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Dealing With Dictators

By Wendy R. Sherman

WASHINGTON— Saddam Hussein and Kim Jong Il have something in common: not the so-called axis of evil, but the fact that neither can take yes for an answer. Faced with an offer of United Nations inspectors rather than probable extinction, Saddam Hussein, even after the urging of Arab states, cannot say yes. And on the threshold of re-engagement with the United States, Kim Jong Il decided to have a gun battle with South Korea, ensuring that North Korea's progress with the outside world would pause if not halt.

Both of these men clearly fear a loss of control, an undermining of their power by foreigners or by popular revolt. We have long known that survival is Mr. Kim's main objective. His forays into the civilized world are meant to garner enough hard currency and official acceptance to remain in power. Mr. Hussein, too, is obsessed with power and somehow thinks that he will prevail as the tyrannical arbiter of Middle East history.

So what is the Bush administration to do? Had it engaged with these complex policies and personalities -- rather than following its "any foreign policy but Clinton's" approach -- would such engagement have made a difference? What's to be done with leaders who threaten international security while trampling the rights of their own people?

Unfortunately, "off with their heads" is not a sufficient foreign policy. The United States has clear and compelling security interests in the Middle East and in northeast Asia, from halting terrorism and reducing human suffering to protecting democratic allies and ending the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Such an agenda calls for a comprehensive approach that relies on a wider range of foreign policy tools than cruise missiles.

On Iraq, the Bush administration did ultimately gain Security Council approval of the "smart sanctions" policy initiated by the last administration. However, until very recently the administration had not engaged all interested parties in a joint effort to deal more broadly with Iraq. And as the administration learned during Vice President Dick Cheney's trip to the Persian Gulf in March, Arab states see Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as tightly linked. Most important, the administration has not yet made the case for invasion of Iraq by answering the key questions of why, how and what kind of regime comes after that of Saddam Hussein.

Americans and the rest of the world need to know what the likely consequences are of a unilateral military assault on Iraq. But the administration has not articulated its plans, and so Iraqis and citizens of other Arab states often perceive America to be imposing its will rather than promoting its vision.

By failing to engage with others, the administration has created unnecessary anxiety in Europe as well as in the nations nearer Iraq. It has potentially increased Jordan's vulnerability as planners talk of staging an American invasion from within its borders. And it has left a vacuum of hopelessness throughout the region.

Since we are where we are, the administration must begin a clear and purposeful dialogue with our partners -- and encourage debate within our country. Senators are considering hearings and even floor debate on Iraq; both are long overdue. At the same time, the United Nations and Arab states must continue to urge Saddam Hussein to let in the inspectors, to say yes in a meaningful way.

In North Korea, the Clinton administration understood that the combination of weapons of mass destruction and an authoritarian and reclusive regime was very dangerous. Working with South Korea and Japan, the last administration carefully engaged Pyongyang to work toward elimination of the threat to regional and American security.

The Bush administration stepped back this policy toward North Korea. The current administration is replete with advisers who never liked the 1994 Agreed Framework that halted North Korea's fissile material production (a process necessary for producing nuclear weapons) in return for a joint effort with South Korea and Japan to build light water reactors in the North. The Bush administration decided instead to try to put North Korea policy on hold until after this fall's Congressional elections and South Korea's presidential election in December. The North, always ready to be its own worst enemy, has now ensured with its attack on South Korean gunboats that re-engagement will now not occur.

Kim Jong Il could change the equation by visiting Seoul, by agreeing to and acting on a permanent site for reunification of separated families, or by truly going to work on reconnecting the railroad between North and South. But he, too, is unlikely to act until next year.

For now, the United States should create an opportunity to renew contacts with North Korea. We can do that by urging China and Russia to counsel the North to stop precipitous acts -- and by staying close to South Korea, understanding that a change in leadership in South Korea will not mean a wholesale change in its engagement policy. We must honor the Agreed Framework commitments, as must North Korea. Finally, we must continue food aid to North Korea to ensure that pregnant women, children and seniors don't starve while their leader indulges his appetite for international isolation.

Ultimately, there are no simple solutions. No single order or military strike, no one act of isolation or disregard, will make the problem go away or send the despised dictator packing. Even successful military action, like sending the Taliban underground in Afghanistan, still leaves us needing to win the peace, something the Bush administration is discovering is a difficult proposition. Victory in foreign affairs requires a well articulated policy and use of every available tool at our disposal.

Photo (Paul Sahre)