US Policy Toward Rogue States: Comparing the Bush Administration’s Policy Toward Iraq and North Korea

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The George W. Bush administration resorted to war to respond to the threat of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, whereas it virtually ruled out the use of force to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. By utilizing various strands of realist international relations theories, we trace motivations behind the administration’s divergent foreign-policy choices toward rogue states. That the United States rushed to war against Iraq while procrastinating on North Korea presents a puzzle to conventional realism, which postulates that great powers observe changes in relative capabilities and respond accordingly. We argue that policy differences should be embedded in discussion of the administration’s foreign-policy grand strategy, which sought to sustain the hegemonic status of the United States in the world. Iraq and North Korea had different implications for Bush’s grand strategy, thereby calling for different approaches. By tracing the strategic design of the Bush administration, we attempt to provide a more complete account of policy differences toward rogue states, as well as indicate the significant changes in US policy during the George W. Bush administration and since. Keywords: US foreign policy, George W. Bush administration, North Korea, Iraq, rogue states.

In his State of the Union address of January 2002 George W. Bush claimed that North Korea, Iraq, and Iran were intent on acquiring weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). In the hands of this “axis of evil,” WMDs would pose a grave security threat to the United States. Of these three states, North Korea had the most advanced WMD programs and had come closest to developing the capability to strike the United States and its allies with nuclear weapons. Iranian development of nuclear power facilities and long-range missiles was also a growing concern to the United States, but North Korea surpassed Iran in WMD capabilities. Consequently, some scholars and foreign-policy
practitioners contended that the North Korean nuclear issue should take priority over Iraq’s WMD programs (Dunn 2003, 279).

Toward the end of 2002, however, the Bush administration prepared to attack Iraq in earnest, whereas it virtually foreswore the use of force against North Korea. The basic foreign-policy posture of the United States toward North Korea remained intact even after Pyongyang admitted to a secret nuclear program in direct violation of the 1994 Agreed Framework, which served as a basis for future negotiations. The United States was reluctant to settle the nuclear issue with North Korea through military means, even when the Six Party Talks failed to produce satisfactory results.

Why did the Bush administration decide to attack Iraq while exercising restraint toward North Korea? That the United States rushed to war against Iraq while behaving with restraint and patience toward North Korea during the Bush administration presents something of a puzzle. It also somewhat contradicts the conventional wisdom of realist theories of international relations: that states rationally focus on the distribution of material capabilities and act accordingly. Since North Korea’s WMD capabilities surpassed those of Iran and Iraq, it would have been more rational for the Bush administration to apply sterner measures toward North Korea and to focus its military power on disarming Pyongyang first.

By utilizing various strands of realist theories, this article assesses the motivations behind the administration’s divergent foreign-policy choices toward rogue states. We conduct a comparative analysis of US policies toward North Korea and Iraq, the two states that attracted the most attention during the Bush era, in the context of the administration’s grand strategy. In so doing, the article strives for a better theoretical framework than is currently available, one that can account for markedly different approaches to two members of the “axis of evil.”

This article proceeds as follows. The next section briefly notes that although WMDs in the hands of “rogue states” were a pressing security issue following the Cold War, US policy toward Iraq and North Korea differed markedly after September 11, 2001. We next review the realist paradigm, and illustrate how its conventional variety explains US policy. We argue that a more complete account of Bush’s policy choices should draw on a broader discussion of the Bush administration’s foreign-policy grand strategy. The final sections of the