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By Jim Lobe

Encouraging Japan to build nuclear weapons, shipping food aid via submarines, and running secret sabotage operations inside North Korea's borders are among a raft of policy prescriptions pushed by prominent U.S. neo-conservatives in the wake of Pyongyang's nuclear test.

Writing in publications from National Review Online (NRO) to the New York Times, neo-conservatives claim, contrary to the lessons drawn by "realist" and other critics of the George W. Bush administration, that Monday's test vindicates their long-held view that negotiations with "rogue" states like North Korea are useless and that "regime change" -- by military means, if necessary -- is the only answer.

"With our intelligence on North Korea so uneven, the doctrine of pre-emption must return to the fore," wrote Dan Blumenthal, an Asia specialist at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) who worked for Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld during Bush's first term, in the NRO Tuesday. "Any talk of renewed six-party talks [involving China, Japan, Russia, the U.S. and the two Koreas] must be resisted."

The North Korean test "has stripped any plausibility to arguments that engaging dictators works," according to Michael Rubin, a Middle East specialist at AEI, who added that the Bush administration now faces a "watershed" in its relations with other states that have defied Washington in recent years.

"This crisis is not just about North Korea, but about Iran, Syria, Venezuela, and Cuba as well," according to Rubin. "Bush now has two choices: to respond forcefully and show that defiance has consequence, or affirm that defiance pays and that international will is illusory."

"...(He) must now choose whether his legacy will be one of inaction or leadership, Chamberlain or Churchill," he added in a reference to the pre-World War II debate between the "appeasement" of British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and the war policy of his successor, Winston Churchill.

The neo-conservatives, whose influence on the Bush administration has generally been on the wane since late 2003, when it became clear that the Iraq war that they had done so much to champion was going badly, nonetheless retain some clout, particularly through the offices of Vice President Dick Cheney and Pentagon chief Rumsfeld.

They are opposed by the "realists" who are concentrated in the State Department and also include former secretary of state Colin Powell; his chief deputy, Richard Armacost; and a number of top national security officials in the administration of former President George H.W. Bush, such as former national security adviser Brent Scowcroft, and secretary of state James Baker, who just last weekend publicly called for Washington to directly engage its "enemies", including North Korea, Syria and Iran.

That stance is anathema to the neo-conservatives and their right-wing allies, such as Cheney, who, at one national security council meeting on North Korea several years ago, was reported to have said, "We don't negotiate with evil; we defeat it."

The neo-conservatives' main area of concern has historically been the Middle East -- indeed, their central focus in recent months has been publicising the threats to the U.S. and Israel allegedly posed by Iran and Hezbollah and opposing any realist appeals to engage Tehran and Damascus in direct talks. But they have also been warning for some time against "the appeasement" of North Korea and its chief source of material aid and support, China.

In their view, Beijing has always had the power to force Pyongyang to give up its nuclear arms programmes, and the fact that it has not done so demonstrates that China sees itself as a "strategic rival" of Washington, a phrase much favoured by administration hawks during Bush's first year in office.

Indeed, in the most prominent neo-conservative reaction to the North Korean test to date, former Bush speechwriter David Frum called in a column published by the New York Times for the administration to take a series of measures designed to "punish China" for its failure to bring Pyongyang to heel.

Among them, Frum, who is also based at AEI and is sometimes credited with inventing the phrase "axis of evil", in which North Korea, Iran, and Iraq were lumped together, for Bush's 2002 State of the Union address, urged the administration to cut off all humanitarian aid to North Korea, pressure South Korea to do the same, and thus force China to "shoulder the cost of helping to avert" North Korea's economic collapse.

Frum, who is also based at AEI, urged that Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and Singapore to be invited to join NATO and that Taiwan, which China regards as a renegade province, to send observers to NATO meetings.

Frum, who in 2003 co-authored "An End to Evil" with former Defence Policy Board chairman, also suggested that Washington "encourage Japan to renounce the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and create its own nuclear deterrent."

"A nuclear Japan is the thing China and North Korea dread most (after, perhaps, a nuclear South Korea or Taiwan)," he asserted.

"Not only would the nuclearization of Japan be a punishment of China and North Korea," he wrote, "but it would also go far to meet our goal of dissuading Iran (from trying to obtain a nuclear weapons)... The analogue for Iran, of course, would be the threat of American aid to improve Israel's capacity to hit targets with nuclear weapons," according to Frum.

Other neo-conservatives echoed Blumenthal's position that the Six-Party Talks should be abandoned and called for the administration to resist any further appeals for bilateral talks between Washington and Pyongyang -- repeatedly made by China, South Korea, and Russia, as well as by realists here, over the past several years.

"There will be renewed calls for bilateral talks between Washington and Pyongyang. That would be a mistake." according to the lead editorial in the neo-conservative Wall Street Journal, which also urged the U.S. to "make clear that a military response is not off the table."

Other commentators called for strong efforts to achieve regime change. James Robbins, senior fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council, called for covert action, including "sabotage, espionage, information operations, subversion, deception -- the works. A highly paranoid totalitarian regime like Kim (Jong Il's) will be highly susceptible to these methods," he predicted.

At the same time, former House Speaker and DPB member Newt Gingrich, who is also based at AEI, said he favoured continuing shipments of U.S. food aid but through a covert delivery system "consciously designed to undermine the dictatorship".

"Food might be parachuted into the country, delivered from submarines and small boats by clandestine services, shipped in from China and Russia through anti-regime middlemen and delivered in every way possible to divert energy and authority away from the government and toward an alternative organising system of individuals dedicated to a better more prosperous life," he wrote.

Like his fellow-neo-conservatives, Frank Gaffney, the president of the Centre for Security Policy, called for accelerated development and deployment of Washington's embryonic but extraordinarily costly missile defence system, including a ship-launched system that can shoot down ballistic missiles of various ranges "whether launched from places like North Korea or from tramp steamers off our coasts."

He also urged Washington to resume periodic underground nuclear tests of its own, ending a moratorium on such testing announced by former President George H.W. Bush in 1992.

*Jim Lobe wrote this article for Inter-Press Service. Posted October 12, 2006. Jim Lobe, a leading specialist on neoconservatism, is a Washington-based journalist who writes for Inter-Press and other outlets. Posted at Japan Focus on October 17, 2006.*