

# **Blocking Syrian-Iranian-N. Korean Strategic Collaboration: What's Required?**

Testimony of

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I would like to thank Chairman Chabot, Chairwomen Ros Lehtinen, and Chairmen Poe, along with ranking members Faleomavaega, Deutch, and Sherman for asking me to testify today on how best to address the proliferation of strategic weaponry capabilities to, from and between Syria, Iran and North Korea. I understand that it's extremely rare for three subcommittees hold joint hearings but, then, the focus of today's hearing is also extremely challenging and important.

Traditionally, our government has dealt with strategic weapons proliferation threats one country at a time. The nexus of Syrian, North Korean, and Iranian strategic weapons cooperation, however, literally and figuratively runs circles around such an approach. It allows the testing of weapons-related systems in one country to benefit weapons development in another, technology acquisition by one country to benefit the other two, and the transit through and financing from one or more countries to benefit all of the others.

None of this makes tracking or blocking the further spread of strategic weapons-related capabilities any easier for these three trouble states -- just the opposite. In fact, any serious effort to block such collaboration will require that our government to adopt four new anti-proliferation policy premises or principle. These new principles are

- 1. The transition of any one of these states to moderate self-rule would have significant, positive nonproliferation knock-on effects with regard to the other two.***
- 2. Our recognition of these current hostile, autocratic governments' legitimacy and of their questionable per se "right" to engage in dangerous nuclear or aerospace-related pursuits will severely undermine any chance of blocking dangerous collaboration and will afford the nexus and other would-be proliferators a major cover for strategically dangerous pursuits.***
- 3. In reining this proliferation nexus in, one must avoid overplaying one's hand diplomatically or militarily in ways that might risk fueling even more proliferation elsewhere.***
- 4. Any serious effort to reduce proliferation from or between these three targeted states must also address their most prominent sources of military, technical, and political support – Russia and China.***

Adopting these new principles in our fight against strategic arms proliferation will require abandoning some existing policies and implementing new ones. Congress clearly has an oversight and legislative role that can speed up this process.

Below, I review some of the ways Syria, Iran, and North Korea have collaborated in the development of strategic weapons capabilities and how their cooperation is likely to continue. Then, I specify the new principles our government should adopt if it is serious about neutralizing this new proliferation nexus. Finally, I detail how these principles might be applied by our government and allied governments against each of the three states.

### ***In What Strategic Ways Do These States Collaborate?***

One of the most disturbing forms of collaboration is nuclear. North Korea has secured European, Pakistani and (probably) Chinese assistance in its development of uranium

enrichment centrifuges that can make bomb-grade uranium. Iran, meanwhile, has secured European, Russian, Pakistani, and Chinese assistance in developing its centrifuges and uranium hexafluoride feed plant. Both of these countries could assist Syria in this regard, if they chose to do so.

As for the development of large reactors capable of making significant amounts of plutonium, Iran has worked with Europeans, Russians, and others to complete, operate, and eventually fuel a large light water power reactor. North Korea, meanwhile, has worked with the US and South Korea to develop similar technology under the Agreed Framework. Pyongyang is now eager to complete construction and operate an experimental light water reactor of its own. Collaboration between Iran and North Korea on this technology clearly is a possibility. Some experts, including those testifying today, believe North Korea's experimental reactor could be used to make several bombs' worth of plutonium a year and Iran's to make nuclear weapons plutonium as well.

Earlier, of course, Pyongyang received both Russian and Chinese assistance to complete its plutonium-producing, graphite-moderated reactor and reprocessing plant at Yongbyon. As is now well known, North Korea shared graphite reactor technology in the mid-2000s with Assad in Syria. There also is reason to believe that the Iranians may have helped finance this project and that China was a transit state for the transfer of much of this technology from North Korea to Syria.

In addition, both Iran and North Korea are deeply interested in developing nuclear weapons designs. Both may have received Chinese nuclear weapons information through Pakistan. Iran may have benefited from Iraqi, Russian and possibly American weapons design information. North Korea, meanwhile, has benefited from what it may have learned from three separate nuclear weapons tests. The Iranians have long had a scientific team in residence in North Korea. What may or may not have been transferred between these two states relating to weapons design is not publicly known.

Although Iran initially sought North Korean help in the development of Iranian missile technology, Iran now has made significant advances such that it may have at least as much to offer North Korea as Pyongyang has to offer Tehran. Both countries have significant ICBM-capable space satellite launch programs.

With regard to passive defenses, Iran has succeeded in securing the very best European tunneling technology to help it build deep structures to hide and protect some of its nuclear activities against attack. It also is perfecting Western ultra-high performance concrete technology. Both would be of interest to North Korea.

Finally, with regard to deflecting international nuclear, missile, and political sanctions, all three regimes have reason to want to cooperate and learn from one another in a variety of ways. North Korea has learned how to negotiate with the US and other key powers, something Iran is dealing with now. Syria, meanwhile, must get around existing economic and military sanctions that are similar in several respects to those that have been imposed on Iran and North Korea.

### ***How this Nexus Tests Us and Our Current Policies***

Although three does not sound like a large number, Iran, North Korea, and Syria along with their foreign sources of military technical and financial support constitute an exponential increase of intelligence tracking challenges over dealing with just one or two proliferators. I know this from my personal experience in the Defense Department. One of the projects the U.S. was able to close the files on in the early 1990s was the long-range rocket space launcher

program that South Africa was pursuing. Accomplishing this, even though the US did not formally recognize the Pretoria government, was relatively simple, inexpensive, and quick.

By contrast, dealing with the Condor missile program, which involved Argentina, Egypt and Iraq, required the resources of our entire government and that of friendly parties in Germany, Saudi Arabia, France, Argentina, and Egypt. It was a massive, complicated, multiple-year undertaking that taxed our intelligence and diplomatic corps to the maximum. It is also worth noting that with the Condor project, only Iraq was clearly a hostile party and that the Condor was only a missile program. In the case of Syria, Iran, and North Korea, all three are hostile parties that are engaged in multiple projects of concern. This makes things much, much more difficult to track and neutralize.

How much more difficult might it be? This and the brief survey of strategic collaboration I've given above suggests four minimal principles or policy premises our government and that of our allies would need to adopt to tackle this new strategic nexus. Their adoption is not a given.

***The first of these new premises is that the transition of any one of these states to moderate self-rule would have significant, positive nonproliferation knock-on effects with regard to the other two.*** As I've noted the intelligence and diplomatic uncertainties of trying to neutralize the remaining proliferation problems would actually fall exponentially. Also, in Syria's case, there's an additional point. It is quite unclear what awaits us if Assad's rule should come to an end. There is a risk that some of his arsenal may fall into bad hands. However, these risks need to be balanced against the near certainty that if Assad were to stay in power, he would restart his nuclear weapons program with help from North Korea and, possibly, Iran.

***The second new policy principle is directly related to the first: Our recognition of these current hostile, autocratic governments' legitimacy and of their questionable per se "right" to engage in dangerous nuclear or aerospace-related pursuits will severely undermine any chance of blocking dangerous collaboration and will afford the nexus and other would-be proliferators a major cover for strategically dangerous pursuits.*** This principle would require major changes to how our and allied governments currently deal with these states and strategic weapons proliferation generally.

It would be a mistake to cut off communications. Instead, our government should encourage talking with citizens and officials in hostile, closed states like Iran, Syria, and North Korea. Towards this end, I think more can and should be done; Congress should be curious and eager to find out what would make sense.

That said, negotiating with these governments, which necessarily entails recognizing their legitimacy, is a very different matter. At the very least, one has to have a very clear idea of what one's objectives before entering into such negotiations. Otherwise, one risks supporting the legitimacy of a hostile state in exchange for little or nothing at all.

This point is of some moment, since a very strong case can be made that the negotiations with North Korea and Iran are anything but clear with regard to their immediate and long-term objectives. Their goal is somehow to disarm North Korea and to prevent Iran from going nuclear. That's clear enough. But how we plan to these achieve these goals, and according to what time schedule is murky at best. Lacking such an itinerary, a very strong case can be made that our negotiators should stay home.

This, then, brings us to the related problem of recognizing *per se* "rights" to engage in dangerous nuclear and aerospace activities under the guise of "peaceful" commercial activity. For reasons of convenience, our government and most of our allies have gotten into the lazy habit of explaining the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) as demanding three things

equally in order to secure any nonproliferation: nonproliferation safeguards, nuclear disarmament and the sharing of peaceful nuclear technology. This breezy “Three Pillars of the NPT” pitch lacks historical, legal and logical backing. While nuclear disarmament and the sharing of peaceful nuclear technology are mentioned in the NPT, they play a supporting role to the treaty’s primary aim, which is and must be nuclear nonproliferation, not nuclear sharing or technology transfers.

It would be helpful if Congress could get State to heel on this point. I know the Chairman has held hearings in the past on these issues. Perhaps additional hearings are needed. Driving this point home, especially with regard to dangerous nuclear fuel making activities (which are not mentioned in the text of the NPT and demands for which were actually rejected during the treaty’s negotiation) should not be regarded as some academic pursuit. In the March 31<sup>st</sup> edition of *The Washington Post*, Ray Takeyh, a keen analyst of Iranian affairs at The Council on Foreign Relations (but hardly a nonproliferation don), advised the governments negotiating with Iran not to concede to Tehran’s demand that they recognize Iran’s “right” to enrich. As he noted in his piece “The Best Red Line for A Nuclear Iran”:

Tehran knows that as it incrementally builds its nuclear apparatus, it risks the possibility of a military strike. To mitigate this danger, Iranian diplomats insist that the P5+1...recognize its right to enrich. The purpose of such an acknowledgement is to give Iran’s nuclear apparatus legal cover...Should the great powers formally acquiesce to Iran’s right to enrich, the bar for a military strike would be set at a much higher level.<sup>1</sup>

Although, I am extremely skeptical of the benefits of the US or Israel making military strikes against Iran, I think Mr. Takeyh is making a very important point here: Conceding Iran has a *per se* right to enrich will make it more difficult for the great powers ever to limit Iran’s ability to break out at any time to acquire the bombs we all fear.

This then brings us to the **third** point, which is that ***in reining this proliferation nexus in, one must avoid overplaying one’s hand diplomatically or militarily in ways that might risk fueling even more proliferation elsewhere.*** Some experts are now recommending that we concede Iran’s right to enrich in exchange for Iran merely limiting its enrichment levels to 20 percent or less. For reasons detailed by NPEC’s Senior Researcher, Greg Jones, in his most recent analysis,<sup>2</sup> such a deal, however, would be a bad one, as the real problem is the increasing number of Iranian centrifuges and the inability to secure timely warning of military diversions from fuel making activities, not as many insist, the amount of 20 percent enriched uranium Iran has on hand. In any case, if the US were to concede Iran’s right to enrich, it would be all but diplomatically impossible not to approve such rights for Syria, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, and every other nation that might want it.

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1. Ray Takyeh, “The Best Red Line for A Nuclear Iran,” *The Washington Post*, March 31, 2013, available at [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-best-red-line-for-a-nuclear-iran/2013/03/31/9e9397dc-933c-11e2-ba5b-550c7abf6384\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-best-red-line-for-a-nuclear-iran/2013/03/31/9e9397dc-933c-11e2-ba5b-550c7abf6384_story.html).

2. See Greg Jones, “Iran’s Rapid Expansion of its Enrichment Facilities Continues as the U.S. Concedes That Iran Is Getting ‘Closer and Closer’ to Having Nuclear Weapons,” (The Nonproliferation Policy Education Center, March 19, 2013), available at <http://npolicy.org/article.php?aid=1206&rid=4>.

Similarly, it is tempting to close ranks with South Korea in its hour of need as it faces an increasingly hostile North Korea. It would be a mistake, however, to grant Seoul the right to make nuclear fuel from U.S. nuclear materials or to grant it permission to prepare or condition spent fuel of U.S. origin for this purpose. It not only is technically unnecessary and uneconomical, it risks encouraging Japan to take a fateful step in massively increasing its stockpile of nuclear explosive plutonium by opening its uneconomical reprocessing plant at Rokkasho.<sup>3</sup> The reasons why are both cultural and competitive: Parliamentarians in both countries have already gone on record stating that reprocessing on a large scale would constitute a major nuclear weapons option hedge that they believe is desirable. Any move in this direction, however, would inevitably prompt China to up its nuclear ante, thereby increasing the nuclear threats the US and its Asian allies would all face.

As for military actions, one can easily imagine US or allied actions against either North Korea or Iran taking place before the case against these nations' supposed "right" to make nuclear fuel was made persuasively. In this case, even if there were no downsides tactically to such military actions, they could backfire strategically in making the US and allied case appear to the world to be a case of might over right, which will cause more resistance rather than compliance.

***Fourth*** and finally, ***any serious effort to reduce proliferation from or between these three targeted states must also address their most prominent sources of military technical and political support – Russia and China.*** The policy repercussions of this basic point are spelled out below.

### ***Some Specific Operational Implications***

Applying these principles to each of the three states and their supporters produces more than a few things to do.

In the case of North Korea, legislation that would place it back on the list of terrorist nations has already been proposed. It would be useful to pass if only because it would then make sanctioning Pyongyang financial dealings more likely and easier to accomplish. This is important since the one thing that Pyongyang needs to keep its Communist Party members faithful is hard currency – something China has never given it. How does North Korea secure this cash? The answer is illegal activities in Japan, South Korea and elsewhere – counterfeiting, drug trade, gambling establishments in Japan, etc.

It needs banks to hold and move the proceeds from these activities. That's why it was so loud in protesting the sanctions the US imposed on Banco Delta Asia in Macao in 2005, which handled its funds, even though the amount that was frozen -- \$24 million—was hardly massive. Our sanctioning action in this case, also got China's attention, since it was deathly afraid that the US might sanction other banks that were much closer to China's financial center. The US dropped this sanctioning effort and removed North Korea from the list of terrorist nations in 2007. Clearly, if we are interested in increasing pressure on North Korea and China without harming innocents, it would be useful to revisit this decision.

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3. See Henry Sokolski, "Pyongyang Is Not Our Only Nuclear Worry: Japan and South Korea are engaged in nuclear positioning," *National Review Online*, available at <http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/344746/pyongyang-not-our-only-nuclear-worry-henry-sokolski>.

In addition to targeting North Korean hard currency activities, though, the US and its Asian allies should redouble their efforts to enforce their own laws against counterfeiting, drug trade, shady or illegal arms trades, gambling and other illicit activities North Korea might engage in in the region to secure hard currency. As I noted some time ago, the beauty of taking this approach is that it does not require North Korea's consent or the passage of new laws, only the enforcement of existing laws. It also hurts the North Korean Communist Party but not the average North Korean citizen. It's among the very smartest of sanctions.<sup>4</sup>

It also would make sense to increase the intensity of our spotlight on North Korea's human rights abuses and to China's willingness to work with Pyongyang in forcibly repatriating escapees found in China. The latter is done in clear violation of China's treaty obligations. I know that the House has held hearing on these issues before. More is better. Sanctions legislation against China is worth another look. A similar look should be made of Iran's human rights record.

Finally, Congress should use its power of oversight to clarify the supposed "peaceful" character of the nuclear power and space launch activities it and Iran is engaged in. Where did these technologies come from, what their electrical and satellite benefits are, and how much cheaper they might be secured with alternative means should be examined. Here, one wonders why North Korea would not avail itself of Chinese space launch services and Iran of similar Russian services.

As for power, how important are the nuclear programs Iran and North Korea have? How much economic sense do they make given the nonnuclear alternatives? Why are Iran and North Korea making such large research reactors, which can make plutonium in large quantities? Wouldn't much smaller, less plutonium-prone producing research reactors be adequate? What are the safety and nuclear weapons proliferation risks of these programs? Congress should constantly be bearing down on these issues, even at the risk of repetition. Also, on these topics one may want to work with Russian and Chinese experts, not to reach consensus conclusions, but learn more about Russian and Chinese thinking as they help others in these fields.

Finally, a word on moral hazard. In our zeal to crack down on proliferation between Iran, North Korea, and Syria, we need to make clear that we don't throw the baby out with the bath water. In specific, it's important that any deals we might cut diplomatically do nothing to alienate our key Middle Eastern and East Asian allies in ways that might encourage them to go nuclear or ballistic. It also would be a mistake to engage in major military offensive operations under any circumstances unless we had made a clear and coherent case on the matter of nuclear rights. Also, we need to take care in the kind of technical and military support we extend to friends and allies located near Syria, Iran, and North Korea. Rather than approve or transfer dual use or military technologies that would enable them to "go it alone," we should be arming and assisting them in ways that integrate them economically, politically and militarily more closely with us. Anything else risks encouraging these nations to engage in offensive or defensive moves that could force us to have to come to their assistance at time and ways that could be at odds with anyone's best interests.

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4. See Henry Sokolski, "Curbing the North Korean Threat: The U.S. Must Stop Aiding Its Military," *National Review Online*, March 2003, available at [http://www.npolicy.org/article file/Curbing the North Korean Threat-The US must stop aiding its military.pdf](http://www.npolicy.org/article%20file/Curbing%20the%20North%20Korean%20Threat-The%20US%20must%20stop%20aiding%20its%20military.pdf).