

# A North Korean in Iran

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## Ongoing close ties between Tehran and senior North Korean officials are raising concerns about potential transfer of nuclear and missile technology.

**T**he death from natural causes of an old man in North Korea this month should have been the closing chapter of the tale of Pakistan's nuclear and missile cooperation with the Hermit Kingdom. Instead, it may mark the next episode in the saga of Iran's controversial nuclear program.

Jon Pyong Ho, who was 88, had been a highly decorated general in the Korean People's Army, as well as a senior figure in the Korean Workers' Party, Pyongyang's version of the Communist Party. He had been a crucial figure in transforming North Korea into a nuclear-weapon state and, even more controversially, was his country's interlocutor with Pakistani nuclear scientist A.Q. Khan, the "father" of Islamabad's nuclear arsenal. One of the rare pieces of documentary evidence of such collaboration is a letter that Jon wrote to Khan in 1998, thanking the Pakistani scientist for his help and mentioning the payoffs the North Koreans had made to Pakistani generals. "Please give the agreed documents, components etc. to Mr. Yon [the newly appointed liaison with Khan] to be flown back when our plane returns after delivery of missile components," Jon wrote, an apparent reference to North Korea acquiring Pakistani centrifuges.

Although North Korea initially chose the plutonium route to a nuclear bomb, while Pakistan chose enriching uranium, both countries' nuclear programs have a great deal of overlap. Pakistan's Ghauri missiles, the initial launch vehicles for its nuclear weapons, are copies of the North Korean Nodong missile. North Korea's centrifuges at the uranium-enrichment plant at Yongbyon are copies of the so-called P-2 centrifuge, a design acquired through Khan.

Such was Jon's esteem that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un reportedly paid personal condolences at his wake on July 9, the day before the funeral. According to North Korean newspaper *Rodong Sinmun*, the funeral itself was a full-blown official event, organized by a committee of 88 top officials.

The first figure on that list of top officials was Kim Yong Nam. This prominent North Korean official is currently the president of the Supreme People's Assembly and has also served in many other top positions, including as minister of foreign affairs. His name set off alarm bells among North Korea watchers because, in 2002, Kim led a North Korean delegation to Damascus, Syria, where it signed an agreement believed to be related to Syria building a clandestine copy of Pyongyang's plutonium-producing reactor. Five years later, the Israeli Air Force destroyed the facility. Now it appears that Kim may be positioned to play the same role with Iran that Jon once played with Pakistan.

Kim's work has also made him a frequent visitor to Tehran. While Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has avoided being photographed at a nuclear plant -- a notable contrast to his predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who loved to be seen striding next to a cascade of centrifuges -- he has shown no such reluctance with Kim. There are several photos of the two men in Tehran in August 2013, when Kim came for Rouhani's inauguration. And in 2012, Kim was Pyongyang's representative at the Non-Aligned Movement's summit in Tehran. At the official welcoming ceremony, Kim strode alongside Ahmadinejad while reviewing an Iranian military honor guard, and later the two men witnessed the signing of a scientific and technological agreement. No details were provided about the agreement, other than it would include setting up joint scientific and technological laboratories, the exchange of scientific teams, and the transfer of technology in the fields of information technology, energy, environment, agriculture, and food.

On the same 2012 visit, Kim had a one-on-one meeting with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Iran's top leader told him that North Korea and Iran have "common enemies" and that "in the march towards great goals, one should be serious, and pressures, sanctions, and threats should not cause any crack in determination."

One example of transfer of technology that has concerned Washington and other capitals has been in the field of missiles. Iran's Shahab-3 missile is, like Pakistan's Ghauri, a locally produced version of the North Korean Nodong missile. A Shahab-3 missile fired from Iran has the range to reach Israel, as well as threaten Tehran's Gulf Arab rivals. But North Korea has developed bigger missiles, which, if transferred, would extend Iran's reach and payload delivery. The International Atomic Energy Agency has also raised concerns about redesign work by Iran on the Shahab-3 re-entry vehicle to allow it to carry a new payload, which could be a nuclear device.

Public North Korean contacts with Iran have continued this year. In February, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif took a break from negotiations with international powers over his country's nuclear program to hold talks with North Korean Deputy Foreign Minister Ri Gil Song aimed at bolstering bilateral ties. Zarif reportedly emphasized the entitlement of all countries to the right to benefit from peaceful nuclear technology, and Ri supported "Iran's peaceful nuclear policy."

One particular area of concern for the global powers negotiating with Iran is that North Korean technicians will provide Iran with advanced centrifuge technology. Pyongyang has apparently mastered production of the P-2 centrifuge. These are much more efficient than the P-1 centrifuges that Iran currently uses, and they are more proven than the IR-2m that Iran is trying to develop, apparently due to technical difficulties with making the P-2 type and shortages of key raw materials.

Such a move would complicate the negotiations over Iran's nuclear program, which have already been extended until late November after the parties failed to reach an agreement by the original July 20 deadline. The talks over North Korea's illicit nuclear program are going even worse: The legacy of Jon Pyong Ho is moving forward, as the United States opts for a strategy of "strategic patience" -- waiting for North Korea to return to the negotiating table.

North Korea's restarted reactor at Yongbyon is producing new plutonium, its centrifuges are enriching uranium at the same site and possibly unknown locations, and preparations are under way for another nuclear test.

So far, there are no indications that any diplomatic agreement over Iran's nuclear program will shed light on Pyongyang and Tehran's possible nuclear collaboration. But it would be rash indeed to argue that the absence of evidence shows that nothing has gone on.

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