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North Korean Uranium Plant Stokes Proliferation Worries

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The seemingly new uranium enrichment facility in North Korea is increasing concerns that the Stalinist state could provide the equipment to recipients such as Iran, the *Wall Street Journal* reported on Monday (see [GSN](#), Nov. 23).



(Nov. 24) - South Korean firefighters extinguish a blaze ignited by the North Korean shelling yesterday of Yeonpyeong Island. The attack further escalated tensions between Seoul and Pyongyang, which also recently unveiled a previously unknown uranium enrichment plant (*Incheon Fire and Safety Management Department/Getty Images*).

In the last 30 years, North Korea and Iran have deepened their military ties and have cooperated in the creation of new missiles, conventional weapons and submarines. In recent years, multiple North Korean-origin weapon shipments have been seized en route to Iran.

It is believed that Pyongyang -- further impoverished by international sanctions and in need of money -- might try to support Iran's nuclear program as the Gulf state has apparently encountered technical hurdles in its enrichment of uranium (see related [GSN](#) story, today).

"We don't know exactly how coordinated it is, but it would be naive to assume that they're not cooperating on centrifuges," said U.S. House Intelligence Committee ranking member Peter Hoekstra (R-Mich.).

North Korean officials revealed this month to visiting experts a new high-tech uranium enrichment plant at the Yongbyon nuclear complex. Former Los Alamos National Laboratory chief Siegfried Hecker reported seeing "hundreds and hundreds" of centrifuges; he projected the facility had the potential to annually produce enough bomb-grade material to fuel one warhead.

Pyongyang is currently estimated to possess enough processed plutonium for about six bombs.

A high-ranking U.S. official said Washington is aware of the North's potential for nuclear proliferation, but asserted that heightened U.N. Security Council measures have greatly constrained the aspiring nuclear power's capacity to move prohibited goods to outside buyers.

Based on Hecker's information, independent nuclear specialists and U.S. spy officials believe the observed centrifuges are P-2 units and are more advanced than the centrifuges operated by Iran.

"One has to assume that Iran either has the P-2 centrifuge from North Korea, or could get it very easily," Washington-based proliferation specialist Simon Henderson said. He suggested the North might alternatively enrich uranium for Iran.

North Korea is suspected of providing technical support to Syria in secretly building a nuclear reactor before the facility was destroyed unfinished by a 2007 Israeli airstrike (see related [GSN](#) story, today).

While the International Atomic Energy Agency has documented Iranian attempts to develop a more efficient centrifuge, it has not identified any notable advancements in that initiative (see [GSN](#), Nov. 23).

"We don't see it," former IAEA safeguards head Olli Heinonen said this week in Washington of Iran's atomic work.

Officials from Washington and the U.N. nuclear watchdog contend Pyongyang acquired the blueprints for the P-2 centrifuge from the proliferation network once led by Pakistani nuclear scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan. Officials say it is not clear if North Korea has been able to put the designs to effective use.

Regime officials told Hecker their uranium site was only enriching uranium to 3.5 percent. Hecker said he could not independently substantiate that assertion. To be used in a bomb, uranium must be enriched to about 90 percent.

"They were given a brief glimpse at a capability," U.S. State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley said on Monday. "We're going to assess

exactly what we believe that capability represents" (Jay Solomon, *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 22).

The unexpected uranium announcement has raised new concerns over the United States' ability to gather good intelligence on the notoriously secretive state, Reuters reported.

U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who previously headed the CIA, admitted he did not have prior knowledge of the uranium facility, which was established inside a gutted former fuel production plant at Yongbyon. The complex is heavily monitored by U.S. intelligence satellites.

"From an intelligence perspective, it's sort of your worst nightmare," former Bush administration point man for North Korea Victor Cha said. "Their capabilities are beyond what (U.S. intelligence) thought they would be and it was a facility that was basically sitting right under our noses, but we weren't able to see it."

Efforts to spy on North Korea are hindered by the country's mountainous geography and an official culture that presses the public to report suspected spies. Uranium enrichment is also easier to hide than plutonium processing work, which requires a large infrastructure.

Still, some analysts see a validation of the United States' longstanding contention over the doubts of others that North Korea was illicitly building a uranium enrichment program.

Some experts believe Pyongyang will attempt to use its uranium program to extract additional concessions from the international community. U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Adm. Michael Mullen suggested he sees the uranium work as an effort by ailing ruler Kim Jong Il to build up the standing of his youngest son and presume successor with the North Korean military (Phil Stewart, *Reuters I*, Nov. 22).

It is not thought likely North Korea would have the technical know-how to develop the centrifuge facility on its own, Reuters reported on Monday.

"I just can't imagine they would have been able to do this on their own. This is pretty esoteric technology," said Shannon Kile of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

Pyongyang might have used China -- North Korea's historic ally and main economic benefactor -- as a midshipment location for acquiring prohibited enrichment machinery, the Washington-based Institute for Science and International Security said in an October report.

"Most believe that China views North Korea's nuclear weapons program as destabilizing to the region," the report stated. "Nonetheless, China is not applying enough resources to detect and stop North Korea's illicit nuclear trade."

Nothing suggests Beijing is "secretly approving or willfully ignoring exports" that would bolster the North's military nuclear effort, according to the report.

London-based proliferation specialist Mark Fitzpatrick said private Chinese citizens and companies are more likely than the government to have supported Pyongyang's equipment procurement efforts.

"Chinese middlemen, undoubtedly, are a major part of North Korea's procurement network," Fitzpatrick asserted (Fredrik Dahl, *Reuters II*, Nov. 22).

News of Pyongyang's continued nuclear progress is undermining hopes for U.S. President Obama's dream of worldwide nuclear disarmament and calling into question whether his administration has given the North Korean nuclear impasse enough attention, Reuters reported.

Other strategic issues such as a new nuclear arms control treaty with Russia and concerns over Iran's uranium enrichment seemed to dominate in the White House. However, the uranium enrichment plant announcement and yesterday's artillery barrage by the North on a South Korean island have brought the North Korean crisis to the top of the administration's agenda.

"It won't be enough to just hope for the best," Cato Institute analyst Christopher Preble said. "He's going to have to start prioritizing."

The U.S. president is anticipated to use a mixture of strong language and diplomacy to convince North Korea to cease further hostile actions while he attempts to build global support for increased pressure on regime leaders (Matt Spetalnick, *Reuters III*, Nov. 24).

The Obama administration announced today the aircraft carrier *USS George Washington* was sailing toward the Korean Peninsula to take part in joint naval maneuvers next week with the South aimed at deterring future North Korean aggression, Reuters reported.

"This exercise is defensive in nature," according to U.S. Forces Korea. "While planned well before yesterday's unprovoked artillery attack, it demonstrates the strength of the ROK (South Korea)-U.S. alliance and our commitment to regional stability through deterrence."

Washington and ally Japan demanded that Beijing do more to pressure North Korea into ceasing its belligerent behavior. While South Korea threatened a "massive retaliation" should it be attacked again, Seoul notably avoided specifying what form that response would take so as not to further escalate inter-Korean tensions.

Yesterday's shelling of Yeonpyeong Island might have been a ploy by Kim Jong Il to "get some attention and some economic goodies," said security studies academic Lin Chong-pin in Taiwan. Other experts backed the contention that it was meant as a boon to North Korean heir apparent Kim Jong Un (Kim/Lee, *Reuters IV*, Nov. 24).

In a television interview yesterday, Obama vowed the United States would defend longtime ally South Korea, though he declined to describe what that could mean militarily. He met earlier in the day with his senior national security advisers to review the crisis and was scheduled to speak by telephone with South Korean President Lee Myung-bak late yesterday, the Associated Press reported.

As North Korea possesses in premise nuclear weapons -- though it is doubted they could successfully be fielded in a strike -- as well as chemical munitions and a massive standing army, military action against the nation is highly unattractive (Anne Gearan, Associated Press/*Time*, Nov. 23).

The death toll from yesterday's shelling stands at four, with two South Korean civilians and two marines dead. Nearly 20 more were wounded in the attack, Agence France-Presse reported.

Seoul announced it would send more artillery to Yeonpyeong, a small island that houses a marine barracks and lies near a disputed sea border. Some 80 North Korean rounds struck the island and started a number of fires.

South Korea yesterday fired back at its neighbor. Some sources urged an even stronger response.

"A club is the only medicine for a mad dog," according to the *Dong-A Ilbo* newspaper, which called the attack a "war crime" (Simon Martin, Agence France-Presse I/[Google News](#), Nov. 24).

However, "because North Korea has less to lose, they are more apt to take steps that could lead to war," Fitzpatrick told AFP

"South Korea, although they have various means of responding, will be very careful and considerate in their response so as not to create an escalatory spiral in which North Korea has what's called 'escalation dominance,'" he said.

Seoul-based academic Yang Moo-jin took a similar view of the situation: "Despite the strong sound bites, what South Korea can do about this is quite limited. ... At best, it may irritate the North into further provocative acts to find an excuse to mount retaliatory attacks, but even that's a remote possibility" (Frank Zeller, Agence France-Presse II/[mysinchew.com](#), Nov. 24).

Several prominent U.S. congressional lawmakers yesterday demanded that Beijing do more to reign in North Korea, the *Los Angeles Times* reported.

House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Howard Berman (D-Calif) called on China to "immediately suspend its economic and energy assistance to show Pyongyang that its aggression has consequences" (Richter/Glionna, *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 24).