

North Korea's Alliance with Syria Reveals a Wider Proliferation Threat

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Brief Analysis

The longstanding cooperation between the two regimes seems to have intensified during Syria's war, with troubling implications for future missile, chemical, and even nuclear proliferation in the Middle East.

North Korea's decades-old military alliance with the Assad regime is stoking fears inside the Trump administration that Kim Jong-un is not only profiting from Syria's six-year war, but also learning from it. According to U.S., Arab, and Israeli officials, he has continued to supply weapons and military equipment to Damascus throughout the conflict despite facing numerous international sanctions. In recent months, UN investigators have uncovered North Korean supplies being smuggled to Syria's Scientific Studies and Research Center (SSRC), the secretive body that oversees Bashar al-Assad's chemical weapons program. Syrian opposition groups and the UN also allege that North Korean military advisors are present inside the country to help Assad, a charge Pyongyang has denied.

Such activities have led officials to conclude that North Korea's alliance with Damascus poses a long-term security threat to the United States and its allies in the Middle East and Asia -- a threat that could grow as Pyongyang advances its nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities, and as Assad strengthens his hold on power with help from Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah. Officials already fear that North Korean advisors have been integrated into the planning and operations of these military players. Even more worrisome, the West has proven incapable of shutting down Pyongyang's arms shipments to the wider Middle East, which are expected to become even more lethal in the coming years.

TWO REGIMES LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER

According to U.S. and South Korean officials, the Syria-North Korea alliance goes back to the 1960s and is far

A deeper and more entrenched than many Middle East analysts realize. Pyongyang and Damascus were both clients of the Soviet Union during the Cold War and established formal diplomatic relations in 1966. North Korean fighter pilots later aided the Syrian air force during its historic conflicts with Israel, including the 1967 Six Day War and the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Pyongyang has also dispatched tank crews and missile technicians to Syria to support its interminable "struggle" against Israel. "The North sees Israel as an invader and has been willing to support military action by the Arabs that promotes Palestinian liberation," wrote Moon Chung-in, a top advisor to the South Korean president, in 2007. "Solidarity between North Korea and the Arabs has been bolstered by maintaining security relations, which go far beyond diplomatic rhetoric."

The North's assistance to Damascus has intensified as the Kim family develops more sophisticated weapons systems. According to current and former U.S. officials, North Korea has proven willing to transfer equipment directly to Damascus and help the regime procure it from third countries such as China. The latter contention is particularly disturbing given that Pyongyang has used front companies across China to not only procure equipment for its military and nuclear weapons, but also export it.

Meanwhile, many North Korea analysts believe Kim is gleaning lessons from Assad's battlefield tactics, including the use of chemical weapons. There is little question that Kim is willing to use such weapons abroad -- Washington believes he authorized the use of VX nerve agent this February to assassinate his half-brother Kim Jong Nam in Malaysia, so he can be expected to use his vast chemical arsenal in any conflict with the West. "Korean analysts should take note of how chemical weapons were used in the [Syrian] civil war because this is likely going to be a test-bed for future North Korean actions in conflict with the South," wrote military strategist Bruce Bechtol Jr. in a 2015 report for the *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*.

NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION

Many current and former U.S. officials consider Pyongyang's construction of a graphite reactor in Syria's Deir al-Zour province as one of the greatest acts of nuclear proliferation in history. Called al-Kibar, the facility was almost an exact replica of the Yongbyon reactor that North Korea has used to harvest plutonium for its own nuclear weapons arsenal. The Syrian reactor was close to being operational when Israeli jets destroyed it in 2007, killing a number of North Korean technicians working there.

Despite the audacity of this proliferation, the U.S. government and the UN's nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency, have yet to close their investigations into the reactor. As for the infrastructure and raw materials required to support such a facility -- including fuel fabrication plants and uranium -- their original source and ultimate fate largely remain a mystery. U.S. intelligence agencies are even uncertain who paid the North Koreans to build the plant given the Assad regime's tight finances. One theory still being pursued is that Iran funded al-Kibar and sought to outsource some of its nuclear research to Syria. And according to David Asher, former special coordinator of the State Department's North Korea Working Group, "It seems pretty clear the North Koreans never stopped working in Syria, which raises a whole bunch of other questions."

MISSILE TECHNOLOGY

U.S. government cables indicate that officials in the George W. Bush and Obama administrations were equally stunned by the web of front companies Pyongyang used to procure equipment for Syria's missile programs. North Korean brokers purchased graphite, specialty steel, nozzle throats, and related materials to help Syria develop Scuds and other short- and medium-range ballistic missiles. Some of these transfers directly involved the SSRC, which U.S. and Israeli officials believe is central to all of the Assad regime's nonconventional weapons programs. "This dependence on North Korean sources both directly and via North Korean brokers for a range of missile-related materials, advanced chemicals, and technology is likely to continue, given the difficulties Syria has encountered

purchasing such items directly from other suppliers," Secretary of State Hillary Clinton wrote in a 2009 memo focused on preparations for a gathering of the Missile Technology Control Regime in Rio de Janeiro.

Pyongyang's smuggling for Assad and the SSRC has continued, if not accelerated, throughout Syria's current war, even as international sanctions against both regimes have been strengthened. Likewise, North Korean government workers maintain a heavy presence in Damascus. A September report by the UN panel tasked with overseeing North Korea sanctions said it "continues to investigate the widespread presence of [such] nationals...in Africa and the Middle East, particularly in the Syrian Arab Republic, acting on behalf of or at the direction of designated entities, including their involvement in prohibited activities such as trade in surface-to-air missile systems."

For example, the panel noted that two UN member states had interdicted shipments of North Korean equipment bound for Syria in recent months. The consignees for these shipments were Syrian companies sanctioned by the European Union and Washington for serving as SSRC fronts. Syrian-based representatives from one of Pyongyang's main arms suppliers, the Korea Mining Development Trading Corp. (KOMID), were believed to be facilitating the shipments. According to the UN, "The panel is investigating reported prohibited chemical, ballistic missile and conventional arms cooperation, including activities on Syrian Scud missile programs and maintenance and repair of Syrian surface-to-air missile air defense systems."

U.S. POLICY OPTIONS

The Trump administration has stepped up U.S. efforts to choke off North Korea's overseas businesses and proliferation networks. The president has also ordered U.S. intelligence agencies to redouble their efforts to uncover all military cooperation between Pyongyang and Iran, including missile work and potential nuclear weapons links. U.S. officials are worried that North Korea has been integrated into the coalition of Middle Eastern regimes, terrorist groups, and militias that Tehran dubs the "Axis of Resistance." This alliance has rallied to Assad's defense but is also active in Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories.

Despite the Trump administration's pledge, however, some fear that Kim's rapidly expanding weapons arsenal -- which now includes as many as twenty atomic bombs, according to U.S. and Chinese officials -- could be even more difficult for the United States and UN to track. The White House will need to mobilize all of its Middle Eastern and Asian allies to guard against acts of proliferation potentially worse than the reactor North Korea built in eastern Syria. There is wide consensus that the cash-strapped North has every incentive to try selling even its most advanced weapons systems. In recent years, the United States has tracked North Korean arms sales to some of its closest regional allies, including Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, so preventing transfers to Iran's "axis" will no doubt be more difficult than ever.

Jay Solomon is the Segal Distinguished Visiting Fellow at The Washington Institute and author of The Iran Wars: Spy Games, Bank Battles, and the Secret Deals That Reshaped the Middle East. ❖

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