the Iraqi regime was not considered to be in possession of any nuclear weapons. US intelligence estimates indicate North Korea may already be in possession of one or two nuclear devices. In addition, the Yongbyon facilities are not the only known nuclear facilities in North Korea. A successful military strike on Yongbyon would not destroy nuclear material at facilities at unknown locations.⁸

Secondly, the Osirak nuclear facilities were not 'hot', that is, the strike took place prior to the loading of nuclear fuel into the reactor. North Korea restarted its 5 MW nuclear reactor at the Yongbyon facilities on 26 February 2003. This dramatically increases the potential threat to the region of adverse environmental radiation effects as a result of a strike.

Finally, Iraq had not stated its objective of massive retaliation in the event of a strike. There was no build up of tension, the two states were in a state of 'permanent hostility' as a result of Iraq's failure to sign an armistice agreement after the 1948 Arab–Israeli War. Further, Iraq had no prior indication of a strike on its Osirak facilities. In comparison, North Korea has

repeatedly stated its intent of massive retaliation in the event of a strike. Its bellicosity has even extended to the statement that sanctions alone would be a pretext for war.

After Iraq: Negotiations?

With its focus on Iraq, the Bush administration has followed a policy of 'strategic neglect' in relation to the escalation tactics of North Korea. It has stated negotiations should only take place within a multilateral setting. At the same time it has stated 'all options remain on the table' to deal with North Korea.⁹ With the resolution of the Iraq conflict, greater attention is likely to turn to North Korea.

Despite the overwhelming arguments against a military option highlighted above, there exists in the US, near equivalent domestic opposition to negotiations that could be perceived as rewarding North Korea for its errant behaviour. Senator McCain, an opponent of renegotiating the Agreed Framework, stated 'those who counsel a return to the status quo fail to grasp the danger of rewarding threats with retreat and concession'.¹⁰

One option is to continue the policy of strategic neglect with its inherent danger of allowing North Korea to obtain further nuclear devices.¹¹ This could lead to increased international pressure on North Korea, particularly from influential neighbours, China and Russia.

Another option already widely canvassed is the return to bilateral US–North Korea negotiations. A task force of prominent academics on the North Korean nuclear crisis

at the Centre for International Policy at the University of Chicago stated in its key finding that the US should offer to negotiate directly with North Korea on all issues of concern to both sides.¹²

Implications for Australia

The current nuclear crisis is of vital interest to Australia for at least two reasons:

- forty-two per cent of Australia's merchandise exports go to the North East Asian region including our key markets Japan, China and South Korea.
- a conflict would inevitably require an Australian commitment given its interests, its alliance with the United States and its status as a signatory to the Joint Declaration on the Korean Armistice (1953), confirming the resolve of signatories to the defence of South Korea.

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2. 'Blair points to North Korea as next target', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 January 2003.
3. John Howard Interview, *The 7.30 Report*, 18 March 2003.
4. William Perry, *Review of United States Policy Toward North Korea*, 12 October 1999.
5. Senator Kyl (Rep—Arizona) *Congressional Record Weekly Update*, 6–10 January 2003.
6. The 'Rumsfeld Report', The Commission to Assess the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States, 104th Congress.
7. 'Clinton had plans to attack N. Korea nuclear reactor', *CNN World Report*, 16 December 2002.
8. Selig S. Harrison, *Turning Point in Korea—Report of the Task Force on US Korea Policy*, February 2003.
9. Ari Fleischer, *White House Daily Briefing Transcript*, 19 March 2003.
10. Sen. John McCain, 'Don't Appease Pyongyang', *The Weekly Standard*, 20 January 2003.
11. As stated by Colin Powell in an interview with NBC on 29 December 2003: 'What are they going to do with another two or three nuclear weapons? If they have a few more, they have a few more'.
12. See note 7.