

The Dilemma of the “Axis of Evil”: The Rise and Fall of Iran–DPRK Relations*

Lyong Choi,** Jong-dae Shin, and Han-hyung Lee

Korea Military Academy; University of North Korean Studies; Korea Military Academy; Seoul, Republic of Korea

This research examines the international relations between North Korea (the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea or DPRK) and Iran in the context of their shared perception of a threat from the United States. We discuss the conventional idea of the international relationship—the enemy of my enemy is my ally—to explain Pyongyang–Tehran relations, evaluate its past and current relations, and offer policy suggestions for the recent denuclearization approach toward North Korea and Iran. Using newly discovered archival resources and political records, we challenge the conventional idea that the two states share the same threat perception in a consistent manner and suggest the level of their military cooperation changes depending on the approach from Washington and the international community. This research provides a more exact picture of the international relations North Korea and Iran since the 1980s and of the link between their shared threat perception and denuclearization debates.

Keywords: North Korea, Iran, Axis of Evil, Persian Gulf, the Middle East, Iran–Iraq War, U.S. foreign policy, JCPOA, North Korean nuclear crisis

Introduction

After the Khomeini Revolution in the late 1970s, Iran began to confront the Western world. In 2002, the Iranian nuclear program was revealed and international sanctions were imposed on Tehran. However, international relations between Iran and the West have increasingly improved after Iran experienced political diversification and allowed Western access to its natural resources, e.g., natural gas and petroleum. In April 2015,

* This work was supported by the Korea Military Academy Research Fund of 2019.

** E-mail: choiu2@kma.ac.kr.

Iran and the P5+1 countries finalized the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (hereafter JCPOA), in which the signatories agreed that a freeze of Iran's nuclear program would then lead to the lifting of international sanctions on Tehran. Another member of the "axis of evil," North Korea (the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or DPRK) entered denuclearization negotiations with South Korea and the United States in the first half of 2018. Some policymakers and political scientists expected that the JCPOA could be the template for the potential denuclearization agreement between Pyongyang and the other five countries involved in negotiations. However, once the Trump administration announced its withdrawal from the JCPOA, the international society had to deal with North Korean and Iranian nuclear issues simultaneously. One of the most serious concerns is that the negotiation process and/or result of one deal can impact the other. Tehran and Pyongyang could work together to produce the "best results" in their respective negotiations. However, if the best results for them mean that both states can maintain their considerable nuclear capabilities, the cooperation between Iran and North Korea could make negotiations more complex. Those states seeking the denuclearization of Iran and North Korea would prefer to keep the deals separate to prevent information sharing and cooperation between Tehran and Pyongyang aimed at preventing denuclearization. This article will explore the international relations between Iran and North Korea and discuss how and why the two states work together.

The Puzzle of Iran–North Korean Relations

Iran established formal relations with North Korea in 1973 during the rule of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. However, mainly because of its relations with the United States and South Korea, Iran took a cautious approach toward North Korea.¹ After the Khomeini Revolution, Iran strengthened relations with North Korea based on anti-Western ideology. Despite its ties with Baghdad in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), Pyongyang exported military supplies to Iran during the Iran–Iraq War and exchanged military technologies with Iran after the 1980s. In the 2000s,² the two states attempted to develop nuclear and missile capabilities and are suspected to have shared their nuclear weapon technologies. The "Axis of Evil" speech by then U.S. President George W. Bush in January 2002 implied the connection among Iran, North Korea, and Iraq.³ It drew international attention toward relations between Tehran and Pyongyang in the context of states that had formed an anti-U.S. alliance and/or international order.⁴ One interesting point of their bilateral relationship is that Tehran and Pyongyang have significant differences in perception of their bilateral relationship. Historical evidence indicates that Iran has stricter and more realistic views on its relations with North Korea. First, the unpaid loans from Iran to North Korea—amounting to approximately 300 million USD—undermines Tehran's credit to Pyongyang. Next, the unclear position of North Korea between Shiite Iran and the Sunni Gulf Cooperation Council states also weakens ties between Pyongyang and Tehran. Despite such restrictions, Iran and North Korea have a significant history of military cooperation, and this poses an intriguing puzzle

in international relations scholarship. Under what conditions did Iran and North Korea work closely? Moreover, if the condition of Iran and North Korea working closely together can be satisfied in the present, can Iran and North Korea cooperate to see progress in their own respective nuclear deals?

This article will define the framework of international relations between North Korea and Iran with existing international relations (IR) theories and analyze the changes in the relations between Iran and North Korea on the basis of recently published academic work, news stories, reports, interviews with officials, and government archives. This research will contribute to international security studies and provide a more exact picture of the history of relations between Iran and North Korea. More specifically, it will challenge the conventional idea that Tehran and Pyongyang share a common threat perception toward Washington. Lastly, it will provide policy recommendations for ongoing security issues in the Persian Gulf and Northeast Asia.

Theoretical Explanations for the Influence of Indirect Relations on Direct Relations: The Enemy of My Enemy Is My Ally?

The influence of indirect relations on direct relations in international politics—e.g., “the enemy of one’s enemy can be one’s ally”—has long been recognized by military leaders and diplomats, who have practiced it throughout history. Based on such empirical evidence, some IR scholars have sought to explain why the enemy of one’s enemy could be one’s ally.⁵ Realism schools structuralized those relations through the theories of the balance of power or balance of threat: to face a more powerful or threatening state(s), one seeks a potential ally (or allies), and they are more likely to be an enemy of one’s enemy. However, states do not form alliances in certain conditions. Snyder’s security dilemma in alliance politics provides a useful tool for analysis of the level of relationship between potential allies. We also need, however, more empirical cases to robustly support this idea. In many cases, states ally with others to achieve common security goals. Despite their mutual rivalry and mistrust, the United Kingdom (UK) and France allied against Germany in WWI. The Waltz and Walt schools provide a clear and durable explanation for this and many other cases with their theories of the balance of power and balance of threat. However, Iran has not allied itself with North Korea despite its long-term cooperation with Pyongyang and their common security goals, i.e., a common threat from the United States. Their relations have not ventured outside the confines of a strategic partnership. If that is the case, what makes the difference between these two cases?

Maoz et al. tested the level and impact of indirect relations on direct relations and argued that the conventional ideas of “the enemy of one’s enemy is not my enemy” or “the enemy of my ally is my enemy” do not work under certain conditions. For this, they suggest a couple of hypotheses. Foremost, in the rationalist’s view, a state makes opportunistic decisions in its foreign policy to maximize its own interests. Second, Maoz et al. argued that distance between potential allies could make a difference in

their relations from Walt's idea: if its potential ally is located in another region, a state is unlikely to expect a direct contribution from its potential ally to its national security. Third, Maoz et al. suggested national status/reputation was another variable: the international relations of powerful states are more likely to be wider and more complex than those of weak states. Moreover, a powerful state is more likely to be concerned with changes in the balance of power and, hence, will make more changes in foreign policy, e.g. to form or dissolve alliances. Under these conditions, a state does not place importance on its relations with a potential ally more than is necessary. We can apply these variables to the Iran–North Korea case.⁶

Iran's diplomatic behavior appears opportunistic when it comes to its stance on North Korea and its rivals, South Korea and the United States. Despite its ideological ties with Pyongyang, Tehran had no qualms working with North Korea's enemy.⁷ While Tehran was provided with supplies and weapons by Pyongyang in the 1980s, it did not stop economic exchanges with Seoul. Iran recovered its infrastructure (destroyed during the Iran–Iraq War), with the help of South Korean companies and imported consumer and military goods. South Korea is one of Iran's top ten trade partners.⁸ Plus, Tehran attempted to recover its relations with Washington and signed the JCPOA, while Pyongyang threatened the United States with a series of nuclear and missile tests. There has been some evidence that Iran has disagreed with North Korea in its approach toward South Korea and the United States. Mainly for economic benefits, Iran has developed its economic partnership with South Korea for decades.⁹ When Iran became able to control the level of threat from the major source of its security concerns, the United States, during the JCPOA negotiations, it refused to follow North Korea's hardline stance toward the United States. These autonomy issues limited Iran's partnership with North Korea. In his seminal work, Snyder proposed the alliance security dilemma and that states will consider the security–autonomy trade-off before they decide to form an alliance.¹⁰ In this context, Iran might have been reluctant to develop its relations with North Korea because of concerns that such a relationship will curtail its freedom to act in its own national interests.

The second hypothesis offered by Maoz et al. can also be easily applied: mainly because of the distance between them, Iran never expected direct military contributions from North Korea. Also, in the same context, South Korea does not pose any threat to Iran.¹¹ Although Iran and North Korea have no border-related political conflict, or rivalry due to natural resources or historical issues, as other states do in their respective regions, the distance between them prevents the two countries from forming a military alliance. In a nutshell, despite its shared threat from the United States, Iran has not deeply involved itself with North Korea and the inter–Korean conflict because of Pyongyang's limited influence in the Persian Gulf.

Lastly, the variables of national status/reputation can also explain the behavior of Iran. Compared to North Korea, which has a small economy and is only a minor military power in East Asia, Iran is a major economic and military power in the Persian Gulf and is thus more concerned about the ebb and flow of international relations. Iran competes with other major powers for hegemony over the Persian Gulf and the Middle East,

such as Saudi Arabia and Israel, while North Korea struggles with its survival among superpowers like the United States, Russia, and China.¹² In short, Iran shows a more balanced approach to its relations with the United States and its allies than North Korea does.

The above factors may decide the long-term relationship pattern between Iran and North Korea. However, the second and third factors are almost fixed in a specific period of their bilateral relationship, the 1970s to the 2010s. The first factor, the opportunistic nature of international relations, impacts bilateral relations. A state is opportunistic and is likely to make diplomatic policy that maximizes its national interests even if the policy undermines relations with a potential ally. However, if a state has few options in its international relations, it is less likely to be opportunistic and stick to the relationship with a potential ally. In this context, if Iran's international relations is restricted by international sanctions or pressure from the United States, it might be more likely to increase its cooperation with North Korea. With this idea in mind, we will now examine the changes in the bilateral perceptions between Iran and North Korea.

Formation of the Iran–North Korea Relationship, 1979–1992

Before the Khomeini Revolution, Iran had diplomatic relations with the two Koreas. However, North Korea had a hard time competing with South Korea in Iran for the strong U.S. influence on Tehran.¹³ In the late 1970s, along with the USSR and other Communist states, North Korea revealed its support for the Khomeini Revolution. The North Korean leader, Kim Il-sung, praised the victory of the Iranian revolution with his congratulatory message to the new Iranian government.¹⁴ In the early 1980s, Iran and North Korea started to develop their military and political cooperation. For Iran, North Korea was one important source of weapons and supplies for its campaign against Iraq. Mainly because of the difficulties it faced in replacing Western-made weapons, which Iran had easy access to before the revolution, Tehran benefited from North Korea's active weapons industry.¹⁵ For North Korea, the importance of relations with Iran increased mainly because of its political isolation from the international community and economic difficulties. North Korea's intervention in the decolonization movements of the Third World, mostly in Africa and Asia, and a decrease in economic aid from China and the USSR, weakened its economic power. For this reason, it exported military supplies and weapons to Libya during the 1977 Egyptian–Libyan conflict, despite its friendly relations with Egypt and also offered partial credit assistance to provide firearms to Zimbabwe in the early 1980s.¹⁶

Coupled with economic difficulties, terrorist acts perpetrated by the country in the early 1980s worsened North Korea's international status. In 1983, the Rangoon bombing shocked the international community, and even some Third World states turned their backs on Pyongyang.¹⁷ Consequently, North Korea showed great interest in relations with Iran. It expected to overcome its economic difficulties and international isolation through partnership with Iran. North Korea is believed to have been the largest arms

supplier to Iran in 1982, accounting for almost 40 percent of the total arms supplies to the country.¹⁸ Specifically, Iran imported about 150 T-62 tanks, 400 artillery pieces, 1,000 mortars, 600 anti-aircraft guns, and 12,000 light firearms from North Korea. Pyongyang provided several hundred instructors and technicians to Tehran. In return, Iran promised to supply four million tons of crude oil to North Korea at prices 30 USD or less per barrel until 1987. The two states have exchanged high-ranking officials since 1980.¹⁹ However, North Korea's new diplomatic approach conflicts with its traditional one: the Sunni GCC states condemned North Korea's duplicity. While Pyongyang argued that the exports of military supplies to Iran were not made on purpose, Iraq decided to cut its relations with North Korea.²⁰ In addition, despite North Korean propaganda aimed at tarnishing South Korea's image abroad, Arab states increasingly showed interest in economic exchanges with South Korea.²¹ For instance, North Korea repeatedly argued that South Korea supported Israel during the Yom Kippur War in 1973 and Iran in the 1980s. However, North Korea failed to damage the relations between South Korea and the Arab states. Seoul denied North Korea's claims and emphasized its support for Arab nations.²² As a result, Pyongyang became more dependent on its partnership with Iran.

However, Iran was not willing to develop its relations with North Korea more than necessary. North Korea's position between Iran and the Arab states undermined Iran's trust in North Korea. In 1984, the pressure from the Arab states toward North Korea became stronger, and Egypt, one of the traditional partners of North Korea, officially asked Pyongyang to stop exporting military supplies and weapons to Iran. Hosni Mubarak, the then Egyptian president, visited Pyongyang in 1983, and Kim Il Sung promised not to finalize a new contract with Iran for the export of weapons and supplies.²³ Coupled with North Korea's unclear stance between the Sunni and Shiite states, North Korea's weak economic power during the Iran–Iraq War was a limiting factor in developing Iran–North Korean relations. During the Cold War, North Korea asked Third World states it had close relations with not to form a diplomatic relationship with South Korea. These states agreed to do this while being supported by Pyongyang. This could have applied to the Iran–North Korean relationship as well. Pyongyang wanted Tehran to cut its ties with Seoul, which were established during the rule of the pro-U.S. Shah. In fact, Tehran downgraded its diplomatic relations with Seoul to a *chargé d'affaires* level in 1981. Before the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Iran and South Korea formed a close relationship due to having a common ally, the United States.²⁴ After the revolution, Iran started to denounce South Korea's pro-Western stance and stopped its export of crude oil to the country in 1979. However, this does not mean that Iran sided with the North: despite the downgrading of the formal relationship, Iran quickly recovered its economic exchanges with South Korea following the Iran–Iraq War in the 1980s. Iran needed to find a vendor for ammunition and other military-related supplies, and South Korea was one of the suppliers of needed items (e.g., rations, tents, sleeping bags, boots, helmets, uniforms).²⁵ Moreover, Tehran invited South Korean companies to take a part in construction projects in Iran. The trade and economic exchanges between Iran and South Korea increased continuously in the 1980s and 1990s.²⁶

In the late 1980s, based on its economic connections with Seoul, Tehran started to recover its formal and diplomatic relations with South Korea despite North Korea’s distaste toward such a development. In Pyongyang in 1988, Iranian diplomats announced that Iran had accepted the Hungarian recognition of South Korea and even spurned North Korea’s request to boycott the Seoul Olympic Games.²⁷ In 1989, the Iran–South Korean relationship was upgraded from the *chargé d’affaires* level to an ambassador level. In the late Cold War era, despite its stronger ideological bonds with North Korea, Iran had a deeper and broader economic relationship with South Korea than North Korea. Like many other friends of Pyongyang, Tehran attempted to avoid entrapment in issues existing between the two Koreas.²⁸ As Snyder argues, states consider security–autonomy trade-offs before forming alliances with other state(s), and Iran put more emphasis on autonomy than on security interests in its relations with North Korea. In this context, Tehran stood between Seoul and Pyongyang.²⁹ However, after the end of the Cold War, Iran–North Korean relations entered a new phase in their relationship due to Western pressure. This resulted in the development of military cooperation between the two states, although they still maintained different approaches toward the West.

The Paradoxical Rise of the “Axis”: 1990s–2000s

After the phrase “Axis of Evil” was first used by President George W. Bush in the early 2000s, much research on the military cooperation between Iran and North Korea was conducted. Security experts indicated that Tehran and Pyongyang might have exchanged technologies for nuclear warheads and delivery measures (e.g., ballistic missiles) since the 1990s during the George H. W. Bush administration. The second Bush administration grouped Tehran and Pyongyang into the same category and, ironically, pushed them to work in a closer manner. In 2006, Mark Fitzpatrick, the executive director of IISS–Americas, argued that North Korea exported weapons—including nuclear materials—to some countries in Africa and the Middle East in the early and mid-2000s. Fitzpatrick indicated that Iran and a few states remained on a list of target states of North Korean weapon exports while the United States applied pressure to stop North Korea’s exports.³⁰ After Libya, Egypt, Pakistan, Yemen, and the Arab Emirates decided to cease imports of North Korean weapons, Iran and Syria became more important consumers for the North Korean military industry. However, despite the accusation from the Bush administration that there was a link between Tehran and Pyongyang, Iran’s approach toward North Korea remained inconsistent. Indeed, U.S. policy toward Tehran guided Iran–North Korea relations during this period. Iran–North Korean military cooperation varied depending on the various U.S. administrations that held power during the 1990s and 2000s, from the first Bush and Clinton administrations to the second Bush and Obama administrations.

Military Cooperation in the 1990s and 2000s

The Iran–Iraq War in the 1980s established the foundation of technological cooperation between Iran and North Korea. While the two states gained the attention of the international community for their own nuclear programs, there have been few signs of cooperation on nuclear technology between Tehran and Pyongyang.³¹ However, there is some evidence for their cooperation on ballistic missile technology. Tehran could have secured ballistic missile technology from North Korea, and Pyongyang could have obtained empirical data for missile technology from the war and secured economic sources for the further development of missile technologies from Tehran. In the 1990s and 2000s, the two states strengthened their bilateral cooperation on missile technology while developing their respective nuclear programs. North Korea imported the short-range missile (Frog Missile) from the USSR in 1964, but it was not able to acquire mid- or long-range ballistic missile technology from Moscow. In the mid-1980s, North Korea procured the prototype of a “Scud-B” missile from Egypt and developed its own version of the technology through reverse engineering. During the Iran–Iraq War, North Korea exported “Scud-B” missiles (Hwasong-5) to Iran and developed the “Scud-C” missile in 1991.³² After the war, Tehran and Pyongyang initiated some agreements for bilateral military cooperation: North Korea provided technology to Iran for manufacturing Iran’s missiles, which allowed Iran to develop the Shahab-1 (Scud B), and Shahab-2 (Scud C) missiles. North Korean engineers visited Iran for the construction, operation, and maintenance of missile manufacturing facilities and Iranian technicians visited North Korea to study ballistic missile technology.³³ In return, Tehran was supposed to provide the funds for North Korea’s development of the Rodong-1, which was the basis of Iran’s Shahab-3.³⁴ The U.S. intelligence community reported that the partnership between the two states accelerated the development of their nuclear delivery system programs.³⁵

In 2006, Iran announced that its partnership with North Korea had expired, and it no longer received technological support from the country.³⁶ Although Pyongyang shocked the international community with its development of medium and long-range ballistic missiles—i.e., the Musudan and Daepo-dong missiles, and a SLBM in the 2010s—Tehran has not revealed further plans for a future partnership with North Korea. However, this does not mean that the bilateral exchanges has entirely ceased. Iran requires technological support from North Korea for maintenance of its missiles and manufacturing facilities.³⁷ Indeed, some media outlets revealed that a number of Iranian scientists and technicians stayed in North Korea when Pyongyang launched its long-range rocket in 2012.³⁸

U.S. Administrations and Iran–North Korean Relations

Despite the increase in military exchanges, there have been structural limitations on the bilateral relations between Iran and North Korea. As discussed earlier, physical distance and national status are fixed and limit the development of bilateral relationships. In this context, the approach of the U.S. administration toward Iran and/or North Korea has

been an important factor dictating the level of partnership between these two enemies of the United States. Indeed, the beginning of a bilateral relationship is based on an indirect relationship via a common perception of a shared enemy. However, such a perception has not always been constant: Iran’s threat perception toward the United States often guided its relations with North Korea. Differences in policy orientation among American leaders create change within Iran’s threat perception. Excluding the Bush era, successive U.S. administrations allowed the Iranian leadership to have a chance to improve its relationship with Washington.³⁹ In contrast, North Korea steadily worsened its relationship with the United States following the end of the Clinton era. Thus, North Korea’s threat perception was constant, and it rarely impacted its approach toward Iran.

Iranian President Mohammad Khatami, who was elected in 1997, initiated political reforms aimed at democratizing Iran and attempted to introduce the free market and foreign capital. His actions were highly appreciated by the Clinton administration and led to the relaxation of U.S. sanctions on Iran in 1998.⁴⁰ The domestic aspiration for democratization and economic development in Iran pushed the Iranian leadership to reconsider their policy toward the United States. In contrast, North Korea’s Kim family regime attempted to negotiate with the United States without any significant change in its domestic politics. Despite its military exchanges with Pyongyang in the 1990s, Tehran might have considered that it could stop working with North Korea if it could normalize its relationship with the United States.

However, Iran’s efforts in the 1990s were ignored by the new U.S. leadership—the George W. Bush administration of the early 2000s. After the 9/11 attacks, Iran revealed its intention to cooperate with the United States by attacking Sunni Taliban forces in Afghanistan. U.S. neo-conservatives suspected Iran’s intentions and rejected their gestures aimed at achieving normalization of the bilateral relationship. In 2003, Tehran suggested talks for the normalization of economic and diplomatic relations with Washington in exchange for the extradition of Al Qaeda leaders to the United States. However, the Bush administration rejected the offer while demanding the complete denuclearization of Iran. Moreover, the administration also dissuaded three major EU states—the UK, France, and Germany—from negotiating with Iran for denuclearization.⁴¹

The Obama administration re-considered Iran’s efforts and signed the JCPOA in 2015, despite its controversial nature. Simply put, the most potent driving force in Iran–North Korea relations and cooperation in the 2000s might be their common perception of the threat toward the United States. The Bush administration categorized the two states into one category and allowed them no other choice. However, Iran attempted to distance itself from North Korea due to a wider range of national interests that it was considering. In the next chapter, we will review the mutual perception between Tehran and Pyongyang to assess the limits of the bilateral relations between the two states.

Mutual Perceptions in the Axis of Evil

After the Kim Jong Un regime was established in the late 2000s, Pyongyang developed its nuclear weapon capabilities with five nuclear tests (six times, if one includes the Kim Jong Il era), and numerous missile tests. Before the two Koreas entered a new phase of peace talks in the first half of 2018, North Korea moved resolutely to become a nuclear power. It is noteworthy that North Korea conducted its fourth, fifth, and sixth nuclear tests and its tests of medium and long-range ballistic missiles, along with a SLBM test, after the JCPOA was signed in 2015. Although North Korea's nuclear armament is not directly linked with Iran's JCPOA, it clarifies the difference between the perspectives of the two states on international relations and the respective level of development of each country's nuclear program. While Pyongyang is still friendly toward Tehran, Tehran keeps a considerable distance from Pyongyang due to its nuclear adventurism, confrontational stance toward the United States, and equivocal position between the Sunni and Shiite states. An analysis of the media in the two states appears to be a good way to show differences in their mutual perception.

In the 2010s, in articles that concerned Iran in North Korea's Korea Central News Agency (KCNA), North Korea consistently showed a favorable stance toward Iran. For instance, in 2011, the KCNA published 273 news items about Iran, exceeding those that concerned other states friendly with North Korea in the Middle East—Syria and Egypt—by about 200 times. North Korea revealed its broad yet deep interest in Iran's domestic and foreign affairs and appeared to exaggerate its comradeship with Iran. Notably, the KCNA often emphasized Iran's conflicts with the United States.⁴² However, Iran does not seem to trust North Korea's intentions in regards to its decades-old “Sunni–Shiite Dilemma.” The KCNA takes a similar approach toward Egypt. Excluding 2011, when the pro-North Korean Mubarak regime fell, North Korea also dealt with Egyptian issues as frequently as Iranian ones. After resuming its relationship with Egypt in 2012, North Korean media bias toward Iran was reduced, and it took a balanced position between Iran and Egypt. North Korea's “Sunni–Shiite Dilemma” deepened in the 2010s: Iran welcomed the collapse of the Mubarak government, the old comrade of the Kim regime, while the North avoided mentioning Iran's views.⁴³

The Iranian media takes a neutral position between the two Koreas, coupled with Iran's mistrust of North Korea and its economic ties with South Korea. For Iran, South Korea is still an important economic partner. South Korean companies enjoyed a share of almost 70 percent of Iran's automobile and electronic-devices markets in the early 2010s.⁴⁴ Moreover, Iran was one of the top suppliers of crude oil to South Korea before Seoul began participating in U.S. sanctions on the country.⁴⁵ Iran's newspapers objectively dealt with conflicts on the Korean Peninsula—e.g., the sinking of the *Cheonan* and North Korea's nuclear and missile tests. While Iranian journalists emphasized comradeship with Pyongyang, they also highlighted Iran's economic and cultural exchanges with South Korea. For instance, in the 2010s, the Iranian national broadcaster televised the South Korean TV shows, *Daejanggeum* and *Jumong*, and reported on political exchanges with South Korean leaders as well as North Korea's anti-

American sentiment.⁴⁶

In contrast to North Korea, Iran limits its relations with North Korea and rejects developing the partnership more than needed. Mainly because of their respective national power and the physical distance between them, Iran has not found a significant reason to deepen or widen its cooperation with North Korea. The JCPOA agreement further reduced the strategic value of North Korea to Iranian security. While North Korea alarmed the international community and became a nuclear threshold state through a series of nuclear and missile tests, Iran neither withdrew from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) nor conducted a nuclear test. Coupled with its unclear Middle East policies, North Korea’s nuclear development-focused brinkmanship strategy has weakened Iran’s incentive to work with North Korea. As Azad argues, any political and/or economic exchange between the two states is suspected by the international community to be concerning joint nuclear and missile development.⁴⁷ The JCPOA agreement further widened the gap between Iran and North Korea in their perspective toward nuclear proliferation. However, the recent pressure from the United States on Iran and North Korea might substantially impact the positions of the two states and could make the Iranian and North Korean nuclear issues more complicated. This is because the two countries could revive their former partnership and work together against U.S. pressure.

The U.S. Withdrawal from the JCPOA and Iran–North Korea Relations

In April 2015, U.S. President Obama called the JCPOA a historic agreement. The JCPOA, often called the P5+1 deal, was the result of confidence-building among the world powers and Tehran for Iran’s denuclearization, despite its transitional nature.⁴⁸ The international community mitigated tensions in the Middle East and Persia and showed the potential of denuclearizing Iran. The JCPOA, at the very least, demonstrated that the world powers and Iran shared the same idea of peace and desired an end to wars in western Asia. However, the Kim Jong Un regime interpreted the JCPOA as a victory for Iran as Tehran was promised to be removed from some international sanction lists. In November 2013, Pyongyang argued that North Korea must be removed from the lists along with Iran, but did not mention Iran’s denuclearization. When the JCPOA was signed in 2015, North Korea claimed it was a nuclear weapons state and praised Iran’s achievements in lifting sanctions that had been imposed on it. However, it still did not mention the suspension of Iran’s nuclear program. As North Korea’s nuclear program is more advanced than Iran’s, North Korea’s leadership may have considered that North Korea deserved better compensation than Iran.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, Iran did not voice any words of support toward North Korea’s nuclear program, and the United States remained in the JCPOA. It appears that Iran attempted to separate its own denuclearization process from North Korea’s nuclear weapons-related quagmire.

Regarding its own denuclearization negotiations, Pyongyang could consider the terms and conditions of the JCPOA as the bottom line. Because the JCPOA limits Iran’s

nuclear weapons producing capabilities and the operations of facilities for uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing for 15 years, Iran can maintain considerable nuclear latency to revive its nuclear program at a later date.⁵⁰ To respond to changes in the security environments of the Asia–Pacific region and to overcome international sanctions-induced economic difficulties, the Kim Jong Un regime might negotiate to maintain its nuclear capabilities as much as possible, even if it should disarm its nuclear weapons and close its reactors and missile sites. Moreover, North Korea is not recognized as a nuclear weapons state like India, Pakistan, and Israel in the NPT; rather, it is considered a nuclear threshold state, or *de facto* nuclear weapons state. This can be the foundation of the Kim regime to negotiate with the United States and international nuclear regimes for better terms and conditions than those laid out by the JCPOA. In a nutshell, the Kim regime would like to demand that the United States compensate it for the disarmament of nuclear weapons and allow it to maintain more nuclear and missile capabilities than the JCPOA allowed Iran.

However, considering the threat level of the North Korean nuclear program and the lack of economic leverage, the international community is less likely to accept North Korea's demands. First and foremost, North Korea left the NPT in 2003, conducted some nuclear and missile tests, and then announced the success of its nuclear weapons program in 2017. The international non-proliferation regime would need to set stricter criteria for the North Korean denuclearization process than it did for Iran. Furthermore, since North Korea is not a major economic power, it is hard to expect that major states will support North Korea's interests.⁵¹ The CVID (complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement) and FFVD (final, fully, verified denuclearization) mentioned by the Trump White House implies that the United States will not allow North Korea to possess any significant nuclear capabilities for potential weaponization. The Kim regime does not accept this idea, and this was well demonstrated by Pyongyang's denunciation of John Bolton's comment concerning the so-called Libyan model of denuclearization.⁵² Although the U.S. State Department announced that the denuclearization of North Korea would follow the "North Korea model," Washington still emphasized the complete denuclearization of North Korea and a stricter approach to North Korea than Iran.

The Trump administration, for its part, appears to consider that the North Korea model should fall somewhere between the Libyan model and the JCPOA, or Iran model. For the United States, signing something like the JCPOA with North Korea would be the best-case scenario. Conversely, for North Korea, the JCPOA represents only the minimum of what it expects to sign. In this context, the unilateral withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA on May 8, 2018, might actually be an important event that impacts the denuclearization negotiations focused on North Korea's nuclear program and Iran's stance on potential U.S.–DPRK negotiations. North Korea might question Washington's credibility in committing to a treaty with Pyongyang where Trump guarantees the survival and legitimacy of the Kim regime in exchange for denuclearization. Just like Trump withdrew from the JCPOA, North Korean leadership could figure the next U.S. administration could also break its agreement with Kim Jong Un. An issue for Kim is that North Korea will lose leverage (i.e. its nuclear capabilities)

in the new negotiations. In this sense, Kim might attempt to delay the agreement with Washington until he can be assured that Trump will be re-elected. If Trump fails to commit to a viable denuclearization agreement, as well as lifting sanctions on Pyongyang, Kim will not work to disarm itself. This situation is reminiscent of a “game of chicken,” where one state must yield to the other in order to continue negotiations.

Trump’s decision, moreover, will push Iran to intervene in negotiations between North Korea and the United States, since the result of those negotiations could decide the results of negotiations between Iran and the United States. Iran expects that the Trump administration will ask for stricter rules in Iran’s denuclearization process. Moreover, Tehran does not want to re-negotiate the JCPOA under Trump’s proposed terms and conditions. Iran’s Foreign Minister Javad Zarif stated that, “Iran has decided to resort to the JCPOA mechanism in good faith to find solutions in order to rectify the United States’ multiple cases of significant non-performance and its unlawful withdrawal, and to determine whether and how the remaining JCPOA participants and other economic partners can ensure the full benefits that the Iranian people are entitled to derive from this global diplomatic achievement.”⁵³ Thus, the negotiations on North Korea’s nuclear program and a second JCPOA could impact each other and make the negotiation process more complex. In short, Iran and North Korea will demand equal terms and conditions for their agreement if the other secures more favorable terms.⁵⁴ This “double-trouble game” can bring the “enemy of my enemy is my ally” logic to the fore and encourage Iran to share information concerning U.S.–Iranian negotiations with North Korea. For instance, on August 8, 2018, the North Korean foreign minister visited Tehran, and Iran warned the Kim government not to trust Trump.⁵⁵ In the worst-case scenario, if both nuclear deals fail, the two states can re-initiate their cooperation on their respective nuclear programs.

It is important that the international community, especially the United States and the other P5+1 states, make efforts to separate the negotiations with the two states to simplify the overall negotiation process. The JCPOA has already been agreed upon, so it is the easiest to begin with. If Trump intends to denuclearize North Korea, he may try to renegotiate the JCPOA as soon as possible and confirm his commitment to the treaty. If Trump finds a way to satisfy both conservative U.S. voters and Iran, then Tehran will see no benefit in working with Pyongyang. Moreover, the United States can ask other P5+1 states to support negotiations with North Korea. It is thus necessary for Washington to promote peace in the Middle East and Persia and harmony between the Sunni and Shiite states.

Additionally, it is also necessary for the international community to help North Korea move away from nuclear weapons. The opportunity cost for the North Korean nuclear program is higher than the Iranian one, considering North Korea’s nuclear and missile capabilities. Furthermore, North Korea is not attractive to foreign investors from an economic perspective in contrast to energy resource-rich Iran. Accordingly, the international community should assume a different approach toward the denuclearization of North Korea. The disarmament process should be tightened to end any possibility that North Korea will revitalize its nuclear program, while economic compensation in return

for halting its nuclear weapons development should be more generous than what was given to Iran.

Conclusion

As discussed above, the level of Iran–DPRK cooperation has largely been at the mercy of Iran–U.S. relations. Other important factors of state-on-state relations, such as distance and reputation, are fixed and do not have a significant effect on bilateral cooperation. The military partnership between Iran and North Korea was strengthened in the post–Cold War period when they were isolated from the international community, mainly because of their confrontation with the United States. It is noteworthy that their cooperation peaked when a politically conservative U.S. administration came to power, like the second Bush administration. However, Iran continuously attempted to improve its relations with the United States and extended its economic exchanges with South Korea, the arch-enemy of North Korea. The signing of the JCPOA was the result of Iran’s efforts to be recognized as a normal state. Unlike North Korea, Iran did not conduct any nuclear tests and attempted to democratize its society. This history-based case study suggests that the international community needs to separate Iran from North Korea in order to ensure that the two negotiations on denuclearization become simpler and more achievable. It is thus not recommended that the United States enforce new rules on Iran as strict as those used in the process of North Korean denuclearization; this would trigger Tehran’s suspicion of Washington’s intentions and cause Iran to restart its clandestine nuclear program. Moreover, North Korea is unlikely to trust the Trump administration because it unilaterally walked away from the JCPOA agreement. North Korean leaders may also believe that the next U.S. administration will break an agreement made with Trump, especially if the Democrats return to the White House. If the Trump administration aggressively maintains pressure on the two states, Iran and North Korea will exchange information and work for mutual benefit by cooperating in their respective negotiations with the United States. The international community should call on the United States to return to the JCPOA, or, at least, re-negotiate a new agreement with Iran to prevent Iran–DPRK cooperation and the introduction of Iran–related issues in U.S.–DPRK denuclearization negotiations.

Notes

1. Shirzad Azad, *Koreans in the Persian Gulf: Policies and International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2015), 73.
2. Baghdad cut its diplomatic relations with Pyongyang due to duplicity exhibited by the North Korean government. See the Diplomatic Archives of the Republic of Korea, “North Korea’s Military Supports for Iran, 1983,” 725.1 IR. For North Korea’s stance on NAM diplomacy, see Kim Il Sung, *The Non-alignment Movement is A Mighty Anti-imperialist Revolutionary Force of Our Times* (Pyongyang: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1976).

3. After all, Iran and Iraq are hostile to one another.
4. Patrick McEachern and Jaclyn O'Brien McEachern, *North Korea, Iran and the Challenge to International Order* (London: Routledge, 2017).
5. These include Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 1979); Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); Bruce Bueno De Mesquita, *The War Trap* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981); Henry S. Farber and Joanne Gowa, "Common Interests or Common Politics? Reinterpreting the Democratic Peace," *The Journal of Politics* 59, no. 2 (1997): 393–417; Thomas Christensen J. and Jack Snyder, "Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity," *International Organization* 44, no. 2 (1990): 137–68; and Zeev Maoz, Lesley G. Terris, Ranan D. Kuperman, and Ilan Talmud, "What Is the Enemy of My Enemy: Causes and Consequences of Imbalanced International Relations, 1816–2001," *Journal of Politics* 69, no. 1 (2007): 100–15.
6. Maoz, Terris, Kuperman, and Talmud, "What Is the Enemy of My Enemy," 102–07.
7. Lyong Choi and Jong-dae Shin, "The Enemy of My Ally Is Not My Enemy: The ROK–U.S. Alliance and ROK–Iran Relations, 1978–1983," *Asian Perspective* 41, no. 3 (2017): 403–29; and Azad, *Koreans in the Persian Gulf*.
8. Diplomatic Archive of Republic of Korea, "Business Entry into and Operation of South Korean Companies in Saudi Arabia," 1982, 761.71SB; and Diplomatic Archive of Republic of Korea, "To Promote Import Crude Oil from Iraq, 1982," 1982, 763.52 IQ.
9. South Korea has been one of Iran's top ten trade partners for decades. See Choi and Shin, "The Enemy of My Ally Is Not My Enemy."
10. Glenn H. Snyder, "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics," *World Politics* 36, (1984): 461–63.
11. For correlations between territorial contiguity and the probability of conflicts, see Paul K. Huth and Todd L. Allee, *The Democratic Peace and Territorial Disputes in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and Walt, *The Origins of Alliance*.
12. For details of Iran's position in the Gulf region, see F. Gregory Gause III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
13. Diplomatic Archives of Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (AMAE), Folder 784/1978, Issue 220: Features of Political–Diplomatic Relations between the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and Some Countries in Europe, Asia, Africa, America (Cyprus, Spain, USA, Bangladesh, Philippines, India, Indonesia, Japan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Central African Republic, Egypt, Gabon, Iraq, Iran, Libya, Nigeria, Mozambique, Syria), January 7, 1978–September 23, 1978. Obtained and translated for NKIDP by Eliza Gheorghe.
14. "President Kim Il Sung Meets Iranian Parliamentary Delegation," *Pyongyang Times*, September 26, 1981.
15. Azad, *Koreans in the Persian Gulf*, 75.
16. For Egypt–North Korea relations, see Diplomatic Archives of Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (AMAE), Folder 784/1978, Issue 220; and Nack An and Rose An, "North Korea Military Assistance," in *Communist Nations' Military Assistance*, eds., John F. Copper and Daniel S. Papp (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1983). For North Korea and Zimbabwe relations, see Lyong Choi and Il-young Jeong, "North Korea and Zimbabwe, 1978–1982: From the Strategic Alliance to the Symbolic Comradeship between Kim Il Sung and Robert Mugabe," *Cold War History* 17, no. 4 (2017): 329–49.
17. Charles K. Armstrong, *Tyranny of the Weak: North Korea and the World, 1950–1992* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2013), 208–12.
18. Husain Haqqani, "Comrade 40%: Pyongyang's Arms for Iran," *Arabia–The Islamic World Review* 30 (1984): 17.
19. Diplomatic Archive of Republic of Korea, "North Korea's Military Supports for Iran, 1983," 1983, 725.1 IR.
20. Balazs Szalontai, "Cracks in the North Korea–Iran Axis: Elements of Dissonance in the Rhetoric of the Tehran–Pyongyang Partnership," *NK News*, August 5, 2014, <http://www.nknews.com>.

- nknews.org/2014/08/cracks-in-the-north-korea-iran-axis/ (accessed January 5, 2019). Iraq had close economic relations with North Korea before 1980. See Diplomatic Archives of Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (AMAE), Folder 784/1978, Issue 220.
21. Azad, *Koreans in the Persian Gulf*, 39.
 22. Diplomatic Archive of Republic of Korea, "Issues of Export of Military Supplies, 1983," 765.541.
 23. Diplomatic Archive of Republic of Korea, "North Korea–Iran Relations, 1984," 1984a, 725.1 IR.
 24. Choi and Shin, "The Enemy of My Ally Is Not My Enemy," 406.
 25. Diplomatic Archive of Republic of Korea, "Export to Military Supplies to the Middle East, 1982," 1982, 765.541 XF.
 26. Choi and Shin, "The Enemy of My Ally Is Not My Enemy," 417.
 27. Szalontai, "Cracks in the North Korea–Iran Axis."
 28. For instance, since the early 1980s, the NAM states have rejected inclusion of the Korean question on the main agenda of NAM summits, despite Pyongyang's persistent requests. For details, see , "Hungarian Embassy in the DPRK, Report, March 5, 1983, Subject: The DPRK's Activities Before the 7th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement," March 5, 1983, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, MOL, XIX-J-1-j Korea, 1983, 78, doboz, 81-10, 002438/1983. Obtained and translated for NKIDP by Balazs Szalontai, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116018> (accessed January 7, 2019).
 29. Snyder, "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics," 461–63.
 30. Libya's Qaddafi regime, in particular, attempted to import hexafluoride uranium from North Korea. For details, see Mark Fitzpatrick, "Iran and North Korea: The Proliferation Nexus, Survival," *Global Politics and Strategy* 48, no. 1 (2006): 62.
 31. Paul K. Kerr, Steven A. Hildreth, and Mary Beth D. Nikitin, "Iran–North Korea–Syria Ballistic Missile and Nuclear Cooperation," *Congressional Research Service Report for Congress*, 2016, 5.
 32. Fitzpatrick, "Iran and North Korea," 62.
 33. International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *Iran's Strategic Weapons Programmes: A Net Assessment* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 96.
 34. Kenneth Katzman, "Iran: U.S. Policies and Options," *Congressional Research Service Report for Congress*, 2005, 19.
 35. Fitzpatrick, "Iran and North Korea," 64.
 36. BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific—Political, "Iran Admits Buying Missiles from North Korea During Iraq War," November 7, 2006, 7. Translated from Nezavisimaya Gazeta.
 37. Michael Elleman, *Iran's Ballistic Missile Capabilities: A Net Assessment* (London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2010), 91–99.
 38. Richard Weitz, "The North Korean–Iranian Missile Axis," *Second Line of Defense*, December 15, 2012, <http://www.sldinfo.com/the-north-korean-iranian-missile-axis/> (accessed on September 27, 2018).
 39. Reza Simbar, "Iran and the U.S.: Engagement of Confrontation," *Journal of International and Area Studies* 13, no. 1 (2006): 73–87.
 40. Daniel Wertz and Ali Vaez, "Sanctions and Nonproliferation in North Korea and Iran: A Comparative Analysis," *Federation of American Scientists*, June 2012, http://fas.org/pubs/_docs/IssueBrief-Sanctions.pdf (accessed December 12, 2018).
 41. Ted G. Carpenter, "North Korea and Iran: The Case for Formal Relations," *Chronicles Magazine*, November 2006, <http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/north-korea-iran-case-formal-relations> (accessed December 8, 2018).
 42. Szalontai, "Cracks in the North Korea–Iran Axis."
 43. "Pyongyang, Beijing Wary of Change in Egypt," *Korea Times*, February 2011, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2011/02/116_81501.html (accessed on September 28, 2018).
 44. "Kia's Iran Embargo Failed," Iranian Students' News Agency (ISNA), September 24, 2011.
 45. "N. Korea Kept Silent on Iran's Nuclear Deal," Yonhap News, April 6, 2015, <http://www>

- yonhapnews.co.kr/bulletin/2015/04/06/0200000000AKR20150406043500014.HTML (accessed on September 27, 2018).
46. Szalontai, “Cracks in the North Korea–Iran Axis”; and *Iran National Broadcast*, 2016, <http://edition.presstv.ir/detail/166760.html> (accessed on September 28, 2018).
 47. Azad, *Koreans in the Persian Gulf*, 72.
 48. P5+1 refers to the permanent members of the UN Council and Germany.
 49. “N. Korea Kept Silent on Iran’s Nuclear Deal.”
 50. U.S. Department of State, “Joint Comprehensive Action of Plan, Annex I: Nuclear Related Commitments,” 2015, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/245318.pdf> (accessed on October 5, 2018).
 51. Iran has abundant petroleum and natural gas deposits.
 52. Karl P. Mueller, “Commentary: Forget the ‘Libya model’ for North Korea,” Reuters, June 1, 2018.
 53. Javad Zarif, Iran Foreign Minister, “Letter to U.N. Secretary General António Guterres,” May 10, 2018, <http://en.mfa.ir/index.aspx?siteid=3&fkeyid=&siteid=3&pageid=36409&newsview=514551> (accessed on October 7, 2018).
 54. “A Trump Deal with North Korea Is Bad News for Iran,” *Realclear Defense*, July 13, 2018, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2018/07/13/a_trump_deal_with_north_korea_is_bad_news_for_iran_113604.html (accessed on October 7, 2018). The principle “most-favored-nation treatment,” can be their logical basis.
 55. “North Korea’s Foreign Minister Visits Iran after U.S. Sanctions Are Reimposed,” *NBC News*, August 8, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/north-korea-s-foreign-minister-visitsiran-after-u-s-n898611> (accessed on October 6, 2018).

Notes on Contributors

Lyong Choi is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the Korea Military Academy. He obtained a Ph.D. in international history from the London School of Economics and Political Science. His research focuses on issues of modern and contemporary American, East Asian, and Korean history. He published “Human Rights, Popular Protest and Jimmy Carter’s Plan to Withdraw U.S. Troops from South Korea,” *Diplomatic History* in 2017, “North Korea and Zimbabwe, 1978–1982: From the Strategic Alliance to the Symbolic Comradeship between Kim Il Sung and Robert Mugabe” in 2017 and “Re-thinking Normalization between ROK and PRC in the Early 1990s: The South Korean Perspective” in 2014 for the *Journal of Cold War History*.

Jong-dae Shin is professor at the University of North Korean Studies, Seoul, Republic of Korea. His recent journal publications cover North Korea’s international exchanges and science and technology cooperation with the Middle East, and the history of the inter-Korean division. His publications include: *Inter-Korean Relations of 70 Years* (Seoul: Seonin, 2016); *70 Years of Separation and Republic of Korea* (Seoul: National Museum of Korean Contemporary History, 2016); *Routledge Handbook of Modern Korean History* (London: Routledge, 2016); “Diplomatic Competition between the Two Koreas and 6.23 Declaration,” *Modern North Korean Studies* 22, no. 3 (2019); and “The Analytical Levels and Main Agendas in the History of Inter-Korean Relations,” *Korea and World Politics* 30, no. 3 (2014).

Han-hyung Lee is a lecturer of Political Science, Korea Military Academy. He is an expert of North Korean military affairs.

