

# Assessing North Korean assistance to Syria's weapons programmes

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The UN Panel of Experts published its report on North Korean proliferation in March 2018. *Alessandra Giovanzanti* examines the report and assesses the evidence of North Korean support for Syria's chemical weapon and ballistic missile programmes

## Key Points

- The report provided new evidence of North Korea's deceptive practices in violation of UN resolutions and embargoes, underlining the challenges faced by counter-proliferation practitioners.
- Evidence assessed in the report suggests that the nature of North Korean-Syrian chemical weapons co-operation intensified with the advent of the conflict in Syria.
- According to the report, co-operation has taken the form of the provision of dual-use equipment, as well as technical expertise in the form of delegations of North Korean advisers visiting Syria.

On 5 March 2018, the UN Panel of Experts presented its report (S/2018/171) on North Korea's proliferation-related activity. The panel was appointed to monitor the observance of international sanctions imposed on Pyongyang, and the report included new evidence on the continuing North Korean trade of "prohibited ballistic missile, conventional arms-related and dual-use goods" and other "projects within the Syrian Arab Republic".

The dual-use items described by the report have the potential to further Syria's chemical weapons (CW) or missile programmes, which have continued despite the civil war, international sanctions, and Syria's accession to the Chemical Weapon Convention (CWC) in 2013.

## Historical co-operation

North Korean-Syrian co-operation is long-standing and Pyongyang has been a key enabler of Syria's military advancements, including in Syria's import of conventional weapons, air defence, ballistic missile, and nuclear technology. In return, these activities have helped North Korea's Cold War-era 'anti-imperialist' credentials and have provided funds for its own nuclear and missile programmes.

Co-operation has its roots in the 1960s, when North Korean pilots were dispatched to Syria during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. In 1970, North Korea dispatched tank crewmen, pilots, and missile technicians to Syria, and during the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War, a further 30 North Korean pilots were sent to Egypt and Syria to train Arab pilots.

During this period, North Korean-Syrian co-operation was primarily confined to information-sharing, with Syria primarily depending on the Soviet Union for its military support. Foreign military sales began in the late 1970s, starting with small-arms, although by the late 1980s this had escalated to the sale of ballistic-missile technology. For example, in December 1989 the *Korea Times* newspaper quoted Israeli military sources as saying that Syria had approached North Korea for assistance to develop surface-to-surface missiles after China, under US pressure, had withdrawn from a similar deal.



*US soldiers wear chemical warfare gear during a joint military exercise with South Korea at a US Army base in Dongducheon, 40 km north of Seoul, on 3 March 2011. Protection against North Korea's chemical weapons capability is a key issue for the US and South Korean military, underlining the seriousness with which North Korea's capabilities in this area are taken. (Jung Yeon-je/AFP/Getty Images)*

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By the early 1990s, Syria had purchased North Korean Scud-based Hwaseong-6 missiles (commonly referred to as 'Scud Cs'). According to the Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms Control, Syria flight-tested 'Scud C' missiles in July 1992 and again in mid-1994. In addition to acquiring missile production facilities in the mid-1990s, Damascus also purchased longer-range 'Scud-D' missile technology, and in September 2000 the Jerusalem-based Voice of Israel network reported that Israel's Arrow radar had detected a test launch of the Syrian 'Scud D' missile.

In October 2007, an unidentified UN member state seized a shipment originating from the North Korea General Trading Corporation (likely to have been a cover for Korea Tangun Trading Company) that was bound for Latakia, Syria. According to UN report S/2012/422, the intended recipient was the Handasieh General Organization Engineering Industries, a front company of the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Centre (SSRC), which is responsible for Syria's chemical and missile programmes.

The materials found on board included double-base propellant blocks, of which 50 (6 cm in diameter and 13 cm in height) were deemed "usable for gas generators to power Scud missile turbopumps", and other dual-use items ("electrical and thermal switches") had "potential ballistic missile applications".

In June 2012, *Jane's International Defence Review* reported that a co-operative missile development programme between North Korea and Syria had gained momentum through a project to upgrade Syrian 'Scud D' surface-to-surface missiles with a manoeuvring re-entry vehicle (MaRV) capability. According to UN report S/2018/171, this was corroborated by a member state that informed the panel that North Korea's Ryonhap-2 Corporation was involved in the Syrian 'Scud D' MaRV project in 2008.

### **Chemical connection**

Despite the well-documented missile co-operation between the two countries, there has previously been only limited evidence of CW co-operation. According to an October 2013 interview with Bruce Bechtol, a professor of International Relations at Angelo State University in Texas and former senior intelligence analyst at the US Defense Intelligence Agency, on Radio Free Asia, "Initially [North Korea] sold chemical weapons to Syria in the early 1990s and then evolved into building two chemical weapons fabrication facilities for the Syrians in the mid-1990s under a contract ... [and] at least at one of the facilities, not only do the North Koreans help them with the materials needed to fabricate these warheads and artillery shells, but they actually have the missiles."

Claims that North Korea provided chemical warhead technology for Syria's Scud-type missiles were reiterated in 1997 by the Israeli Ministry of Defence, and in September 2007, *Jane's Defence Weekly* reported that a "joint development programme by Iran and Syria to weaponise Syrian 'Scud B', 'Scud C' and 'Scud D' short-range ballistic missiles with chemical warheads ha[d] been aborted following an explosion at a classified missile production laboratory in Aleppo, northern Syria, in July".

Although the report did not identify the presence of North Korean workers, commentators such as Bechtol have suggested that several North Korean engineers also died in the explosion. In September 2007, Israeli jets destroyed an alleged North Korean-designed and -built nuclear reactor at Al Kibar.

Aside from these reports of nuclear and missile co-operation, the majority of concrete finds regarding CW have involved equipment for defence against chemical attacks. For example, in November 2009, South Korean authorities detained and inspected the merchant vessel *MSC Rachele* at the port of Busan and found four containers filled with, among other things, 14,000 sets of protective chemical clothing that could be used for military purposes to protect against some chemical agents. These containers originated in the North Korean port of Nampo, were shipped to Dalian (China), and then placed on board the *MSC Rachele*. The kits were bound for Latakia for delivery to the Syrian Environmental Study Centre, a front company of the SSRC.

**[Continued in full version...]**

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