

Introduction

A few months after the 9/11 attacks, American president George Bush Jr. spoke of the United States' goal of preventing regimes that sponsor terror from threatening the country, referring to North Korea, Iran, and Iraq as states that "constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world"¹. Out of these original members, only North Korea and Iran remain, as Iraq ceased to be a focus of Washington's anti-terror agenda after the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

With the development of North Korea's nuclear program and its withdrawal from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003, allegations arose that Pyongyang was providing nuclear technology to Iran. In 2012, the two countries also signed a scientific, academic, and technological cooperation agreement². Over the past two decades, North Korea has sent several delegations to visit Tehran in order to strengthen ties between both countries.

The relations between Iran and North Korea have been fueled by attempts by the international society to exclude and isolate both of them. The two sides have strengthened their cooperation and ties based on their common anti-Americanism. This sentiment has outweighed their differences, such as their ideology and the fact that Iran maintains bilateral relations with the Republic of Korea (South Korea). North Korea's isolation began during the Korean War (1950-1953) and reached its peak with the development of its nuclear program. As for Iran, the Islamic Revolution and the declaration of its desire to spread it to other countries, as well as the subsequent American hostage crisis and the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), plunged the country into international isolation.

As in the case of North Korea, Iran's unwillingness to comply with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the suspicion from the international society that it might be contemplating developing a military nuclear program have worsened the situation. This has pushed both of them to seek new alliances that could be beneficial and that could alleviate the impact of being excluded from international institutions and the

¹ Retrieved from <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>

² Islamic Republic News Agency. ایران و کره شمالی سند همکاری علمی، دانشگاهی و فناوری امضا کردند. [Iran and North Korea Sign Scientific, Academic and Technological Cooperation Document.] (2012, September 1) *Islamic Republic News Agency*. <https://www.irna.ir/news/80303070/دند-امضا-کرند-فناوری-امضا-کرند>

consequences of sanctions. Thus, despite having very different ideologies –an Islamic republic and a dynastic totalitarian dictatorship where the closest figure to a god is their supreme leader–, they have strengthened their relations, nurtured by their shared anti-Americanism and the need for strategic partners.

Relations between Iran and North Korea can be explained through the theory of realism in International Relations, specifically through the balance-of-power and balance-of-threat theories. In *Politics Among Nations*, Morgenthau delves into the role of national interest and power in International Relations: “The main signpost that helps political realism to find its way through the landscape of international politics is the concept of interest defined in terms of power”³. He also claims that “the statesman must think in terms of the national interest, conceived as power among other powers”⁴. That is to say, states do not act based upon values or ideals, but rather based on what is beneficial for their national interest. This leads to a search for power and, consequently, to the need of a balance of power that guarantees their survival in the system.

Concerning alliances, Morgenthau also states that the historically most important manifestation of the balance of power can be found in the relations between one nation or alliance of nations and another. Moreover, Stephen Walt adds a new dimension to the balance-of-power theory, arguing that it is incomplete⁵. He asserts that, although power is a factor that affects balance, it is not the only one nor the most important factor in all situations. When faced with an external threat, states will either balance, allying with other states with a common threat, or bandwagon, aligning with the state that poses the threat⁶. This illustrates the nature of the relationship between Iran and North Korea: both countries are seeking to survive against a shared threat, thus allying based on a common enemy, the United States.

³ MORGENTHAU, H. J. (1967). *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (4th ed., 1st ed. 1948). New York: Alfred A. Knopf, p. 5.

⁴ Ibid, p. 142.

⁵ WALT, S. M. (2000). *Keeping the World Off Balance: Self Restraint and U.S. Foreign Policy*. SSRN Electronic Journal, 121-154. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.253799>

⁶ WALT, S. M. (1987). *The Origins of Alliances*. Nueva York: Cornell University Press.

Historic Relations Between Iran and the DPRK

After the Korean War, North Korea sought economic support from the Soviet Union and China in order to recover from the aftermath of the conflict⁷. At the same time, Iran aligned itself with the United States and South Korea, especially after the coup d'état of 1953 that reestablished the Shah's authority⁸. Several events, most notably the July 4, 1972, Joint Statement between South and North Korea, had an impact in Pyongyang's foreign policy and diplomacy. This change has also been attributed to the improvement in relations between the U.S. and China, as well as the rapprochement between the latter and Japan⁹.

In this regard, it is essential to consider North Korea's economic situation in the 1970s. As Yang explains, between 1971 and 1972, North Korea acquired large amounts of machinery from Western countries through substantial loans. However, affected by the Oil Shock of 1974, it found itself unable to settle these loans and suffered from increasing external debt problems¹⁰. Thus, in an attempt to find a solution to North Korea's debt problem, its leaders began to seek "to obtain crude oil and convertible currency from oil-rich Iraq and Iran", and arms sales became the most effective way to achieve their economic goals¹¹.

At the same time that changes were taking place in North Korea, Iran's foreign policy was also being modified. According to Szalontai and Yoo, Iran's recognition of North Korea in 1973 would have been part of a new policy toward divided countries with a communist side and a non-communist counterpart.

Ultimately, North Korea and Iran established diplomatic ties in the context of foreign policy changes in both countries that favored the normalization of relations. In addition, the aftermath of the Korean War and its inability to fully recover from its economic downturns pushed the North Korean government to seek benefits in establishing a trade relationship

⁷ Institute for Unification Education. (2009). 북한 이해 2009. [Understanding North Korea 2009].

https://www.unikorea.go.kr/books/understand/understand/ebook/under_NK_2000/assets/contents/download.pdf

⁸ SZALONTAI, B. and YOO J. (2023). Maneuvering between Baghdad and Tehran: North Korea's Relations with Iraq and Iran during the Cold War. *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 25 (2), pp. 179-246.

https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws_a_01119

⁹ Institute for Unification Education, Understanding North Korea 2009.

¹⁰ YANG, M. (2015). 북한의 경제발전전략 70년의 회고와 향후 전망. [70 Years of Economic Development Strategy in North Korea: Retrospect and Prospect.] *통일정책연구 [Tongil Jeongchaek Yeongu]*, 24 (2), 33-66.

<https://repo.kinu.or.kr/bitstream/2015.oak/8865/3/0001477032.pdf>

¹¹ SZALONTAI and YOO, Maneuvering between Baghdad and Tehran. *Op cit.*, pp. 181-182.

with Iran. This first diplomatic contact between the two countries was, consequently, the beginning of a long relationship that would continue and strengthen over the following decades.

The Impact of the Islamic Revolution on Iran-North Korea Relations

The Islamic Revolution transformed political life in Iran. Its foreign policy shifted to adapt to the new ideology. In addition, fueled by a rejection of foreign domination and control, as well as anti-Western sentiment, Iran distanced itself from the United States. Thus, it went from being the United States' partner against the spread of communism in the region to having a hostile relationship with Washington.

On the other hand, inter-Korean relations did not see progress. The Busan-Masan uprising of October 10-20, 1979, against the dictatorial regime of President Park Chung-Hee, and his subsequent assassination on October 26, 1979, only heightened the need for U.S. involvement in the country.

In this scenario, Pyongyang attempted to become closer to Tehran and the new administration after February 1979. As the findings of Szalontai and Yoo illustrate, during the revolution, *Rodong Sinmun*, the official newspaper of the ruling party in North Korea, did not publish a single article on the topic of the Iranian Revolution. Only in February 1979, when Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi left Iran, did they publish an article congratulating the Iranians for their victory against the oppressors. This shows that North Korean leaders maintained a careful stance during the revolution. Later, when Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini came to power, they made great efforts to strengthen ties with Iran. During the first year since he was installed as a leader, the North Korean ambassador visited him no less than six times and even persuaded him to issue a statement appealing for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea¹².

Another significant event that shaped Iran's position in international society and led to further isolation was the hostage crisis of 1979, when a group of students that supported the Islamic Revolution stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran. More than fifty U.S. citizens were held hostage for over a year. In this situation, North Korea was one of the few countries to take Iran's side in the matter. *Rodong Sinmun* published a letter of support

¹² SZALONTAI and YOO, *Maneuvering between Baghdad and Tehran. Op. cit.*

from the then North Korean Foreign Minister Heo, describing the situation as an excuse for the United States to be hostile toward Iran¹³.

After the Islamic Revolution, Iran and North Korea developed strong economic and commercial cooperation that would begin with Iran's acquisition of Scud missiles in the 1980s¹⁴. In October 1983, Iranian Prime Minister Hossein Mousavi and Minister of Defense Colonel Mohammad Salimi traveled to North Korea, and North Korea's Hwasong-5 program was most likely a major topic discussed during this visit¹⁵. A year earlier, in 1982, U.S. sources had already estimated that North Korea, along with China, had supplied 40 % of Iran's arms imports during the war against Iraq; this figure would increase to 70 % by 1987¹⁶. Later on, North Korea also sold Iran, as well as Syria, models of the 300-kilometer range Scud-B ballistic missile and the 500-kilometer range Scud-C that it developed in 1991¹⁷.

Beginning from late 1984 or early 1985, North Korea helped Iran establish a Hwasong-5 assembly facility, providing it with the technology needed to produce them¹⁸. According to a report in Seoul's *Sisa Journal*, in late 1985, Iran and North Korea also agreed to assist each other with ballistic missile technology¹⁹. Another key North Korean contribution to the Iranian missile program is Iran's Shahab-3 missile, a medium-range ballistic missile (MRBM) with an estimated range of 1,300 kilometers based on North Korea's Nodong missile²⁰. In 1995, trade between Iran and North Korea exceeded \$300,000,000, making Iran a major contributor to North Korea's economy²¹.

However, relations between Iran and North Korea after the Islamic Revolution were not limited to trade and military cooperation. This can be seen through the various articles on Iran published by the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), North Korea's state news

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ KERR, P., HILDRETH, S. A. and NIKITIN, M. B. D. (2016). Iran-North Korea-Syria Ballistic Missile and Nuclear Cooperation. *Congressional Research Service*, pp. 1-10. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/nuke/R43480.pdf>

¹⁵ KNOFF, J. W. (1999). A History of Ballistic Missile Development in the DPRK. *Center for Nonproliferation Studies*. <https://www.nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/op2.pdf>

¹⁶ GARVER, J. W. (2016). *China's Quest: The History of the Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China*. Oxford University Press.

¹⁷ KERR et al., Iran-North Korea-Syria. *Op. cit.*

¹⁸ KNOFF, A History of Ballistic Missile Development. *Op. cit.*

¹⁹ Qtd. in Iran Missile Chronology. (2011). *Nuclear Threat Initiative*. https://www.nti.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/iran_missile.pdf

²⁰ KERR, P. (2007). Iran, North Korea Deepen Missile Cooperation. *Arms Control Association*. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2007-01/iran-nuclear-briefs/iran-north-korea-deepen-missile-cooperation>

²¹ Institute for Unification Education. (2024). 북한 이해 2024. [Understanding North Korea 2024.] https://www.unikorea.go.kr/books/understand/understand/under_NK_2024/index.html

agency. Over the years, North Korea has congratulated Iran on the “victory of the Iranian Islamic Revolution”²², even holding film screenings to commemorate the anniversary²³. They also reported that the Iranian ambassador to Korea, Mohammad Ganjidoost, hosted a reception at the Iranian embassy to celebrate Kim Jong-II’s birthday²⁴. Cultural events are also mentioned, such as Iran’s participation in the Pyongyang Film Festival and its victory in two different categories²⁵.

It is important to note that North Korean propaganda always portrays Iran in a positive light. Two articles from 1997 and 1998 describe how foreigners –diplomats and foreign students, including Iranians– helped Korean farmers, transferring agricultural materials to cooperative farms, making donations, and transplanting rice²⁶. Moreover, Iran’s official stance is always one of praise and admiration for North Korea, its leaders, and ideology, as in the following article: “The ambassador, addressing the reception, referred to the friendly relations between the DPRK and Iran, and spoke highly of the Juche idea and the spirit of self-reliance”²⁷. Within the framework of these friendly relations, some agreements are also reported, such as the Juche 87-89 (1998-2000) plan for cultural, scientific, educational, and technical exchange signed between the two countries²⁸.

Among the articles, some express very clearly what North Korea considers as the common ground between them and Iran: their stance against U.S. imperialism. For example, in the aforementioned article concerning the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, according to which: “Iranian Ambassador to Korea Seyed Morteza Mirheidari said in his speech that the will and intention of the Korean and Iranian peoples showed

²² 18th anniversary of victory of Iranian Islamic Revolution commemorated. (1997, February 11). *KCNA Watch*. <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1451999669-716637219/18th-anniversary-of-victory-of-iranian-islamic-revolution-commemorated/>

²³ Film shows marks anniversary of Iranian Revolution. (1998, February 11). *KCNA Watch*. <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1452000051-589618286/film-show-marks-anniversary-of-iranian-revolution/>

²⁴ Iranian ambassador gives reception to celebrate Kim Jong II's birthday. (1999, February 11). *KCNA Watch*. <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1452000587-704494673/iranian-ambassador-gives-reception-to-celebrate-kim-jong-ils-birthday/>

²⁵ Screening results of 6th Pyongyang film festival. (1998, September 25). *KCNA Watch*. <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1452000242-403789018/screening-results-of-6th-pyongyang-film-festival/>

²⁶ Retrieved from <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1452000229-145447864/foreign-embassy-officials-help-farmers-in-rice-transplanting/> and <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1451999635-807616615/foreigners-help-korean-farmers/>

²⁷ “Iranian ambassador gives reception”.

²⁸ Exchange plan signed between Korean and Iranian governments. (1998, February 17). *KCNA Watch*. <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1452000360-329865425/exchange-plan-signed-between-korean-and-iranian-governments/>

an example in construction and the anti-imperialist struggle for independent countries. This will give fear to the enemy who is opposed to independence and freedom”²⁹.

Another article talks about the visit of foreign figures and organizations to the Sinchon Museum, where evidence of the “massacre of Korean people committed by the U.S. imperialist aggressors in Sinchon area during the Korean war” is on display³⁰. According to this news report, Mohammad Hassan Nami, the military attaché of the Iranian embassy in Pyongyang, had written a message in a visitors’ book praising the Korean people for fighting against U.S. imperialism.

Finally, a 1999 article on the commemoration of the centenary of Khomeini’s birth in North Korea summarizes well where, for North Koreans, the Islamic Revolution and ideological shift in Iran converge with their own. As this article points out, “The victory of the anti-U.S., anti-emperor struggle and the Islamic revolution in Iran would have been unthinkable without his leadership. The victory of the Islamic revolution under his leadership was an epochal event which opened the road of independent development, progress and prosperity of Iran”³¹. It also discusses Khomeini’s stance about the North Korean people: “He expressed positive support and solidarity with the struggle of the Korean people for the independent and peaceful reunification of the country with deep concern for the friendly and cooperative relations with the DPRK forged in the joint anti-imperialist and anti-U.S. struggle.

As we can see from the coverage about Iran in the late 1990s, the KCNA writes mostly about cultural and diplomatic events and always presents Iran as an ally that shows admiration and praises North Korea’s leaders and people. The aforementioned newspaper also makes it clear that North Korea and Iran share common ground when it comes to the United States. It is also important to note that, when comparing the facts regarding military cooperation and trade and the KCNA’s official reports, it can be observed that there are no reports regarding such exchanges: this cooperation has been kept out of North Korea’s official channels.

²⁹ “18th anniversary of victory”.

³⁰ Military attaches’ corps visits Sinchon Museum. (1998, November 18). *KCNA Watch*.
<https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1452000211-362810236/military-attaches-corps-visits-sinchon-museum/>

³¹ Centenary of birth of Imam Khomeini commemorated. (1999, October 1). *KCNA Watch*.
<https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1452001543-42444298/centenary-of-birth-of-imam-khomeini-commemorated/>

Overall, the Islamic Revolution –and the change that followed in Iran’s foreign policy–, and the situation of discontent in North Korea regarding the U.S. military presence on the peninsula brought the two countries closer together. For Tehran, Pyongyang has served as a supplier of resources and military expertise, while trade with Iran has helped North Korea finance its various projects. Ultimately, and as the KCNA explicitly states, Iran’s turn against the United States and U.S. imperialism brought it closer to the North Korean regime.

Iran-North Korea Rapprochement in the 21st Century

In the new century, many different events have shaped the position of Iran and North Korea in international society, as well as the way they interact with each other. In the case of Iran, there was an event that aggravated hostilities between the country and the United States. In 2002, the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), an Iranian opposition group, held a press conference in Washington, in which it accused Iran of clandestinely developing nuclear weapons and of two top-secret nuclear facilities being under construction at Natanz and Arak³². In December 2003, after several trips by IAEA inspectors and accusations from the IAEA director of a lack of transparency regarding its nuclear program, the Iranian government signed an agreement with the UN nuclear watchdog for “enhanced, unannounced and on-the-spot inspections of its atomic facilities”³³. A month before said agreement, IAEA director general Mohamed El Baradei had reported that: “Iran had committed numerous breaches of its NPT safeguards agreement in a deliberate counter-effort over many years to conceal material, facilities and activities that should have been declared. These covered the entire spectrum of the nuclear fuel cycle including experiments in enriching uranium and separating plutonium - potential ingredients for nuclear weapons”³⁴.

However, this did not solve the tensions between Iran, the IAEA, and the U.S. In August 2005, the IAEA adopted a new resolution. In this resolution, the Board of Governors of the IAEA expressed its concern upon being notified that Tehran had decided to resume

³² Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C84arSqeGw8>

³³ IAEA signs accord for enhanced UN nuclear inspections in Iran. (2003, December 18). *UN News*. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2003/12/89342>

³⁴ Qtd. in “IAEA signs accord”.

its uranium conversion activities at Esfahan and urged it to suspend all enrichment-related activities again³⁵.

The circumstances deteriorated during the government of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. As Farzamnia explains, during this period, the struggle against world imperialism ought to be, according to the former Iranian president, one of the foundations of Iranian foreign policy³⁶. Thus, the nuclear program was instrumentalized as a way to threaten the West, provoking negative reactions and earning Iran a series of harsh sanctions. As the author illustrates, nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani's willingness to restart negotiations with Europe and fellow negotiator Saeed Jalili's attempts to reach an agreement with Javier Solana, the European Union's High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, failed to achieve a positive outcome for Iran. The European Union joined the U.S. sanctions policy against Iran, and a first sanctions package was approved in 2006. A second package was added a year later³⁷.

The situation improved when, in July 2015, the JCPOA was signed between Iran and the P5+1 group (United States, China, Russia, France, the United Kingdom, and Germany), which would "ensure that Iran's nuclear program will be exclusively peaceful, and mark a fundamental shift in their approach to this issue"³⁸. However, three years after the agreement was reached, in 2018, the United States announced its withdrawal from the JCPOA and reinstated sanctions against Iran.

As for North Korea, a failed nuclear deal and the country eventually going nuclear in 2006 shaped the developments of the new millennium. In 2002, the U.S. Department of State decided to make public the issue of North Korea's clandestine uranium enrichment facilities, which violated the 1994 Agreed Framework between the U.S. and the DPRK³⁹. This treaty aimed to replace North Korea's nuclear power plants with light water reactors (LWRs), which have a configuration that makes use for military purposes difficult. Subsequently, the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization announced that

³⁵ Retrieved from <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/documents/gov2005-64.pdf>

³⁶ FARZAMNIA, N. Las relaciones entre España e Irán (1989-2018). [Spain-Iran relations (1989-2018).] In Camacho Padilla F., and Escribano Martín, F. Una vieja amistad: cuatrocientos años de relaciones históricas y culturales entre Irán y el mundo hispano [An old friendship: four hundred years of historic and cultural relations between Iran and the Hispanic world.]. Madrid: Sílex, pp. 145-183.

³⁷ FARZAMNIA, Las relaciones entre España e Irán. *Op. cit.*

³⁸ Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. July 14, 2015. https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/statements-eeas/docs/iran_agreement/iran_joint-comprehensive-plan-of-action_en.pdf

³⁹ BOUCHER, R. (2002, October 16). *North Korean Nuclear Program* [Press Statement]. <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2002/14432.htm>

it was suspending its deliveries of heavy fuel oil to North Korea starting in December of that year in response to North Korean officials' acknowledgment and admission of having a uranium enrichment program⁴⁰. On December 12, 2002, North Korean authorities announced that it would restart activities at its facilities after eight years; on January 10th, 2003, it announced it was withdrawing from the NPT⁴¹.

Since then, North Korea has conducted six nuclear tests: in October 2006, May 2009, February 2013, January and September 2016, and September 2017. Other events, such as the shelling of the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong in 2010, the launching of a long-range missile in 2012, and a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) in 2016, contributed to the international isolation of the DPRK⁴². These actions were widely criticized by the international society, and the nuclear tests and missile launches were sanctioned through several United Nations Security Council resolutions. These comprised, among others, an arms embargo, a ban on trade with North Korea in various key sectors, the inspection and seizure of North Korean cargoes, and restrictions on access to credit and the international financial system⁴³.

The situation seemed to improve in 2018, with the Inter-Korean Summit and the North Korea-United States Singapore Summit between Kim Jong-Un and Donald Trump. In 2019, they met again at the Hanoi Summit. However, the two countries were unable to reach an agreement, and North Korean relations with both South Korea and the United States have since deteriorated, with an increase in the number of missile test launches from North Korea. On March 21, 2022, North Korea launched two cruise missiles; just four days later, it launched two ballistic missiles into the East Sea. In October of the same year, it displayed a new set of large-scale weapons at its first national defense development exhibition⁴⁴.

⁴⁰ Retrieved from https://www.kedo.org/news_detail.asp?NewsID=23

⁴¹ KERR, P. (2003). North Korea Quits NPT, Says It Will Restart Nuclear Facilities. *Arms Control Association*. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2003-01/news/north-korea-quits-npt-says-it-will-restart-nuclear-facilities>

⁴² Institute for Unification Education. (2017). Understanding North Korea 2017. https://www.unikorea.go.kr/cms/getFile.do?file=2019082715224038212.pdf&orgname=Understanding%20North%20Korea_2017.pdf&mgmtId=MGMT_0000001473&siteId=SITE_00003&filePath=eng_unikorea/common/file/&count=Y

⁴³ DAVENPORT, K. (2022). UN Security Council Resolutions on North Korea. *Arms Control Association*. <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/un-security-council-resolutions-north-korea>

⁴⁴ HERRERA ALMELA, M. (2025). The nuclear panorama in the Indo-Pacific: a region in constant turmoil. In *Global Nuclear Panorama* (Pérez Gil, L. coord.). Cuaderno de estrategia IEEE 229-B. Madrid: Ministerio de Defensa, pp. 95-128. https://publicaciones.defensa.gob.es/media/downloadable/files/links/g/l/global-nuclear-panorama-ce-229-b_1.pdf

The situation has been fueled by joint military exercises by South Korea, the United States and Japan and by the hostile stance of Yoon Suk-Yeol's government toward North Korea. With the new government and Lee Jae-Myung coming to power, Seoul has expressed its intention to improve relations with its northern counterpart. However, Pyongyang has made it clear that it has no plans to pursue friendly relations with the South. On July 28, 2025, the North Korean newspaper *Voice of Korea* shared what Kim Yo-Jong had said about this at a press conference: "If the Republic of Korea, which had stoked the atmosphere of extreme confrontation in the past after unilaterally declaring the DPRK as its principal enemy, expected that it could reverse all the results it had made with a few sentimental words, nothing is more serious miscalculation than it"⁴⁵. Thus, the North Korean politician made it clear that, regardless of the direction that South Korean policy takes, Pyongyang is not interested in establishing amicable relations with the South.

Diplomatic Affairs

Diplomatic relations between Iran and North Korea have been steady over the decades, with cooperation in different fields, which will be delved into in this chapter. What happened in each of these two countries increased their need for collaboration with each other, and while Iran-DPRK ties were not significantly affected by the signing of the JCPOA in July 2015, the U.S. withdrawal from the agreement did bring the two countries closer together.

The JCPOA did have consequences for North Korea, as it brought to the spotlight the issue of its own nuclear program. The KCNA reported on the talks and pressures surrounding the topic right after the conclusion of the JCPOA: "Iran's nuclear agreement is the achievement made by its protracted efforts to have its independent right to nuclear activities recognized and sanctions lifted. But the situation of the DPRK is quite different from it. The DPRK is the nuclear weapons state both in name and reality and it has interests as a nuclear weapons state. The DPRK is not interested at all in the dialogue to discuss the issue of making it freeze or dismantle its nukes unilaterally first. The nuclear deterrence of the DPRK is not a plaything to be put on the negotiating table as it is the

⁴⁵ Press statement of Kim Yo Jong, Vice-Department Director of CC, WPK. (28 de julio de 2025). *KCNA Watch*. <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1753779823-729561779/press-statement-of-kim-yo-jong-vice-department-director-of-cc-wpk/>

essential means to protect its sovereignty and vital rights from the U.S. nuclear threat and hostile policy which have lasted for more than half a century. (...) The DPRK remains unchanged in the mission of its nuclear force as long as the U.S. continues pursuing its hostile policy toward the former”⁴⁶.

This specific article, along with similar articles around this time, illustrates the pressure that was put on Pyongyang to negotiate over its nuclear program after the JCPOA was agreed to. However, there is no indication that this event changed the DPRK’s stance on Iran, as North Korea acknowledged in the article that Iran’s nuclear agreement is an “achievement” and that Iran only sought to have its rights to an independent nuclear program without being sanctioned for it. Iran, on the other hand, did subtly criticize the North Korean regime and sought to improve trade ties with its Southern counterpart⁴⁷.

The aforementioned is evidenced by the different diplomatic visits that North Korean and Iranian diplomats and officials made to each other. In October of the same year, a delegation from the Islamic Coalition Party of Iran visited the DPRK Embassy in Tehran to offer flowers to the images of the North Korean leaders, Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-Il on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the founding of the WPK⁴⁸. In November, an Iranian delegation also visited Mangyongdae, the birthplace of Kim Il-Sung, and the Mangyongdae Revolutionary Museum⁴⁹. In 2017, a North Korean delegation also visited Iran to attend the inauguration ceremony of President Hassan Rouhani⁵⁰, as well as in 2019, led by Pak Myoung-Guk, vice-foreign minister of the DPRK⁵¹.

But the most remarkable diplomatic visit came right after the United States reinstated sanctions against Iran in August 2018. The delegation was led by Ri Yong-Ho, Foreign

⁴⁶ FM Spokesman Slams U.S. for Deliberately Linking Negotiations with Iran over Nuclear Issue with DPRK. (2015, July 21). *KCNA Watch*. <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1546402269-394524458/fm-spokesman-slams-u-s-for-deliberately-linking-negotiations-with-iran-over-nuclear-issue-with-dprk/>

⁴⁷ RAMANI, S. (2023). North Korea-Iran Relations Post-JCPOA. *38 North*. <https://www.38north.org/2023/11/north-korea-iran-relations-post-jcpoa/>

⁴⁸ Delegation of Islamic Coalition Party of Iran Visits DPRK Embassy. (2015, October 9). *KCNA Watch*. <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1451904598-827075236/delegation-of-islamic-coalition-party-of-iran-visits-dprk-embassy/>

⁴⁹ Iranian Delegation Visits Mangyongdae. (2015, November 3). *KCNA Watch*. <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1450697207-987685766/iranian-delegation-visits-mangyongdae/>

⁵⁰ North Korean foreign minister to visit Iran. (2018, August 3). *Islamic Republic News Agency*. <https://en.irna.ir/news/82989917/North-Korean-foreign-minister-to-visit-Iran>

⁵¹ N. Korean top delegation on way to Iran, Syria: Report. (2019, April 29). *Islamic Republic News Agency*. <https://en.irna.ir/news/83296444/N-Korean-top-delegation-on-way-to-Iran-Syria-Report>

Minister of the DPRK. During this visit, both sides “expressed the will to further develop the friendly and cooperative relations between the two countries in various fields”⁵².

According to Samuel Ramani, it appears that Iran might have publicly reached out to North Korea in response to its diplomatic dispute with South Korea⁵³. In January 2023, former South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol started a controversy by referring to Iran as the “enemy” of the United Arab Emirates; two weeks later, Mohammad Hossein Bagheri, Chief of Staff of Iran’s Armed Forces, stressed the importance of strengthening Iran-DPRK cooperation against “unilateralism” and “disruptive measures of global security”⁵⁴. Ramani also argues that the onset of the collapse of the nuclear deal with the U.S. prompted Iran to increase its solidarity toward North Korea, and Iran sought to reapproach North Korea in following diplomatic visits.

North Korea itself has reaffirmed its good relations with Iran. In May 2024, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported that “traditional relations of friendship between the DPRK and Iran have been consolidated and developed in the course of realizing the common cause of independence against imperialism”⁵⁵. The article commemorates the historic meeting between Kim Il-Sung and Ali Khamenei in 1989, as well as the signing of the 1989-1990 plan of action for scientific, technological, and cultural exchanges and the agreement on cooperation between Iran and North Korea, and asserts that “friendship and solidarity between the DPRK and Iran continue to develop even after many decades” and that the North Koreans would “give Iranian people full support in their righteous struggle to safeguard the national sovereignty and the gains of Islamic Revolution”.

Economic and Commercial Interests

Although, in the past, Iran played a major role in North Korea’s economy, the situation has changed. China remains North Korea’s main trade partner, and the DPRK has increased cooperation with Russia after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in response to Russia’s need for ammunition and ballistic missiles, as well as soldiers. Iran’s main trade

⁵² DPRK Government Delegation Pays Official Visit to Iran. (2018, August 10). *KCNA Watch*.

<https://kcna-watch.org/newstream/1533858801-446684393/dprk-government-delegation-pays-official-visit-to-iran/>

⁵³ RAMANI, North Korea-Iran Relations.

⁵⁴ Qtd. in RAMANI, North Korea-Iran Relations. *Op. cit.*

⁵⁵ DPRK-Iran Friendship Continuing over the Century. (2024, May 14). *KCNA Watch*.

<https://kcna-watch.org/newstream/1715670389-290134549/dprk-iran-friendship-continuing-over-the-century/>

partner is also China, to which it mainly exports ethylene polymers, iron ore, and refined copper; and from which it imports gold, motor vehicles, parts, and accessories, and vehicle bodies⁵⁶.

However, Iran and North Korea do engage in trade and commerce with each other, although not with the economic impact that it had in the past. In 2005, North Korea exported \$518,000 to Iran. The main products exported from North Korea to Iran were antibiotics (\$466,000), electric batteries (\$26,300), and rubber belting (\$17,300)⁵⁷. In 2007, the two countries signed a bilateral economic cooperation agreement⁵⁸. From 2013 to 2015, exports from North Korea to Iran accounted for a total amount of \$1,123,000. In 2013, the DPRK mainly exported rubber, textile fiber, and steel products to Iran⁵⁹. Exports peaked in 2014, with exports of automobile and automobile components worth \$625,000⁶⁰. They dropped to \$72,000 in 2015, coming entirely from the export of steel products⁶¹. In the same year, both parties reviewed joint investments and expanded economic cooperation in the tobacco industry⁶².

As for Iran's exports to North Korea, it exported \$21,000 worth of grain, starch, dairy products, and baked goods in 2018⁶³. In addition, in April 2024, a delegation of North Korea's Ministry of External Economic Relations, led by Minister Yun Jong-Ho, visited Iran for the first time in five years to hold talks regarding economic cooperation between the two countries⁶⁴.

⁵⁶ The Observatory of Economic Complexity. *China (CHN) and Iran (IRN) Trade*. <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/chn/partner/irn>

⁵⁷ The Observatory of Economic Complexity. *Iran (IRN) and North Korea (PRK) Trade*. <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/irn/partner/prk>

⁵⁸ Institute for Unification Education. (2025). *북한 이해 2025*. [Understanding North Korea 2025]. https://www.unikorea.go.kr/books/understand/understand/under_NK_2025/index.html

⁵⁹ Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency. (2014). 2013 북한 대외무역 동향. [2013 North Korea Foreign Trade Trends.] <https://dl.kotra.or.kr/pyxis-api/2/digital-files/c16960ef-f51c-018a-e053-b46464899664>

⁶⁰ Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency. (2015). 2014 북한 대외무역 동향. [2014 North Korea Foreign Trade Trends.] <https://dl.kotra.or.kr/pyxis-api/2/digital-files/c16960ef-fc1b-018a-e053-b46464899664>

⁶¹ Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency. (2016). 2015 북한 대외무역 동향. [2015 North Korea Foreign Trade Trends.] <https://dl.kotra.or.kr/pyxis-api/2/digital-files/c16960f0-010a-018a-e053-b46464899664>

⁶² Iran, North Korea review joint investments in tobacco industry. (2015, September 19). *Islamic Republic News Agency*. <https://en.irna.ir/news/81765542/Iran-North-Korea-review-joint-investments-in-tobacco-industry>

⁶³ Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency. (2019). 2018 북한 대외무역 동향. [2018 North Korea Foreign Trade Trends.] <https://dl.kotra.or.kr/pyxis-api/2/digital-files/c16960f0-08a3-018a-e053-b46464899664>

⁶⁴ See <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1714015333-535255860/delegation-of-dprk-ministry-of-external-economic-relations-leaves-for-iran/> and <https://www.nknews.org/2024/04/north-korea-and-iran-to-hold-talks-on-economic-cooperation-in-tehran/>

The products exported from North Korea to Iran appear to correspond to a need created by international sanctions. According to a Human Rights Watch report, under U.S. sanctions, certain vaccines, biological and chemical products, and medical devices are not allowed to be exported on the premise that they could be used for manufacturing weapons. The report also explains that although Iran's Drug and Food Organization claims that the country produces 97 % of the medicines they consume, one-third of them rely on imported materials and medicine, especially those necessary for the treatment of rare diseases and cancer⁶⁵.

North Korea also found itself in dire conditions due to sanctions, which affected economic areas not exclusively related to weapons or missile manufacturing. Following its fifth nuclear test, UN Security Council Resolution 2321 of 2016 introduced a cap on coal and mineral exports, among others. In 2017, following the launch of the Hwasong-14 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), Resolution 2371 banned the DPRK from exporting coal, iron, iron ore, seafood, solder, and solder ore. That same year, following the sixth nuclear test, Resolution 2375 banned the supply of crude oil to North Korea, as well as the export of textile products to other countries. Later, after the launch of ICBM Hwasong-15, Resolution 2397 tightened restrictions on the supply of oil and imports and exports of different products⁶⁶.

According to a report submitted by the organization *Nodutdol* for Korean Community Development to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), as a result of these sanctions, North Korea's trade was halved in 2018: exports plummeted by 86.3 %, while imports dropped by 31.2 %⁶⁷. As this report illustrates, administrative barriers to humanitarian aid caused nearly 4,000 preventable deaths in 2018 alone, of which 1,650 (41,58%) were due to severe acute malnutrition⁶⁸. The situation in North Korea also explains why Iran's reported exports to North Korea are entirely baked goods. In fact, in June 2015, North Korea requested assistance from Iran's Red Crescent Society, seeking humanitarian aid to alleviate the country's famine⁶⁹.

⁶⁵ Retrieved from https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/iran1019sanctions_web.pdf

⁶⁶ Institute for Unification Education. (2025). 북한 이해 2025. [Understanding North Korea 2025.] https://www.unikorea.go.kr/books/understand/understand/under_NK_2025/index.html

⁶⁷ Retrieved from <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/ucm/cfis/secondary-sanctions/2022-09-14/submission-secondary-sanctions-and-sanctions-in-cyber-world-HRC-51-nodutdol.pdf>

⁶⁸ Retrieved from the previous source.

⁶⁹ North Korea appeals for help from Iran Red Crescent Society. (2015, June 30). *Islamic Republic News Agency*. <https://en.irna.ir/news/81666059/North-Korea-appeals-for-help-from-Iran-Red-Crescent-Society>

Military and Technological Cooperation

Various reports and estimates suggest that Iran's missile program has been heavily influenced by North Korean technology and missiles. In the 2000s, Iran worked on upgrading its Shahab-3 MRBM to reach a range of 2,000 kilometers. Their January 2006 test might have involved a more advanced North Korean Nodong-B missile⁷⁰. Later, in 2010, Iran showcased the Simorgh, a two-stage, liquid-propellant space launch vehicle (SLV) that uses engines from the Shahab-3 MRBM⁷¹. An analysis by the International Institute for Strategic Studies explains in detail this carrier rocket and the role that North Korean technology has had in its development⁷².

The Shahab series and the Simorgh are not the only missiles that Iran is suspected to have developed based on North Korean technology. The Khorramshahr, a liquid-fueled, single-stage MRBM, is likely derived from the North Korean Musudan missile, which uses technology and hardware designed for the Soviet R-27 SLBM. Iran is reported to have acquired 18 of these missiles from the DPRK in about 2005⁷³. Moreover, it has been argued that the solid-propellant technology that North Korea has used on its KN-11 SLBM is identical to that used by Iran's Sajjil MRBM⁷⁴.

Also, in August 2011, reports surfaced indicating that North Korea had sold Iran specialized software capable of simulating nuclear explosions with high precision. According to official Western reports, this was part of a \$100 million deal for nuclear training and missile technology⁷⁵.

In 2015, new reports about cooperation between the two countries emerged, claiming that a delegation of North Korean nuclear and missile experts had visited a military facility near Tehran in April of that year⁷⁶. In 2016, the Obama administration sanctioned an

⁷⁰ MISTRY, D. (2007). European Missile Defense: Assessing Iran's ICBM Capabilities. *Arms Control Association*. <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2007-10/iran-nuclear-briefs/european-missile-defense-assessing-irans-icbm-capabilities>

⁷¹ Retrieved from <https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/simorgh/>

⁷² Retrieved from <https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/research-papers/open-source-analysis-of-irans-missile-and-uav-capabilities-and-proliferation.pdf>, p. 19.

⁷³ Retrieved from the previous source.

⁷⁴ ELLEMAN, M. (2016). North Korea-Iran Missile Cooperation. *38 North*. <https://www.38north.org/2016/09/melleman092216/>

⁷⁵ Institute for Science and International Security. (2011). Two Recent Media Reports to Note on Iran's Nuclear Program. <https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/two-recent-media-reports-to-note-on-irans-nuclear-program/>

⁷⁶ IRISH, J. (2015, May 28). North Korean nuclear, missile experts visit Iran-dissidents. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-iran-northkorea-dissidents-idUKKBN00D08020150528/>

official of Iran's Shahid Hemmat Industrial Group (SHIG), which is responsible for its ballistic missile programs. Three years prior, SHIG had been accused of sending its missile technicians to Pyongyang to work on an 80-ton rocket booster⁷⁷.

Although there are no recent reports of military and technology cooperation between Iran and North Korea, this could be attributed to the fact that both countries have achieved the goals that they had when they started working together. North Korea has managed to acquire sufficient nuclear capabilities and become a nuclear state. In the case of Iran, it has acquired the expertise to develop its missile program. Although it still depends on foreign suppliers for certain components and equipment, it has the technical and industrial capacity to develop long-range missiles, as explained in a report by the late Michael Elleman, former Director of Non-Proliferation and Nuclear Policy⁷⁸.

Lastly, it must be noted that, as can be seen in the previous sections of this article, there is no record of these exchanges in official sources, such as trade reports and North Korean state news; most of the information on technological and military cooperation comes from intelligence agencies and external government reports, and should therefore be treated with caution.

Cultural Exchanges

Finally, Iran and North Korea also maintain cultural ties. These have been reported mainly by North Korean news agencies such as *Rodong Sinmun*, *KCNA*, and *Voice of Korea*. In October 2003, the plan for 2003-2005 cultural exchange between the two countries was signed in Tehran⁷⁹. In January 2007, the 2007-2009 plan for cultural and scientific exchange between the DPRK and Iran was signed in North Korea⁸⁰. In April 2010,

⁷⁷ Qtd in United Against Nuclear Iran. (2024). Iran & North Korea: Proliferation Partners.

https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/sites/default/files/Update_Iran%20%20North%20Korea_%20Proliferation%20Partners.pdf

⁷⁸ ELLEMAN, M. (2024). Iran's Ballistic Missile Program. *The Iran Premier*. <https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/irans-ballistic-missile-program>

⁷⁹ Plan for 2003-2005 Cultural Exchange Signed between DPRK and Iran. (2003, October 4). *KCNA Watch*. <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1452003698-933943120/plan-for-2003-2005-cultural-exchange-signed-between-dprk-and-iran/>

⁸⁰ DPRK-Iranian Cultural and Scientific Exchange Plan Signed. (2007, January 20). *KCNA Watch*. <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1451885233-893071514/dprk-iranian-cultural-and-scientific-exchange-plan-signed/>

another plan between both countries was signed: the 2010-2012 plan for cultural and scientific exchange⁸¹.

Important dates of Iran and North Korea to be commemorated in both countries to reaffirm the good relations between them. For example, the anniversary of the birth of Kim Jong-il (Day of Shining Star) is celebrated in Tehran, including political and cultural events such as photo and film exhibitions⁸². Another example is the celebration of the anniversary of the victory of the Islamic Revolution, celebrated at the Iranian embassy in Pyongyang with the participation of members of the Korean Committee for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries, the DPRK-Iran Friendship Association, and the Iranian embassy in Pyongyang⁸³. At the 2024 commemoration of the Islamic Revolution, North Korean and Iranian participants even enjoyed a performance by the students at the Korea-Iran Friendship Jungsun Senior Middle School of the county of Sosong⁸⁴. An Iran-DPRK Friendship Week has also been celebrated on several occasions⁸⁵.

Relations in the future: the Iran-Israel War and the new South Korean administration

On June 13, 2025, Israel launched preemptive strikes against the Iranian nuclear program. President Isaac Herzog claimed that the attack was launched in order to “neutralize an immediate and existential threat” to the Israeli people, arguing that the Iranian regime had destabilized the region “while working relentlessly to advance its military nuclear capabilities, and expand its ballistic missile arsenal”⁸⁶. Subsequently, on June 21, the United States attacked three Iranian nuclear sites: Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahan. However, assessments of the impact of the strikes indicate that they had failed to dismantle Iran’s nuclear capabilities and had only delayed its nuclear program by a few

⁸¹ DPRK and Iran Cooperate in Culture and Science. (2010, April 22). *KCNA Watch*.

<https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1451888473-875794507/dprk-and-iran-cooperate-in-culture-and-science/>

⁸² Day of Shining Star to be Celebrated in Iran. (2013, February 4). *KCNA Watch*.

<https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1451900797-151948860/day-of-shining-star-to-be-celebrated-in-iran/>

⁸³ Anniversary of Victory of Iranian Islamic Revolution Marked. (2008, February 21). *KCNA Watch*.

<https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1451886547-841652232/anniversary-of-victory-of-iranian-islamic-revolution-marked/>

⁸⁴ 45th anniversary of victory of Islamic revolution in Iran marked. (2024, February 8). *KCNA Watch*.

<https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1707383050-724561863/45th-anniversary-of-victory-of-islamic-revolution-in-iran-marked/>

⁸⁵ Week of Iran-DPRK Friendship Opens in Tehran. (2009, October 18). *KCNA Watch*.

<https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1451887979-176361057/week-of-iran-dprk-friendship-opens-in-tehran/>

⁸⁶ Retrieved from <https://www.gov.il/en/pages/statement-by-president-herzog-13-jun-2025>

months, despite Trump's claims that Iran's key nuclear sites had been "completely and totally obliterated" by their strikes⁸⁷.

Three months after the attacks, on September 9, Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi and IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi signed an agreement in Cairo, which aimed to resume nuclear inspections in Iran under the NPT safeguards agreement. This was seen as a positive step forward after President Masoud Pezeshkian had signed a law suspending all cooperation with the UN nuclear watchdog on July 2.

However, on September 20, Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) announced that it would be suspending its cooperation with the IAEA after the UNSC failed to pass a resolution seeking to prevent the reimposition of UN sanctions against Iran. This came after Britain, France, and Germany accused Iran of failing to comply with its commitments under the JCPOA⁸⁸. On November 2, Pezeshkian stated that Tehran will rebuild its nuclear facilities, clarifying that Iran does not seek to become a nuclear state, and that their goal is to "solve the problems of the people, for disease, for the health of the people"⁸⁹. Trump has threatened to retaliate.

As for North Korea, it remains to be seen whether the South Korean government's attempts at rapprochement will yield any results, which seems unlikely. Following the political crisis that struck South Korea after ex-President Yoon Suk-Yeol declared martial law in December 2024, Lee Jae-Myung was elected as the new president. Lee's government has opted for pragmatic diplomacy, seeking to build closer ties with both China and North Korea, in a substantial shift from the previous administration. Yoon Suk-Yeol had an aggressive stance toward North Korea, and reports even arose during the martial law crisis accusing him of plotting to provoke a North Korean attack on the South⁹⁰. In addition, anti-Chinese sentiment grew significantly during Yoon's administration and continues to prevail among his supporters. In contrast, the new government has taken the opportunity to try to make progress with both countries.

⁸⁷ Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8dxuWJ5m9mU>

⁸⁸ Retrieved from <https://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2025/09/20/755397/Iran-suspend-cooperation-IAEA->

⁸⁹ Iran's president says Tehran will rebuild its nuclear facilities. (2 de noviembre de 2025). *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/iran-will-rebuild-its-nuclear-facilities-with-greater-power-president-says-2025-11-02/>

⁹⁰ A related report can be read at <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/opinion/20250717/did-former-president-yoon-try-to-provoke-north-korea-to-attack>

However, at this moment, the two Koreas find themselves at opposite ends in this situation. On November 23, South Korean President Lee Jae-Myung declared that reunification with North Korea was his “ultimate goal and a constitutional duty”, and vowed to achieve it through dialogue rather than unilateral action⁹¹. However, the reality of the two Koreas is far removed from Lee Jae-Myung’s aspiration for reunification, which his predecessor Moon Jae-In (2017-2022) had also set as a goal for 2045. In July 2025, Kim Yo-Jong had already made it clear that Pyongyang has no intention of maintaining amicable relations with the South, let alone becoming one nation again: “The DPRK-ROK relations have irreversibly gone beyond the time zone of the concept of homogeneous nation”, she declared⁹².

On September 3, 2025, world leaders and representatives –including Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, and Kim Jong-Un– gathered in Beijing on the occasion of a military parade marking the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II in China. South Korean National Assembly Speaker Woo Won-Shik took the opportunity to inform Chinese Vice Premier, Ding Xuexiang, that a visit by Xi Jinping to Seoul during the upcoming Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Forum could become a decisive factor in improving cooperation between South Korea and China⁹³. Woo Won-shik also attempted to establish a dialogue with Kim Jong-un, albeit unsuccessfully, as Kim appeared to avoid it, giving him a brief and evasive response⁹⁴. While these attempts at rapprochement were taking place, South Korea, Japan, and the United States completed their joint military drills, which lasted from September 15 to 19. Moreover, it is important to note the strengthening of cooperation and partnership between North Korea and Russia, especially their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty, signed in June, 2024, which includes a mutual defense agreement in the event that either country faces armed aggression.

⁹¹ KIM, E. (23 de noviembre de 2025). Lee says S. Korea’s ultimate goal is reunification with N. Korea. *Yonhap News*. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20251123004800315>

⁹² Press statement of Kim Yo Jong, Vice-Department Director of CC, WPK. (28 de julio de 2025). *KCNA Watch*. <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1753779823-729561779/press-statement-of-kim-yo-jong-vice-department-director-of-cc-wpk/>

⁹³ Woo Won Shik stresses in Beijing that a visit by Xi to Korea would boost bilateral relations (September 5, 2025). *KBS World*. https://world.kbs.co.kr/service/news_view.htm?lang=s&Seq_Code=94707

⁹⁴ KIM, M. (September 4, 2024). 우원식 "7년 만에 다시 뵙니다" 김정은 "네" [Woo Won Shik says “We’re seeing each other after 7 years”; Kim Jong-Un answers “Yes”]. *Chosun Ilbo*. https://www.chosun.com/politics/north_korea/2025/09/03/AXIURM53GVAQ5AAJGZBNEBEVM4/

On top of this is the issue of nuclear submarines: it is worth noting the recent deal between South Korea and the United States on this matter⁹⁵, as well as North Korea's release on December 25, 2025, of an image of what the North claims to be a nuclear-powered strategic guided missile submarine under construction⁹⁶.

Following Israeli and U.S. attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities, the issue of a nuclear deal with Pyongyang resurfaced, as did the possibility of a preemptive strike similar to those carried out against Iran. However, as previously mentioned, these attacks did not eradicate Iran's nuclear capabilities. While it remains unclear whether North Korea possesses second-strike capability, it is a nuclear state with full and independent nuclear capabilities, and it would not be so easy to launch an attack on its facilities –let alone succeed in doing so. The factor of the aforementioned Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty between the DPRK and Russia must also be taken into account⁹⁷.

Iran has reiterated its goal of rebuilding its nuclear facilities, even after Trump's threats to retaliate if it decides to restart them. As for North Korea, it refuses to engage in dialogue with South Korea, and has made it a condition for diplomatic exchange with the United States that denuclearization is excluded as a topic of negotiation. The two countries have remained close for decades, and we will continue to see cooperation between them. It is worth considering Tehran's intention to rebuild its nuclear facilities, for which Pyongyang could become a valuable supplier of materials and personnel, as can be seen in the case of its cooperation with Russia.

Conclusion

Iran and North Korea grew closer in a time frame in which doing so was consistent with their interests and ideological positions. In the decades that followed, they engaged with each other to counter the consequences of war and international isolation. Their ties have remained strong throughout the decades. Overall, their relationship is built on their shared

⁹⁵ SQUASSONI, S. (December 12, 2025). How nuclear submarines could pave the way for nuclear weapons in South Korea. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. <https://thebulletin.org/2025/12/how-nuclear-submarines-could-pave-the-way-for-nuclear-weapons-in-south-korea/>

⁹⁶ YONHAP. (January 2, 2025). Top security adviser raises alarm about N. Korea's unveiling of what it calls nuclear sub. *The Korea Times*. <https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/foreignaffairs/northkorea/20260102/top-security-adviser-raises-alarm-about-n-koreas-unveiling-of-what-it-calls-nuclear-subn>

⁹⁷ PÉREZ GIL, L. (2025). Russia's nuclear power: new approaches to capabilities and doctrine of use. In *Global Nuclear Panorama* (Pérez Gil coord.). Cuaderno de estrategia IEEE 229-B. Madrid: Ministerio de Defensa, pp. 63-94. https://publicaciones.defensa.gob.es/media/downloadable/files/links/g/l/global-nuclear-panorama-ce-229-b_1.pdf

need to counter an external threat –the United States and its allies– and to strengthen their military capabilities in order to do so.

Technological and military cooperation between the two countries has been key to achieving their own strategic goals. North Korean technology has been fundamental for the development of Iran’s missile and nuclear program. In turn, these exchanges with Iran have contributed to North Korea’s economy. The latter has managed to become a nuclear state and has made it clear that it has no intention of giving up its nuclear arsenal under any circumstances. In the case of Iran, its nuclear program survived Israeli and U.S. attacks and is in the process of rebuilding the facilities destroyed by the strikes.

Both countries have sought to strengthen their relationship in times of need, as in the case of Iran’s recent diplomatic crisis with South Korea. North Korea was also quick to show support to Iran after the Israeli and U.S. strikes. Therefore, further cooperation between the two countries can be expected in periods of instability, even more so now that both of their nuclear programs continue to be a central issue in international politics.

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