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Issue Brief

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Iran-North Korea Relations: Friends in Isolation?

August 24, 2017

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A recent visit of a high-level North Korean delegation to Iran for attending President Hassan Rouhani's swearing-in ceremony has raised many eyebrows in the international community. The visit by North Korea's



second most powerful man, Kim Yong Nam, head of the North Korean parliament came at a time when North Korea finds itself under fresh and heavier US backed-sanctions imposed by the United Nations. On the other hand, the US administration under President Trump has also imposed sanctions on Iran in response to its recent missile tests. The visit also signals a strengthening of military, political and economic ties between two of the United States most feared rivals simultaneous to US efforts to isolate the two nations.

On August 3, 2017, Pyongyang's second most powerful leader Kim Yong Nam- President of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly visited Iran to attend President Hassan Rouhani's swearing-in ceremony in Tehran. Kim Yong Nam was joined by Choe Hui Chol, the vice-minister of Foreign Affairs. This visit came at a time when President Trump has imposed new sanctions on Russia, North Korea and Iran, while there has also been an exchange of strong political rhetoric between North Korea and the US.

The US-backed sanctions have come after being passed through both the Senate and House before requiring the final signature of President Trump. The bill passed the Senate 98-2, and it passed 419-3 in the House signifying big support in the various echelons of the US political system.¹ With regard to Iran, the bill focuses mainly on preventing Iran from enhancing its ballistic missiles programme by allowing the sanctioning of any entity believed to be benefiting the programme. They also target acts of human

¹ <http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/trump-signs-bill-sanctioning-russia-iran-north-korea/article/2630394>

rights abuses, transfer/supply of certain weapons to and from Iran, and sanctions on the Iranian Revolutionary Guards in general.² The sanctions against North Korea mainly target trade of reserves such as important minerals and fuels, for example, gold, copper, silver, jet fuel and various others.³ It is expected that these primarily economic sanctions would put North Korea at a loss of nearly \$1 billion, as reported by the US State Department,⁴ while President Trump has heaped pressure on China to help practically enforce the sanctions. In light of the new sanctions, it is also believed that North Korea may be looking towards Iran to buy a greater share of Korean exports as other nations, including China, may exhibit reluctance in doing so.⁵ North Korea, it is believed, utilizes a great deal of the revenue it generates to develop its nuclear programme.⁶

The North Korean state media coverage attributed the purpose of Kim Yong Nam's visit to attend the inauguration ceremony of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's re-election. However, it is believed that there were also military and political aspects to the visit as the delegation comprised senior military members as well.⁷ Iran and North Korea previously too have shared relatively warm relations, while military cooperation between the two countries has been covered by many western and international experts and news agencies. In the past, military technology transfer from North Korea to Iran has been significant.⁸ However, in recent times the reverse has also been evident in Iranian technology being reflected in North Korean military equipment and expertise.⁹ In the summer of 2016, Iran conducted a missile launch which was seen as being similar to a North Korean missile Musudan, the most advanced missile Pyongyang had successfully tested to date.¹⁰

The visit comprised notably of meetings with President Rouhani, Speaker of the Iranian Parliament Ali Larijani and a visit to the opening of the newly constructed DPRK embassy in Tehran. Mr. Hassan Rouhani, in his meeting with Kim Yong Nam stressed the importance of dialogue to achieve peace in the Korean Peninsula and world over. He further went on to say that the countries of the world should refrain from interfering in the internal affairs of others. Reciprocating, Mr. Kim wished that relations

² <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/08/04/politics/us-sanctions-russia-iran-north-korea/index.html>

³ <http://www.nepia.com/media/775109/Eren-Economic-Sanctions-Update-North-Korea-8-2-2017.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/08/08/new-sanctions-could-scare-off-north-koreas-previous-customers.html>

⁵ <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/08/08/new-sanctions-could-scare-off-north-koreas-previous-customers.html>

⁶ <https://usun.state.gov/remarks/7924>

⁷ <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/08/04/north-korea-officials-visit-to-iran-could-signal-wider-military-ties.html>

⁸ <https://watchjerusalem.co.il/2017/05/08/iran-missile-test-exposes-another-link-to-north-korea/>

⁹ <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/05/15/former-cia-agent-says-iran-aiding-north-korea-as-new-missile-test-emboldens-pyongyang.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2017/05/05/pentagon-eyes-north-korea-military-connection.html>

between the two countries would continue to improve saying: “We are keen on promoting ties with Iran in all fields such as economy, sciences and technology,”¹¹ While meeting with Ali Larijani, Kim Yong Nam said that both countries have a common enemy – an indirect reference to the United States – and supported Iran’s right to test its ballistic missile technology saying: “The Islamic Republic of Iran has stated that no authorization is required for the building and firing of missiles, and we support this strong position.”¹² He went on to praise Iran for playing a major role in upholding the objectives of the Palestinian nation, the Non-Aligned Movement and for developing countries.

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Qassemi had announced the participation of delegations from 95 world states and 9 international and regional organizations in the swearing-in ceremony of President Hassan Rouhani.¹³ Many foreign dignitaries were also present on the occasion, notable amongst them were the Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe, Cuban vice president of the Council of Ministers Ulises Rosales Del Toro, the vice-prime minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo and the European Union’s High Representative of Foreign Policy Federica Mogherini.

The delegation from DPRK also utilized the visit as a forum for engaging with world leaders from other countries and showing goodwill for enhancing relations with their respective governments. The visit will carry significance for times to come as a gesture for mutual support, cooperation, unity and peace between the governments of North Korea and Iran who both face economic isolation imposed by the US. Also present at the inauguration ceremony was the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs Federica Mogherini who extended unwavering support to the full implementation of the Iran Nuclear Deal and supported the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in its execution from all the parties involved in the deal.¹⁴ This statement reflects the stance being carried forward by European Union with regard to the Iranian nuclear deal and their belief that the deal should not be scrapped subject to Iran complying with the conditions involved in the agreement that had been signed in Vienna in 2015.

The European viewpoint, however, stands in stark contrast to the approach taken by President Donald Trump who believes the deal should never have been in place and alleges non-compliance by Iran. It is worth mentioning that President Trump had recently recertified the Iranian deal before Congress, rather

¹¹ <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/08/04/north-korea-officials-visit-to-iran-could-signal-wider-military-ties.html>

¹² <http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/patrick-goodenough/north-korea-strengthening-ties-iran-tehran-and-pyongyang-have-common>

¹³ <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13960514000257>

¹⁴ <http://www.federicamogherini.net/federica-mogherini-visits-teheran/?lang=en>

unwillingly however.¹⁵ Developments such as these tend to provoke thoughts on the emergence of more power players in global politics. To help this emergence, US foreign policy showcases isolationism and its once perennial allies in Europe show difference in opinion on matters of pivotal importance. Indeed, a decade ago, few would have foreseen the shift of Europe towards the East in terms of economic security and diplomatic inclinations. It can also be expected that further follow up meetings may be held between Iranian and North Korean authorities or ministries in the times to come.

¹⁵ <http://www.timesofisrael.com/trump-iran-is-not-in-compliance-with-nuclear-deal/>