
UNLIKELY FRIENDS? THE CONSOLIDATION OF THE NORTH KOREAN-SYRIAN ANTI-U.S. ALLIANCE AND THE SYRIAN WAR

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Although the Syrian war has been under intense academic and media scrutiny since it began from the ashes of the Arab Spring in 2011, little has been explored on North Korea's role in the conflict. Rather, most academic research on the war has focused around ISIS, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Russia, and the United States. The sparse scholarly work on North Korean connection to the war has focused around the allegations that it is rebuilding Syria's destroyed chemical weapons stockpiles and that its soldiers and pilots are fighting in the war. This paper critically analyses these allegations and questions their validity. In addition, the paper explores the necessity and context of the Pyongyang-Damascus relations, and questions what regime-survival means on the Korean Peninsula in the context of the Syrian War.

Keywords: *Syria, DPRK, Chemical Weapons, Hegemony, Multipolarity*

Introduction

The relationship between Pyongyang and Damascus has been one of the most consistent and friendly exchanges that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has had with any other state since its establishment in 1948 and the cooling of the Korean War in 1953. Syria was one of the first Middle Eastern countries to establish diplomatic relations with Pyongyang.¹ However, with the outbreak of the Syrian war in 2011, the DPRK saw one of its few international allies threatened to be overthrown by Western-backed militants.

In this regard, Syria and the DPRK share a common enemy that galvanizes and drives this unusual relationship. Syria is not a communist state and the cultures,

1 Niu Song, "North Korea's Middle East Diplomacy and the Arab Spring," *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 10, no. 1 (2016): 75.

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histories and demographics between East Asia and the Middle East are significantly different. However, this relationship is centred around what Damascus and Pyongyang say is in the defence for their sovereignty from external forces, particularly from European powers and the United States. Christina Y. Lin highlights some similarities between the DPRK and Syria. These include both countries remaining technically at war, with the DPRK and the Republic of Korea only agreeing to an armistice and not peace in 1953, and Syria and Israel agreeing to an armistice in 1949. She highlights other commonalities, such as dynastic rule and the fact Pyongyang still wants control over the entire Korean peninsula, while Syria wants full control of Lebanon as part of a "Greater Syria."²

Both Syria and the DPRK claim to be directly targeted by Western powers, and with the ascension of the age of multipolarity where the U.S. is no longer the sole superpower because of the challenges the rise of China and resurgence of Russia present, smaller states can challenge American hegemony.

With Syria being indirectly attacked by the U.S. since 2011, North Korea did not hesitate to defend its ally rhetorically and materially. Such a significant exchange has not been seen in decades, and with a changing of the world order from unipolar to multipolar, it is assumed that an alliance of so-called dissident middle and regional powers, such as that between the DPRK, Iran, and Syria, is increasingly strengthening their ties.³ It has also furthered relations between the DPRK and the Axis of Resistance (Syria-Iran-Hezbollah), especially when considering the significant support Pyongyang has consistently provided to Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, which "included everything from the shipment of short-range missiles and artillery, to the building of underground facilities."⁴

Centred around the Syrian War, the relations between Syria and the DPRK continues to consistently develop and prosper, which would not have occurred without the tragedy that is the Syrian War. The Syrian War provided the opportunity for Syria and the DPRK to present a strengthened united front, at least in rhetoric, to challenge Western hegemony and the allegations of chemical weapons use, foreign troop deployment to Syria, and weapon smuggling.

This paper will analyse the truthfulness behind the allegations of: 1) North Korean chemical weapons and military deployment to Syria; 2) North Korean weapon smuggling to Syria; 3) the failure of the U.S. intervention in Syria; and 4) future prospects this war presents to both Syria and the DPRK in the wider context of a multipolar world system.

2 Christina Y. Lin, "The King from the East: DPRK-Syria-Iran Nuclear Nexus and Strategic Implications for Israel and the ROK," *Korea Economic Institute* 3, no. 7 (2008): 3.

3 Matthew RJ Brodsky, "The North Korean Axis of Middle East Proliferation Read," *National Review*, August 31, 2017, www.nationalreview.com/article/450997/un-report-north-korea-syria-iran-relationship-extensive-long-standing.

4 Bruce E. Bechtol Jr., "North Korea and Support to Terrorism: An Evolving History," *Journal of Strategic Security* 3, no. 2 (2010): 49-50.

Unlikely Friends: Brief Historical Context on DPRK and Syria Relations

Since the establishment of both the DPRK and Israel in the 1940s, relations have been extremely hostile with Pyongyang deducing Israel as an “imperialist satellite.”⁵ Pyongyang refused to recognise Israel’s claim over the occupied Syrian Golan Heights, while in 1988 it recognised the sovereignty of the State of Palestine.⁶ Chapter 1: Article 2 of the DPRK’s constitution states that:

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea is a revolutionary State which has inherited the brilliant traditions formed during the glorious revolutionary struggle against the imperialist aggressors and in the struggle to achieve the liberation of the homeland and the freedom and well-being of the people.⁷

The DPRK believes that the foundations of its state are built on anti-imperialism and “the liberation of the homeland,” the same rhetoric given by armed Palestinian groups in their fight against the Israeli state. In the shared belief that they are both engaged in an anti-imperialist struggle, the DPRK supports the Palestinian cause. Similarly, the Syrian constitution states that:

The march toward the establishment of a socialist order besides being a necessity stemming from the Arab society’s needs, is also a fundamental necessity for mobilising the potentialities of the Arab masses in their battle with Zionism and imperialism.⁸

North Korea’s animosity towards the Israeli state and Syria’s anti-Zionist ideology, which are ingrained into their constitution, has made these two states natural allies. In October 1973, Egypt and Syria launched a war against Israel to liberate the Sinai and the Golan Heights that they had respectively lost in the 1967 Six Day War. In support of the quasi- socialist states of Egypt and Syria, the Soviet Union, Cuba, and the DPRK provided different amounts of support with North Korean pilots engaging with the Israeli air force on numerous occasions during the war.⁹

5 M. Haggard, “North Korea’s International Position,” *Asian Survey* 5, no. 8 (1965): 386.

6 United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization, “Hundred and thirty-first Session: Request for the admission of the State of Palestine to UNESCO As A Member State,” May 12, 1989, unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0008/000827/082711eo.pdf.

7 International Constitutional Law, “North Korea Constitution,” April 2009, www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/kn00000_.html.

8 International Constitutional Law, “Syria – Constitution,” March 13, 1973, Syria - Constitution www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/sy00000_.html.

9 Dario Leone, “An unknown story from the Yom Kippur War: Israeli F-4’s vs North Korean MIG-21s,” *The Aviationist*, June 14, 2013, <https://theaviationist.com/2013/06/24/iaf-f-4-vs-nk-mig21/#.UcmbIT773kM>.

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In 1986, North Korea finally opened its doors to tourists. However, alongside tourists from the US, Japan, and Taiwan, Israelis were also added to the list of those excluded.¹⁰ It was not until 2017 that an Israeli travel company established relations with the DPRK and was able to bring Israeli tourists.¹¹ Despite the fact that Israeli citizens are now allowed to travel to North Korea, the Israeli Foreign Ministry states that:

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs cautions Israeli citizens not to travel to North Korea for any purpose whatsoever [...] as the State of Israel has no diplomatic relations with North Korea [and] in the event an Israeli citizen encounters any kind of distress [...] Israeli representatives will not be able to be of assistance.¹²

On September 6, 2007, years before lifting the ban on Israeli citizens, Israel launched Operation Orchard on a suspected nuclear reactor in eastern Syria that was being built under the supervision of North Korean technicians. The resulting air raid allegedly killed ten North Koreans,¹³ prompting a spokesman for the DPRK Foreign Ministry to state that:

This is a very dangerous provocation little short of want only violating the sovereignty of Syria and seriously harassing the regional peace and security. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea strongly denounces the above-said intrusion and extends full support and solidarity to the Syrian people in their just cause to defend the national security and the regional peace.¹⁴

As of 2011, the United Nations reported that there were 526,744 registered Palestinian refugees in Syria.¹⁵ Syria is also the only Arab state today that provides Palestinian militant groups with logistical and armament support. It is in Syria and the DPRK's defence of the Palestinian cause that both countries find a common ground and a means to build relations.

10 B Koh, "North Korea in 1987: Launching a New Seven-Year Plan," *Asian Survey* 28, no. 1 (1988): 65.

11 Gili Melnitcki, "Israeli Who Visited North Korea Has a Tip for You," *The Haaretz*, February 14, 2017 <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.771704>.

12 Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "North Korea – warning for Israeli citizens," July 6, 2017 mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2017/Pages/North-Korea---warning-for-Israeli-citizens-6-July-2017.aspx.

13 Ariel Natan Pasko, "North Korea: There is an Israel Connection," *Israel National News*, August 16, 2017, <https://www.israelnationalnews.com/Articles/Article.aspx/20887>.

14 Yoav Stern, "N. Korea Condemns Israeli 'Provocation'," *Haaretz*, September 12, 2007, <https://www.haaretz.com/n-korea-condemns-israeli-provocation-1.229314>.

15 United Nations Relief and Works Agency, "Syria." <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/syria>.

In addition, Syria and the DPRK's collective efforts to produce weapons of mass destruction has been another important factor in relationship building. Despite receiving criticisms from Israel and Western powers, both states claim that their nuclear development ambitions are for energy and defensive purposes and that they would not use them to pre-emptively attack another state.

Are North Korean Military Personnel Fighting in Syria?

The Syrian war began in 2011 when Western-backed militants began infiltrating peaceful protests in Syria that called for legitimate political reforms and began firing weapons at Syrian security forces.¹⁶ Western and Arab mainstream media reported that Syrian security forces were brutally cracking down on peaceful protestors but would not mention that armed gunmen began violent skirmishes, as ground sources like Dutch Jesuit priest Father Frans Van der Lugt revealed.

Father Lugt was based in Syria's Homs province and lived in Syria from 1966 until his death. He was killed by the al-Nusra Front, a group linked to Al-Qaeda, on April 7, 2014. He revealed in January 2012 that armed protestors were the first to fire on the police and that "very often the violence of the security forces comes in response to the brutal violence of the armed insurgents."¹⁷ Then in 2012, Ali Hashem, a former Al-Jazeera journalist, claimed he quit the news agency because it refused to publish photos of armed militants firing on Syrian security services and because of its dishonest reporting.¹⁸ Also, a 2012 Human Rights Watch report found that the protests were "overwhelmingly peaceful until September 2011 when military defectors and local residents [...] decided to resort to arms," and also began to kidnap, torture, and execute security forces and pro-government citizens.¹⁹

Succumbing to the pressure from the protestors, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad announced that compulsory military service would be shortened, a crackdown on corruption would begin, political prisoners would be released, taxes would be reduced, salaries in the public sector would be increased, greater freedom for the press would be granted, and job opportunities increased.²⁰ However, despite these announcements, Western and Gulf Arab states began flooding Syria with weapons

16 Tim Anderson, "Daraa 2011: Syria's Islamist Insurrection in Disguise," *Global Research*, March 16, 2016, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/daraa-2011-syrias-islamist-insurrection-in-disguise/5460547>.

17 Tim Anderson, *The Dirty War on Syria: Washington, Regime Change and Resistance* (Montreal: Global Research, 2016), 55.

18 RT, "Al-Jazeera exodus: Channel losing staff over 'bias'," March 12, 2012 <https://www.rt.com/news/al-jazeera-loses-staff-335/>.

19 Human Rights Watch, "Syria: Armed Opposition Groups Committing Abuses," March 20, 2012, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/03/20/syria-armed-opposition-groups-committing-abuses>.

20 Paul Antonopoulos and Drew Cottle, *Syria: The Hegemonic Flashpoint Between Iran and Saudi Arabia* (New Delhi: Vij, 2017), 7.

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in an attempt to provoke an armed conflict.²¹ As the Axis of Resistance is the only true threat to the existence of Israel, regime-change in Syria and Iran has been a priority for Israeli and U.S. strategy in the Middle East, driving the idea in Pyongyang that Damascus is engaged in an anti-imperialist struggle.

It is because of the deliberate media manipulation and the smuggling of weapons into Syria by foreign states that Damascus and Pyongyang claim that the Arab country is engaged in an anti-imperialist struggle. During a meeting in May 2014 with a North Korean delegation headed by Minister of Foreign Trade Ri Ryong Nam, Assad claimed that the DPRK and Syria were both refusing to bow to pressure, rejecting subordination, sticking to sovereignty and independent decision-making, and standing against imperialist plots targeting the interests and capabilities of the peoples in their regions.²²

There are however, differing claims as to the role the DPRK is playing in Syria. Although Syria and the DPRK have coordinated on matters of diplomacy and anti-hegemony, as well as exchanges in scientific and military matters, an associate professor of political science at Angelo State University named Bruce Bechtol Jr highlights that “the relationship has actually been ‘ramped up’ since the Syrian civil war intensified”.²³ He suggests that although relations were always strong, they have strengthened because of the war. Asaad az-Zoubi of the Saudi-formed High Negotiations Committee of the Syrian political opposition claimed that two militia units from North Korea, Chalma-1 and Chalma-7, were fighting for government forces.²⁴ He then went on to say that North Korean troops are extremely dangerous.²⁵ Supporting the claim that the North Korean military are actively fighting in the Syrian war, Burhan Ghalioun, former president of another opposition group called the Syrian National Council, said in 2013 that North Korean pilots were flying in the Syrian Air Force.²⁶

In addition, Rami Abd-al-Rahman of the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights claimed that Arabic-speaking North Korean officers were taking

21 Tim Anderson, “Daraa 2011: Syria’s Islamist Insurrection in Disguise,” *Global Research*, March 16, 2016, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/daraa-2011-syrias-islamist-insurrection-in-disguise/5460547>.

22 Al-Manar, “President Assad: Both Syria, North Korea Standing against Imperialist plots,” May 29, 2014, archive.almanar.com.lb/english/article.php?id=153899.

23 Hamish Macdonald, “North Korea and Syria: A revamp in relations,” *NK News*, <https://www.nknews.org/2014/09/north-korea-and-syria-a-revamp-in-relations/>.

24 TASS, “North Korean units fight for Bashar Assad regime in Syria — HNC,” March 22, 2016, tass.com/world/864368.

25 Elizabeth Shim, “North Korea troops fighting in Syrian civil war, delegate says,” *UPI*, March 22, 2016, https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2016/03/22/North-Korea-troops-fighting-in-Syrian-civil-war-delegate-says/1021458696828/.

26 Oliver Hotham, “Activist: Assad has hired N. Korean pilots for air strikes,” *NK News*, October 29, 2013, <https://www.nknews.org/2013/10/activist-assad-has-hired-n-korean-pilots-for-air-strikes/>.

part, alongside the regular forces, in the fighting in Aleppo and that although the overall number of these officers is unknown, “there are certainly between 11 and 15 North Korean officers and the majority of them speak Arabic... (they) are deployed at several fronts such as the defence factories southeast of Aleppo and at the regular forces’ bases inside the city itself.”²⁷

However, the validity of these claims must be questioned. It is impossible to verify these claims as no evidence has been put forward. Officially, the DPRK leadership has denied claims that it is militarily involved in the Syrian war, with states news agency KCNA quoting a spokesperson for the North Korean Foreign Ministry in November 2013 saying that the reports were:

Foolish plots of hostile forces to tarnish the image of the peace-loving DPRK and cover up their criminal acts of blocking the peaceful settlement of the Syrian situation. The Syrian situation should be settled peacefully through dialogue and negotiations as early as possible in the interests of the Syrian people free from foreign intervention on the principle of ensuring sovereignty and territorial integrity.²⁸

Despite denying the involvement of military in the Syrian war, the DPRK has continuously provided rhetorical support for Damascus. DPRK leader Kim Jong Un said in November of 2012 that he wishes success in Syria’s efforts to “defend the sovereignty, peace, and stability of the country,” while Pyongyang’s ambassador to Damascus, Jang Myong Ho, claimed that the war in Syria is a result of conspiracies created by the US and its puppets but that the DPRK has “confidence that the Syrian Arab Army will emerge victorious.”²⁹ This is an unsurprising position to take considering that ‘anti-imperialism’ is ingrained into the country’s ethos via their constitution, education system, and historical memory. With Pyongyang viewing the U.S. as the epitome of an imperialist empire, it believes that by supporting Syria it is engaging in an international anti-imperialist struggle.

In speaking with Hassan Joudeh from Syria’s Ministry of Information on March 24, 2019, he claimed that there were no North Korean soldiers or pilots fighting

27 Nate Thayer, “North Korea and Syrian chemical and missile programs,” *NK News*, June 19, 2013, <https://www.nknews.org/2013/06/north-korea-and-syrian-chemical-and-missile-programs/>.

28 Oliver Hotham, “North Korea denies involvement in Syria conflict,” *NK News*, November 15, 2013, <https://www.nknews.org/2013/11/north-korea-denies-involvement-in-syria-conflict/>.

29 Julian Ryall, “North Korean leader offers support to Assad,” *DW*, November 20, 2012, www.dw.com/en/north-korean-leader-offers-support-to-assad/a-16392804; Elizabeth Whitman, “Syria Pledges Support For North Korea, Kim Jong Un: Baath Party Praises Pyongyang For Strong Relations Amid ‘Terrorism’ Threats,” *International Business Times*, August 31, 2015, www.ibtimes.com/syria-pledges-support-north-korea-kim-jong-un-baath-party-praises-pyongyang-strong-2075519.

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in Syria, but that there are North Korean military experts and advisors in the country. He went on to explain that they were not located on the frontlines, like the Iranian and Russian military advisors, but also that this was not a recent phenomenon as they have been in Syria for decades monitoring Israel and maintaining military ties between the two countries. Although it is impossible to verify without an official announcement or photographic evidence, we know at the very minimum that North Korean officers are operating in Syria, but their capacity in relation to the war remains unknown. Philip Smyth, a researcher at the University of Maryland, is also skeptical of North Koreans fighting in Syria and alternatively suggested that people claiming to see North Korean fighters were confusing their identity with Hazara militias fighting in Syria.³⁰ The Hazara are a Shi'ite minority from Afghanistan with significant Asiatic features and are believed to be the descendants of Mongol invaders. The Hazaras have 12,000 to 14,000 fighters battling on the side of Syrian government forces.³¹ Despite the announcements from Damascus and Pyongyang that North Korea does not have any military personnel actively involved in the war, this has not stopped Bechtol from making the accusation in his paper provocatively titled "North Korea and Syria: Partners in Destruction and Violence" in *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* that North Korean pilots are active in Syria, with him stating that:

It appears that the reasons behind the augmentation of helicopter units by North Korean pilots is a shortage of trustworthy pilots (or pilots who are loyal to the Assad regime) in the Syrian air force. Whether it is that, or simply a shortage of trained pilots, North Korea's augmentation of air units with its own pilots is yet another disturbing aspect of its support to Syria in the ongoing civil war.³²

This bewildering notion was put forward without any solid evidence besides the assertion made by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, who was then quoted by *The Jerusalem Post*.³³ Any serious analysis of Syria would scoff at the claims made by Bechtol that there is or was a "shortage of trustworthy pilots," considering that Hafez al-Assad, the previous Syrian president and father to Bashar al-Assad,

30 Adam Taylor, "Are North Koreans fighting in Syria? It's not as far-fetched as it sounds," *The Washington Post*, March 25, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/03/25/are-north-koreans-fighting-in-syria-its-not-as-far-fetched-as-it-sounds/?utm_term=.ae0003461a67.

31 Tasnim News, "زا یدادعت ادوب یگن اخی تیئی کی ادتبا نوی مطاف یل عف تالی کشیت," June 29, 2015, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1395/03/29/1107833>. Accessed November 25.

32 Bruce E. Bechtol Jr., "North Korea and Syria: Partners in Destruction and Violence," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 27, no. 3 (2015): 286.

33 Jonathan Spyer, "BEHIND THE LINES: ASSAD'S NORTH KOREAN CONNECTION," *The Jerusalem Post*, November 2, 2013 www.jpost.com/Features/Front-Lines/Behind-The-Lines-Assads-North-Korean-connection-330303.

was a fighter pilot whose power-base was the air force centred around the Dmeyr airbase.³⁴ The strength of the air force institution in Syria remained after Hafez's death and Bashar's ascent to the presidency. It is for this reason that the Syrian Airforce until this day has the country's "most secretive and fearsome intelligence service,"³⁵ as the Middle East Intelligence Bulletin described it, and the "most powerful, ruthless—and undoubtedly most feared—security agency in all of Syria," as Robert Fisk explained in November 2016.³⁶ The Syrian security and intelligence apparatus is centred around the air force and suggesting that there is a "shortage of trustworthy pilots" goes against many of the serious analysis, historical or contemporary, on Syria. As Dr Josef Oltmert explains, the Syrian air force has always been a bastion of Alawite domination over the Syrian military.³⁷ The Alawites are a minority Islamic sect constituting only about 13% of the population, in which the Assad's belong to.³⁸ When considering that the air force is the pinnacle of Syria's military and intelligence, and has played a leading role in fighting ISIS and Al-Qaeda affiliated groups, it is reprehensible to believe that North Korean pilots were/are needed in Syria because of trust and/or loyalty issues as Bechtol contends.

The involvement of North Korean advisors and experts in Syria allows for them to gain valuable combat experience, particularly in irregular warfare. This would help the Korean People's Army to plan future tactics in any potential war on the Korean peninsula. In addition, it also allows the North Korean advisors to observe how Russian weapons operate in the field and propels them to adjust their own equipment or to buy weapons from Russia in the future.

Chemical weapons accusations and responses in the Syrian war

Another point of contention has been chemical weapons. On August 21, 2017, *Reuters* released a story stating that the DPRK was allegedly smuggling chemical

34 Tom Cooper, "How Fighter Pilots Made Modern Syria," *Medium*, January 23, 2017, https://medium.com/war-is-boring/how-fighter-pilots-made-modern-syria-804f0e1d1283_

35 Middle East Intelligence Bulletin, "Syria's Intelligence Services: A Primer," July 1, 2000, https://www.meforum.org/meib/articles/0007_s3.htm.

36 Robert Fisk, "Tougher tactics would have ended Syrian war, claims the country's top intelligence general," *The Independent*, November 27, 2016, www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-war-aleppo-exclusive-top-syrian-general-robert-fisk-tougher-tacts-a7442161.html.

37 Josef Oltmert, "Solution in Syria?" *The Huffington Post*, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/dr-josef-olmert/syria-solution_b_1619536.html.

38 Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "International Religious Freedom Report 2006," *U.S. Department of State*, 2006, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2006/71432.htm>.

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weapons to Syria, with two shipments intercepted in a six-month period.³⁹ *Reuters* conceded that there was “no details on when or where the interdictions occurred or what the shipments contained”⁴⁰ and despite there being no solid evidence that the shipments contained chemical weapon materials, the story was repeated the next day on all mainstream media, including *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *France24*, *Business Insider*, and *NBC*.

Again, there was another claim made about DPRK actions with regards to the Syrian War, but backed with no solid evidence. Although the DPRK claims it has no chemical weapons, other sources, such as the International Institute for Strategic Studies, state that the DPRK comes third after the U.S. and Russia in terms the number of nuclear weapons it possesses.⁴¹ The DPRK is one of the few states that have not signed or ratified the Chemical Weapons Convention, and it refused to admit to having chemical weapons. The DPRK however, has signed the Geneva Protocol, which prohibits the use of chemical weapons during wartime.⁴²

This does not prove that North Korea has no chemical weapons in its possession. Still, the acknowledgements of uncertainties on what Syria’s bound shipments contain sets a dangerous precedent when attempting to engage with so-called dissident states like Syria and the DPRK. This is especially sensitive as Syria got rid of all its chemical weapons under UN supervision in June 2014.⁴³

On April 7th, 2017, the US launched 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles on Shayrat Airbase, in Syria’s Homs countryside, in response to the Khan Shaykhun chemical attack incident in the jihadist-held province of Idlib three days earlier. The chemical attack was immediately blamed on Syrian government forces without any independent investigation being conducted and with Trump stating that:

It is in the vital national security interest of the United States to prevent and deter the spread and use of deadly chemical weapons. There can be no dispute that Syria used banned chemical weapons, violated its obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention, and ignored the urging of the

39 Michelle Nichols, “North Korea shipments to Syria chemical arms agency intercepted: U.N. report,” *Reuters*, August 21, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-syria-un/north-korea-shipments-to-syria-chemical-arms-agency-intercepted-u-n-report-idUSKCN1B12G2>.

40 Ibid.

41 International Institute for Strategic Studies, *North Korean Security Challenges: A Net Assessment* (London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2011), 161.

42 Nuclear Threat Initiative, “North Korea,” December, 2015, www.nti.org/learn/countries/north-korea/chemical/.

43 UN News Centre, “Removal of Syria’s chemical weapons material complete, announces OPCW-UN mission,” June 23, 2014, www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=48103#.WhrO0kqnHIU.

U.N. Security Council.⁴⁴

Trump blamed Syria for the attack within hours of the incident and omitted the fact that Syria destroyed its entire chemical weapon stockpile years earlier.⁴⁵ However, six months after the event, on October 19th, the U.S. State Department acknowledged that the Al-Qaeda linked Al-Nusra, who were in control of Khan Sheykhun at the time of the attack, used chemical weapons, stating that:

Tactics of ISIS, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham [al-Nusra], and other violent extremist groups include the use of suicide bombers, kidnapping, small and heavy arms, improvised explosive devices, and chemical weapons. They have targeted major city centres, road checkpoints, border crossings, government buildings, shopping areas, and open spaces, in Damascus, Aleppo, Hamah, Dara, Homs, Idlib, and Dayr al-Zawr [Deir Ezzor] provinces.⁴⁶

Because it does not acknowledge the fact that the terrorists in Khan Sheykhun could have conducted a false flag operation to force international intervention against Bashar al-Assad's regime, this statement contradicts the U.S. policy towards Syria. There was also no need for the Syrian government to conduct a chemical weapons attack, as the Syrian Army was advancing and winning against all terrorist forces in the country. In August 20, 2012, U.S. President Barrack Obama stated:

We have communicated in no uncertain terms with every player in the region that that's a red line for us and that there would be enormous consequences if we start seeing movement on the chemical weapons front or the use of chemical weapons. That would change my calculations significantly.⁴⁷

Obama promised that, in the event that chemical weapons were deployed and used in Syria, there would be "enormous consequences," which was interpreted as a military attack or intervention. However, after the announcement, observers saw

44 Donald Trump Jr, "Statement by President Trump on Syria," *The White House*, April 6, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/04/06/statement-president-trump-syria>.

45 Paul Antonopoulos, "Jumping to conclusions; something is not adding up in Idlib chemical weapons attack," *Al-Masdar News*, April 4, 2017, <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/jumping-conclusions-something-not-adding-idlib-chemical-weapons-attack/>.

46 U.S Department of State - Bureau of Consular Affairs, "Syria Travel Warning," *U.S. Passports and International Travel*, October 18, 2017, <https://travel.state.gov/content/passports/en/alertswarnings/syria-travel-warning.html>.

47 Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps," *The White House*, August 20, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/08/20/remarks-president-white-house-press-corps>.

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a spike in chemical weapon attacks, with five major incidents within the 366 days following the “red line” announcement.⁴⁸ After one attack, the U.S. once again blamed the Syrian government. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov responded to the allegation by stating that “the accusations of Damascus using chemical weapons put forth by the United States are not backed by credible facts.”⁴⁹ He also questioned why the Syrian government would now use chemical weapons when it had a clear strategic advantage over the militant fighters on that particular battle front.⁵⁰ In another attack, Carla Del Ponte, a member of the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic stated on May 6, 2013 that chemical weapons “[were] used on the part of the opposition, the rebels, not by the government authorities.”⁵¹ It is for this reason that some suggest that armed militants have far greater incentives to use chemical weapons than the Syrian government does. It must be questioned why the Syrian Army would risk a military confrontation with the U.S. and cross a “red line” by using sarin gas for no clear strategic battlefield advantage. Rather, it can be suggested that many instances of chemical weapons allegations are false-flag operations used by terrorist groups such as Al-Nusra to try and provoke U.S. interventions. In August 2013, just days after UN weapons inspectors landed in Damascus to begin an investigation into the alleged use of chemical weapons, one attack left hundreds of people dead. It was again blamed on the Syrian government by Western powers. Given the red line warning by Obama, and the timing of the arrival of the UN weapons inspectors, it would seem illogical for the Syrian government to deploy such weapons at that moment.

It is not the aim of this paper to explore every chemical weapon allegation in the Syrian War. Rather, it provides some context on why it is highly unlikely that Syria is currently using chemical weapons in the war, despite the allegations made with little to no evidence, particularly after the red line threat. The paper therefore argues that false-flag operations has been used continuously to try and provoke a US attack against Syria, just as Trump had done in April 2017. It can be safely suggested that the then newly elected President of the U.S. wanted to send a strong message not only to Syria and Iran, but also to North Korea. Indeed, the Shayrat attack was also a warning to the DPRK.

48 Masuma Ahuja, “A partial list of Syria’s suspected chemical weapons attacks this year,” *The Washington Post*, August 21, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/08/21/a-partial-list-of-syrias-suspected-chemical-weapons-attacks-this-year/?utm_term=.3aaf28674f08.

49 Paul Richter, Christi Parsons, and David S. Cloud, “Getting U.S. weapons to Syria rebels will take weeks,” *The Los Angeles Times*, June 14, 2013, articles.latimes.com/2013/jun/14/world/la-fg-us-syria-20130615.

50 DW, “Russia expresses doubts on Syria’s chemical weapons use,” June 15, 2013, www.dw.com/en/russia-expresses-doubts-on-syrias-chemical-weapons-use/a-16885053.

51 Richard Hall, “UN’s Carla Del Ponte says there is evidence rebels ‘may have used sarin’ in Syria,” *The Independent*, www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/uns-carla-del-ponte-says-there-is-evidence-rebels-may-have-used-sarin-in-syria-8604920.html.

Fox News Contributor Judith Miller and Charles Duelfer, a former deputy chairman of the U.N. weapons inspection agency, suggested that the strikes against the Shayrat airbase was to send “a strong message not only to Syria but to several other states and groups with a stake in the outcome of that country’s brutal civil war. To North Korea, the strike is a warning.”⁵² It is suggested that it was a warning to the DPRK, as the attacks occurred several days before Trump met with Chinese leader Xi Jinping, where the topic of focus was the DPRK. In the months before the meeting between the two leaders, the U.S. President had given many rhetorical warnings to the DPRK about its weapons program. In response to the U.S. airstrike on the Shayrat airbase, an unnamed spokesman for the DPRK Foreign Ministry stated that: “The U.S. missile attack against Syria is a clear and unforgivable act of aggression against a sovereign state and we strongly condemn this.”⁵³ This occurred during a period when Trump was giving strong rhetorical warnings to North Korea to stop its weapon programs.

Rather than threatening the DPRK into submission, the airstrike furthered Pyongyang’s desire to continue producing weapons of mass destruction, including expanding its nuclear arsenal. In response to the aggression, the DPRK’s Foreign Ministry claimed that the “reality of today” justifies their decision to strengthen their military power so they can meet force with force. For them, it “was the right choice a million times over” to continue with the weapons program.⁵⁴ The DPRK has consistently defended its weapons program as a means to deter any supposed U.S. plans to attack or invade the country. Although Washington has on numerous occasions made it clear that it has no plans to pre-emptively attack or invade the DPRK without provocation, U.S. actions against Syria will keep Pyongyang sceptical and committed to its weapons program. Rather than having the desired effect of sending a threatening message to the DPRK, the airstrikes against Syria strengthened its resolve, suggesting a significant blunder in Washington’s policy as it was not able to subdue the DPRK weapons program, and forced the meeting of the DPRK and U.S. leaders. Since the airstrikes by the US against Syria in April 2017, the DPRK conducted its sixth nuclear bomb test on September 3, 2017 as well as several other ballistic missile tests, which all received severe condemnation not only from Washington, but also Beijing and Moscow.

Just days before the airstrikes, Kim congratulated Assad on the creation of an independent country, ensuring regional peace and security, while also praising Syria’s ruling Ba’ath party for resisting foreign and domestic enemies in the ongoing fight for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria. His statement also reasserted

52 Alex Diaz, “North Korea, Syria and decades of chemical weapons,” *Fox News*, April 10, 2017, www.foxnews.com/world/2017/04/10/north-korea-syria-and-decades-chemical-weapons.html.

53 Ju-min Park and Jack Kim, “North Korea calls U.S. strikes on Syria ‘unforgivable’,” *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-northkorea/north-korea-calls-u-s-strikes-on-syria-unforgivable-idUSKBN17A0H4>.

54 Ibid.

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the anti-U.S. stance that both governments conform to.⁵⁵ Syria-DPRK relations improved so much throughout the war that, in a show of solidarity and appreciation, Syria marked the 70th anniversary of Korea's liberation from Japanese imperialists by opening the Kim Il-sung Park in Damascus. The DPRK's ambassador to Syria, Jang Myong-ho, expressed his appreciation for the gesture and emphasized his belief that Syria would "achieve the final victory in its fight against aggression."⁵⁶ This gesture from Syria is an expression of appreciation for the fruitful cooperation between the two countries, especially considering that North Korea, to different extents, has supported Syria in every war it has been involved in since the accession of the Ba'ath Party in 1963.

The allegations of the Syrian government using chemical weapons also goes hand in hand with the allegations of weapons smuggling. Bechtol in his 2015 publication refers to evidences that Damascus possesses chemical weapons from North Korea or built chemical weapons with North Korean assistance. However, all his references concern years of the war prior to the UN supervision of Syria's chemical weapons removal.⁵⁷ In fact, Bechtol makes no reference to the UN's supervision of Syria's chemical weapons removal, suggesting there is a clear agenda to present past occurrences as facts in the contemporary.

DPRK's Illegal Weapons Trade with Syria

As the DPRK is sanctioned by most of the world because of United Nations resolutions, it has had to actively, but covertly, engage in trade. A report from the UN Panel of Experts found that the DPRK were defying the UN sanctions and continued to trade arms, ammunition, and minerals with other states.⁵⁸ Although the DPRK officially states it does not sell weapons to Syria, other reports claim that the DPRK has supplied the Syrian military with rifles, artillery, mortars, machine guns, ammunition, bombs, armoured vehicles, anti-tank weapons, and multiple rocket launchers.⁵⁹ Reports throughout the duration of the war have consistently claimed that Syria-bound ships from the DPRK are using fronts but are still being intercepted and found to be loaded with war equipment, demonstrating that Pyongyang is materially supporting the Arab country.

55 Elizabeth Shim, "Kim Jong Un congratulated Syria's Assad before U.S. strike," *UPI*, <https://www.upi.com/Kim-Jong-Un-congratulated-Syrias-Assad-before-US-strike/5141491572060/>.

56 SANA, "قديح تي مست مسارم.. تيب عشل اتي طارق مي دل ايروك رححتل 70 ىركذلا قس انمب" August, 31, 2015, www.sana.sy/?p=260320.

57 Bruce E. Bechtol Jr., "North Korea and Syria: Partners in Destruction and Violence," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 27, no. 3 (2015): 282.

58 Leo Byrne, "PoE says North Korea 'flouting sanctions': report," *NK News*, February 8, 2017, <https://www.nknews.org/2017/02/north-korea-flouting-sanctions-poe-report/>.

59 Bruce E. Bechtol Jr., "North Korea and Syria: Partners in Destruction and Violence," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 27, no. 3 (2015): 285.

Despite its claims, it is unlikely that the DPRK is not engaging in arms sales with Syria, leading Bechtol to correctly assert that this is a major revenue scheme for the DPRK.⁶⁰ He then states that “Syrians frequently visit North Korea because of arms deals, but these are events that get little to no publicity.”⁶¹ Although he lists high-level diplomatic visits during the war period, he is not able to provide evidence that the exchanges were about arms deals. However, during a conversation with Bechtol on April 15, 2019, Ali Abbas from the Syrian Air Force intelligence revealed that an extremely high-ranking Syrian military commander makes frequent visits to the DPRK.⁶² One purpose for the frequent Syrian commanders’ visits to the DPRK is to inspect arms before they are shipped to Syria, according to Ali Abbas. Therefore, claims that the DPRK does not engage in an international arms racket cannot be taken seriously.

A report by the Small Arms Survey with the support of the Australian government found that the DPRK sells billions of dollars of weapons to Syria, Iran, Cuba, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Namibia, and Yemen.⁶³ How much of this is directed to Syria is almost impossible to know unless either the Syrian or DPRK government publicly admit it. However, Larry Niksch of the Congressional Research Service estimates North Korea’s illicit arms sales in the Middle East alone to be about \$3 billion per year, while Bechtol stated that “illicit activity is worth more than 40 percent of the real North Korean economy. And of that 40 percent, more than two-thirds of it is weapons proliferation.”⁶⁴ This could also suggest that the survival of the Syrian government is a necessary stream of rare international revenue for the DPRK, and that the Syrian War is a bittersweet event for Pyongyang especially when considering the intensification of sanctions against the DPRK.

According to Joshua Pollack, for illicit arms sales to continue, it must be between trusted states and it is for this reason that Pyongyang now deals primarily with Iran and Syria in the area of missiles and other weapons.⁶⁵ This illegal weapons trade is to the advantage of both Syria and the DPRK, as the former gets precious weapons necessary to the war effort, while the latter gets valuable revenue essential for state survival.

60 Steve Mollman, “The war in Syria has been great for North Korea,” *Quartz*, April 19, 2017, <https://qz.com/962995/the-war-in-syria-has-been-great-for-north-korea/>.

61 Bruce E. Bechtol Jr., “North Korea and Syria: Partners in Destruction and Violence,” *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 27, no. 3 (2015): p. 280.

62 Ibid.

63 Paul Holtom and Irene Pavesi, “Trade Update 2017: Out of the Shadows,” *Small Arms Survey*, 2017, www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/S-Trade-Update/SAS-Trade-Update-2017.pdf, p. 69-71.

64 Christopher Woolf, “A key supplier of Syria’s chemical weapons? North Korea,” *PRI*, April 21, 2017, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-04-21/key-supplier-syrias-chemical-weapons-north-korea>.

65 Joshua Pollack, “Ballistic Trajectory: The Evolution of North Korea’s Ballistic Missile Market,” *Nonproliferation Review* 18, no. 2 (2011): 412.

Conclusion

It is likely that the Syrian government will be victorious in its war against armed militants, particularly since the liberation of Aleppo in December 2016 and the virtual destruction of ISIS at the end of 2017. Countries that maintained relations with Syria will thus be in prime position to win lucrative reconstruction contracts. Whether this includes the DPRK remains to be seen.

However, the war has undeniably strengthened the relationship between the two countries. To confirm their stronger relationship, Assad in September 2017 sent an appreciative letter to Kim, thanking the DPRK for providing support without elaborating on the type of support.⁶⁶

Syria and the DPRK have much in common, including their resilience to external interference and sabotage, their virtual dependence on the support of China and Russia, and their anti-imperialist claims. The Syrian war provided the opportunity for the Korean People's Army to observe and follow in close detail how to deal with an internal revolt. Effectively, Syria has provided the blueprint to Pyongyang of how a regime can survive this type of aggression.

Although some claim that North Korean soldiers and pilots are fighting in Syria, this remains highly unlikely as no one has been able to produce photographic evidence, or any evidence for that matter. As Syrian sources Hassan Joudeh and Ali Abbas revealed in their paper, North Korean military advisers are present, but have been for decades. In this critical time for Syria, North Korean advisers are closely monitoring how the Syrian Army has been successful in regime survival.

Although mainstream media claimed that North Korea played a role in distributing chemical weapons to Syria, this mostly occurred in the pre-war period. No evidence points to the fact that the DPRK has attempted to rebuild Syrian chemical weapon stockpiles after the UN supervised the dismantling of Syria's chemical weapons in 2014. The only so-called evidence of this comes from a single *Reuters* news article, which became a reference for all other mainstream media despite the outlet acknowledging that there is no way of knowing what the ships contained.

At a time when their government forces were on the verge of being victorious in the war, attempting to acquire chemical weapons would be a major strategic blunder for Damascus as it risks further U.S.-led intervention against the regime. This alone renders *Reuters'* claim unlikely, especially as Syria has fully cooperated with the UN and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and continues to do so.

It is very likely, however, that sale of arm sales from the DPRK to Syria occurs frequently, as an inside source of the Syrian military revealed. With few allies and extremely restrictive sanctions placed against the DPRK, it had to actively

66 Tom O'Connor, "War in Syria: Assad thanks Iran and North Korea for Help in letters to two supreme leaders opposed to U.S.," *Newsweek*, September 15, 2017, www.newsweek.com/war-syria-assad-thanks-iran-and-north-korea-support-letters-two-supreme-665992.

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search markets and employ ingenious methods to engage in arms racketeering. This is mostly done through front companies and has been successful.

With the failure of the U.S. to covertly topple Assad from leadership, as it has been successfully done in Libya in 2011, the strength of the North Korean-Syrian relationship suggests it is unlikely that Washington will attempt to have the Kim regime overthrown through internal means. Rather, the U.S. failure in Syria has deepened the intention of the DPRK to improve its weapons program. As exemplified by the Syrian case, even the dismantling of weapons of mass destruction can result in accusations of its use without any evidence. The Khan Sheykoun event is a good enough reason for the DPRK not to abandon its program in the short-term, which shows the failure of Washington in trying to intimidate Pyongyang. However, it is clear that the survival of the Assad government and the DPRK's continuous and uncompromising support for Syria under the idea of supporting an anti-imperialist struggle will mean that the relationship is not only preserved but has shown a level of maturity that is missing from Washington's engagement with its allies since the beginning of the Trump administration. It is only expected that Syria and the DPRK will continue being allies as long as their respective leaderships survive all threats.