

A serial invader is always looking for the next target. The new U.S. rationale for invasion — the doctrine of “preventive war” that flies in the face of international law — justifies invasion anywhere, anytime. With the war launched in Iraq, the Bush administration appears to be laying the groundwork for its next move: an attack on North Korea.

On the surface, of course, war doesn't seem imminent. The United States and North Korea may be at loggerheads over the latter's nuclear weapons program, but the final red line — the actual reprocessing of plutonium at the antiquated facility at Yongbyon — has yet to be crossed.

North Korea has recently test-fired a couple of short-range missiles, challenged a U.S. surveillance plane, and threatened all sorts of horrors if it is attacked. Still, it is eager for direct negotiations and has several times proposed a suspension of its nuclear program in fair exchange with the United States.

As with Iraq, the Bush administration has pursued

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cloddish diplomacy in East Asia. Unilateralist in its dealings with so many countries, the Bush administration insists on negotiating with North Korea in a multilateral forum. Despite the urgings of militant pundits

to launch a surgical strike, however, the Bush administration continues to claim that it supports a diplomatic solution, that the current crisis isn't even a crisis and that the new policies of preventive war don't yet apply to Pyongyang.

Don't be fooled by these calming words. The Bush crowd has made its personal antipathy for Kim Jong Il, and its immediate desire for regime change in Pyongyang very clear. Just as the administration went to great lengths to deny the U.S. role in building up Saddam Hussein, it has rewritten history by systematically portraying North Korea as the only party to renege on the 1994 agreement, even though the United States failed to take promised steps toward diplomatic recognition of Pyongyang.

As with Iraq, U.S. militarists have inflated the North Korean threat, charging that North Korean missiles can reach the United States (they can't), that North Korean nuclear weapons are operational (even if they exist, they are not likely to be deliverable) and

that the North Korean military is a fearsome force (it is large but significantly outclassed by the combined South Korean and American military).

Meanwhile the heavy machinery is in place. Twenty-four long-range U.S. bombers are now in Guam. As part of a recent computer-based command training drill, the U.S. aircraft carrier *Carl Vinson*, six F-117 Nighthawk stealth fighters and an Aegis warship were recently in South Korea for the first time in a decade.

The U.S. army has even made noises about moving U.S. troops in South Korea further from the Demilitarized Zone so that they wouldn't be held hostage by a U.S. military strike. The most frightening development is that the Pentagon is playing with the idea that if it acts soon, it can take out North Korea's nuclear reactor without contaminating the region with radiation.

According to such a scenario, a second, more comprehensive and devastating nuclear strike would then deter North Korea from retaliating with missile attacks on Seoul or Tokyo.

South Koreans are terrified at the prospect of such a military strike. They would suffer the most from U.S. folly and have already witnessed the disruption of their own process of engaging the North. Together with other countries in the region, South Korea is urging the United States to sit down and talk with North Korea.

North Korea has no plans to attack anybody, but a

similar lack of the usual *casus belli* did not prevent the United States from invading Iraq. Even Iraqi acceptance of United Nations inspectors and the destruction of al Samoud 2 missiles did not prevent war.

The lesson for Pyongyang: Only the possession of nuclear weapons seems to deter the United States. So expect Pyongyang to continue doing precisely what the United States wants to forestall.

In an attempt to urge a diplomatic settlement in Iraq, many Democrats tried to point out that the Bush administration was ignoring a more critical situation in North Korea. “North Korea presents a far more imminent threat than Iraq to the security of the United States,” Democrat Robert Byrd told the Senate at the beginning of March.

Soon the Bush administration may well clear up the glaring inconsistency in its foreign policy by applying its Iraq logic to East Asia, with even more devastating consequences.

It's not too late, though, for a policy change in Washington. An ounce of preventive diplomacy — immediate, direct negotiations with North Korea — can cure what may become a pathological addiction to preventive war.

► John Feffer is editor of the forthcoming book “Power Trip: Unilateralism and Global Strategy After September 11.” He'll be speaking at Union College on Monday, and Skidmore College on Tuesday.