

The Crisis with North Korea: Implications for the Middle East

by [Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](/experts/michael-eisenstadt)

Jul 7, 1994

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](/experts/michael-eisenstadt)

Michael Eisenstadt is the Kahn Fellow and director of The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program.



Brief Analysis

With the opening of new negotiations between the United States and North Korea, it is important to underscore one of the major concerns driving the current crisis: fear that a nuclear North Korea would export nuclear arms and technology to rogue states in the Middle East in order to earn hard currency. This could bring about a fundamental shift in the balance of power in the region virtually overnight that could threaten vital U.S. interests there, prompt a nuclear arms race, and lead to greater regional instability.

North Korea's Nuclear Program

North Korea's main known nuclear research complex is located at Yongbyon and consists of several elements: an 8 MW research reactor used mainly for civilian purposes that commenced operation in 1967; the 25 MW research reactor that is at the center of the current controversy and that started operation in 1986; a 200 MW reactor currently under construction which is expected to be completed in 1995, and; a nuclear fuel reprocessing plant. The 25 MW reactor has been refueled twice. In 1989 enough spent fuel to yield plutonium for one or two bombs was removed from the reactor and may already have been used for this purpose. In addition, earlier this year enough spent fuel to yield plutonium for four or five more bombs was removed. The fuel (encased in alloy rods) is now in a cooling pond and will be ready for reprocessing within two months; the extracted plutonium could conceivably be in a weapon by year's end. In addition, the 200 MW reactor, when completed in 1995, will produce enough plutonium for ten to twelve bombs per year. A second separation facility to accommodate this increased production is currently under construction.

North Korea has already demonstrated that a latent nuclear capability can be a powerful bargaining tool vis-à-vis the U.S.; this lesson surely has not been missed by countries with nuclear ambitions such as Iran, Libya, and Iraq. Failure to roll back the North Korean nuclear program will, moreover, have other undesirable consequences. First, it will strike another blow to the credibility of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)--already sullied in Iraq--as a tool for stemming nuclear proliferation. Second, if North Korea is permitted to get away with its violations of the NPT, other NPT member states might be tempted to follow suit. Third, the transfer of North Korean nuclear weapons to the Middle East could undermine key U.S. interests in the region (e.g. the peace process) and make it difficult, if

not impossible, to achieve meaningful arms control in the future.

A Rogue's Gallery: Selling to Iran, Libya... and Iraq?

Speculation that North Korea intends to produce nuclear weapons for export has been fueled by two facts: North Korea has in the past transferred chemical warhead technology to Syria and perhaps Iran, and its most advanced missiles to these two countries as well as Libya; further, the 200 MW nuclear reactor now under construction at Yongbyon will have a plutonium production capacity that would seem to exceed any credible North Korean military requirement.

North Korea is, however, not likely to export nuclear weapons to the Middle East in the immediate future, probably focusing instead on building its own nuclear arsenal before it produces for export. While a few bombs could transform the military equation in the Korean Peninsula, their export would probably not generate sufficient funds to dramatically alter North Korea's economic circumstances. However, North Korea would not hesitate to export nuclear weapons technology as soon as it is in a position to do so.

Although no one knows how many nuclear weapons North Korea considers "sufficient," it probably needs a small arsenal (more than the 5-7 it may have by year's end) to meet its own military requirements and to account for the possibility that some might fail. It might take a year or more for North Korea to accomplish this, although this time-frame could be shortened if sanctions were to be imposed on North Korea, thereby increasing its need for hard currency.

The most likely customers for a North Korean bomb are Iran and Libya. Iran is believed to have nuclear ambitions and is North Korea's largest customer in the region--it has bought everything from small arms to SCUD-C missiles, and it reportedly helped fund North Korea's NoDong-1 missile. Libya is also known to have nuclear ambitions, has bought arms from North Korea, and is likewise reportedly interested in the NoDong-1. Although Syria is a major customer of North Korea (it has bought SCUD-Cs and received assistance in developing chemical warheads) and has an ambitious strategic weapons program, its nuclear intentions remain ambiguous. Iraq, which does not have a military supply relationship with North Korea but retains its nuclear ambitions, will probably try to exploit its contacts in the former Soviet Union to acquire fissile material or nuclear weapons. It is, however, unlikely to turn down an offer to purchase fissile material or bombs from North Korea if given the opportunity.

Iran, Libya, and Iraq have all had their nuclear ambitions thwarted by war, supplier controls, financial problems, or a lack of qualified personnel. The purchase of nuclear weapons may thus be the only way for any of these to achieve nuclear status in the foreseeable future. For this reason, North Korea may be the achilles's heel of U.S. counter-proliferation efforts. And because each of these states are politically isolated and subject to economic sanctions of one kind or another, they may all see the bomb as a way to end their isolation and rapidly overturn an unfavorable status quo, as well as a short-cut to regional power status.

Implications of a Nuclear Break-Out in the Middle East

A sudden nuclear break-out by Iran, Libya, or Iraq would undermine key U.S. interests in the Middle East. Beleaguered and isolated, the sudden acquisition of a nuclear capability might encourage rash behavior by sometimes impetuous leaders such as Libya's Qaddafi or Iraq's Hussein, or tempt these countries to use their nuclear capabilities as a lever to wrest political concessions from the international community or lift restrictive economic sanctions (although it is not clear how such a gambit might be carried out).

The acquisition of nuclear arms by Iran, Libya, or Iraq would produce, almost overnight, a major shift in the regional balance of power. In the past, such rapid changes have often led to crises or war: in 1955, the Czech arms deal with Egypt helped bring about the Suez Crisis of 1956; the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the subsequent collapse of Iran's army led to the Iraqi invasion in 1980, and Iraq's growing sense of strength following its victory over Iran in

1988 led to the invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Moreover, the rapid acquisition of nuclear capabilities by these countries prior to the development of an appropriate doctrine for their use, a clear understanding of their political and military utility (and limitations), and the creation of adequate command and control arrangements, is likely to have a destabilizing impact on the region.

Finally, the acquisition of nuclear arms by Iran, Libya, or Iraq might also spur countries which have in the past eschewed the bomb (e.g. Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Syria) to seek a protective U.S. nuclear umbrella or, alternatively, to pursue their own nuclear options, prompting a nuclear arms race in the region. The progressive spread of nuclear capabilities in the region is likely to complicate the problem of deterrence, posing new challenges to regional stability.

For these reasons, it is critical that North Korea not be allowed to retain its ability to produce nuclear weapons. While the risk of confronting North Korea over this issue is great, the potential cost of inaction could be even greater--and may not be limited to East Asia.

Michael Eisenstadt is senior military fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

Policy #122

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

[\(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven\)](#)

TOPICS

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](#)