Bush Labels North Korea, Iran, Iraq an 'Axis of Evil'

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Apparently attempting to increase international pressure on “rogue states” that could use weapons of mass destruction (WMD) or provide them to terrorists, President George W. Bush characterized North Korea, Iran, and Iraq as “an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world,” in his January 29 State of the Union address.

Although he provided no new information about the activities of these countries, Bush stated that his administration would act to prevent “regimes that sponsor terror” from threatening the United States and its allies with WMD. Bush told the nation that North Korea, Iran, and Iraq “pose a grave and growing danger” and could provide WMD and missiles “to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred.”

Bush did not give specifics on what plan of action might be in store or when the United States might act, but he noted that he “will not wait on events while dangers gather,” warning that his administration “will not permit the world’s most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world’s most destructive weapons.”

During a January 31 speech to the Conservative Political Action Committee, national security adviser Condoleezza Rice elaborated on the threat posed by the named rogue states, saying Bush’s speech put state sponsors of terrorism “on notice” and enunciated the “growing danger” posed by North Korea, Iran, and Iraq.

She cited North Korea as “the world’s number-one merchant for ballistic missiles, open for business with anyone, no matter how malign the buyer’s intentions,” called Iraq “determined to acquire” WMD, and said Iran’s “direct support of regional and global terrorism” and “aggressive efforts” to develop WMD “belie any good intentions it displayed” after September 11.

Analysts have voiced concern that Bush’s speech was setting the stage for military actions against one or all of these states in the next iteration of the administration’s war on terrorism. Senior administration officials have acknowledged that a full range of options are being developed for Iraq, but while visiting Seoul February 20 Bush said he had “no intention of invading North Korea.” At a February 12 hearing before the Senate Budget Committee, Secretary of State Colin Powell also said that there is no plan to begin a conflict with Iran. Rather, the administration is likely to try to apply pressure on both Russia and China to end all nuclear and missile cooperation with Tehran. (See U.S. Presses Russia on Nuclear, Missile Cooperation With Iran.)

Unsurprisingly, Pyongyang, Tehran, and Baghdad all dismissed Bush’s accusations. North Korea’s state-run television called Bush a “nuclear maniac” and characterized his remarks as “reckless” and “tantamount to a declaration of war.” In a statement carried by Iran’s official Islamic Republic News Agency, Iranian President Mohammad Khatami said Bush’s rhetoric was “intervening, warmongering, [and] insulting.” Iraqi Vice President Taha Yassin Ramadan rejected Bush’s charges as well, calling them “stupid” and “inappropriate.”

Some of Washington’s closest allies were also highly critical of Bush’s rhetoric. British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw speculated that Bush’s remarks were intended to appease domestic political constituencies rather than warn of a credible threat. In Washington on February 1, Straw reasoned
that the State of the Union address “was best understood by the fact that there are midterm congressional elections in November.” In a February 6 interview on Inter Radio, French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine called Bush’s terrorism-based approach to foreign affairs “simplistic” and said that the Bush administration dealt with “international issues in a unilateral manner.”

Perhaps the strongest criticism came from Chris Patten, the European Union’s foreign policy chief. In an interview published in the February 9 Guardian, Patten said that Bush’s address was “more rhetoric than substance.” He also called the speech “unhelpful” and said that it is “hard to believe” that Bush’s axis of evil comment was a “well thought-through policy.”

Powell rejected characterizations like those of Vedrine in testimony before the House International Relations Committee on February 6, stating, “The suggestion that…the United States is acting unilaterally and not consulting with our European partners…simply couldn’t be further from the truth.” However, Powell added, “When it is a matter of principle, and when the multilateral community does not agree with us, we do not shrink from doing that which we think is right, which is in our interests, even if some of our friends disagree with us.”