

North Korea in the Middle East: A Dangerous Military Supply Line

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Pyongyang has long threatened U.S. regional allies and interests with military support for terrorists, militias, and hostile regimes. Can a potential bilateral deal sever these supply lines?

On June 7, Anthony Ruggiero, Kongdan (Katy) Oh, and Jay Solomon addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Ruggiero is a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and a veteran of Treasury and State Department programs tasked with countering North Korea. Oh is a resident staff member at the Institute for Defense Analyses and coauthor of North Korea Through the Looking Glass. Solomon is former chief foreign affairs correspondent for the Wall Street Journal. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

ANTHONY RUGGIERO

Iran's missile relationship with North Korea is robust—so much so that the Obama administration took the diplomatic risk of sanctioning Tehran for receiving materials from Pyongyang just one day after the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was implemented. In announcing that designation, the Treasury Department noted that senior Iranian officials had worked with North Korea for several years. As Pyongyang develops more advanced weapons, the relationship will become even more attractive to Iran, particularly if the Kim regime manages to produce a functional ICBM.

A more controversial question is whether the two countries have a nuclear relationship. North Korea could give Iran blueprints, testing data, lessons learned, and centrifuges. No definitive information exists in the public realm regarding the status of Pyongyang's enrichment efforts, but wherever they stand, Iran has the resources to buy assets from the program.

As for relations with Syria, reports that Bashar al-Assad is set to visit Kim Jong-un soon are not surprising. Although Israel destroyed Syria's North Korean-built nuclear reactor in 2007, neither Damascus nor Pyongyang suffered any lasting consequences for their proliferation activity, so it has continued. They have cooperated on ballistic missile development, with multiple groups of North Korean technicians traveling to Syria and transferring special missile technology, including help with developing Scuds. Kim has also provided Syria with technology and materials used for the development of chemical weapons, such as acid-resistant tiles and associated valves, pipes, and cables.

Elsewhere, Pyongyang has formed export relationships with Persian Gulf states, including the United Arab Emirates and other U.S. partners that Washington may be hesitant to sanction. North Korean solid propellant for short- and medium-range missiles would be especially attractive to regional states and nonstate actors.

As it negotiates with the Trump administration, North Korea needs to come clean on all of its proliferation efforts.

Pyongyang likely does not realize just how much the United States knows about its activities. Armed with copious intelligence data, American officials will usually be able to tell when their counterparts across the table are being honest, and to what extent they are serious about an agreement. North Korea has pledged to stop proliferating military technology in the past but continues to do it, so the administration's demands will have to be more specific in order to obtain meaningful changes.

North Korea likely learned from the JCPOA that cheating on nuclear deals is permissible, that limited deals can be exploited, that it can push the envelope on nuclear issues to extract concessions, and that its military sites are off limits. Yet Washington has hopefully learned some lessons as well.

First, the administration needs to be prepared to walk away from the table if necessary. Second, it should understand that nuclear-focused deals do not solve broader strategic problems. Third, it should avoid phased denuclearization, insisting on the Libya model of denuclearization instead (while refuting accusations that it is invoking that country's specter of regime change). Fourth, Washington should not give North Korea any relief until it makes real progress toward denuclearization. Yet if Kim is truly willing to commit to such progress, the administration should be prepared to negotiate "big for big."

China and Russia, the world's top sanctions evaders, are not partners in these negotiations. They no doubt expect the Trump administration to believe Kim's promises, make concessions, and fall into the trap of phased denuclearization. In the end, though, Chinese and Russian companies could wind up bearing the brunt of U.S. sanctions. Although no sanctions regime is foolproof, American authorities can enforce them in new ways to increase their effectiveness. For example, Washington has already identified and sanctioned North Korean shipping networks, but it could go further and start intercepting the vessels directly.

KONGDAN OH

North Korea's nuclear and missile relationship with Syria began during the reign of Kim Il-sung, and symbols of its depth abound, from the monument to the late ruler erected in Damascus to the numerous congratulatory remarks Assad sent when Kim's son assumed power. As for relations with Iran, Pyongyang built them on a foundation of blackmail and anti-American geopolitics.

In 1997, a North Korean delegation met with the Israeli ambassador in Stockholm, explained that their country had successfully tested a satellite missile, and warned that Iran and other Middle Eastern states were interested in buying it. They asked Israel for one billion dollars in exchange for withholding the missile technology from its enemies. The Israelis declined to give cash, but they did offer humanitarian aid, agricultural technology, medicine, and other assistance worth even more than a billion dollars. Pyongyang refused the deal, explaining that it would rather violate the Geneva Conventions than be held to purportedly biased standards intended to serve the United States.

Today, North Korea is changing internally. Its citizens have around 3.7 million cell phones and can directly contact people in parts of South Korea, China, and Russia. Such contacts will inevitably raise questions at home about the regime's ideology and legitimacy. Kim knows that he has to focus on economic development if his regime is to survive, but the Democratic People's Republic remains a very cash-poor society with miniscule foreign reserves.

Therefore, Pyongyang will likely keep any nuclear promises it makes if the price is right. To be sure, the JCPOA withdrawal has likely convinced the regime that the United States is unreliable, so North Korean officials may be less willing to adhere to a deal signed with Washington. Yet given their dire economic situation, they may decide to put aside their distrust and uphold agreements for economic benefits.

Meanwhile, North Korea's relationship with China is at a historic low. A few years back, President Xi Jinping sent an envoy to Pyongyang asking it to halt nuclear testing. Testing resumed shortly thereafter, though, producing tensions that persist today. Xi has met with Kim at least twice in recent months, but Chinese government mouthpieces have been very sarcastic and skeptical about the prospect of talks with Washington.

JAY SOLOMON

Stories about Pyongyang's involvement in the Middle East have been floating around for years, from North Korean pilots fighting in the 1973 Yom Kippur War, to North Korean engineers visiting Iran during its war with Iraq, to Israel's attempt at paying Pyongyang off as a way of preventing missile exports to the region. All of these stories are true, and the Kim regime continues to get away with such proliferation today.

In Syria, North Korea uses foreign shell companies to procure equipment for Damascus indirectly. These fronts have been found in Malaysia, Egypt, and across China, among other locations. The notion that Beijing is blind to such activities strains credulity. In essence, then, the international community's ability to curb North Korean nuclear proliferation depends on political will in these front countries.

Today, almost every state in the Middle East has some link to North Korean military systems. In Yemen, the government acquired some of Pyongyang's missile technology before the current war. As a result, the missiles that rebel Houthi forces are launching into Saudi Arabia may have input from North Korean sources—or Iranian sources, or both.

In retrospect, both the Clinton and Bush administrations failed to insist on a full accounting of Pyongyang's

proliferation activities. For example, the lack of such transparency led to the collapse of a 1994 framework agreement in which North Korea agreed to stop proliferating. Even today, the public is still learning the extent of North Korea's technical assistance to Syria's chemical and nuclear weapons program.

In negotiating with the Kim regime, the United States should take a few lessons from its JCPOA experience. That deal failed to resolve a host of important issues, and looming political transition in Washington greatly increased its risk of eventual collapse. Despite moving forward with the deal, the parties—not to mention rival camps inside the U.S. government—never completely agreed on sanctions issues, and the Obama administration dropped the matter of “possible military dimensions.” In short, international agreements of this sort are inherently political, so they should be put into treaties if they are going to stand the test of time.

This summary was prepared by Samuel Northrup.