



PERSPECTIVES

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Iran and North Korea: Two Peas in a Nuclear Pod

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Much separates Iran and North Korea, but the two have plenty in common when it comes to nuclear ambitions. Whenever they move to appease the West, they somehow get closer to realizing their goals, while the world fumbles to curtail them.

The world recently marked two years since Iran and the West signed a landmark nuclear agreement, and much has been said on the issue.

Those who support the deal celebrated it, saying it was the best alternative and that Iran's compliance with the terms of the agreement, apart from several minor violations, proves its success. Those who opposed the deal (myself included) have pointed out that it has enabled Iran to be readmitted into the family of nations, and the alliance it has since formed with Russia, which I believe was forged only because of the deal, has allowed it to become a regional power. Iran's control of the axis between Tehran, Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut will one day lead to a bloody struggle, both with Israel and with the Sunni Arab states, which see Iran's expansionist aspirations as a threat to their very existence.

Recently, ostensibly in an unrelated move, North Korea took a major step towards creating a nuclear balance of terror toward the US by testing an intercontinental ballistic missile that could potentially hit the American heartland. Pyongyang saw this move as necessary to ensure that under no circumstances would Washington pressure it to change its ways, thus ensuring the isolated nation's complete freedom in navigating its future course.

Over the past few decades, North Korea's leaders have assumed that the US would be wary of pressing a nuclear state capable of threatening major American cities. It was the North's way of insuring itself against any use of force by the West.

The North Korean case is interesting because over the past 25 years, the West had held negotiations with it in various fora, and several agreements have been signed with the aim of halting the nuclear project launched by Pyongyang in the mid-1980s. North Korea's violations of the agreements always earned condemnation, but it never suffered any real penalties. Economic sanctions proved futile, and Pyongyang forged ahead even when it was made to pay a heavy economic price (which it still pays today). UNSC resolutions against the rogue nation proved equally fruitless.

Still, there have been a few moments of optimism along the way. The North's 2005 deal with the US, for example, was lauded as a breakthrough, and some in Israel had hoped similar efforts would lead to an effective nuclear deal with Iran. But the US and the international community's feeble reaction to the country's first nuclear test in 2006 made by then-leader Kim Jong Il, the father of current leader Kim Jong Un, proved that violating the deal harbored no risk. The "breakthrough agreement" turned into yet another step towards North Korea's becoming a nuclear threshold state.

The strong correlation between the North Korean and Iranian cases is clear. It was underscored further in 2007, when Iran's top nuclear negotiator, Ali Larijani, said, "Pay attention to North Korea's conduct. What has come of two years of negotiation with North Korea? It led to [the West's] acceptance of North Korea's nuclear technologies in the field of uranium enrichment. So now, they [the West] will accept ours."

One would have to be blind not to see the astounding resemblance between the international processes opposite Iran and North Korea. Both have undergone the same stages of dialogue with the global community, led by the US.

One would also have to be incredibly naive to think that Iran, which is far more powerful than North Korea, would not exploit the weakness shown by the international community, again led by the US. It is clear Iran is biding its time and will not hesitate to break free of the restrictions imposed on it by the toothless 2015 agreement. It will continue on its nuclear path as soon as the opportunity presents itself.

That said, there are major differences between Iran and North Korea and the spheres in which they operate.

The first is the position and international standing of South Korea, the North's wealthy neighbor, versus the position and standing of Iran's neighbors. South Korea's capital, Seoul, is less than 40 kilometers (25 miles) from the border with North Korea – a border along which thousands of artillery guns are deployed, ready to strike Seoul instantly. There are also massive North Korean armored forces on the border, ready to march through the huge tunnels running underneath it to take the South.

In stark contrast, Iran's Persian Gulf neighbors and even Israel would take severe measures against the Islamic Republic, including the use of military force, though the Islamic Republic would certainly mount a forceful response.

The second difference stems from the relative power wielded by North Korea and Iran. While the former is insignificant in terms of the global economic system, the latter is a regional power with a prominent position in the international energy market, especially for China and India. This makes North Korea a country against which it is relatively easy to mobilize the international community, as opposed to the real difficulty of garnering global support to pressure Iran.

In retrospect, it is clear that one of the reasons the international community came together to pressure Iran stemmed from the shared concern that without such pressure, Israel would potentially have no choice but to strike Iran's nuclear facilities. It seems the world wanted to curb Israel, and to an extent the US, far more than it wanted to curtail Iran.

Once it became clear that under the Obama administration the military option was off the table and Israel had accepted (under protest) the American move toward a nuclear deal, global concern waned. It is clear that without this constraint, the international community will do nothing to stop Iran once it crosses the nuclear threshold. Anyone who fails to see this is ignoring the lessons learned from the North Korean precedent.

Meanwhile, Iran is promoting the development of an envelope scheme that will allow it to embark on a path towards nuclear power. Assisted by Russia, it is intensively building its air defense systems. It is cultivating a solid economy that can better withstand potential future sanctions and other means of economic pressure, which was what brought it to the negotiation table on its knees – an achievement wasted by the American negotiators as soon as they allowed the Iranians to see that Washington was as eager to strike a deal as they were. It is developing missiles that would allow it to launch nuclear weapons to any range, as well as the next generation of centrifuges, which would allow it to make the leap to enriched uranium at peak speed.

Israel must learn the lessons of the nuclear agreement with Iran as well as study how North Korea became a nuclear power that threatens the US. Iran must not be allowed to duplicate the success of its friend on the Korean peninsula.

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