

Trump's North Korea Talks Need to Address Syrian and Iranian Proliferation

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Brief Analysis

When Pyongyang was able to cooperate freely with Middle Eastern regimes in the past, it built a clandestine nuclear reactor in Syria, so Washington cannot afford to turn a blind eye to such activity again.

As President Trump prepares for direct negotiations with North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un in the coming months, one of the administration's goals for this historic dialogue should be to permanently halt Pyongyang's arms sales to the Middle East. Since the 1990s, successive U.S. administrations have held exhaustive talks with the regime aimed at ending its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs, with very limited success. But Washington has never placed a high priority on shutting down North Korea's foreign proliferation networks, according to current and former U.S. officials. The result is that Pyongyang continues to export dangerous military technologies to countries such as Iran, Syria, and Egypt, despite facing draconian international sanctions.

SYRIAN PROLIFERATION, THEN AND NOW

Evidence of North Korea's clandestine role in building a plutonium-producing reactor in Syria emerged in 2007, just as the Bush administration was negotiating a disarmament deal with Pyongyang. At the time, construction of the reactor at al-Kibar was viewed as one of the worst cases of nuclear proliferation in history. Yet Washington nevertheless refrained from punishing North Korea severely in the hope of securing a diplomatic victory on the disarmament issue, according to former U.S. officials involved in the talks; the administration never demanded a full accounting of Pyongyang's activities in Syria either. That round of negotiations collapsed, however, and North Korea's nuclear arsenal grew dramatically in the ensuing years.

Although Israeli jets ultimately destroyed Syria's reactor in September 2007, killing a number of North Koreans working at the site, the United States cannot afford to turn a blind eye to the regional proliferation threat in the next

round of talks. "Syria set a terrible precedent for the cause of nonproliferation," said Elliott Abrams, who served as a senior National Security Council official in the Bush administration. "North Korea basically got away scot-free with the sale."

Experts are also concerned that Pyongyang may have helped Syria develop other nuclear assets. On March 21, the Washington-based Institute for Science and International Security released a report calling for UN inspectors to visit a site near the western Syrian town of al-Qusayr, noting that the Assad regime may have built a uranium-enrichment facility there with Pyongyang's assistance.

Whatever the case, both Washington and South Korea say they will retain sanctions on the North during the next talks, despite Kim Jong-un's reported pledge to freeze all ballistic missile tests. "At this point, we have offered them nothing," South Korean foreign minister Kang Kyung-wha told *Face the Nation* on March 18. "There will be no reward for dialogue."

This approach seems prudent given that Pyongyang's willingness to export sensitive technologies to Syria has once again been laid bare. In a confidential report, UN inspectors describe how North Korean trade companies smuggled tons of industrial equipment into Syria in recent years for what appeared to be the construction of a new chemical weapons production facility. The shipments, which were tracked by several UN member states, included acid-resistant tiles, stainless steel pipes, and other materials associated with such facilities. The UN also identified forty previously undisclosed North Korean shipments to Syria's Scientific Studies and Research Center, the body that oversees chemical weapons production, between 2012 and 2017.

In addition, the UN found that Pyongyang has been deploying engineers to Syrian chemical weapons and missile plants in recent months. According to one member state, North Korean personnel were found at such facilities in Hama, Adra, and Barzah. The presumed purpose of their presence was to aid the Syrian military in its operations against rebels. Yet U.S. defense officials are also worried that the North Koreans are learning from the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons, perhaps in case they need to resort to chemical attacks if conflict breaks out on the Korean peninsula. Washington believes that Pyongyang is more than willing to use such weapons, claiming that VX nerve agent was the instrument of choice when Kim Jong-un ordered the assassination of his half-brother last year in Malaysia.

MISSILE COOPERATION WITH IRAN, AND NUCLEAR TOO?

UN, U.S., and Middle Eastern officials continue to express concerns about North Korea's suspected missile cooperation with Iran. Last September, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps **[displayed a new ballistic missile \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-new-ballistic-missile-may-have-north-korean-icbm-links\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-new-ballistic-missile-may-have-north-korean-icbm-links)** called the Khoramshahr at an annual parade in Tehran. Technical analysts say the weapon bears a sharp resemblance to North Korea's BM-25, which has a range of 3,500 kilometers—a capability that would allow Tehran to hit European capitals and Israel.

North Korea and Iran have been cooperating on missile development since the 1980s, according to U.S. and Israeli officials. Earlier versions of Iran's Shahab missiles were almost exact replicas of North Korea's Nodong series, and Western intelligence agencies tracked regular bilateral exchanges of scientists and engineers.

Today, officials are trying to determine whether this cooperation remains close—and if it has extended to the nuclear field. North Korea's second-ranked political official, Kim Yong-nam, visited Tehran for ten days last August, setting off alarm bells in Western capitals. He had previously inked a scientific cooperation agreement with Iran in 2012, similar to the one he signed with Syria a decade earlier. At the time, Washington worried that the Iran agreement could presage nuclear cooperation, and such concerns persist.

To date, however, U.S., European, and UN officials say there is no smoking-gun evidence of nuclear cooperation

between the two countries. And on missile development, North Korea and Iran appear to have grown largely self-sufficient, though the technical ties remain. "It doesn't seem like they need each other as much anymore," stated Uzi Rubin, an expert at Israel's Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. "The North Koreans are forging ahead of the Iranians in many ways."

Moreover, even U.S. allies in the Middle East have made arms deals with North Korea, say U.S. officials. Last year, the Trump administration withheld military aid from Egypt due in part to concerns that it was purchasing weapons from Pyongyang. These included 30,000 rocket-propelled grenades seized in Egyptian waters in 2016, a transaction that may have netted North Korea more than \$20 million.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The Trump administration has stated that negotiations with Kim Jong-un will focus on dismantling the regime's nuclear arsenal and shuttering its proliferation networks—no surprise given that North Korea's recent advances on these fronts have caused growing unease in Washington. According to current and former U.S. officials, however, it is unclear what the administration could offer Pyongyang in return for cutting off one of the country's primary revenue sources. To be sure, North Korea is eager to roll back the punishing international sanctions, particularly those targeting its mineral and agricultural exports. But much like his father and grandfather before him, Kim Jong-un has shown no inclination to seriously modernize the country's economy or allow significant foreign investment, since any such steps could threaten his hold on the isolated state. Instead, the suspected depths of North Korea's economic ills mean that he will likely continue marketing his wares to bad actors in the Middle East, unless President Trump proves willing or able to offer him a sufficiently enticing alternative.

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