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by Jim Lobe

WASHINGTON - The coalition of foreign-policy hawks that promoted the 2003 invasion of Iraq is pressing US President George W Bush to adopt a more coercive policy toward North Korea, despite strong opposition from China and South Korea.

By most accounts, North Korea ranked high in bilateral talks between Bush and Northeast Asian leaders, including Chinese President Hu Jintao, at the summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in Santiago, Chile, this past weekend, although the final communique did not address the issue.

Bush reportedly tried to make clear that his patience with Pyongyang and its alleged efforts to stall the ongoing "six-party talks" was fast running out and that Washington will soon push for stronger measures against North Korea in the absence of progress toward an agreement under which Pyongyang would dismantle its alleged nuclear-arms program.

Bush claimed on Sunday that his interlocutors, who include the leaders of the four other parties to the talks - Russia, China,

Japan and South Korea - agreed with him, but Hu and South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun have not backed down publicly from their strong opposition to a harder line toward Pyongyang.

Indeed, just before the weekend summit, Roh told an audience in Los Angeles that a hardline policy over North Korea's nuclear weapons would have "grave repercussions", adding, "There is no alternative left in dealing with this issue except dialogue." The South Korean leader also denounced the idea of an economic embargo against Pyongyang.

That the hawks back in Washington are indeed mobilizing became clear on Monday when William Kristol, an influential neo-conservative who also chairs the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), faxed a statement titled "Toward Regime Change in North Korea" to reporters and various "opinion leaders" in the capital. PNAC issues statements relatively infrequently, so its formal statements are carefully noted. PNAC boasts Vice President Dick Cheney, Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and Cheney's powerful chief of staff, I Lewis Libby, among a dozen other senior Bush national security officials, as signers of its 1997 charter.

"It's clear that they see the transition [between the Bush administration's two terms] and before any new round of the six-party talks, as the time to try to set policy direction," one veteran analyst told Inter Press Service on Monday.

Kristol's statement referred in particular to two recent articles, including one published last week by Nicholas Eberstadt, a Korea specialist at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), that appeared in the neo-conservative *The Weekly Standard*, which is edited by Kristol.

The article, "Tear Down This Tyranny", called for the implementation of a six-point strategy aimed at ousting North Korean Chairman Kim Jong-il, in part by "working around the pro-appeasement crowd in the South Korean government", which apparently includes President Roh himself.

The second article, published on Sunday in *The New York Times*, detailed a number of recent indications cited by right-wing officials and the press in Japan - including high-level defections and the reported circulation of anti-government pamphlets - that Kim's hold on power may be slipping.

The article noted in particular a recent statement by Shinzo Abe, secretary general of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), that "regime change" was a distinct possibility and that "we need to start simulations of what we should do at that time".

"Recent reports suggest the presence of emerging cracks in the Stalinist power structure of North Korea, and even the emergence of serious dissident activity there," wrote Kristol. "This should remind us that one of President Bush's top priorities in his second term will have to be dealing with this wretch[ed] regime," he went on, citing Eberstadt's strategy as "useful guidance for an improved North Korean policy".

Eberstadt's article, which criticized Korea policy in Bush's first term for being both "reactive" and "paralyzed by infighting", proceeds from the explicit assumption that efforts to persuade North Korea to give up its nuclear program - which US intelligence believes may already include as many as eight nuclear weapons - are almost certainly futile.

"We are exceedingly unlikely to talk - or to bribe - the current North Korean government out of its nuclear quest," wrote Eberstadt in an implicit rejection of the basic goal of the six-party talks. Moreover, he wrote, the nuclear crisis and the North Korean government are essentially one and the same: "Unless, and until, we have a better class of dictator running North Korea, we will be faced with an ongoing and indeed growing North Korean crisis."

To achieve the desired "regime change", Eberstadt called first for a purge of US State Department officials who had argued for engaging Pyongyang during Bush's first term. Washington, according to

Eberstadt, should also increase "China's 'ownership' of the North Korean problem" by making clear to Beijing that it "will bear high costs if the current denuclearization diplomacy failed".

At the same time, US officials must recognize that South Korea has, under Kim and the "implacably anti-American and reflexively pro-appeasement" core of his government, become a "runaway ally" - "a country bordering a state committed to its destruction, and yet governed increasingly in accordance with graduate-school 'peace studies' desiderata".

"Instead of appeasing South Korea's appeasers (as our policy to date has attempted to do, albeit clumsily)," wrote Eberstadt, "America should be speaking over their heads directly to the Korean people, building and nurturing the coalitions in South Korean domestic politics that will ultimately bring a prodigal ally back into the fold."

Washington should also ready "the non-diplomatic instruments for North Korean threat reduction," he wrote, arguing that preparing for the deliberate use of such options - presumably an economic embargo or even military strikes - "will actually increase the probability of a diplomatic success".

Finally, echoing Shinzo Abe, of Japan's LDP, Eberstadt called for planning for a "post-Communist Korean Peninsula" with other interested parties, "to maximize the opportunities and minimize the risks in that delicate and potentially dangerous process". Eberstadt's strategy, according to a number of analysts, largely echoes the views of John Bolton, under secretary of state for arms control and international security, a former American Enterprise Institute vice president who is openly campaigning to become deputy secretary of state under Condoleezza Rice.

Bolton, perhaps the administration's most extreme hardliner, has strong support in Cheney's office and other right-wing strongholds, including The Weekly Standard and on the editorial page of The Wall Street Journal.

On Saturday, Tokyo's right-wing Governor Shintaro Ishihara, who claims to be on friendly terms with Bolton, told Fuji Television that Bolton wants to impose economic sanctions against North Korea, which in the US official's view, would lead to Kim's ouster "within one year".

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