



## North Korean military proliferation in the Middle East and Africa: Enabling violence and instability

by Bruce E. Bechtol Jr, Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 2018, 274 pp., \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-7588-1

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## BOOK REVIEW

**North Korean military proliferation in the Middle East and Africa: Enabling violence and instability**, by Bruce E. Bechtol Jr, Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 2018, 274 pp., \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-7588-1

North Korea is oftentimes described as a hermit kingdom that isolates itself from the rest of the world. Historical scholarship published in recent years proved that North Korea, in fact, had an extensive network of relations with the rest of the world. However, North Korea's relations, especially with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, did not receive enough attention. The main problem is obvious: neither North Korea nor most of the countries in the MENA region declassified all of their archival records. Therefore, scholars have a limited amount of access to official sources. This problem regarding source material generally discouraged scholars from embarking on projects regarding North Korea's relations with the Middle East and Africa. By deploying a mix of interviews and open-source material, Bruce E. Bechtol Jr. overcame the problem regarding source material. In his masterful book, Bechtol investigates North Korea's covert military ties with the Middle East and Africa.

From the outset, Bechtol makes it clear that North Korea's military proliferation is not a regional problem; rather, it is a threat to the interests of the international community. North Korea needs military proliferation to fund its large military along with other sources of illicit income. According to Bechtol, North Korea's military proliferation program consists of four main parts: 1) weapon of mass destruction (WMD) and ballistic missiles, 2) conventional weapon sales, 3) refurbishment of Soviet-era weapons, 4) technical and military assistance (p. 7). North Korea provides the abovementioned services to states and individual groups.

Bechtol defines Iran as North Korea's most important customer and devotes a chapter to the military cooperation between North Korea and Iran. According to Bechtol, Iran received technical expertise, raw materials, and advisers from North Korea to develop its nuclear and conventional military programs. Iran's military collaboration with North Korea started in the 1980s, but the year 2003 proved significant for the development of North Korea's proliferation of Iran. In 2003, Pakistani A.Q. Khan network was exposed and shut down by Pakistan's government mainly due to pressure from the U.S. North Korea took advantage of the void left by this network and started helping Iran with its nuclear weapons program. Bechtol suggests that North Korea used its expertise in constructing underground facilities by building more than ten thousand metres of underground nuclear infrastructure in Iran. In addition, he provides in detail how North Korea assisted Iran's nuclear weapons program every step of the way. It is quite surprising that Iranian technicians and engineers always observed

significant nuclear and ballistic missile tests in North Korea. Afterward, they would transfer the technology used in these tests to Iran. In this chapter, Bechtol also delves into conventional weapons sales and argues that North Korea uses Iran as a conduit in its deals with Hezbollah and Hamas.

Syria is another beneficiary of North Korean military proliferation in the Middle East. The relationship goes back to 1967, when North Korean pilots themselves flew Syrian airplanes during the Arab-Israeli War. Bechtol proves that the relationship continues today in the areas of nuclear proliferation, weapons of mass destruction, and conventional weapons sales. What is most striking in this chapter is that North Korea seems to have relied on individuals such as Kim Kyok-sik, a close confidant of Kim Jong Il, to maintain good relations with the Syrian regime. Bechtol pinpoints Aleppo as the centre of chemical weapons assistance and argues that North Korea, Iran, and Syria collaborated in the establishment of at least five Syrian chemical weapons facilities (p. 108).

The last chapter is devoted to North Korea's military proliferation efforts in Africa. North Korea has been proliferating the continent since the 1970s, and it mainly focuses its efforts on countries that cannot obtain the kind of weapons North Korea provides. In the MENA region, North Korea primarily engages with Egypt and Sudan. While Egypt is mainly interested in obtaining missiles from North Korea, Sudan seems to have acquired more sophisticated weapon systems such as air attack satellite-guided missiles. Bechtol demonstrates that North Korea uses front companies very cleverly in its deals with both countries to evade UN sanctions. With this book, Bechtol revealed North Korea's vast network of military proliferation in the Middle East and Africa. Since most of this network is still intact today, reading this book is of great importance for scholars and foreign policy experts interested in the MENA region's military proliferation by North Korea.

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