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Democratic People's Republic of Korea: Iraq and North Korea: end the double standard

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OPINION - Edward A. Olsen

There's a double standard in US policy toward Iraq and North Korea. Both the North Korean and Iraqi regimes are notorious dictatorships whose pursuit - and possible possession - of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) pose clear regional threats and endanger US interests. Despite these similarities, Americans seem prepared to use military force to coerce cooperation from Iraq, but shy away from it in North Korea. There should be greater consistency in policy.

Few disagree that the Saddam Hussein regime is politically oppressive, endangers its neighbors' stability, and poses risks to world peace via its quest for nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons as well as the missile technology to deliver them. Ending these dangers has been a cornerstone of both the Bush and Clinton administrations. There is today considerable popular American enthusiasm for decisive military action against Saddam. Yet US policy toward the Kim Jong-il regime in North Korea is not nearly as assertive even though North Korea - if anything - is worse than Iraq.

North Korea's terrorist record is abominable. It is armed to the teeth despite demonstrable needs to feed starving sectors of its population. Pyongyang's quest for WMD is as serious as Baghdad's. Moreover, history and Pyongyang's policy pronouncements suggest that North Korea might well use them given the opportunity.

If the US is willing to attack Iraq to halt the threat it poses, in principle it also should be willing to attack North Korea for the same reason. Far from attacking North Korea, American policy focuses on economic and strategic incentives to alter North Korean policy.

These efforts are in harmony with South Korea's "Sunshine Policy" toward North Korea, designed to reduce bilateral tensions. So far these progressive policies have yielded little, causing some American and South Korean critics to condemn them as "appeasement." In short, the US pursues one set of benign diplomatic policies toward North Korea and another set of assertive military policies toward Iraq, even though the problems they pose are extraordinarily similar.

Perhaps US policy toward the generic issue of rogue states pursuing WMD and advanced missiles would be better served by greater consistency. If US policy toward North Korea is a legitimate approach, let's also apply it to Iraq. Perhaps Iraq can be persuaded to change or can be bought off through economic incentives. Since Iraq is arguably less dangerous than North Korea, this option could be appropriate.

On the other hand, if the issues at stake in Iraq warrant military action and that action succeeds, then it may be time to take similar military action against North Korea. Clearly there are conservative elements in South Korea that would support decisive action to end the North Korean threat. Now that Japan knows it is within range of North Korean missiles - and with Tokyo accepting greater responsibility for regional security after the 1996 Clinton-Hashimoto summit - Americans should expect Japanese support for decisive military action against North Korea. Both have reason to participate in a US-led coalition attack on North Korea designed to eliminate its ability to threaten the region.

Either policy path is plausible. But it is time to end the double standard that exists in US policy toward the Middle East and Northeast Asia. It's unlikely that rapid success with North Korea will be sufficient to reshape American policy toward Iraq. But, if a major attack on Iraq proves necessary and effective, pressures are likely to increase to apply the Iraqi model to North Korea.

Against that background, Americans and our allies in South Korea and Japan should get ready for the major challenge of military intervention in North Korea. And, for its part, North Korea would be prudent to watch the Iraqi situation and learn some lessons. If Pyongyang wants to deter application of an Iraqi model to North Korea, it should take preemptive steps to permit American and South Korean diplomacy to bear fruit.

Edward A. Olsen is a professor of national security affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, Calif. He wrote 'US Policy and the Two Koreas' (Westview Press, 1988). The views expressed here are his own.