

Revisionist Allies: The Destabilizing Impact of the Iran-North Korean Strategic Partnership

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Abstract

This essay discusses the emergence of Iran and North Korea as revisionist powers. The partnership between Tehran and Pyongyang presents a strategic challenge to US dominance in the Post-Cold War era. The ideological, transactional, and strategic drivers of Iran's deadly alliance with North Korea are identified. The unsettling consequences of this revisionist partnership are felt across the Mideast. North Korean assistance for Iran's missile and militia strategy advances Tehran efforts to dominate the Middle East. No American Administration has effectively responded to the geo-military challenges this partnership portends.

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The unsettling consequences of this *revisionist* partnership are felt across the Mideast. North Korean assistance for Iran's missile and militia strategy advances Tehran efforts to dominate the Middle East. No American Administration has effectively responded to the geo-military challenges this partnership portends.

Iran's defiance parallels North Korean resistance to diplomatic efforts to divest Pyongyang of its nuclear weapons. Despite its enfeebled economy, the regime has increased its nuclear military capability. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) proliferation of conventional arms, weapon systems and platforms to Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas provide a critical financial windfall for Kim's tyrannical rule. This *revisionist* alliance desires to upend the liberal global order.

The reemergence of great power competition is recognized in US national security doctrine documents.¹ A struggle that analysts argue the United States is ill prepared to manage. Rising *revisionist powers* seek to weaken the US dominated global and regional order.

Since no one *revisionist* power can militarily challenge American interests, they cooperate to undermine America's global position. Iran's military cooperation with Russia in Syria for example has assured the Assad regime's preservation furthering Moscow's and Tehran's regional influence.² Russia's air support for Islamic Revolutionary Guard- Quds Force (IRGC-QF), the Syrian army and Hezbollah helped quell the Sunni dominated rebel insurgency. The Islamic Republic's alignment with Russia, China and North Korea existed for over a generation.

It is seen graphically in Iran's military assistance for Russia's efforts to subjugate Ukraine. Tehran has provided Moscow thousands of armed drones and as UN limits on the Islamic Republic export of ballistic missiles come to an end by October 2023 Tehran will likely export these armament systems in support for Russia's military campaign.

Alliances among *revisionist* powers have strengthened as America aims to extricate itself after costly interventions in the Mideast and Central Asia. Tehran and Beijing's March 2021 \$400 billion economic and military cooperation agreement, for example, provides the Islamic Republic with the financial means to pursue its regional agenda.³

Russia, China, and North Korea cooperate with Iran to fortify Tehran's military and economic capability.⁴ Collectively they have assisted the Islamic Republic's efforts to become a hegemonic Mideast power. Historically these countries have cooperated in illicit activities designed to circumvent international sanctions imposed against Iran's regime. Criminal smuggling networks ran by Lebanese and Iranian expatriates moreover assist Iran's capacity to trade oil and money for advanced missiles.

North Korean front companies in Malaysia and China transfer missiles and conventional weapons to the Islamic Republic and they launder Iranian payments through Macau casinos.⁵ The concealment of North Korean weapons and spare parts in reflagged commercial shipping tankers is part of Pyongyang's clandestine network to proliferate arms to the Mideast.

Weapons proliferation is a financial lifeline for the North Korean regime. The DPRK earns between 2 to 3 billion dollars a year on sales to Iran alone.⁶ Like other *revisionist* powers Iran scams the system by exploiting global clandestine networks. Criminal smugglers operating throughout the Gulf allow Tehran to violate UN Resolutions aimed at curtailing Tehran's quest to develop ICBM nuclear capability.

Iran's *Shahab* ballistic missile series are based on North Korea's *No-Dong* and *Musudan* designs.⁷ North Korean technicians were instrumental in assisting Iran's ballistic missile programs that are hidden in fortified underground bunkers built with Pyongyang's assistance.

The strategic and transactional drivers of the Iran- North Korea axis is shaped by common anti-American sentiment. Both nations have historically clashed with the United States.

American intervention in the Korean conflict and Washington's support for the Shah's pre- revolutionary regime are used by Pyongyang and Tehran to stoke hatred of the United States among their populations. Anti-Americanism drives North Korean communism and Iranian Islamism. Collectively they seek America's global military disengagement and the weakening of its allies.

US led efforts to isolate the Iranian and North Korean regimes, furthermore, provides sufficient incentives for Tehran and Pyongyang's cooperation. Reinforcing their antipathy toward Washington are America's alliances with hated regional adversaries.

American support for Japan, Israel and Sunni Gulf Kingdoms exacerbates Pyongyang and Tehran's anti-Western hatred by aggravating historical resentments. Japanese atrocities on the Korean Peninsula, Jerusalem's past military and economic cooperation with the Shah's regime and the Sunni-Shia conflict converge to reinforce hostility toward American allies.

America's partnership with disliked regional adversaries also reinforces conspiratorial thinking within the Iranian and North Korean governments. Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) manifestos rail against a nefarious *US, Zionist, and Saudi/UAE alliance* intent upon the Iran's destruction.⁸ Such sentiments echo the Kim regime's condemnation of a diabolical *US-Japan Conspiracy* that is presented as an existential threat to the regime's survival.⁹

International efforts to repress Pyongyang and Tehran nuclear weapons programs through economic sanctions challenge these regimes. Faced with daunting military and economic problems, Tehran and Pyongyang have partnered to facilitates their survival and further their regional policies.

Reinforcing this alliance is a similar totalitarian worldview. The ideational convergence between the two regimes is multi-faceted. Collectively their regimes reify *supreme leaders*, embracing a *communitarian worldview* that sharply *restricts freedom*.

Within the Shia *Twelver tradition*, Iran's Supreme Leader is viewed as the earthly representative of the 12th Imam who once released from occultation, will usher forth an apocalyptic war resulting in Islamic global domination. Since he is the embodiment of divine rule, the Supreme Leader's decisions cannot be challenged. North Korean communism similarly imbues its leadership with divine qualities that parallel the religious deference given to Iran's Supreme Leader. North Korea's system of *Suryong* consecrates the *guided leader* absolutist position in a rigidly stratified social and political order.¹⁰

Both regimes have created leadership cults whose absolutist power is enforced by security services that brutalize regime dissidents. The DPRK's *Songbun* classification system condemns most of the population to economic servitude and misery.¹¹ Iranian jails house hundreds of thousands of dissidents and the Islamic Republic have one of the highest execution rates in the world.¹² Here totalitarian personality cults, strict censorship, and military power advance regime survival.

North Korea and Iran reject liberalism that they see as threatening to their autocratic one-party regimes. Liberalism's emphasis on democratic rule and individual rights are the antithesis of Iran and North Korea's totalitarian worldviews that reify dynastic cults and prioritize collective interests. Ayatollah Khomeini's *Third Islamic Way* and Kim il Sung's *Juche* were cast as autonomous revolutionary movements at war with the West.

The Kim family's monopolization of power reflects the regime's integration of Stalinist and Confucian principles, imbuing the state with religious mandate to protect the popular classes¹³. Under Kim Jong-il the Communist Party's status declined resulting in a military first doctrine [*Songun*] that prioritized the armed forces modernization and the creation of a *guiding leader* personality cult.¹⁴ North Korea's ideology is not far from the philosophical foundations of Iranian clerical rule that mix religious and secular forces.

The consecration of elite rule in North Korea and Iran has moreover created clientele networks that wield immense economic clout. The Kim family's dynastic rule has elevated the role of the military in the management of the political economy and prioritized the armed forces military capacity. Kim's family and the military elites that surround them provide a center of political-economic gravity within the regime.

A parallel dynamic has occurred in Iran where the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has advanced the IRGC's influence over the country's national defense and industrial scientific complex.¹⁵ Like the Korean military the IRGC has substantial holdings in industry, finance, armaments, and energy development. The Supreme Leader strong personal relationship with IRGC commanders made the force a vanguard in the development of Iran's regional missile and militia strategy.

Khamenei's favoritism toward IRGC has sidestepped legislative and Presidential controls creating a highly personalistic form of decision-making. Tehran and Pyongyang's *deep state* concentration of power have furthered their strategic partnership.

Iranian Islamism has socialist foundations. Shia clerics worked with the Iranian Communist Party to undermine the Shah's regime¹⁶. The revolutionary movement that toppled the Pahlavi dynasty combined Shia religious discourse with Marxist doctrines.

Clerics in the pre-revolutionary period spoke of a religious mandate to create an Islamic socialism. After the 1979 Revolution Iran's first Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini nationalized the economy aiming to redistribute wealth toward the impoverished classes. Tehran's egalitarian embrace of exploited groups also extends to the liberation of oppressed Shia populations across the Muslim world.¹⁷

Shia victimization and martyrdom narratives mesh well with Marxist-Leninist theories of capitalist oppression. The ideological synthesis between Iran and North Korea is furthered by their ambitious foreign policies to remake the regional order free of oppressive American influence.

Ideological ties are buttressed by transactional relations. North Korea receives Iranian oil and cash for its weapons technology transfers that have equipped Iran and its regional proxy forces with missiles, conventional arms, and underground tunnel complexes.

North Korean weapons transfers and other forms of military-scientific assistance have allowed Iran to fortify its missile and militias strategy that has given it de facto control over the Iraqi, Lebanese and Syrian regimes. Having formed a pan ethnic Shia force comprised of 190,000 militia members, Tehran can strike across the Mideast.¹⁸ Iran's military expansion in the Levant and the Gulf jeopardizes US, Israeli and Sunni Gulf security interests and escalates the violence driving the Syrian and Yemeni civil wars.

North Korea, moreover, has a long history of weapons transfers to the Assad regime. Pyongyang played a pivotal role in Syria's development (with Iranian funds) of a plutonium nuclear reactor that had it not been destroyed by a 2007 Israeli air strike could have produced enough fissile material to develop a nuclear weapon.¹⁹ The Syrian regime's chemical weapons program was built with North Korean materials, infrastructure assistance and technical expertise to deadly effect. Syrian military artillery and ballistic missile strikes employing sarin nerve agents against rebel forces in 2013 killed over a thousand people.²⁰

North Korea's arms pipeline and advisory assistance are integrated within Tehran's *hybrid warfare* strategy. Faced with American conventional military superiority, Tehran has crafted an asymmetric warfare strategy using proxy forces to blunt direct American military retaliation. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps training and strategy borrows from communist guerrilla doctrine developed by Mao and Che Guevara. Pyongyang has similarly fortified its asymmetric military assets emphasizing special forces operational capability.

The DPRK doctrine of *Ch'ongdae* (gun philosophy) sees military mobilization and modernization as indispensable for the revolutionary regime's survival.²¹ Iranian and North Korean military doctrine and weapons technologies converge to compromise Western interests. The Iran-North Korean partnership has proven highly destabilizing to American and allied interests in Asia and the Mideast.

Iran's missiles and technology have with Pyongyang's assistance been transferred to Tehran's regional proxies in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon Yemen, and the occupied Palestinian territories. These weapons factories are placed in heavily populated areas in Lebanon making any US or Israeli military strikes problematic.²² North Korean assisted tunnel construction and underground weapons depots, allows Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas a ability to protect its weapons development factories. Even with hundreds of Israeli air strikes against IRGC and Hezbollah arms convoys and depots, Jerusalem has not prevented Tehran military entrenchment in Syria.²³

The Islamic Republic's coastal defense system of cruise missiles, drones, swarm boats and submarines (some manufactured by North Korea) threaten oil tanker shipping in the Persian Gulf and gives it the capacity to strike at Saudi refining capability.²⁴ Iran's drone and missile support have assisted Houthi rebel attacks across Yemen's Saudi border striking airports and oil operations.²⁵

Iran's missile precision project is progressively moving into developing an ICBM's capable of carrying nuclear weapons. Pyongyang's export of conventional arms to Syria and Yemen has prolonged the intensity of their civil wars.

How to blunt the destructive impact of the Iran and North Korea partnership has befuddled US policymakers. Diplomacy has yielded little success. Violating successive international nuclear limitation agreements, North Korea developed a vast atomic weapon arsenal.

The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) did not impair Tehran's missile development program. Though economic sanctions may have curtailed the speed and scale of North Korea and Iran's nuclear weapons programs, they have not rolled them back. That said the UN ended JCPOA restrictions on Iranian trade in conventional weapons in 2020 and restrictions placed upon Iran's ballistic missile development and centrifuge development are expected to expire by October 2023. Freed from these restraints, Iran could move from nuclear threshold state to a nuclear armed regime within months.²⁶ Such a development would invite an Israeli military response.

Tensions in the Middle East have risen appreciably since Hamas October 7, 2023, attack on Israeli communities bordering the Gaza Strip that killed over 1,400 Israelis. Israel has retaliated with a bombing campaign pounding The Islamic Resistance Movement's military infrastructure killing nearly 3,000 Palestinians. As Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) ready an assault force to enter the Gaza Strip the death toll could rise exponentially.

Iran's complicity in Hamas' October 7th attack is currently under debate. What few doubt, is Iran's long-term financial and armaments support for Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hamas and other "resistance" groups that have coalesced around a coordinating arm called the "Lion's Den".²⁷ Hamas alone receives \$100 annually from Iran and supplies most of its rocket and missile arsenal. The intricate network of North Korean assisted underground tunnels and Pyongyang's provision to small arms to Hamas further underscores the destabilizing consequences of the Islamic Republic of Iran partnership Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Hamas is likely using this underground tunnel system to confine 199 Israeli and foreign hostages it captured in its October 7th *al Asqa Storm* Operation. These tunnels are probable conduits for Hamas fighters and weapons when Palestinian forces resist the IDF's impending ground incursion. These tunnels were also prominently featured in assisting Hezbollah in its 2006 war with Israel. During that war Hamas and Hezbollah coordinated their military efforts against Israel establishing some parallels to today's conflict.

The prospect of escalation as Israel's prepares a massive ground incursion into Gaza risks sparking a multi-front war between Israel and Iranian backed Hezbollah in Lebanon. Should such a conflagration occur, North Korea would intensify its supplies of arms to Iran and its militia proxies. It has already done so in support for Russia's military campaign in the Ukraine.²⁸

The global community confronts a stark choice in confronting the destabilizing impact of the Iran-North Korea *revisionist* alliance. Given its immense human and material costs, a concerted international *military solution* to vanquish the Iranian-North Korean partnership is unlikely. Distressingly some security analysts urge US policymakers to accept North Korea as a de facto atomic weapons nation seeking only to limit Pyongyang's nuclear weapons development.²⁹

It is only a matter of time until policymakers may propose adopting the same position vis-à-vis Iran. Accepting the risks of a nuclearized Iran and North Korea furthers violent upheaval across the Mideast and Asia. Far from pacifying such regimes, international acquiescence to their respective nuclear weapons programs is likely to further Iran and North Korea's destructive geo-military ambitions. The Gaza war may be just the beginning of a series of destructive military clashes across the Middle East and possibly Asia where Iran and North Korea are central protagonists.

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