
North Korea's Military Cooperation Policy Toward Iran and other Middle East Countries¹

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Abstract

North Korea, which has been engaged in military cooperation with many countries around the world, has also been promoting military cooperation with Middle Eastern countries, including Iran. The purpose of this study is to re-examine North Korea's military cooperation policy toward the Middle East and military cooperation between North Korea and Iran using North Korean public documents and records of defectors which have rarely been used in previous studies.

North Korea has been promoting diplomatic relations with Middle Eastern countries since the 1960s, and it had strong ties with Egypt and Syria in the Non-Aligned Movement. It dispatched its air force to Egypt and Syria during the 1973 Yom Kippur War (October War).

North Korea began military cooperation with Iran after the Iranian Revolution in 1979, which broke diplomatic relations with the US and Israel. During the Iran-Iraq War, North Korea exported many weapons, including missiles, and dispatched its troops to Iran. After the war, it began to export missiles not only to Iran but also to other Middle Eastern countries to earn foreign currency.

However, as international sanctions made it almost impossible for Middle Eastern countries to import North Korea's weapons, North Korea seemed to bring its military cooperation policy toward the Middle East back to cooperating

with the Non-Aligned Movement; as Non-Aligned Movement members, Egypt, Syria, and Libya were more important partners for North Korea than Iran. Nevertheless, since Egypt and Libya have good relations with Israel and the US, I argue that Syria is the most important country for North Korea's military cooperation policy toward the Middle East.

Keywords: North Korea, Military Cooperation, Middle East, Iran, Nuclear

Introduction

This study aims to re-examine North Korea's military cooperation policy toward the Middle East and the military cooperation between North Korea and Iran using North Korean public documents and records of defectors which have been rarely used in previous studies.

North Korea has promoted military cooperation with several countries, already since the 1970s including Middle Eastern ones, exporting missiles and other weapons and dispatching military units and engineers to these and to North Africa.

However, few studies have addressed North Korea's military cooperation with the Middle East. That of Alon Levkowitz is one of the few representative studies on this topic.² Moreover, most of these studies have focused on North Korea's military cooperation with Iran, which has been considered to be different from the cooperation between North Korea and other Middle Eastern countries, due to nuclear and missile issues.

Therefore, researchers have been interested in North Korea's nuclear and missile cooperation with Iran. The two countries were able to share nuclear technology because Abdul Qadeer Khan, who was responsible for Pakistan's nuclear programme, sold nuclear-related materials and technology to both of them. The US Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), published in 2010, also noted that both countries continue to violate the international community's nuclear non-proliferation regime.³

However, unlike North Korea, which has been developing nuclear weapons, Iran is trying to dispel suspicions of doing such a thing. Iran agreed to the implementation

of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on July 14, 2015; although it had to accept the reduction and inspection of nuclear facilities, it can continue nuclear development.

Siegfried S. Hecker and Bruce E. Bechtol strongly suspected nuclear cooperation between North Korea and Iran, even after Iran agreed to 'first-stage measures' on November 24, 2013.⁴ After the JCPOA, the UN Security Council lifted sanctions against Iran on January 16, 2016; however, Bechtol and Larry Nicksch suspected that North Korea would continue nuclear cooperation with Iran based on press articles and US Congressional reports.⁵

Nevertheless, views are contradictory. In his research, Balázs Szalontai found that the image of North Korea in the Iranian government and public opinion were often negative and that Iranian–North Korean relations are somewhat tense; his research does not suggest that North Korea and Iran engage in nuclear cooperation.⁶

If North Korea had not provided nuclear technology and materials to Iran, its military cooperation with Iran would not differ significantly from that with other Middle East countries. This is because North Korea has provided almost all kinds of military cooperation, except for nuclear, to these countries.

Is North Korea's military cooperation with Iran fundamentally different from its military cooperation policy toward other Middle Eastern countries? Here I re-examine North Korea's military cooperation policy toward the Middle East as well as military cooperation between North Korea and Iran. I outline what kind of military cooperation North Korea has been providing to Iran, mainly using documents released by the DPRK's government and records provided by North Korean defectors.

I conclude that North Korea's military cooperation with Iran is similar to its military cooperation with most Middle Eastern countries and clarify which of these countries is the DPRK's most important partner in the region.

1. What kind of Middle Eastern Countries does North Korea Prefer?

During the Cold War, North Korea tended to establish diplomatic relations with socialist and Non-Aligned countries that were in conflict with the West. After the Cold War, North Korea established relations with almost all member countries of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which was originally created in 1949, to provide collective security for the West, against the Soviet Union. Turkey, the only NATO member in the Middle East, also established diplomatic relations with North Korea on January 15, 2001.

As a socialist country, Algeria was the first country in the Middle East and North Africa to establish diplomatic relations with North Korea on September 25, 1958. North Korea began establishing diplomatic relations with Middle Eastern countries in the 1960s because the Sino-Soviet conflict split the socialist camp. Therefore, the DPRK began to look to Non-Aligned countries.

North Korea established diplomatic relations with the Arab Republic of Yemen (North Yemen) on March 9, 1963, with Egypt on August 24, 1963, with Syria on July 25, 1966, with Iraq on January 30, 1968 (breaking them off on October 10, 1980), with the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) on February 7, 1968, and with Sudan on June 21, 1969. In 1984, the DPRK also revealed that it recognised internally the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as a state on April 13, 1966. North Korea also signed a trade agreement with Lebanon on September 15, 1967, and concluded formal diplomatic relations on February 12, 1981.

North Korea, as a socialist country, preferred to establish diplomatic relations with republican states which had limited relations with the West in the 1960s and avoided diplomatic relations with monarchies; leaving the Kingdom of Cambodia in Southeast Asia as the only exception in that decade.

Libya and Tunisia were exceptional republican Middle Eastern countries that delayed the establishment of diplomatic relations with North Korea until January 29, 1974 (Libya) and July 16, 1975 (Tunisia). Diplomatic relations were established with Libya after it transitioned from a monarchy to a republic on September 1, 1969.

Further, North Korea had had no intention to normalise diplomatic relations with Tunisia due to its criticism of the DPRK in the 1960s.

North Korea began establishing diplomatic relations with monarchies in the Middle East in 1973, when it became a UN observer and began UN-centred diplomacy to seek to adopt resolutions reflecting its own claims in the UN General Assembly. To gain support from more UN members at the assembly, North Korea promoted the development of friendly relations with Non-Aligned countries, regardless of them being republics or not. North Korea established diplomatic relations with Pahlavi Iran on April 15, 1973, and with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan on July 5, 1974 (breaking them off on February 1, 2018). In 1976, however, North Korea abandoned its UN-centred diplomacy and once again became reluctant to conclude diplomatic relations with monarchies.

North Korea began to establish diplomatic relations with other Middle Eastern monarchies after the Cold War: with Morocco on February 13, 1989, with Oman on May 25, 1992, with Qatar on January 11, 1993, with Kuwait on April 4, 2001, with Bahrain on May 23, 2001, and with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on September 17, 2007. It has no diplomatic relationship with Saudi Arabia.

Despite being a republic, North Korea considers Israel an enemy because of its strong relations with the West. Accordingly, the two countries have no diplomatic relationship. Yet, North Korea has not always regarded Israel as an enemy. In fact, in 1950, it commented that Israel was a great nation.⁷ This opinion changed after the Soviet Union broke off diplomatic relations with Israel on February 11, 1953, and in 1954, North Korea criticised Israel as an anti-Soviet Union and pro-US country.⁸

Thus, until the end of the Cold War, North Korea had regarded Middle Eastern countries that were republics and had limited relations with the West as important. Pahlavi Iran, which had strong ties with the West before the 1979 Revolution, was not important for North Korea.

2. The Beginning of North Korea's Military Cooperation with the Middle East

Among Middle Eastern countries, Algeria is the first country whose military cooperation with North Korea can be confirmed by records. The ruling party of North Korea – the Workers' Party of Korea – decided to send a military delegation to Algeria on January 16, 1970.⁹

North Korea's promotion of military cooperation with the Middle East resulted from UN-centred diplomatic efforts that sought to gain the support of UN member states since 1973. North Korea then formally joined the Non-Aligned Movement. The Middle Eastern countries with which North Korea promoted military cooperation stood in conflict with Israel, which on its side had close ties with the US.

North Korea's first dispatching troops to the Middle East also served the purpose of fighting Israel. In 1973, North Korea dispatched air force units to Egypt and Syria, both of which were engaged in hostilities with Israel. These North Korean troops fought Israeli troops in the Yom Kippur War. The Korean People's Air Force units arrived at Egypt in early June and were assigned to an Egyptian military squadron in July.¹⁰ The Korean air force units consisted of 30 pilots, eight air traffic controllers, five interpreters, three commanders, a doctor and a cook, for a total of 48 men.¹¹ According to North Korean reports, the North Korean air wing shot down four Israeli F-4 fighter jets in their first battle.¹²

On the other hand, the Syrian government had requested North Korean air support during the Yom Kippur War.¹³ In return for the dispatch of North Korea's air force, Syrian President Hāfiz al-Asad, who visited North Korea from September 28 to October 3, 1974, promised North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Il-sung that he would dispatch Syrian troops to assist North Korea if the Korean War broke out again.¹⁴

According to the South Korean Defense Ministry, Egypt relinquished Soviet-made Scud B (R-17E) ballistic missiles to the DPRK in return for its dispatch of troops.¹⁵ It is believed that North Korea's ballistic missile development program began with ballistic missiles from Egypt, and neither North Korea nor Egypt has ever denied it. The development of the North Korean ballistic missiles that threaten Japan, South

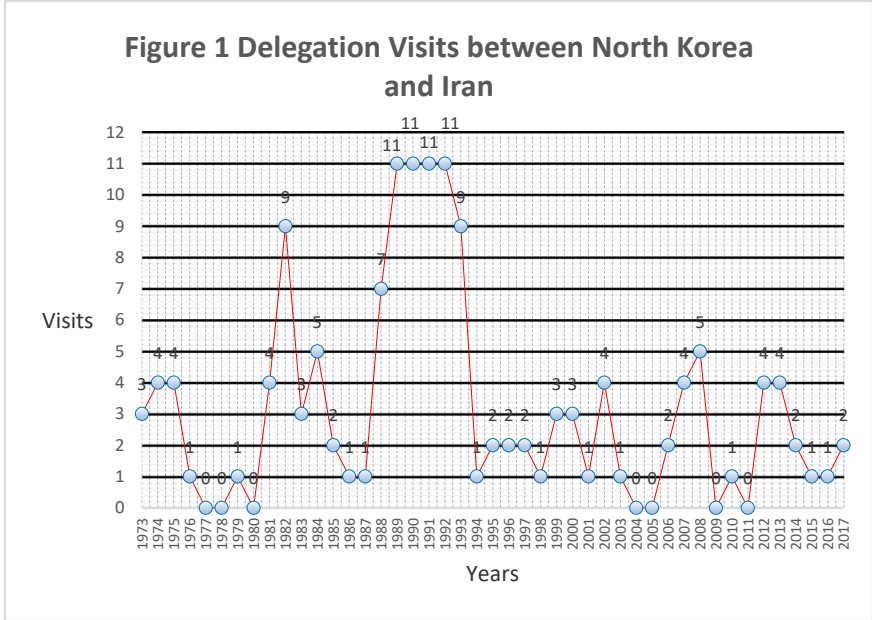
Korea and the US began with help from Egypt.

After Yom Kippur War, North Korea continued to send engineers and experts to Egypt and Syria to develop its military.¹⁶ Even after abandoning its UN-centred diplomacy in 1976, the DPRK continued its military support of Middle Eastern countries in conflict with Israel. On July 16, 1977, Kim Il-sung announced a policy of support for the PLO.¹⁷ On June 29, 1982, the North Korean government released a statement announcing that it would provide any requested assistance, including the dispatch of troops, to Lebanon.¹⁸ Libyan Supreme Leader Muammar al-Gaddafi visited North Korea in 1982, and North Korea and Libya signed an 'Alliance Treaty on Goodwill and Cooperation' on November 2, 1982. This treaty was aimed at strengthening military cooperation between both countries, explicitly stating that it was meant to counter (Israeli) 'Zionists'.¹⁹

I argue that Egypt, Syria and Libya, the republics in conflict with Israel, were the most important Middle Eastern partners for North Korea. On the other hand, Pahlavi Dynasty Iran, which had close ties with the US and Israel until the Islamic revolution in 1979, was not a state with which North Korea could promote military cooperation.

3. Changing Perceptions of Iran in North Korea

North Korea concluded diplomatic relations with Pahlavi Iran on April 15, 1973. In the following, I examine the change in perception of Iran in North Korea since the conclusion of diplomatic relations based on the number of visits of delegations between North Korea and Iran. Delegation visits between the two countries were recorded in the Korean Central Yearbook, published annually by the Korean Central News Agency, a state-run news agency. However, the available data, summarized in Figure 1, is limited to the period from 1973 to 2017.



Source: *Korean Central Yearbook*, each year's edition (excluding sports teams).

The number of delegation visits reflects the relationship between North Korea and Pahlavi Iran. After the conclusion of diplomatic relations, delegations visited each other approximately four times a year until 1975, but only once in 1976, when North Korea abandoned its UN-centred diplomacy, and no visits were made in 1977 and 1978 (Figure 1).

After the Iranian Revolution, relations between North Korea and Iran changed dramatically. The last Shah of Iran fled to Egypt on January 16, 1979, and the dissidents established a provisional government on February 13. The DPRK approved of the Iranian provisional government on the same day. The Iranian provisional government broke off relations with Israel on February 18 and declared the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran on April 1. As the US broke off its relationship with Iran on April 8, 1980, Iran, which was a republic and had limited relations with the West, became a desirable Middle Eastern country to promote

military cooperation with for North Korea.

Consequently, delegation visits began to increase in 1981 after the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War, but again declined between 1985 and 1987, probably because of opposition from the PLO. However, from 1988 to 1993, after the Iran-Iraq War delegation visits between the two countries became frequent (Figure 1).

Yet, delegation visits once more declined sharply after Kim Il-sung's death in 1994. North Korea's diplomatic activities also decreased sharply, as the country experienced an economic crisis from 1995 to 2000. Once the economy began to recover a bit in 1998, diplomatic activities also gradually picked up again, however, there were ups and downs from year to year.

In terms of relations with Iran, delegation visits since the 2000s have been considerably less than in the 1987-1993 period. This which shows that Iran is no longer important for North Korea. Although delegation visits between the two countries may temporarily increase, it will be difficult to restore pre-1994 relations. Military cooperation between North Korea and Iran is likely to be affected by the bilateral relationship between North Korea and Iran.

4. North Korea's Arms Exports to Iran and Changes in its Military Cooperation Policy Toward the Middle East

The outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War on September 22, 1980, marked the beginning of military cooperation between North Korea and Iran. It was reported in South Korea that, on October 9, a US government official had stated that North Korea had provided medical supplies and ammunition to Iran.²⁰ Simultaneously, Iraq broke off diplomatic relations with North Korea on October 10, 1980. Undoubtedly, Iran had imported weapons from North Korea during the Iran-Iraq War, as mentioned by Manouchehr Mottaki, Iran's Foreign Minister, on October 1, 2009.²¹ Iranian President Hassan Rouhani also admitted that North Korea had cooperated with Iran during the Iran-Iraq War on January 26, 2015.²²

According to one North Korean defector, who claimed to have worked on an Iranian missile base construction in 1986, Iran fought against Iraq using weapons –

from rifles to missiles – made by North Korea.²³ Although his story may have been exaggerated, it is likely that North Korea exported large quantities of weapons to Iran. On April 8, 1984, it was reported in South Korea that North Korean weapons accounted for approximately 40% of Iran's arms imports.²⁴

North Korea also dispatched soldiers to Iran to fight against Iraq during the Iran–Iraq War. The above defector also said that thousands of North Korean military personnel had worked in the Iran–Iraq War as commanders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and that hundreds had been killed in battle.²⁵ Tatsuo Nagashima, who was vice president of the Iran-Japan petrochemical (IJPC) and had stayed in Iran from 1980 to 1982, also saw about 100 North Korean soldiers at the airport in Tehran.²⁶ This proves that North Korea had sent military advisers and military units to Iran to participate in the war with Iraq.

However, it is believed that military cooperation between North Korea and Iran declined between 1985 and 1987 as delegation visits between the two countries also declined sharply during this period (Figure 1). South Korea reported that Yasser Arafat, chairman of the PLO, had visited Pyongyang on May 7–9, 1984 and obtained a promise from Kim Il-sung to stop arms exports to Iran.²⁷ Moreover, in July, South Korea claimed that arms exports from North Korea to Iran had been curtailed.²⁸ Although these reports cannot be verified, I do not believe it to be a coincidence that delegation visits between North Korea and Iran were also declining at the same time.

Nevertheless, North Korea continued to export its missiles to Iran. On March 27, 1985, the Japanese public broadcaster NHK reported that Iran had imported surface-to-surface missiles from North Korea.²⁹ A defector involved in missile factories in North Korea also revealed that the DPRK began exporting missiles to Iran in the 1980s. According to the defector's estimates, in the 1980s, when North Korea began exporting missiles, annual sales were \$500 million. This had doubled to \$1 billion in the early 1990s.³⁰ The DPRK thus exported an astonishing number of arms during the Iran–Iraq War.³¹

Even after the Iran–Iraq War ended on August 20, 1988, North Korea continued to export missiles to Iran. Since then, delegation visits between the two countries have

also increased (Figure 1). According to defectors from North Korea, after the Cold War, the DPRK exported missiles not only to Iran but also to Iraq, Egypt, Syria, the UAE, Yemen, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Libya, of which Saudi Arabia and the UAE have close ties with the US.³² Of course, it is possible that the defectors may have misremembered or exaggerated their stories.

Efraim Halevy, director Israel's secret service Mossad, also recalls that the Middle East was a major market for North Korea in the post-Cold War period of the 1990s, when the DPRK became a major supplier of weapons, including ballistic missiles, to the Middle East.³³ The Iran–Iraq War had turned the Middle East into an important export market for North Korean missiles.

The Iran–Iraq War and the end of the Cold War changed the purpose of North Korea's military cooperation with the Middle East from supporting the Non-Aligned Movement in its opposition to the US and Israel to acquiring foreign currency. This roughly coincides with the post-Cold War period, when the DPRK began shuttering diplomatic relations with Middle Eastern monarchies that had close ties to Western countries.

Later, when Israel and the US demanded from North Korea to stop exporting missiles to the Middle East, the DPRK in turn started to ask for compensation. At the end of 1992, Halevy, and from 1996–2000, the US went into negotiations with North Korea.³⁴ According to Yong-ho Thae, former North Korea's deputy ambassador to the United Kingdom, North Korea negotiated in Stockholm with Israel demanding \$1 billion in compensation for stopping missile exports in 1999.³⁵ From October 23 to 24, 2000, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright visited Pyongyang. She discussed the missile issue with North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-il, who confirmed that North Korea had been exporting missiles to Syria and Iran to earn foreign currency. He added that his country would stop its missile exports if the U.S. compensated for the losses incurred.³⁶ However, the US was unable to reach a final agreement with Kim, who demanded \$1 billion in compensations for stopping missile exports.

The number of delegation visits between North Korea and Iran declined sharply after 1994 (see Figure 1), but North Korea continued to export its missiles. This was

not only because of Iran's conflicts with the US and Israel, but also because Iran was a lucrative arms market that provided foreign currency.

5. Allegations of Nuclear Cooperation Between North Korea and Iran/Syria

In the 2000s, the North Korean nuclear issue re-emerged as a serious problem. This issue, which had first surfaced in the early 1990s and was temporarily settled when North Korea sealed its nuclear facilities in accordance with the US–North Korea Framework Agreement of October 1994. However, suspicions were raised that North Korea was planning to produce enriched uranium, an explosive material used in nuclear weapons. On October 3, 2002, US Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly, visited North Korea as a special envoy of the US President. There, he met with First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Kang Sok-ju. On October 16, the US announced that during Kelly's visit, North Korea had admitted to activities with the purpose of creating highly-enriched uranium. North Korea denied these accusations and relations between both countries further deteriorated. After declaring withdrawal from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) on January 10, 2003, the North Korean Foreign Ministry on April 30 announced that the DPRK had decided to aim for the possession of nuclear weapons.³⁷

Along with the allegations of highly-enriched uranium being produced in North Korea, another allegation emerged that Abdul Qadeer Khan in Pakistan had sold nuclear-related components and technology to North Korea, Iran, Libya and other countries – an allegation that had already been circulating since the 1990s. Abdul Qadeer Khan himself admitted to this in 2004. Pervez Musharraf, then President of Pakistan, also later revealed this in his memoirs.³⁸

Although many have discussed the suspicion of nuclear cooperation between North Korea and Iran, no hard evidence has emerged, and the US Intelligence Agency also did not provide any solid evidence in support of such claims.³⁹

A Congressional Research Service (CRS) report released on April 16, 2014, assessed that there would be no nuclear cooperation between North Korea and Iran.⁴⁰

Moreover, it is unlikely that Iran, which has its own nuclear technology and signed the JCPOA in 2015, would have any incentive to engage in nuclear cooperation with North Korea, despite the drastic deterioration of its own relations with the US.

However, it is possible that North Korea will engage in nuclear cooperation with other Middle Eastern countries. The DPRK had strong relations not only with Iran, but also other countries in the region. However, the international sanctions that resulted from North Korean nuclear tests since 2006 made it almost impossible for Middle Eastern countries to import North Korean weapons. Therefore, North Korea seems to have shifted its military cooperation policy toward the Middle East from earning foreign currency back to cooperating with the Non-Aligned Movement. At the 8th Party Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea in January 2021, North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un called for the establishment of a self-reliant economic system without being dependent on trade and for solidarity with countries in conflict with the US.⁴¹

Egypt, Syria and Libya were particularly important partners in the Middle East for the DPRK's activities directed at the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War. However, Egypt has been promoting reconciliation with Israel and the US since the Camp David Accords in 1978. North Korea's confidence in Egypt may be lower than in Syria, particularly since Egypt concluded diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1995 after the death of Kim Il-sung. Libya signed the Alliance Treaty with North Korea in 1982, but after the fall of the Gaddafi administration in 2011, the Alliance Treaty faded from people's memories. Therefore, as suggested by the destination of the New Year's cards sent by its Supreme Leader every January, Syria has been the most important partner in the Middle East for North Korea in recent years.

2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
President of Syrian Arab Republic	President of Syrian Arab Republic	President of Syrian Arab Republic	The Secretary-General of the Arab	The Secretary-General of	The Secretary-General of

			Socialist Ba'ath Party, President of Syrian Arab Republic	the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, President of Syrian Arab Republic	the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, President of Syrian Arab Republic
Emir of State of Kuwait	President of State of Palestine				
President of State of Palestine	President of Republic of Tunisia				
President of Islamic Republic of Iran	President of People's Democratic Republic of Algeria				
President of Republic of Tunisia	President of Arab Republic of Egypt				
President of People's Democratic Republic of Algeria					
President of Arab Republic of Egypt					

Source: *Rodong Sinmun*.

Table 1 shows that Kim Jong-un, North Korea's current Supreme Leader, considers Syria to be his closest ally in the Middle East. Kim Jong-un stopped sending New Year's cards to Iran in 2019 and Egypt in 2020. Since 2020, the only New Year cards he had sent to the Middle East went to Syria.

In 2000, Kim Jong-il told Albright that North Korea's missile exports were to

Iran and Syria, seemingly having recognised these two countries as important weapons export destinations. Therefore, even if North Korea does not provide nuclear support to Iran, it is possible that it will promote nuclear cooperation in Syria.

Israel bombed a nuclear reactor under construction in Syria on September 6, 2007 ('Operation Outside the Box') – a fact that the Israeli government officially acknowledged on March 18, 2018. It is assumed that Syria built this reactor with the assistance of North Korea, although no hard evidence exists. Given the North Korean Supreme Leader's cordial attitude toward the Assad administration in Syria, I cannot rule out the possibility that North Korea has provided nuclear technology to Syria.

Evidence of the strong relationship between North Korea and Syria appears in a number of reports stating that North Korea sent troops and military equipment to the Syrian Civil War in support of Assad's regime. On November 14, 2013, North Korea's Foreign Ministry proclaimed that that the DPRK had never sent military supplies or air force pilots to Syria.⁴² However, the state-run Russian news agency TASS reported on March 23, 2016, that North Korea had deployed two military units to Syria, named *Chalma-1* and *Chalma-7*.⁴³ *Chalma* is probably more accurately *Cheolma*, which means 'iron horse' in Korean, which, in North Korea, is another name for "tank". Therefore, it can be assumed that *Chalma-1* and *Chalma-7* are tank units. Although I do not know whether this is true or not, this certainly is a possibility, given Kim Jong-un's attitude toward Syria. It seems that North Korea now considers Syria – not Iran – to be its most important partner in the Middle East.

Conclusion

For North Korea, which has promoted diplomatic relations and military cooperation with republican countries with limited relations with the West, Pahlavi Iran, a monarchy with close ties to the US, was not a target for promoting military cooperation. The 1979 Iranian Revolution made Iran a desirable Middle Eastern country for North Korea to promote military cooperation as it had become a republic and broken off relations with the US and Israel.

During the Iran–Iraq War, North Korea began military cooperation with Iran,

including the export of missiles, and the dispatch of military personnel. After the Iran–Iraq War, North Korea exported missiles not only to Iran, but also to many other Middle Eastern countries. Not only Iran but also the whole Middle East became North Korea’s missile export market in the 1990s, and North Korea’s military cooperation policy toward the Middle East became more focused on earning foreign currency rather than supporting the Non-Aligned Movement.

In the 2000s, North Korea’s nuclear development again became a serious issue, along with Pakistan’s sale of nuclear-related materials and technology to North Korea and Iran. The relationship between North Korea and Iran, which had been seen as missile cooperation, began to be seen as nuclear cooperation.

However, the trends of delegation visits show that relations between North Korea and Iran have cooled considerably compared to pre-1994, and no solid evidence of nuclear cooperation between North Korea and Iran exists. In the current relationship between North Korea and Iran, I argue that there exists the possibility of missile cooperation and little possibility of nuclear cooperation. If no nuclear cooperation has been established between the two, then the situation is not much different from the military cooperation between North Korea and other Middle Eastern countries.

Instead, North Korea began to focus more on maintaining relationships with the Non-Aligned countries than on earning foreign currency following international sanctions. Syria is probably the most important Non-Aligned country in the Middle East for North Korea today. It is strongly suspected that North Korea dispatched its military units to Syria to support the Assad regime during the Syrian Civil War.

In addition, unlike in Iran, a nuclear reactor in Syria is suspected to have been built by North Korea. In recent years, among all countries in the Middle East, North Korea’s Supreme Leader has sent New Year’s cards only to Syria. Therefore, I argue that if there exists any possibility of North Korea promoting nuclear cooperation in the Middle East in the future, this will not occur in Iran but in Syria.

- This work was supported by AKS support (AKS-2022-C-016), JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 19H00583 and 20H01470.

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¹ This article is a revised version of one originally published in Japan in 2017, as the following information indicates. Satoru Miyamoto, “North Korea and Iran Military Cooperation within North Korea's Military Cooperation Policy toward Middle East,” *Defense Studies*, No.57 (September 2017), 37-57.

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