



The Iranian-North Korean Nexus After the Singapore Summit

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The summit that took place in Singapore in June 2018 between President Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un likely had a significant impact on the Pyongyang-Tehran nexus. Given the depth of strategic cooperation between the two countries, Iran can be expected to take steps to minimize any challenges that will be posed to that cooperation, either directly or indirectly, by the tentatively developing Pyongyang-Washington relationship.

In the wake of the Singapore summit, it is plausible that North Korea will be required by the US to avoid technology transfer to, and interactions with, other states or entities with regard to military nuclear technologies or armaments. It is not yet known whether Iran will be specifically mentioned during negotiations between Pyongyang and Washington. If it is, there will need to be control measures set up to validate that contact between Tehran and Pyongyang is not taking place. Beyond those agreed-upon control measures, a variety of surveillance steps will have to be taken by intelligence apparatuses checking for hermetic monitoring.

The surreptitious Iranian-North Korean interface has a long history. Its main component is a tight technological cooperation in the fields of missiles and nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. Each country has its own knowhow that it contributes to that cooperation. Iran substantially foots the bill.

The Iranian-North Korean interface has boosted Syrian strategic military capacities, a vector that climaxed in the form of the Syrian plutonium reactor

that was destroyed by the IDF in 2007. But even irrespective of Syria, the Pyongyang-Tehran nexus ought to be broken.

The two states are more or less equivalent from a scientific standpoint, with each having certain advantages over the other that they share without reservation. Both possess arsenals of operational chemical and biological weapons, including weapons in the form of warheads carried on missiles. The cardinal difference is the possession of nuclear weapons – along with the related knowhow – by North Korea. Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons persists undiminished, if restrained somewhat by the 2015 Vienna Nuclear Deal.

The summit between President Trump and Kim Jong-un created an entirely new situation. It is now open to question whether or not Kim Jong-un intends to give up his full inventory of military nuclear assets – almost any conveyable component of which Iran would be happy to possess. The last thing Tehran wants is to be informed by Pyongyang that its precious inventory is being completely destroyed or dismantled to meet the terms of a nuclear disarmament regime to be created with the US.

The Iranian-North Korean nexus has been largely under wraps for a long time. In September 2012, however, a meaningful event took place in public when the Iranian Minister of Science and Technology signed an agreement with North Korea establishing declared cooperation. No details were provided about the agreement other than that it would include “setting up joint scientific and technological laboratories, the exchange of scientific teams, and the transfer of technology in the fields of information technology, energy, environment, agriculture and food.”

Given the generality and vagueness of this formulation, it was reasonable to infer that the agreement went far beyond its alleged civilian sphere. In fact, that was but a disguise. Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei has since clarified that the agreement is an “outcome of the fact that Iran and North Korea have common enemies, because the arrogant powers do not accept independent states.”

Overt observations concerning Iranian-North Korean military technological cooperation picked up in September 2017, when a retired US Marine officer noted: “North Korea is getting £2bn a year from Iran. They have merchandised their warfare, their chemical weapons and nuclear weapons,” while the buyers are the Iranians. Although unverified, this observation may well reflect a meaningful part of the Iranian-North Korean interface.

US State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert said recently that US and North Korean officials had set up working groups to deal with the “nitty gritty stuff,” including verification of efforts to achieve denuclearization. These groups will be headed on the US side by Sung Kim, a Korean-American who is also ambassador to the Philippines. It has to be assumed that any information – classified or unclassified, formal or informal – pertaining in any way to the denuclearization of North Korea will be passed in real time by Pyongyang to Tehran, which will be eager to receive it.

Iran can learn many vital lessons from such information – about how to reset and reconfigure its own plans for the future procurement of nuclear weapons, the practical implementation of those plans, and the means of coping with control measures. This is one context in which Iran will be reassessing the 2015 Vienna Nuclear Deal, taking into consideration the repercussions of the US withdrawal. Iran might even try to influence the conceptual essentials and pragmatic practicalities of North Korea, if and when it ventures towards actual denuclearization.

Given the depth of the Iranian-North Korean relationship, Pyongyang is highly likely to concur in the Iranian approach – in other words, to wish to maintain the cryptic interface with Tehran regardless of the degree of soundness of Pyongyang's interface with the US.

Pyongyang's connection to Tehran is officially undisclosed, notwithstanding the fact that the North Korean embassy in Tehran was rebuilt last year – probably with fortified inaccessibility in terms of intelligence. But intelligence breakthroughs are always around the corner.

How will the Iranian-North Korean interface change now that Pyongyang is forming tentative ties to the US? First, it is likely to strengthen its counterintelligence elements in order to maintain covert reciprocal activities. North Korean knowhow regarding unconventional weapons – knowhow that has not yet passed to Iran – will presumably be transferred. Iran might try hard to get Pyongyang to convey to Iran, rather than declare, any elite North Korean personnel and as yet undeclared critical technological components – and possibly actual weaponry – currently in North Korean facilities. Existing joint programs concerning missiles, particularly those designed to carry unconventional warheads, might be relocated in part to Iran.

Bahram Ghassesemi, the spokesman for Iran's Foreign Ministry, said about the Singapore summit, “Our principal position on the Korean Peninsula is clear. We want peace, stability and security in that region, and we welcome any step taken in that direction. However, [due to] what we know of America and our understanding of their breaking their international commitments, we think

the government of NK must act very carefully.”

Right after the summit ended, Iranian government spokesman Muhammad Bagher Nobakht said, "We don't know what type of person the North Korean leader is negotiating with. It is not clear that he would not cancel the agreement before returning home."

Iran has much to lose if North Korea entirely meets the requirements likely to be posed by the US, and will endeavor to hamper any such development. The American-North Korean-Iranian triangle is geopolitically fascinating and has far-reaching strategic ramifications. The dynamics underlying it have two elements: a visible element comprised of the recently established relationship between Pyongyang and Washington; and a largely invisible element comprised of Pyongyang's long relationship with Tehran. The first element will be influenced by China, and perhaps also by Russia – but the second will retain its autonomy, its clandestine nature, and possibly its inaccessibility. This is a matter of serious concern, as Iran stands to be endowed with rescued North Korean assets.

This situation has secondary implications for Syria. Joint Iranian-North Korean technological assistance to Syria in developing and producing missiles, rockets, and chemical weapons has been going on for a long time. Tehran and Damascus would both prefer that the North Korean contribution to this development continue unimpaired, and Tehran will make an effort to see that it does.

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