

# A Threefold Cord is not Readily Broken: North Korea's Military Bond with Iran and Syria

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The supply of nuclear technology from North Korea to Syria, which was discussed publicly following the Israeli Air Force operation in September 2007 and in a recent discussion in the US Congress, is just one facet of North Korea's multi-dimensional military export enterprise to the Middle East, and to Iran and Syria in particular. These exports include the sale of missile technology, the transfer of chemicals, nuclear technology, and even aid to Hizbollah. This situation is not auspicious for Israel, as North Korea is wont to shirk international arms control laws and does not desist from transferring WMD technology. The extreme and isolationist character of the North Korean regime exacerbates the problem, as its considerations, decision making processes, and other elements that need to be factored in to exert any influence on Pyongyang are shrouded in great secrecy. This essay aims to shed light on the transfers of arms and military technology from North Korea to Iran and Syria, and provide the background for discussion of Israel's options in confronting the situation.

## **North Korea's Military Involvement in the Middle East**

Arms exports from North Korea to the Middle East began in the 1980s, when the destination countries included – over different periods – Libya, Yemen, Egypt, Iran, and Syria. Today, as a result of international pressure to cut off military ties with North Korea,<sup>1</sup> Iran and Syria remain its main partners, and this partnership focuses global interest on North Korea's ties with the Middle East. Especially

with Iran and Syria viewed as Israel's principal external threats, North Korea's relations with these two countries are of particular significance.

As far as is known, the most extensive cooperation between North Korea and Middle East countries is in the area of ballistic missiles. The ties started toward the end of the Iran-Iraq War, when Iran sought to acquire missiles in response to the Iraqi missile attacks. North Korea, the main supplier, sup-

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plied during and after the war hundreds of Scud B missiles (280-320 km range). Iran, which adopted a policy of self-reliance, decided to attain the ability to develop its own missiles in view of their strategic importance. Once again, North Korea, along with China and the USSR, provided assistance and played a central role in establishing an industrial infrastructure to manufacture Scud B missiles (the Shehab-1), followed by the Scud C (Shehab-2, 500-600 km range). The missiles became operational but Iran remained dependent on imports of critical components critical for the manufacture of the missiles. The cooperation between the two countries continued with the development of the Shehab-3 missile based on the North Korean Nodong-1 missile (range of about 1,300 km). Over the last decade, Iran has been helped by North Korea in the development of the Shehab-4 missile, based on the North Korean Taepodong-1 missile (range of about 2,000 km) or the Taepodong-2 missile (range of about 10,000 km), whose development was reportedly funded partly by Iran.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the two countries are cooperating on the development of an advanced version of the Chinese C-802 cruise missile. Meanwhile, North Korea has continued to sell advanced missiles to Iran; in 2006, for example, it transferred to Iran 18 BM-25 missiles with a range of 2,000 km.<sup>3</sup>

Syria followed a similar route to acquiring an arsenal and the ability to manufacture ballistic missiles. In 1990 Damascus and Pyongyang signed a contract for the sale of 150-200 Scud C missiles and 12-18 launchers. The agreement also involved the transfer from North Korea to Syria of an assembly and production line that produced some of the missiles. In 2000 there were reports that the two countries signed a transaction for the

sale of Scud D missiles, with Syria receiving several dozen missiles.<sup>4</sup> Finally, North Korea also helps Syria and Iran build underground storage facilities for the missile systems and maintain the missile base, and shares with them the know how it accumulates from its own missile testing.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, with North Korea's help Iran and Syria developed manufacturing abilities and the most significant stockpiles of ballistic missiles in the Middle East, except for Israel.<sup>6</sup>

Another area in which these countries are apparently cooperating is nuclear weapons. What this cooperation involves, its scope, and how long it has been going on is much more elusive.<sup>7</sup> What is known is that even though the nuclear programs of North Korea and Iran are seemingly advancing along different routes – North Korea's program is based on plutonium and Iran's is based on uranium – there is nonetheless technological cooperation between them. First, the countries' nuclear programs are partly based on know how and components from the illegal distribution network of Abdul Qadeer Khan, the driver behind the Pakistani nuclear program. Second, in addition to the plutonium program, North Korea is suspected of having secretly run a program based on uranium enrichment.<sup>8</sup> These factors, and the fact that the other suppliers of the Iranian nuclear program (principally Russia and China) have greatly downscaled their cooperation due to international pressure, raise the suspicion that the two military partners are also maintaining ties in the nuclear area. Indeed, there have been assessments regarding the possibility that North Korea is transferring nuclear materials and know how to Iran.<sup>9</sup>

According to the information revealed in the United States last April, it appears that nuclear cooperation with Syria began back in

1997 and has involved the supply by North Korea of technological expertise for the construction of a reactor for the manufacture of plutonium. This expertise included plans for construction of the reactor, expert advice, and transfer of equipment and materials. According to the same assessments, when the reactor was bombed by Israel it was close to completion, and could have been activated within a short space of time.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, there is military cooperation between North Korea and Syria in the areas of conventional weapons and terrorism. For example, a shipment of aerial defense systems sent from North Korea to Syria and seized by Cyprus in September 2006 reportedly contained components that can be used for missile launchers.<sup>11</sup> In addition, a report prepared for the US Congress highlighted the military aid given by North Korea to Hizbollah, which operates under Iranian and Syrian auspices.<sup>12</sup> According to the report, relations between them started in the late eighties when senior Hizbollah members underwent several months of training and preparation in North Korea. This cooperation grew after 2000, and experts from North Korea went to Lebanon to instruct Hizbollah activists in the construction of trenches and underground bunkers. As became clear in the Second Lebanon War, these subterranean systems ("nature reserves" in IDF lingo) played an important role in Hizbollah combat.

Also attributed to North Korea is assistance with constructing a missile force for Hizbollah. According to the report, the missiles launched on Israel by Hizbollah during the Second Lebanon War were assembled in Iran with components that came from North Korea. In this case the North Korea link is not direct, as in the previous example, and one could argue that North Korea was not

aware of this. However, in view of the close ties between the three parties and the importance countries attach to the identity of the end user of weapon systems they export, it is hard to assume that the missiles were transferred to Hizbollah without North Korean consent.

### **North Korean Interests**

The varied objectives and considerations that guide North Korea's decisions regarding arms supply to Iran and Syria fall into two main groups: obtaining financial resources and advancing military development programs.

Although official figures are not publicized, the North Korean economy is known as among the most centralized and insular economies in the world, and certainly one of the weakest. The GDP there is \$1,800, the public expenditure is estimated at around \$3 billion (for the sake of comparison, expenditure in Israel, whose population is about one third of North Korea's, is about \$60 billion), and its foreign trade is estimated at about \$5 billion a year (Israel – \$100 billion).<sup>13</sup> Due to the weakness of its industry and agriculture North Korea finds it difficult to increase its revenue, while at the same time political changes in the Soviet Union/Russia and China have reduced their economic support of North Korea and their willingness to provide it with subsidized energy sources. These circumstances endanger the regime of Kim Jong-il, whose survival depends on ensuring the lifestyle of the elite and providing the population's basic needs.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, Pyongyang has developed unconventional sources of income (including circulating counterfeit dollars, drug trafficking, manufacturing forged cigarettes and pharmaceuticals, produced under the aus-

**Table 1: Arms Exports from North Korea to the Middle East, 1996-2006 (\$ m.)**

	'90	'91	'92	'93	'94	'95	'96	'97	'98	'99	'00	'01	'02	'03	'04	'05	'06	Total
Iran	4	111	132	148	9	9	4	4	2									424
Syria		96	96	53	43	43	21				13	13	13	13	13			415
Total	4	207	228	201	52	52	25	4	2		13	13	13	13	13			

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, in: <http://armstrade.sipri.org>

pices of the government and in conjunction with regional crime organizations),<sup>15</sup> and sought alternative suppliers of energy sources. The military cooperation with Iran, and (probably) through it with Syria and Hizbolah, serves these objectives. Arms exports bring in on average at least tens of millions of dollars a year (table 1; it is probable that revenue from arms exports is higher than indicated, as the figures include only the transfer of conventional arms and missiles and not sale of know how, transfer of parts, cooperation in non-conventional areas, disguised weapons shipments, and so on), ensure oil supplies from Iran, and allow North Korea to erase its debts to Tehran and in part pay for the oil it buys from it.<sup>16</sup>

The second benefit gained by Pyongyang from its military cooperation with Iran and Syria is advancement of its arms programs. There is some narrow historic, ideological, and cultural common ground between North Korea and Iran and Syria, but the political and strategic circumstances in the international system since the 1990s have generated a common denominator between them. Politically, the resistance of the three countries to the US-led world order has positioned them as the most centralized and isolationist countries in the world. In fact, Syria has apparently replaced Iraq as the third member of

the axis of evil that was announced by President Bush in 2002 and considered one of the main threats to the international arena, with its members – particularly North Korea and Iran – subject to intense international pressure to change the nature of their regimes and modus operandi. These regimes perceive the international demands as a threat to their very survival, a danger to their aspirations and regional standings, and in the case of North Korea, a danger to the very existence of the country as a sovereign political entity.

These political circumstances also bring the countries closer in strategic terms. In view of their hard line political stances, the three experience stiff military rivalry with other countries in their regions and are threatened implicitly by the United States. Given their meager economic and technological resources, they have limited ability to accommodate these threats and cannot build up a standing military to counter the armies that might potentially overcome them. Under these circumstances the three countries have adopted the strategy of developing an asymmetric deterrent force based at least in part on targeting the enemy's weak points. The main components of this strategy include attaining military means that can damage the enemy's rear (including non-conventional warheads) and surface-to-surface missiles for delivery.

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The development of this range of means is itself complicated, but it spares the three countries a quantitative and qualitative symmetrical arms race with their enemies, which none are capable of maintaining.

Adopting a similar military strategy generates a basis for cooperation between the three countries. While fear for its survival – particularly concern over a US attack – motivated the North Korean regime to develop a nuclear program and missiles, the international pressure exerted makes it difficult for it to advance these programs. The tests it conducts incur international censure and sanctions that limit its ability to import the components and materials it needs for these programs.<sup>17</sup> Here the cooperation with Iran and Syria is quite valuable. In technological terms, the operational use made by Iran of the missiles it received from North Korea during the war with Iraq, its willingness to allow testing of North Korean missiles at its test sites, and provision of data it obtained from the missile tests it itself conducted has provided Pyongyang with much valuable information. In addition, the military cooperation with Iran helped to fund its military development programs, and the large number of missiles purchased by Iran and Syria allowed North Korea's production capability to move on to a new, larger phase.<sup>18</sup> Second, according to reports in the press, there is the possibility that North Korea is clandestinely selling to Iran and Syria nuclear facilities and materials that it undertook to destroy as part of its negotiations with the United States in the Six-Party Talks (with South Korea, China, Japan, and Russia), ongoing since 2002, about dismantlement of its nuclear program.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, it is clear to North Korea that cooperation with Iran and Syria should be pursued with extreme caution as

its exposure as a supplier of non-conventional weapons may harm the fragile talks. With the tightrope tactics it is using, such exposure is liable to be one pull too many on the slender thread that binds the whole process together, and the achievements reached to date – particularly direct talks with the United States – might evaporate. This dilemma is clear both to North Korea and Iran. Thus in addition to the shared fate thrust on them by circumstances, they examine their steps very carefully and are highly suspicious of one other.<sup>20</sup>

### **Assessment**

The current situation has generated a certain shared fate between North Korea, Iran, and Syria. The three countries face US-led international pressure, but compliance threatens the survival of their regimes. On the other hand, maintaining the confrontation is wearing them down. Complicating matters further is that the United States, which plays a central role in both East Asia and Middle East arenas, employs different strategies with Iran and with North Korea: while the United States is conducting open negotiations with North Korea, it has adopted a harder line with Tehran, refusing to hold direct talks as long as Iran continues with its uranium enrichment program, and has not ruled out the possibility of a military option.<sup>21</sup> Possible reasons for this disparity in strategies are: (a) due to its control of oil reserves and its standing in the Persian Gulf, Iran is viewed by Washington as the greatest danger to American interests; (b) it appears that Iran's commitment to its nuclear program is greater than North Korea's; and (c) using a military force against North Korea is expected to exact too high a price, given both the concern that North Korea has already



attained nuclear weapons, and the opposition among the US' partners in the Six-Party Talks.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, from the point of view of nuclear weapons proliferation in the world, North Korea is considered as a more dangerous country than Iran, with the suspicion that North Korea is less inhibited and for financial gain would not be deterred even from transferring nuclear bombs,<sup>23</sup> which is probably without precedent.

This shifts the spotlight to the United States, which plays a central role in all the relevant arenas. Proliferation of nuclear weapons from North Korea to the Middle East is a secondary result of two more extensive related processes. The first is the struggle for survival of the North Korean leadership, a fight that includes the last vestiges of the Cold War. The second process is Iran's struggle to preserve the leadership's values and to consolidate its regional standing, a struggle that has also engulfed Syria. The similarity between the two processes is only partial, as each is underway within a particular matrix. Nevertheless, their basic outlines cast the three main players facing the United States within the same framework, which places them under the most intense pressure and ultimately pushes them into highly risky cooperation that in other circumstances might have been too dangerous to undertake. The United States has to maneuver in this domain while taking into account how activity in and pressures on eastern Asia impact on efforts in the Middle East, and vice versa. Because of the complex matrix of pressures, risks, and constraints on each area, this process is far from easy.

The immediate casualty of the cooperation between Pyongyang and Tehran and Damascus is Israel, which is identified, directly or indirectly, with the confrontations

that spawned this cooperation. Other than the direct and strong hostility that exists between Israel and Iran and Syria against an ideological and territorial backdrop, Israel is also identified as a close ally of the US. This generates a value basis for military cooperation between North Korea, Iran, and Syria, which arouses faint memories of the support of the Soviet bloc for the Arab struggle against Israel during the Cold War, though




this is certainly not the main factor underlying their cooperation. On the other hand, this factor should not be dismissed entirely since it helps explain, for instance, North Korea's assistance to Hizbollah. Thus, Israel would do well not to make do with monitoring the end stage of arms proliferation from North Korea to the Middle East – i.e., actual transfer of arms – but should also take a close look at the processes that lie at the root of the matter. This analysis, which focuses on the East Asia situation and the Six-Party talks, is one of the conditions for understanding and forecasting the dynamics of relations between North Korea, Iran, and Syria, and defining the pos-

sibilities of taking action in this area. Furthermore, Israel should labor to ensure that North Korea's Middle East connections are on the agenda of international parties, especially the United States, for example through documenting how the cooperation between Pyongyang and Tehran, and perhaps Damascus as well, advances North Korea's armament program. In other words, proliferation of military technology from North Korea to Iran and Syria is not a one-way street that impacts only on the Middle East, rather a circular process that influences North Korea's neighbors and adversaries as well.

## Notes

- 1 UN Security Council resolutions 1695 (July 2006) and 1718 (October 2006) ban imports and exports of arms from North Korea.
- 2 Agreements signed by Iran and North Korea in 1985 and 1992 included help with funding the missile development programs. Due to scant information, it is difficult to evaluate the amounts allocated for the development programs, the exact designation of the funding, and so on. See Daniel A. Pinkston, *The North Korean Ballistic Missile Program* (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2008), pp. 16-18; and Mark Fitzpatrick, "Iran and North Korea: The Proliferation Nexus," *Survival* 48, no. 1 (2006): 62-64.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 "Report: Syria Advised by North Korean Chemical Arms Experts," *Haaretz*, February 19, 2008, [www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/928122.html](http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/928122.html).
- 5 Michael Sheridan, "A Tale of Two Dictatorships: The Links between North Korea and Syria," *Times Online*, September 16, 2007, in: [www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article2452356.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article2452356.ece).
- 6 This assessment is based on the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) data on the Middle East military balance. The data that has been published on Israel's missile reserves is very sketchy. See: [www.inss.org.il/memb.php](http://www.inss.org.il/memb.php).
- 7 In this context, see Emily B. Landau, "Syria, September 6: Sharpening Questions and Dilemmas," *Strategic Assessment* 10, no. 3 (2007): 14-15.
- 8 Wade L. Huntley, "Rebels without a Cause: North Korea, Iran and the NPT," *International Affairs* 82, no. 4 (2006): 723.
- 9 Barak Ravid, "Concern: Nuclear North Korea in Iran," *Haaretz*, April 7, 2008.
- 10 "Background Briefing with Senior U.S. Officials on Syria's Covert Nuclear Reactor and North Korea's Involvement," April 24, 2008, in [www.cfr.org/content/publications/attachments/NKSyriapdf.pdf](http://www.cfr.org/content/publications/attachments/NKSyriapdf.pdf).
- 11 GlobalSecurity.org, in: [www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/syria/2006/syria-060911-voa01.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/syria/2006/syria-060911-voa01.htm).
- 12 Larry Niksch and Raphael Perl, *CRS Report for Congress: North Korea: Terrorism List Removal?*
- 13 The World Bank, in: <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/DATASTATISTICS/0,contentMDK:20421402~pagePK:64133150~piPK:64133175~theSitePK:239419,00.html#IDA>; U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, in: [www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook).
- 14 Andrew J. Coe, "North Korea's New Cash Crop," *Washington Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (2005): 74.
- 15 Raphael Perl and Dick K. Nanto, *CRS Report for Congress: North Korean Crime-for-Profit Activities* (Washington: Congressional Research Service, February 2007).
- 16 Alon Levkowitz, "Iran and North-Korea Military Cooperation: A Partnership within the 'Axis of Evil,'" *Iran-Pulse* 10 (February 26, 2007): 2.
- 17 For example, Security Council resolutions 1695 and 1718 were taken following missile testing and nuclear testing carried out by North Korea in 2006, while the missile test of August 1998 led to a decision by Japan not to help with funding a nuclear reactor for peaceful purposes promised to Pyongyang as part of a treaty Japan signed with North Korea in 1994. See note 1 above, and "World: Asia-Pacific Anger at North Korean missile launch," *BBC News*, September 1, 1998, in: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/161513.stm>.

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- 18 For details and examples of the technological cooperation noted see Ephraim Kam, *From Terror to Nuclear Bombs: The Significance of the Iranian Threat* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense Publishing House and Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, 2004), p. 214; Levkowitz, "Iran and North-Korea," pp. 1-2.
- 19 For the actual existence of these possibilities, see Yoav Stern, "Report: North Korea and Syria Cooperate on Building a Nuclear Plant," *Haaretz*, October 17, 2007.
- 20 Fitzpatrick, "Iran and North Korea," p. 66
- 21 Channel 10 News, May 15, 2008; Yossi Melman, "Secret Contacts Revealed between the Americans and the Iranians," *Haaretz*, April 15, 2008; Emily B. Landau and Ram Erez, "The Nuclear Dimension of 'Axis of Evil': Different Strategies for Different Threats," *Strategic Assessment* 6, no. 1 (2003): 7-13.
- 22 Okmin Chung, "U.S. Approaches toward the Two Remaining 'Evils,'" *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 17, no. 1 (2005): 195-98.
- 23 Nir Reichtal, "The Nuclear Threat from the East is Closer Than Ever," *Ynet*, January 18, 2008, [www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3494304,00.html](http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3494304,00.html).