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The 2010 Arab Spring not only reshaped the power structure of the Middle East, but also greatly affected the diplomatic strategies of outside players in the region. For interested countries such as North Korea, a realignment of Middle East strategy becomes a priority for the preservation of national interests. Despite its relatively small size and distant location in Northeast Asia, North Korea has substantial interests in the Middle East and Africa. These two regions include many pan-Socialist and war-torn countries; accordingly, North Korea's economic interest is based on the export of both weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and conventional weapons. For this reason, the Arab Spring has had a significant impact on the domestic and foreign affairs of North Korea.

North Korea's Middle East Diplomacy: Past and Present

There were no direct relations between North Korea and any Middle Eastern country at the time of the founding of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in 1948. The establishment of diplomatic relations between North Korea and Middle Eastern countries may be divided into several stages.

Stage 1

The Korean War (1950–53) resulted in sanctions being imposed on the DPRK and its isolation from the West and other UN member states. From that point on, Eastern Bloc and pan-Socialist countries such as Nasir's Egypt, Syria, Iraq

under the rule of the Ba'ath Party, North and South Yemen, and Qadafhi's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya have been priorities of North Korean diplomacy.

Stage 2

At the beginning of the 1970s, with the outbreak of the first oil crisis and the easing of international scrutiny, North Korea began to establish diplomatic relations with some Middle East monarchies, such as Iran and Jordan.

Stage 3

Near the end of the Cold War, especially at the beginning of the twenty-first century, North Korea successively initiated diplomatic relations with five Gulf monarchies (not including Saudi Arabia) as well as with Turkey, which had contributed troops to US efforts during the Korean War.

Generally speaking, there are two remarkably contradictory features in the conduct of North Korea's Middle East diplomacy. Since the 1970s, the importance of ideology has been declining in North Korea's foreign relations. North Korea has felt compelled to maintain diplomatic ties with all countries in the Middle East except Israel, and in recent years, most notably, with both Kuwait and the pro-American Mubarak regime in Egypt. There is even evidence of a failed North Korean demarche to Israel in 1992, which was conducted in great secrecy.¹ However, in adherence to its anti-American and anti-Israeli slogans, North Korea has also attached great importance to developing diplomatic relations with historically friendly countries, specifically those with anti-American orientations, especially Libya, Syria, and Iran. Consequently, those countries and Egypt—four countries that established embassies reciprocally with the DPRK—are top priorities in North Korea's Middle East diplomacy.

The 9/11 attacks and subsequent US War on Terror in Afghanistan and Iraq greatly influenced North Korea during a period of increased North Korean radicalism. The relationship between North Korea and Afghanistan had been stagnant due to the Afghan civil war, and it neither improved nor weakened following the founding of Hamid Karzai's government. In contrast, the relationship between North Korea and Iraq improved significantly. Although the two established diplomatic ties as early as 1968, the conflict between the ruling parties in Syria and Iraq, along with the Iran–Iraq war, ultimately led to Saddam dissolving ties in 1980. After the 2008 regime change, North Korea successfully restored its diplomatic relations with Iraq. The upheavals in Egypt, Libya, and Syria had a great impact on North Korea's Middle East diplomacy, those countries having suffered the most political turbulence during the unrest. Therefore, recalibrating its policy toward the Middle East is a matter of national interest to the North Koreans.

North Korea's National Interests in the Middle East

Neither realism nor idealism can entirely account for North Korea's diplomatic practices since its foundation, as seen in the contradictions between Kim Il-sung's domestic and foreign goals. Internationally, the Kim family's hereditary theocratic model is viewed as heterogeneous, and its national image is fragile. After the Cold War, North Korea wanted to initiate relations with Washington in order to gain US recognition of its dynastic system, but this, of course, was wishful thinking. Although the Americans did not want to reinstate military action in Korea, they also could not tolerate the brutal regime in Pyongyang. Therefore, Washington adopted a strategy of containment. At the same time, the North Korean regime relied on military rule, and military interest groups sought to expand their power in domestic politics through anti-American activities. Additionally, the Kim family was trapped by its decades of anti-American propaganda, which had become an important source of legitimacy.

Pyongyang's move to improve relations with Washington can be considered a pragmatic one. The Middle East is the primary region of the world in which anti-American and anti-Israel forces converge. Coupled with the turbulence and security issues, the Middle East is, in fact, the most favorable region in which North Korea can maximize its arms exports.

The national interests of North Korea in the Middle East can be examined from two major perspectives: economic and political. In short, Pyongyang's core interests are the preservation of Kim's rule through the Worker's Party of Korea (WPK), national sovereignty and unity, and financial guarantees safeguarding the modernization of national defense. Therefore, DPRK involvement in the Middle East is a core interest.

North Korea's Political Interests in the Middle East

The realization of political interests is premised on the legitimacy of rule. When it was founded, North Korea was a Socialist country governed by the WPK and guided by the principles of Marxism-Leninism. After the end of the Korean War, Pyongyang's diplomacy was modeled on that of the Soviet Union and China and strongly supported international Communist, anti-imperialist, and anti-colonialist movements. It also actively developed diplomatic relations with Socialist countries, pan-Socialist countries in the Third World, and Socialist parties in the Nordic countries. However, North Korea always distanced itself from other powers. It did so especially in its communications with China and the Soviet Union, though slightly favoring China, so as to maintain independence as much as possible. The unique location of North Korea as the buffer in Northeast Asia between Chinese and Soviet Communist spheres created a win-win situation

following the fallout of Chinese–Soviet relations. Although the guiding ideology of the WPK shifted from orthodox Marxism–Leninism to the *Juche Saesang*, and then to “Kim Il-sung–Kim Jong-il-ism,” and despite the fact that Communist ideals were in fact removed from its national and party constitutions, the nature of the WPK remains inherently Communist as a result of the Cold War legacy on the Korean Peninsula.²

Since most Middle Eastern countries are allied either with the US or Russia, the most effective political mechanism with which to gain favor from all Middle Eastern countries is to oppose Israel. Due to the special relationship between the US and Israel,³ opposing Israel is a variation on anti-Americanism. Therefore, North Korea utilized its participation in the Middle Eastern countries’ struggle against Israel to establish its image as an anti-American actor.

Although North Korea recognized the independence of Algeria as early as 1958 and established diplomatic ties with many Arab republics in the 1960s, these relationships went no further. The regional situation in the 1960s was quite tense for both North Korea and Arab countries.

In the 1970s, the degradation of relations between Egypt and the Soviet Union, and the improvement of ties between the Soviet Union and North Korea, afforded an opportunity for Pyongyang to engage in Middle Eastern affairs. The withdrawal of Soviet advisers left a leadership vacuum in the Egyptian military, especially in the air force. Egypt began to seek assistance from countries that were skilled in using Soviet-made weapons. The combat experience of North Korea’s air force in North Vietnam, the detainment of the US surveillance ship *Pueblo* in 1968, and North Korea’s downing of the US spy plane EC-121 in 1969 all impressed Egypt. In March 1973, a high-ranking officer of the North Korean People’s Army (KPA) was invited to visit Egypt and spoke with its air force commander, Hosni Mubarak, and its general chief of staff, Saad el-Shazly, about a variety of topics, including the possibility of North Korean pilots visiting Egypt. A military assistance agreement was signed by top leaders from both sides. In June 1973, in advance of the Yom Kippur War in October, North Korea sent a military advisory group of 1,500 people and an air force aid group of thirty-nine personnel, led by Air Force General Chief of Staff Jo Myong-rok. However, North Korea did not emerge unscathed. A MiG-21 jet piloted by a North Korean was shot down by two Israeli F-4 fighters, and another North Korean pilot was mistakenly downed by an Egyptian anti-aircraft missile.⁴ More importantly, Egypt and North Korea quickly developed a *de facto* alliance. Egypt transferred its Soviet-made Scud-B missiles to North Korea in 1977, providing the original source material for North Korea’s missile research and development.

After the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981, Mubarak became president, and the friendship he and Kim Il-sung had initiated during the Yom Kippur War lasted

until the Korean leader's death in 1994. Throughout his own presidency, Mubarak made numerous visits to North Korea. Kim Il-sung once said, "In the war of 1973, North Korea and Egypt fought side by side like brothers." Mubarak also repeatedly stressed that he would keep his vow to Kim Il-sung not to establish diplomatic ties with South Korea. Although Beijing developed diplomatic relations with Seoul in 1992, Cairo did not do so until 1995, a year after Kim Il-sung's death.⁵

In the meantime, North Korea enhanced its political relations with anti-Israel regimes and forces, such as the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Hamas, Hizbullah in Lebanon, Syria, and Iran. The North Koreans had established relations with the PLO in April 1966. Kim Il-sung regarded the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian liberation movement and refused to recognize the Jewish State, believing that the Palestinians were entitled to all the territory controlled by Israel. In the 1970s and '80s, the PLO set up military camps throughout the Middle East in which terrorists from all over the world were trained, sometimes with the assistance of North Korean instructors.⁶ The DPRK also set up Palestinian training camps on its territory, such as the Pyongyang camp, which was visited by Black September leaders Abu Daoud and Abu Nidal.⁷

In November 1988, the PLO announced the establishment of the "State of Palestine" and Pyongyang immediately recognized it. After the Cold War, Hamas opposed the PLO's reconciliation with Israel in the Oslo Accords and continued its violent activities against the Jewish State. Despite the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the collapse of Moscow's grip over Eastern Europe, and the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Israel, Pyongyang maintained its anti-Americanism and supported Hamas terror activities. According to a North Korean Foreign Ministry statement on the 2008–09 Gaza War between Israel and Hamas, "The DPRK resolutely condemns Israel's killing of unarmed civilians. It is a crime against humanity, a serious provocation against the Palestinians and other Arab people, and a public challenge to the Mideast peace process." The North Korean media opined that "as long as Israel continues its policies against Palestine and the US insists on its two-pronged Middle East policy, there will be no peace in the Middle East."⁸ In November 2012, Pyongyang condemned Israel's air attack in the Gaza Strip. North Korea is one of the few nations in the world outside the Middle East that openly supports Hamas and strongly condemns Israel. Due to North Korea's longstanding support for the Palestinian struggle against Israel, Palestinian groups did not establish diplomatic relations with South Korea until very recently.

North Korea developed relations with Libya under the anti-American Qadhafi regime. Beginning in the mid-1970s, and influenced by Nasir's ideology, the Libyan dictator took it upon himself to lead the anti-American movement in the Arab world, an effort admired in Pyongyang. Motivated by common interests, North Korea and Libya developed diplomatic ties in 1974. Relations between

Tripoli and Washington were contentious, and they severed ties in 1982. At that point, Qadhafi embarked on his anti-American agenda in earnest. He paid an official visit to Pyongyang in October 1982, where it was said that “Qadhafi is the only one among the chiefs of the countries in the Middle East and North African Maghreb who dares to fight against the US. Libya is ‘North Africa’s Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.’” Moreover, the two sides signed the DPRK–Libya Treaty of Alliance on Friendship and Cooperation in November 1982, an intergovernmental military alliance containing twelve provisions. The fourth stated that they could communicate on military intelligence, exchange experts, and provide weapons to each other without reservation. The fifth provided that if either were attacked or threatened by a third country, the other would offer military and material assistance.⁹

Thereafter, both countries maintained a close relationship, as evidenced by the signing of a protocol governing military cooperation in 1984, an agreement in 2002 protecting foreign investments and encouraging cooperation in science and technology, and a memorandum of human capital coordinating manpower exports in 2006. They also supported each other’s anti-American and anti-Israel activities, including the Lockerbie bombing in 1988. Although Libya and South Korea eventually established diplomatic ties in 1980, they were far less meaningful than those between Tripoli and Pyongyang. When South Korea’s activities in Libya risked jeopardizing the relationship between North Korea and Libya, North Korea was always favored.

The Economic Interests of North Korea in the Middle East

North Korea’s economic and military construction funds historically came mainly from the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and China. Against the backdrop of a newly divided Korean Peninsula, North Korea modeled its economy on the Soviet Union’s “heavy industry first” plan. Although “the policy of heavy industry first was based on its internal natural resources, it excessively relied on the capital and technical assistance from the Soviet Union.” This policy is “closely related to military buildup and continuous increase in munitions products.”¹⁰ In 1982, industry accounted for 70 percent of the total GDP of North Korea while it constituted only 35 percent of South Korea’s. This explains why North Korea’s material production was actually higher than that of its counterpart until the 1980s, while its standard of living was much lower, even as early as the 1970s.¹¹ China gradually reduced its aid to North Korea after its “economic reform.”

The drastic changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe were also a severe blow to the economic development of North Korea. Although North Korea had not participated in the Council for Mutual Economic Association (CMEA)—the Socialist countries’ “common market”—due to its principle of “economic

independence,” its main trade partners were CMEA members. The loss of the country’s import/export market disrupted its highly industrialized agricultural production while its obstinate planned economic model impeded its economic development. North Korea neither shared in the benefit of the economic development of East Asia nor participated in any regional organization for economic cooperation, such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) or the framework of ASEAN+3. To maintain the Kims’ regime, North Korea pushed its “heavy industry first” model to the limits.

Pyongyang scammed the great powers, as well as its neighbors, by developing nuclear weapons and long-range missiles in order to receive economic aid, especially food and oil. It is worth noting that although North Korea imported oil from Libya and Syria, its main supplier was China. However, North Korea’s civilian oil demands are far smaller than those of other countries, so oil is not one of its main concerns in the Middle East. North Korea exported conventional weapons, missiles, and nuclear reactors to radical anti-American and anti-Israel countries and organizations around the world, especially in the Middle East, in exchange for vast amounts of foreign currency. From this perspective, the Middle East is of key importance to North Korea’s economic wellbeing.

Pyongyang began exporting weapons to the Middle East several years before the end of the Cold War, contributing to regional instability. After the end of the Cold War, especially after the “Arduous March,” North Korea’s economy was badly hurt. According to Professor Mike W. Peng of the University of Texas at Dallas, “At present, North Korea’s only reliable exports are illegal drugs, weapons, and counterfeits. North Korea’s nuclear weapons are viewed by experts as an economic, not a military, weapon.”¹² After losing the Socialist market, North Korea had no choice but to leverage access to foreign exchange as a major tool of economic growth, mainly through the sales of missiles and nuclear weapons. As Li Daguang, a professor at the National Defence University PLA China, noted, “Nuclear weapons and missiles are the top priority of the weaponry and equipment development of North Korea, and they are also the foundation of the battle effectiveness of the North Korean army.”¹³

After acquiring Scud Missiles from Egypt, North Korea commenced its project of missile replication and development. It exported many copies of Soviet-made missiles to Iran during the Iran–Iraq War. For an extended period of time, Libya, Iran, Syria, Yemen, Hamas, and Hizbullah in Lebanon purchased North Korean missiles. For instance, in 2007, the independent US agency of Certified Release Signatories (CRS) submitted a report to Congress describing the Israeli intelligence assessment that North Korea was Hizbullah’s main source of missiles in its war against Israel.¹⁴ In August 2009, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) intercepted an illegal arms shipment to Iran that originated in North Korea and found

that it contained rockets.¹⁵ North Korea imports high-tech machines and accessories from Taiwan, Switzerland, and Japan, while setting in place a secret global network that conducts capital deals via financial companies in Germany and Hong Kong. It pays the cost of imports using foreign exchange earned by arms exports.

North Korea's nuclear ambitions date back to the 1970s. In 1988, the US officially raised the issue of North Korea's development of nuclear weapons, which led to the UN sanctions of 1994. In June of that year, US President Bill Clinton dispatched former President Jimmy Carter to speak with Kim Il-sung in Pyongyang. The two sides reached an agreement entitled the "Framework Agreement on the DPRK Nuclear Issue." The Bush administration's ineffective handling of the nuclear issue thrust North Korea into a new crisis. Not only did Pyongyang again seek to obtain the status of "nuclear power;" it also began exporting nuclear reactors, focusing its attention on the Middle East, a hotbed of global nuclear proliferation.¹⁶ Syria's nuclear program is seen as closely related to North Korea's. The nuclear reactor in al-Bara, Syria, which was bombed by Israel, was similar to the one in Nyongbyon. This information had not been disclosed until the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) did so in July 2007 and submitted the issue of the Syrian nuclear program to the UN Security Council for discussion.

North Korea's Response to the Unrest in the Middle East

North Korea's most critical political and economic interests are tied to the Middle East. Therefore, regional unrest has had a severe impact on North Korea in a number of ways. First, it undermined the influence of the anti-American camp, of which North Korea is a leading member. Libya, a close ally, repaired relations with the West after the Iraq War and then, after Qadhafi's overthrow, shifted its allegiance to the West, at least while it was a coherent state. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad also faces armed opposition supported by the West. Whether his regime will survive or not depends in some measure on how and to what extent foreign powers continue to intervene. Of course, Iran suffered due to the significant economic sanctions imposed by the West over its nuclear program. Second, the upheavals brought an end to the rule of several strongmen who sought to impose a dynastic system: Ben Ali (Tunisia), Mubarak (Egypt), Salleh (Yemen), and Qadhafi (Libya). All had groomed their sons as successors. Their failure certainly did not go unnoticed in North Korea. Finally, the unrest may affect the weapons market as well as trade in grains and oil, each of which is integral to North Korea's national interests. Faced with these challenges, North Korea's official media responded in typical fashion.

Libya

In 2011, after the outbreak of the civil war in Libya, the North Korean Foreign Ministry condemned the West, claiming, “The United States and European countries worked hand in glove to attack Libya by force. This is a brutal aggression against a country’s sovereignty and territory. It tramples the Libyan people’s dignity and right to life; it is a serious crime against humanity.”¹⁷

Pyongyang prohibited the reporting of any news on the subject and forbade its own expatriates working in Libya—including more than 200 nurses, workers, and army instructors—from returning home.¹⁸ The North Korean embassy in Libya was hit by NATO bombs in May 2011. North Korea “supported Qadhafi’s regime to maintain stability by providing special military assistance.” North Koreans fought in the Libyan regular army during the civil war. However, both sides possessed weapons acquired from North Korea. The Zimbabwean presidential guard “Brigade 5,” which had received training and arms from North Korea, also arrived in Libya to support Qadhafi in February of the same year.¹⁹ After the regime change in Libya, North Korea did not break off diplomatic ties but appointed a new ambassador in July 2012. However, the new Libyan regime closed its embassy in North Korea in June 2012, as North Korea had never officially recognized the Libyan National Transitional Council (NTC) as the legitimate government. Seo Jeong-min, a South Korean scholar of Middle East studies, pointed out that “many of the NTC’s ranking officials are on good terms with the US, and they are probably well aware of North Korea’s ties to the Qadhafi regime. It won’t be easy for North Korea and Libya’s transitional council to form amicable relations.”²⁰

Egypt

With the ouster of Morsi by General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, North Korea’s Egyptian policy confronted a new dilemma. Mubarak had ceded power to the military at the beginning of the Arab Spring. The regime change in Egypt was relatively peaceful and took place within a constitutional framework. Hence, North Korea kept silent on Mubarak’s arrest but congratulated Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood candidate, after his victory in the presidential election in June 2012.

Indeed, Morsi’s attitude toward Israel was quite indifferent and he refused to answer the congratulatory call from Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu. Moreover, he took the initiative in promoting the restoration of diplomatic ties between Egypt and Iran.

On the other hand, in January 2012, Jong-Won Yoon, South Korea’s ambassador to Egypt, predicted that “after the recovery of democratization, Egypt will adopt a free market economic system, which will make relations between Egypt and South Korea closer, because Egypt needs South Korea’s help for its economic

recovery, and Egypt would like to learn from the democratic experience of South Korea."²¹

After the collapse of the Morsi regime, Egypt's policy toward the Korean Peninsula changed. Sisi invested great efforts in developing relations with South Korea. In March 2016, he traveled to Seoul. On that occasion, seventeen years after Mubarak's visit, Sisi declared, "It is important to revive the Egyptian economy. From that perspective, if South Korean firms offer jobs to Egyptian youth, this will create a beneficial cycle." He went on to declare, "As far as I know, South Korea is a mature and developed country. It is fully capable of solving issues through dialogue." To be sure, the Sisi regime clearly favors Seoul over Pyongyang, and it has been observed that "Egypt, currently a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, was behind ... [the] unanimous adoption of a new council resolution punishing North Korea for its recent nuclear and missile tests."²²

Syria

North Korea and Syria are not only allies; they also have a similar political system. North Korea firmly supported the Syrian Assad regime, which was an example of dynastic rule similar to that of the Kims in Pyongyang. Bashar al-Assad came to power after the death of his father Hafez al-Assad in 2000. After the sudden death of Kim Jong-il on December 17, 2011, Kim Jong-un glided into power smoothly, as the third-generation ruler of the Kim dynasty. In February 2012, North Korea, together with China, Russia, Cuba, Iran, and several other countries, voted against the UN General Assembly resolution on the Syria issue. Assad and Kim Jong-un exchanged celebratory telegrams, congratulating each other on birthdays and achievements. On November 5, 2012, North Korea and Syria signed a series of new agreements, initiating cooperation in the fields of information, economy, and tourism. As Chinese scholar Pang Zhongying said:

Assad's regime in Syria is very similar to North Korea in Northeast Asia due to hereditary power. The collapse of Bashar al-Assad would be a big blow to the newborn regime of Kim Jong-un. The impact of the change in Syrian regime will not be limited to the Middle East; instead, it will also influence North Korea, which is far away in Northeast Asia. A North Korean regime change will substantially and greatly change the regional order in Northeast Asia.²³

Iran

North Korea drew lessons from Qadhafi's denuclearization and eventual demise. Hence, it cooperated with Iran and took an increasingly hardline attitude on

ensuring its research and development program of nuclear weapons and long-range missile technology.

The US-led overthrow of the Saddam Hussein's regime engendered two opposing reactions on the part of Middle Eastern countries seeking nuclear weapons: On the one hand, Libya abandoned its efforts to create nuclear weapons and weapons of mass destruction, and reconciled with the West completely. Qadhafi also accepted Ban Ki-moon's request to appeal to North Korea to give up its nuclear program and receive aid and assurances from the international community. North Korea flatly rejected that idea. On the other hand, Iran and Syria believed that Saddam was toppled because he did *not* develop nuclear weapons. This logic radicalized their faith in the nuclear project, a position shared by North Korea. Pyongyang launched a missile test, carried out an underground nuclear explosion in 2006, and another in 2009. It insisted that Libya was deceived by the West into abandoning its nuclear program, leading to its demise. Libya, in fact, has been viewed as the second negative example after Iraq:

"Odyssey Dawn" has provided North Korea the best excuse to reject nuclear dismantlement. Hence the difficulty for neighboring countries, including China, to persuade North Korea to return to the Six-Party Talks will increase greatly. Even if there were a chance in the future to restart the Six-Party Talks, North Korea might stress the threat of the West, the necessity of deterring aggression, and require for nuclear disarmament talks as a nuclear-weapons state.²⁴

Iran has not been greatly affected by the Arab Spring, but it still strengthened cooperation with North Korea regarding issues of nuclear and long-range missile projects. In August and September of 2012, a high-level North Korean delegation led by Kim Yong-nam participated in the Non-Aligned Movement Summit in Iran and then paid an official visit. Both sides claimed to oppose imperialism and signed a cooperation agreement on science and technology. Moreover, South Korean officials believed that "Iran obtains missile technology not only from China and Russia, but also from Britain, Germany, and some other Western countries. The technology then flows into North Korea." Even after the international community continued to impose sanctions on North Korea, it carried out a missile emission test in Iran. South Korea and the US believe a group of Iranian experts secretly teach weapons technology in North Korea in order to overcome the problem of Pyongyang's missile launch failure in April 2012.²⁵ On December 12, 2012, North Korea launched the Kwangmyongsong-3 satellite.²⁶ On January 24, 2013, North Korea declared that the Six-Party Talks were no longer relevant, that they would not discuss the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and that they would conduct their third nuclear test in the near future. On January 28, 2013, Iran announced that it had successfully launched a monkey into space. The West considered this preparation for long-range

missile development. On February 12, 2013, North Korea conducted a third nuclear test. The mainstream media in South Korea echoed British and American media reports according to which Pyongyang's "nuclear weapons were jointly possessed by Iran and North Korea because Iran has provided the assistance."²⁷ On February 16, 2013, Iran's supreme leader Khamenei stated, "We believe nuclear arms must be eliminated and we do not want to make nuclear weapons. But if at some time we do not think so and decide to produce nuclear arms, no power can stand in our way."²⁸ The determination of Iran and North Korea to develop nuclear weapons and long-range missiles regardless of international opposition has been made clear.

Conclusion

The dust from the Arab Spring has yet to settle. The future of the civil war in Syria is of critical significance to the Middle Eastern geopolitical order. North Korea has adopted a wait-and-see posture regarding the unrest. It did not expect to see its Middle Eastern allies confront regime change, so it supported the ruling authorities, including the former Qadhafi regime in Libya and current Assad regime in Syria. As for the countries in which old regimes were replaced by new ones within the constitutional framework, North Korea recognized the new authorities and sought to maintain bilateral relationships, as exemplified in its flirtation with the short-lived Morsi regime in Egypt. Regarding the countries in which regimes were changed through violent means, North Korea neither recognized nor opposed the new authorities but hesitantly maintained diplomatic relations. For instance, it sent a new ambassador to Libya without officially recognizing the new regime. As for countries with more stable political situations, North Korea strengthened political and military cooperation, such as its active interaction with Iran on anti-American activities, nuclear tests, and long-range missile tests.

As its fear of the American-led West deepened, it took a pragmatic attitude toward transitional countries in the Middle East. Its fear originated from the huge gap between the Middle East's call for "democracy," and its own dynastic regime spanning three generations. In fact, the ideologies of North Korea and its Middle East allies differ completely. So, too, do the theoretical bases of their respective anti-Americanisms. The unrest has severely weakened anti-Americanism in the Middle East. Moreover, the continuous eastward creep of American strategic focus, coupled with US-South Korean military exercises, has heightened North Korea's growing sense of insecurity and an awareness of the potential damage to its political interests. Pyongyang's intention of challenging the international mechanism to restrict nuclear proliferation has become increasingly obvious. It attempted to force Americans to admit the legitimacy of Kim's regime by drawing the situation to the brink of war and pursuing the status of nuclear power. Announcing the revocation of the Korean Armistice Agreement signed in 1953 was but one extreme example. The possession of nuclear weapons and the

dynastic system are elements of North Korea's political strategy: the former is a means and the latter is a goal. However, such means cannot be accepted by world powers or North Korea's neighbors, which is why the UN Security Council adopted resolution 2094 and imposed sanctions on North Korea. It is noteworthy that three of the four clauses of the resolution are related to research and development of nuclear weapons and arms trade, and the fourth concerns luxury goods, including jewelry and automobiles. This was not the first time the UN Security Council imposed sanctions on the export to North Korea of luxury items, but the effects of former sanctions were not so pronounced. In the international community, the prohibition on the export of luxury goods is seen as an important step toward weakening totalitarian rule.

The reshaping of the Middle East's political landscape has had a twofold impact on the future of North Korean economic interests, with arms trade at the core: On the one hand, some new regimes, such as that of Libya, will take a different political attitude than held in the past, which will affect their choice of arms suppliers. The exports of weapons from North Korea will, in these cases, be negatively affected. On the other hand, some transitional countries in the Middle East are suffering domestic political turbulence and civil war, which affords North Korea the opportunity to export weapons to militant organizations throughout the region. However, in addition to the UN resolution that strengthened the sanctions, North Korea's arms exports are handicapped due to the country's great distance from the Middle East. In short, the Arab Spring has posed a great challenge to North Korea's core interests. Pyongyang's previous efforts in the Middle East have been somewhat wasted. However, one cannot ignore the fact that the diplomatic, economic, and trade relationships between North Korea and five GCC countries led by Kuwait remain quite favorable. It also indicates that unless North Korea integrates into the current international system and promotes domestic reform, its ultimate long-term interests cannot be achieved solely through possession of nuclear weapons.

Notes

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