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The North Korean Foreign Minister Visits Tehran by Lt. Col. (res.) Dr. Dany Shoham

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Iran and North Korea are faced with similar challenges posed by the US, particularly since the summit between North Korean leader Kim Jung-un and President Trump. The recent visit of the North Korean foreign minister to Tehran might presage an attempt to covertly retain and transfer cardinal North Korean nuclear and ballistic assets to Iran.

Not long after the US reimposed sanctions on Iran, North Korea's foreign minister, Ri Yong-ho, arrived in Tehran. The visit took place in the midst of faltering talks between Pyongyang and Washington over fulfilling the goal of denuclearizing the Korean peninsula. Ri traveled to Tehran after attending a security forum in Singapore where he and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo sparred over an agreement made at June's landmark summit between Trump and Kim Jong-un.

On his visit to Tehran, Ri met first with Foreign Minister Muhammad Javad Zarif, who said the two countries "expressed satisfaction with existing bilateral relations and called for further expansion of ties." He added, vaguely, that they had "discussed the latest regional and international developments, as well as issues of mutual interest." Ri then met with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and briefed him on the ongoing talks between the DPRK and the US. He was quoted as saying that his country's strategic policy advocates a widening of ties with Iran and a confrontation of unilateralism. Ri described the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal with Iran as a contravention of international regulations.

Rouhani said the US, which seeks a deal to rein in Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs, cannot be trusted. "In the current situation, friendly countries should develop their relations and cooperation in [the] international

community,” he said, adding that Tehran and Pyongyang have “always had close views” on many issues.

A third meeting took place between Ri and Iranian Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani. Noting the longstanding ties between the Islamic Republic and the besieged DPRK, Ri highlighted Pyongyang’s satisfaction with the resilient and longstanding friendship between the two states. “We are very content with developing relations between Iran and North Korea,” he said, “while we are both experiencing similar problems under US sanctions. Dealing with Americans is difficult, and as our main goal is total disarmament of the whole Korean Peninsula, it is necessary that the Americans also abide by their commitments, but they refuse to do so. Although [Pyongyang] has agreed on disarmament to deliver on its commitments in negotiations with US, we will preserve our nuclear science as we know that the Americans will not abandon their hostility toward us.”

The two countries have the backing of China and Russia, but they rely on each other and act as one entity in several respects. In view of the political and economic pressures they both face at present, as well as the difficulties resulting from prohibitions on military technologies, they view certain key components of their resources as common assets. The two countries are seeking an optimal way to classify, pool, and protect those common assets.

Whereas Iran is supposed to avoid the development of nuclear weapons, including adjustable ballistic missiles, North Korea is expected to get rid of its existing nuclear weaponry, its facilities dealing with military nuclear technologies, and its adjustable ballistic missiles. Both countries still, however, view nuclear weapons – particularly in the form of ballistic missiles – as an essential asset. They both possess meaningful infrastructures and knowhow of direct and indirect relevance. A complex, multi-factorial equation is thus formed whereby the two countries are trying to act as a unitary, nearly autonomous compound in certain respects. This is how they ought now to be viewed and approached. Given their present obligations, Tehran and Pyongyang are jointly mobilizing to minimize the loss of perceived common assets while avoiding military confrontation with the US and assuring the regimes’ survival.

The recent visit of North Korea's foreign minister to Tehran appears to mark a new chapter that commenced unofficially right after the Singapore summit between Trump and Kim Jong-un. The implications of the summit for Iran, in light of its nexus with North Korea, were highly consequential. The new chapter extends beyond diplomacy. It will entail a demanding Western intelligence and counter-intelligence effort, not only with regard to what is

going on in North Korea itself but also with regard to clandestine, intensifying nuclear and ballistic technology transfers from North Korea to Iran.

This new chapter might eventually lead either to long-lasting nuclear weapons deprivation for both Iran and North Korea, or to military confrontation with one or both of them aimed at ensuring such an achievement. Intermediate situations are also possible. As stated, Pyongyang could purport to dispose of its prohibited nuclear and ballistic assets but covertly send them to Tehran.

The phrase “complete denuclearization” (in reference to North Korea) will have to be carefully defined. The definition of “knowhow” has already been disputed by the North Korean foreign minister, who insisted on “preserving nuclear science and knowledge.” The fact that he made this claim during a visit to Tehran is significant.

The covert, unofficial phase preceding the visit consequent to the Singapore summit probably included intensive contacts between the North Korean Ministry of Atomic Energy Industry and the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, as well as between the North Korean Ministry of People's Armed Forces and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. Fifty-seven days after the Singapore summit, that undisclosed phase brought about the visit of Ri Jung-ho to Tehran. The visit enabled direct, high-level discussion and the demonstration of a joint posture.

The informal message emerging from the visit is as follows: “We, Iran and North Korea, stand together to counter any move taken against either of us, and we intend to tightly and thoroughly cooperate for that purpose. Our legitimate scientific and technological infrastructures and activities will persist. We represent one system, based on one paradigm.”

Apparently in response to this, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who had been scheduled to travel to Pyongyang recently, was asked by President Trump to cancel the visit for now on the grounds of a lack of progress in the denuclearization talks – a plausible outcome of Ri's visit to Iran.

On the practical level, a variety of related assets – in addition to operational weaponry – found in North Korea, which will eventually be categorized as destined for monitored elimination or dismantling, might instead be conveyed – either assembled or unassembled – to Iran, where they will be warmly welcomed. The visit of the North Korean foreign minister to Tehran signals the potential removal of weaponry, technological assets, and skilled personnel from North Korea to Iran rather than a full declaration of their existence and subsequent elimination or dismantling. The absence of a

common border between the two countries will make camouflaged transportation from North Korea to Iran complicated and risky, but the two countries should be expected to do their utmost to overcome that disadvantage.

Lt. Col. (res.) Dr. Dany Shoham, a microbiologist and an expert on chemical and biological warfare in the Middle East, is a senior research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. He is a former senior intelligence analyst in the IDF and the Israeli Defense Ministry.

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