



PERSPECTIVES

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The Quadruple Threat: North Korea, China, Pakistan, and Iran

by Lt. Col. (res.) Dr. Dany Shoham

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The vast, uninterrupted territory that contains North Korea, China, Pakistan, and Iran has greater geostrategic importance today than ever before. Of the two outermost countries of that territory, an anonymous senior US administration official recently said that "Iran and North Korea have resumed cooperation in the framework of a project on long-range missiles that includes the transfer of core components."

On September 8, 2020, a meeting took place between Chairman of National Security and Foreign Policy Commission of the Iranian Parliament Mojtaba Zolnouri and North Korean Ambassador to Iran Han Sung-joo. The meeting was held to discuss the launch of financial and barter networks between the two countries. US Special Representative for Iran and Venezuela Elliott Abrams responded by saying, "We are very concerned about Iran's cooperation with North Korea. ...We will be watching the cooperation with North Korea very carefully and doing what we can to prevent it."

A senior US administration official who preferred to remain anonymous recently said that "Iran and North Korea have resumed cooperation in the framework of a project on long-range missiles that includes the transfer of core components," a venture that is subject to interpretation. A "transfer of core components" might well extend beyond items related to solely conventional warhead-carrying missiles. No matter what it will in fact entail, the transfer will likely be insufficiently monitored due to the parties' ability to make untraceable transfers on land across their contiguous territories. Aerial non-commercial transportation flights along the same uninterrupted corridor are also not easily monitored.

The other two countries in the contiguous nexus, China and Pakistan, are not likely to interfere. On the contrary: they are essential parts of the complex.

North Korea

The Pyongyang regime is an unpredictable and often indecipherable tyranny, and a proliferator of WMDs plus ballistic knowhow and components. It is a threatening element for these reasons:

- It managed to avoid any agreement with the US regarding its development of ballistic and nuclear capabilities
- It possesses nuclear, biological, and chemical weapon arsenals
- It might be actively assisting the Iranian nuclear weapons program
- There is a concealed terrestrial interface between North Korea and Pakistan via China. Intelligence satellites have detected that the Karakoram Highway has been used to supply illicit nuclear material and dual-use items for missiles
- North Korea has been increasingly close to China since 2018, especially after Xi Jinping met with Kim Jong-un in Pyongyang in June 2019
- In August 2019, Director of the General Political Bureau of the KPA Kim Su Gil visited Beijing to meet with Zhang Youxia, the second-ranked vice chairman of the Central Military Commission. Zhang told Kim that the delegation's visit was of "crucial significance in bilateral exchange."

North Korea shares a 1,416 km land border with China.

A new long-range missile was recently displayed by North Korea during its 75th anniversary military parade. This missile, together with its heavily modified truck, appear to represent a quantum leap (beyond the Hwasong-15 ballistic missile) in Pyongyang's capacities, in reference to its missiles, launchers, and warheads, both conventional and unconventional. It is unlikely that North Korea attained these upgraded capacities without assistance.

China

China is a matter of serious concern for these reasons:

- It possesses nuclear, biological, and chemical weapon arsenals. Its biological weapons arsenal is the most advanced in the world

- It strives to match and eventually surpass the West, both scientifically and technologically
- It is a “great pretender” that is inclined to overshadow competitors, including friendly competitors, in all fields
- Globally, it seeks to attain a geostrategic position through which it can exercise definitive, if largely unseen, influence upon international bodies. One example is its current interface with the WHO
- It has boundless ambition: it is pursuing hegemony in Asia (and beyond) through economic and military predominance. Two outcomes are the remarkable support lent by China to North Korea and Iran (essentially against the US) and to Pakistan (essentially against India)

China shares a 592 km land border with Pakistan.

Pakistan

Pakistan is:

- In possession of nuclear, biological and chemical weapon arsenals
- The only Muslim country to possess a stockpile of nuclear weapons
- Reportedly collaborating with and being assisted by China in the development and field testing of biological warfare agents

China is an important source of Pakistan’s missile technology.

Islamabad’s tight military cooperation with Beijing consists mainly of purchasing attack submarines and developing fighter jets, with the addition of other faculties under so-called “scientific” frameworks. Military-to-military cooperation between the countries has strengthened in recent years, with Pakistani military personnel being trained in Chinese military institutions. The two countries often conduct joint military exercises.

Pakistan has a 959 km land border with Iran, a link that remains useful despite the fact that existing Pakistani interfaces are complex and in some cases substandard. The Pakistani-Iranian border represents the final western terrestrial passage to and from Iran along the uninterrupted quadruple territory under discussion (irrespective of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project and the overland Silk Road Economic Belt project).

The German report

In June 2020, the Office for the Protection of the Constitution for the German state of Baden-Württemberg issued a report for the year 2019 that provided an explication of the illicit North Korea-Pakistan-China relationship. With reference to the nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons programs of North Korea and Pakistan, the report says:

They aim to complete existing arsenals, perfect the range, deployability and effectiveness of their weapons and develop new weapons systems. They are trying to obtain the necessary products and relevant knowhow through illegal procurement efforts in Germany. In order to circumvent existing export restrictions and embargoes, risk states must constantly develop and optimize their procurement methods. To conceal the actual end user, they can procure goods in Germany and Europe with the help of specially established cover companies and, in particular, transport dual-use goods to risk states. Typical bypass countries include Turkey and China.

Additionally, of course, single-use “goods” related to WMDs are clandestinely transported internally along the North Korea-China-Pakistan axis.

Iran

Iran can certainly be added to the extensively Chinese-supported duo of North Korea and Pakistan, with one key difference: Iran is the only one of the four to still be without nuclear weapons, though it is in active pursuit of them. On October 16, the Iranian opposition group The National Council of Resistance of Iran pointed out a secret facility in Sorkheh Hesar, east of Tehran, for producing nuclear weapons. Iran possesses biological and chemical weapons arsenals, is upgrading its ballistic capabilities, fosters relations with North Korea and China, and keeps its land border with Pakistan safe and exploitable for transportation. Moreover, to the west, Iran is endeavoring to construct a sound terrestrial bridge to Syria (and Lebanon) through Iraq, which would significantly lengthen the transportive axis of the uninterrupted quadruple territory.

Finally, on the military level, Iran and China recently tentatively agreed to extend their joint research and development of weapons, intelligence sharing, and joint training plus exercises. This is in parallel to their intention to form a broad and long-term logistical and economic cooperation. China stands to attain a great many footholds in Iran.

The Islamic regime in Iran has always been a radically oriented disguised tyranny, the deeds of which were often marked by elegance and sophistication. The disguise has at last begun to disintegrate, even in the eyes of inexplicably sympathetic European countries. Iran's bonding with China could prove disastrous, particularly within the context of the uninterrupted quadruple territory.

The geostrategic importance of the belt comprising the four contiguous countries is increasing. This meaningful trend is basically independent of the new overland Silk Road and maritime Silk Road. The quadruple belt should be monitored closely to avoid the coalescing of the four countries into a formidable block.

While the territory comprising North Korea, China, Pakistan, and Iran might form a cardinal unified factor within the geostrategic system of the eastern hemisphere (and beyond), the interactions of China and Iran with Israel are meaningful in the region. Two remarkable examples—if not directly connected to the above—are the recent Iranian cyberattack on Israel's drinking water, which aimed to destabilize the chlorine level and poison the country's citizens; and the approaching operational management of the port of Haifa's New Bay Terminal—not far from Haifa Naval Base, which houses Israeli submarines, missile boats and other vessels—by the Shanghai government-owned SIPG, from 2021 to 2046.

If China finds that it needs to prioritize between Iran and Israel—an entirely conceivable scenario—it will favor Iran, no matter what the context.

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.