

DISCUSSION PAPER



A Dangerous Partnership: The Iran-North Korea Nexus

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Introduction

The exclusion and isolation of certain countries in international relations is often driven by concerns about their domestic politics, human rights violations, supporting terrorism, or engaging in illegal military activities. Iran and North Korea have combined all the above with nuclear threats, leading their states to be labelled as "Rogue States" in the post-Cold War.

A key reference in the International Relations (IR) literature that specifically discusses this concept is "Rogue States and U.S. Foreign Policy: Containment after the Cold War" by Robert S. Litwak, which discusses how the United States and its allies adopted policies aimed at containing states that were deemed outside the bounds of acceptable state behaviour.

North Korea (after 1953) and Iran (after 1979) faced prolonged international isolation and sanctions imposed by the U.S. and other Western powers. This exclusion drove both nations to explore alternative methods to bolster their military strength and circumvent the constraints imposed by the West.

Iran's trajectory in this direction began with the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which marked a turning point in Iran's relations with the West as the country's leadership changed after the revolution. The revolution, particularly the US embassy hostage crisis, severely strained the strong relations Iran once enjoyed with the West during the Shah's rule. This crisis, which saw fifty-three American diplomats and citizens held hostage from November 4, 1979, until their release on January 20, 1981, marked a significant turning point in diplomatic ties. This dark episode led to a break in diplomatic ties and pushed Iran to seek cooperation with other non-Western countries.

Similarly, North Korea completely severed its ties with the West after the Korean War. After the devastation of the war, Pyongyang was subjected to isolation which fuelled more its aggressive policies. One strategy for Pyongyang to escape its economic constraints was to export its military technology, particularly in missile development. This led to a form of solidarity with Tehran, rooted in their shared opposition to a global order dominated by the United States and its allies.

Particularly noteworthy in this relationship is cooperation in the areas of nuclear development. North Korea's transfer of missile technology to Iran has significantly increased Iran's military capability and enabled it to develop an indigenous missile program that has altered the strategic balance in the Middle East. This cooperation has triggered a regional arms race and raised nuclear proliferation concerns, complicating the balance of power in the Middle East.

This paper examines the cooperation between Iran and North Korea from historical, strategic and global security perspectives. It considers the origins of this cooperation, its implications for regional and global stability, and its far-reaching consequences for asymmetric warfare and the proliferation of proxy groups. Finally, it discusses the measures that can be taken to counter the threats posed by this alliance and the challenges ahead.

Historical Background and Initial Cooperation

Economic and diplomatic sanctions by the international community have pushed Iran and North Korea out of the global system. While Iran turned to alternative supply routes after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, North Korea became isolated due to its nuclear activities. This isolation made it inevitable for both countries to deepen their defence cooperation. This need became especially critical during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). Having severed official ties with the US and Europe, the new Tehran administration was ill-equipped to counter the superior military capacity of Iraq. To overcome this problem, the Tehran administration searched for alternatives and started to get closer to North Korea.

With the support of the Soviet Union and China, North Korea had developed a strong military-industrial infrastructure and emerged as a potential partner in the effort to expand it (Chivvis & Keating, 2024). In the aftermath of the Korean War, Pyongyang developed a sophisticated arsenal of Scud-type ballistic missiles and other military technologies and began exporting them to generate revenue and increase its geopolitical influence. Iran took advantage of this opportunity to acquire Scud-B and Scud-C missiles, which played an important role in defensive and offensive strategies during the war (Yıldırım, 2015).

The 1990s was a period of deepening cooperation between Pyongyang and Tehran. The regime in Tehran remained committed to its policies aimed at destabilizing the Middle East, hindering efforts to normalize relations with regional neighbours and Western countries. Iran's nuclear proliferation and ballistic missile development programs have only heightened concerns about its aggressive ambitions. Additionally, Tehran's strategy of expanding regional influence through Shiite proxies and its support for various armed groups has deepened its isolation both regionally and on the global stage (Azizi, H., & Barnes-Dacey, J., 2024).

In the post-Korean War period, North Korea has been in constant tension with Western countries, South Korea and Japan, and its ties with states other than China and the Soviet Union has remained limited. As part of its state-supported acts of violence intended to destabilise its perceived enemies, Pyongyang has been linked to

several acts of terrorism. In 1983, North Korea orchestrated a bombing in Rangoon, Burma (now Myanmar), aimed at killing South Korean President Chun Doo-hwan. The bombing targeted a South Korean delegation, killing 21 people, including several South Korean officials. Then, in 1987, North Korean agents planted a bomb aboard Korean Air Flight 858 in 1987. The bomb exploded over the Andaman Sea, killing all 115 people aboard.

Meanwhile, North Korea has consistently engaged in provocative actions, including missile tests, cyberattacks, and aggressive rhetoric towards its neighbours, particularly South Korea and Japan. Its drive towards nuclear armament and its nuclear tests in 2006, 2009 and 2013 have led North Korea to be globally isolated (UN Security Council Reports on North Korea Sanctions, 2013).

This isolation has led the two countries to deepen their defence cooperation, extending to technology sharing in the defence industry. In this context, North Korea provided Iran with technical expertise and equipment for missile production, which enabled Iran to develop the Shahab missile series (Unal, 2014). While the Shahab-1 and Shahab-2 were missiles directly derived from North Korean designs, the Shahab-3, introduced in the early 2000s, represented a significant advance, capable of hitting key targets in the region with a range of up to 1,300 kilometres (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2021).

The two countries have also cooperated on nuclear development. North Korea's nuclear program served as a model for Iran and played an important role in advancing Iran's nuclear capability through technology transfers. Although Tehran claims that its nuclear ambitions are for civilian purposes, its clandestine activities and lack of full cooperation with international inspections have raised suspicions of weaponization (IAEA Reports on Iran's Nuclear Program, 2005-2023). While North Korean technology transfers have played a critical role in advancing Iran's nuclear capability, the full extent of this cooperation remains unclear.

Two Isolated Powers Striving for Survival

Iran's and North Korea's security strategies are rooted in the concern for the survival of both regimes. Iran's foreign policy and security strategy is built on Persian nationalism and Shiite expansionism to ensure the continuity of its theocratic regime. North Korea, on the other hand, maintains regime stability by deterring potential domestic rivals and legitimizing its internal problems through external threats in line with the principle of "Unfinished Revolution". Both countries maintain a sense of being surrounded by enemies and an emphasis on independence in their foreign policy approaches, placing a chronic threat perception at the centre of their foreign policies.

This concern for regime survival has led Iran and North Korea to adopt governance models in which the armed forces are at the forefront. In Iran, the Revolutionary Guards (Pasdaran) play a decisive role in the political and economic management of the country, intelligence activities and cross-border operations. North Korea, on the other hand, has made the military a central actor in the state's domestic and foreign policy through the "Songun" (Army First) policy designed by Kim Il-sung in the 1980s (Lee, 2017). This policy is based on the principles of North Korean political independence, economic self-sufficiency and the right to self-defence.

The two countries have complementary resources, capabilities and goals, and their partnership has been strengthened by the dynamics of balancing each other's international isolation. Iran's rich energy resources overlap with

North Korea's energy needs, while North Korea's economic challenges are met by Iranian revenues from energy exports (Soufan Center, 2024). Iran assists North Korea in arms sales and military training to other actors in the Middle East, while North Korea benefits from Iran's experience in the space program and Iran benefits from North Korea's know-how in nuclear technology and ballistic missiles (Bloomfield, 2020). This mutual transfer of technology contributes to the achievement of both countries' goals of acquiring nuclear weapons. Through this strategic cooperation, Iran and North Korea aim to gain a stronger position vis-à-vis the Western powers and their allies.

Diplomatic Relations

Diplomatic relations between Iran and North Korea began after the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. During the Iran-Iraq War, which lasted from 1980 to 1988, North Korea provided military and diplomatic support to Iran, laying the foundation for relations between the two countries, and this support played an important role in shaping future cooperation (Chivvis & Keating, 2024). Diplomatic contacts continued in the 1990s, but in the early 2000s these relations began to develop more significantly (SETA, 2020).

The visit of a North Korean foreign delegation to Tehran in 2007 led to a deepening of cooperation between the two countries. During this visit, agreements were reached on cooperation in economic, military and cultural fields, and this process contributed to the strengthening of the two



North Korea's foreign affairs minister Lee Su-young shakes hands with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif during his visit to Iran for 53rd annual meeting of Asian-African Legal Consultative Organization in Tehran, Iran on September 14, 2014. (Mehdi Ghasemi - Anadolu Agency)

countries' diplomatic relations (Unal, 2014). The 2008 visit of Iranian officials to Pyongyang also reinforced the two countries' commitment to support each other on international platforms. During this period, the Iran Culture Week events organized in North Korea in 2009 turned into a platform emphasizing the common values of the two countries and efforts were made to increase Iran's cultural influence in North Korean society (Balázs Szalontai & Yoo Jinil, 2023).

During the inter-Korean crises in 2009 and 2013, Iran was supportive of North Korea, which helped to put relations between the two countries in a strategic context (IAEA Reports, 2005–2023). In 2013, a high-level North Korean delegation attending the inauguration of Hassan Rouhani as President agreed to further cooperation with Iran in military, economic and cultural fields, such as the nuclear program and missile technology (Soufan Center, 2024). In the process, Iran and North Korea pledged to support each other in the field of nuclear technology, and these agreements led to further consolidation of bilateral relations.

At the heart of relations between Iran and North Korea is a similarity in nuclear energy policies and a common approach to regional security policies. Iran's support for its nuclear program and North Korea's determination to continue this support are factors that strengthen the strategic alliance between the two countries. Think tanks in Iran have also developed a view that Iran and North Korea are natural allies. According to this perspective, the two countries continue to cooperate and take strategic steps in line with their mutual interests, especially in areas such as nuclear energy, military technology and the Syrian war (Bohdan, 2023).

In the Iranian media, North Korea is generally portrayed in a positive light, highlighting its support for military technology, its anti-Western stance and the parallels in its nuclear energy policies. Iranian officials and diplomatic representatives have emphasized the positive developments in relations with North Korea and have stated that these relations will deepen in the future (Bernal, 2023). Moreover, the two countries have cooperated within the framework of the Non-Aligned Movement to block various regulations on the international arms trade. This cooperation has had the effect of reinforcing the strategic importance of Iran-North Korea relations, not only regionally but also globally.

Economic Relations

Economic relations between Iran and North Korea began in the 1980s. Most of the economic exchanges were shaped by the defence industry. In recent years, Iran has announced its intention to export oil to North Korea and bilateral talks have been initiated.

North Korea's economy is closed and dependent on foreign aid. Despite its rich mineral resources, the country faces serious difficulties in meeting food and other basic needs. The famine of the late 1990s significantly reduced the country's foreign trade. As of 2012, North Korea's exports amounted to around 5 billion dollars and imports to around 4 billion dollars. China and Russia are North Korea's main trading partners (Bernal, 2023). On the other hand, Iran's economy is also closed and largely state controlled. Iran's energy sector finances a large part of the state budget and most of the revenues in this field are transferred to the state budget.

Both countries have long been subject to international sanctions over their nuclear programs. Sanctions against Iran were initiated and expanded by the UN Security Council in 2006. Sanctions against North Korea were imposed earlier and remain in place due to its nuclear program and missile development efforts. These sanctions have limited both countries' foreign trade (Kim, 2017).

Defence Industry Cooperation

The cooperation between Iran and North Korea first manifested itself during the Iran-Iraq war. Pyongyang, which supported Iran during the war and provided significant arms aid to the country, started to improve its relations with Tehran. In addition to exchanging know-how on nuclear technology, North Korean experts are in close contact with Iran on the transfer of military technology. North Korea continues to support Iran in the development of the Shahab-3 ballistic missile and the enrichment of uranium.

The pursuit of ballistic missile technology by states pursuing nuclear armament has led to the consideration of these missiles as an extension of the capability to use weapons of mass destruction rather than as a singular and independent military capability. Indeed, examples such as North Korea and Iraq in the 1980s and 1990s reinforced the perception that a state's interest in ballistic missiles is a harbinger of its intent to acquire nuclear weapons. Today, Iran's rapidly diversifying and growing stockpile of ballistic missiles is perceived as a direct extension and striking element of Tehran's nuclear weapons program and is seen as a serious threat by both regional countries and Western powers (Isbilen, 2018).

Despite international pressure, Iran has acquired the necessary technological capability and today, with the support of North Korea, not only has the capability to produce short-range and medium-range ballistic missiles, but also has thousands of such missiles in its inventory. Iran's next goal is to produce long-range ballistic missiles, with the goal of producing intercontinental ballistic missiles (Elleman, 2024).



(Fatemeh Bahrami - Anadolu Agency)

To understand the state of Iranian missile technology and the role of North Korea in its development, it is important to review basic missile types. Iran's short-range missiles are based on North Korean models, specifically the Fateh-100 and Shahab-2 (Scud-C). Iran also acquired the CSS-8 missile from China, with North Korean support. The Iranian military currently possesses approximately 400 Shahab-1 and Shahab-2 missiles, along with over 50 launcher systems. Both the Shahab-1 and Shahab-2 are derivatives of the Russian-made Scud (R-17) missile and are equipped with a 700 kg warhead likely filled with high-explosive material. The Shahab-2 missile, with a range of approximately 550 km, was developed with North Korean support and became operational in the late 1990s.

In 1998, Iran developed and tested the Shahab-3, a single-stage, liquid-fuelled, medium-range missile. Based on North Korea's Nodong-1 missile, the Shahab-3 became operational in the early 2000s, with a range of approximately 1300 km. A more advanced version, the Shahab-3A, extended this range to 1500-1800 km. The presence of an atmospheric warhead on the Shahab-3A has led to suspicions that Iran is developing unconventional warheads, possibly nuclear. In 2004, the Shahab-3B emerged, with claims of a range exceeding 2000 km. The missile's circular margin of error is believed to range between 500-2500 meters, with improvements in the Shahab-3B version reducing this error. These missiles are estimated to carry warheads weighing between 500-800 kg. Notably, all Shahab-3 missiles, capable of carrying nuclear warheads, are powered by a single-stage liquid-fuel engine. However, the necessity of filling

the fuel before launch poses challenges, prompting Iran to further develop solid-fuel missiles with support from North Korean expertise. For this reason, Iran continues to develop solid fuel missiles, again with know-how obtained from North Korea (Fitzpatrick, 2021).

Recently, Iran is known to have developed the Sejil missile, a solid-fuel, dual-stage missile with an estimated range of 2000 km. The Sejil missile has significantly enhanced Iran's long-range strike capabilities. The testing of the Sejil-2 played an important role in unveiling Iran's missile capabilities, especially in terms of solid fuel (Isbilen, 2018).

While there is no definitive data on Iran's intercontinental ballistic missile program, it is believed that only the successful launch of the multi-stage Safir rocket into space could be a means to test long-range ballistic missile technologies. Iran sent the Safir rocket into space in 2013. Later, Iran successfully launched its self-developed Simurg satellite-carrying missile into space, and the engines of these rockets suggest that the missile technology may have the capability to be used at the intercontinental level (Mahdi, 2024).

On the other hand, Iran's technological upgrading of its ballistic missiles means that its military cooperation with North Korea will further increase. In addition, Iranian experts are working with North Korea not only in the missile field but also in many other military fields such as nuclear technology and cyber space. Iran is also helping Pyongyang with centrifuges and uranium enrichment facilities that North Korea uses to produce nuclear weapons. In return, North Korean experts provide Iran with their experiences in uranium enrichment.

This exchange between the two countries has intensified, especially after the unilateral withdrawal of the United States from the nuclear deal under the first Trump administration. During this period, Iran experienced a breakdown in trust in the United States and Western powers and increased its investments in both nuclear and ballistic missile technologies. With this capability and advances in missile technology, Iran has become one of the largest ballistic missile powers in the Middle East affecting the complex balance of power in the region, whether for Israel or Saudi Arabia.

Nuclear Proliferation Concerns

The Iran-North Korea alliance has also raised serious concerns about nuclear proliferation. North Korea's nuclear advances, which have led to the development of operational nuclear weapons, have been a roadmap for Iran to bypass international restrictions and controls.

Iran's nuclear ambitions have long been a source of tension in the Middle East and beyond. While Tehran maintains that its program is for peaceful purposes, its past covert activities and uranium enrichment efforts that exceed civilian-use requirements paint a different picture. North Korea's technical support has enabled Iran to advance in

centrifuge designs, enrichment techniques, and even the miniaturization of nuclear warheads.

This cooperation has raised fears that a nuclear arms race could emerge in the Middle East. Countries, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have made clear their intention to launch similar programs if Iran goes nuclear. This carries the potential for further chaos in an already volatile region.

This situation is also a concern for the Israeli administration, which views Iran as a threat and has stated that it will target Iran's nuclear facilities whenever the opportunity arises. Tensions have escalated further with the recent conflicts involving Israel, Palestine, and Hezbollah, leading to a cycle of attacks and reprisals between Israel and Iran (Karkazis, Anastasiadou, & Markopoulos, 2024).

At the global level, the Iran-North Korea partnership challenges the effectiveness of international nuclear non-proliferation regimes. The fact that these countries have been able to evade inspections and continue their programs despite the efforts of initiatives such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) highlights the limitations of existing mechanisms.

Regional Impacts

Missile capabilities have also become a cornerstone of Iran's asymmetric warfare strategy. Iran has been strengthened with the missiles it received from North Korea and aims to increase its influence in the region. By supplying missiles to proxy groups such as Hezbollah and the Houthis, Iran has increased its influence in the region and created new challenges for its enemies. For example, Hezbollah's possession of Iranian-backed missiles has affected the dynamics of the Israeli Lebanese conflict. Hezbollah has launched several attacks on Israel with the missiles it received from Iran and has managed to inflict some damage to the Israeli side (Karkazis, Anastasiadou, & Markopoulos, 2024).

The Houthi missile attacks on Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have highlighted Iran's ability to project power through its proxy forces beyond its borders. These missile strikes have not only posed direct military threats but also targeted critical economic infrastructure, as seen in the 2019 attacks on Saudi Arabia's Aramco facilities, which underscored Iran's strategic advantage from such proxy actions (The Guardian, 2019). These attacks serve as an asymmetric tool for Iran to challenge its regional rivals, disrupting energy markets and impacting the global economy. Additionally, Houthi strikes on ships in the Red Sea have disrupted international maritime trade, further damaging global economic stability.



(North Korea News Agency - Anadolu Agency)

Prospects

The Iran-North Korea cooperation can also be considered a common challenge to the West. The US sanctions and isolation efforts against both countries have led these two regimes to a closer partnership. This situation questions the effectiveness of international sanctions mechanisms.

With Trump set to begin his second term, certain actions are anticipated from the US administration:

1. Maximum Pressure 2.0:

During his first term from 2017 to 2021, President Trump initiated a "maximum pressure" strategy against Iran. This included withdrawing from the landmark nuclear agreement between Iran and global powers, reinstating severe economic sanctions, and authorizing the assassination of Qassem Soleimani, a top Iranian general. Should Trump return to the White House, experts suggest that a "maximum pressure 2.0" approach might follow, with an emphasis on "containment and regime destabilization."

According to analysts, Trump could aim to create a lasting policy framework on Iran, one that would be challenging for future U.S. administrations to reverse. In a sign of continuity, Brian Hook, a key figure behind the "maximum pressure" campaign, is anticipated to play a prominent role in the incoming administration, potentially as Secretary of State. Throughout his campaign, Trump sent conflicting signals about Iran, at times threatening drastic military action while also expressing a willingness to engage in negotiations. While Trump stated his desire for Iran's success, he maintained that Tehran should not be allowed to acquire nuclear weapons.

Conclusion

The strategic alliance between Iran and North Korea continues to present shared defiance of a global order dominated by Western powers. Their cooperation, rooted in shared isolation and geopolitical interests, has led to the development of advanced missile technologies and nuclear capabilities that threaten regional stability. As both countries continue to defy international sanctions, their partnership undermines global non-proliferation efforts and raises the spectre of further destabilization. The response to this alliance, particularly through diplomatic engagement, additional sanctions, and military measures, will shape the future of global security in an increasingly multipolar world.

Strengthening Sanctions and Export Controls:

International sanctions and export controls against both sides are expected to be enhanced. This includes targeting entities facilitating their cooperation, closing loopholes in sanctions enforcement, and reinforcing global frameworks like the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR). Collaborative intelligence-sharing and cyber operations can be employed to track and disrupt illicit transfers, while partnering with technology firms can prevent the misuse of dual-use technologies.

2. Military Action:

During his first term, Trump was uncertain whether his goal was to alter Iranian policy or to overthrow the Iranian regime. Given Tehran's current vulnerabilities, the former objective may now be within reach, but the latter is likely not on the agenda. A potential joint operation with Israel to strike Iran remains a possibility, especially as Iran appears to refuse a deal that addresses Israel's security concerns entirely. If the Trump administration were to reach a deal with Tehran, Israel would likely remain hesitant to support it unless the agreement includes the dismantling of Iran's nuclear program, an end to its support for proxy groups, and a halt to its ballistic missile development. Since October 7, 2023, Israel has adopted more hardline demands and is expected to strongly pressure the Trump administration to consider military action against Iran unless these maximalist demands are met.

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