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Iran's Attack on Israel Offers Kim Jong Un a Test Case of Western Defenses

As Iran and North Korea draw closer, Pyongyang could learn from Tehran's attack on Israel

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North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un at an army training exercise in March. PHOTO: KCNA/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

SEOUL—The Iranian assault on Israel last month is likely to have drawn the keen interest of one world leader in particular: North Korea's Kim Jong Un.

The attack—and the overwhelming success of Israel and its allies, including the U.S., to repel it—offers Kim a real-world test case of a clash with Western defenses.

It adds to North Korea's understanding of how its munitions might perform should it attack Japan or South Korea, two countries whose defenses are—like Israel—increasingly integrated with the U.S. And it comes as North Korea and Iran draw closer, raising concerns in the West that the two could eventually cooperate militarily.

Even before Iran's attack on Israel, North Korea was watching the performance of its own munitions in Ukraine, where Russia is using North Korean arms against weapons the U.S. and its European allies have supplied to Kyiv.

To be sure, there are important differences. Iran's attack on Israel came with ample forewarning, with the weapons in flight for hours as they traveled more than 1,000 miles. Kim is unlikely to give such advance notice for a potential strike of South Korea or Japan—one that could arrive in mere minutes, security experts say.

Nuclear-equipped North Korea ranks as one of the world's most volatile military threats. In recent years, Pyongyang has carried out weapons tests with impunity, including an April 22 exercise that Kim oversaw and that state media claimed was the country's first simulated nuclear counterattack.



Drones or missiles in the skies over northern Israel during Iran's attack in April. The assault came with ample forewarning. PHOTO: ATEF SAFADI/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

The lessons Tehran gleaned from its own strike on Israel, as well as Israel's small-scale retaliation against Iran, are likely to prove instructive to Kim, as well as to China's Xi Jinping and Russia's Vladimir Putin, said Cho Sang-keun, a professor at South Korea's Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology, who researches military technology.

Russia, China, North Korea and Iran, which have drawn closer since the Ukraine war started and find common cause in their antagonism to the West, form something of an "authoritarian value chain," Cho added.

"With similar values, these authoritarian countries can trade know-how on weapons production or technology," Cho said.

Pyongyang-Tehran Ties



Russia's Minister of Natural Resources Alexander Kozlov, left, with Yun Jong Ho, center, the head of North Korea's external economic relations, in Moscow in March. PHOTO: ALEXANDER RYUMIN/TASS/ZUMA PRESS

North Korea recently sent a high-level delegation to Iran led by Yun Jong Ho, who heads the country's external economic relations and visited Russia in March. State media didn't offer details on the nature of the trip. But U.S. and South Korean officials have recently expressed concern about potential military cooperation between Iran and North Korea. The delegation, which returned to Pyongyang on Thursday, attended a trade show and met with state officials, an Iranian foreign ministry spokesman said earlier this week, dismissing speculation of bilateral military cooperation as biased and baseless.

Tehran and Pyongyang have a history of arms deals dating back to the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. Iran's Shahab-3 ballistic missiles appear to have been developed based on North Korea's Rodong designs, according to a 2019 assessment by the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency.

South Korea's spy agency said it would look for commonalities between Iran's drones and missiles used against Israel. There is little evidence that Pyongyang and Tehran have worked closely in recent years. But the potential exists for the two to join forces on military technology, said Tianran Xu, an analyst for the Open Nuclear Network, a research group based in Vienna.

Iran used a mix of ballistic and cruise missiles along with explosive drones to attack Israel in April, similar to Russian attacks on Ukraine. Much of the incoming fire was detected by early warning radars then intercepted by defense systems, along with help from the U.S., U.K. and other allies. Israel itself has

several layers of air-defense systems including the midrange David's Sling, designed to intercept missiles from around 62 miles to 124 miles away, and the long-range Arrow-2 and Arrow-3 systems that can shoot down missiles outside the earth's atmosphere.



A ballistic missile near Arad, Israel, following Iran's missile-and-drone attack on the country in April.
PHOTO: AMIR COHEN/REUTERS

But North Korea would pose a greater threat, in part because South Korea and Japan are much larger territories to defend, said Derek Grossman, a former Pentagon official who worked on Indo-Pacific security issues.

Given its overwhelming success, “the Israel case is really the exception to the rule,” said Grossman, who is now a senior defense analyst at Rand Corp., a think tank based in Santa Monica, Calif. “Shooting down a bullet with another bullet is extremely difficult to do.”

A takeaway for Kim might be to focus a first wave of missiles or drones on targeting South Korean, Japanese and U.S. missile defenses, said David Maxwell, a former U.S. Army Special Forces colonel who served in Japan and South Korea. Iran didn't appear to attempt this or was unsuccessful in doing so against Israel. By contrast, Israel's attack in retaliation for the Iranian barrage took out radar systems defending the main target, an Iranian air base.

“A major principle for any air attack is the suppression of enemy air defenses,” Maxwell said.

Vulnerabilities in Seoul and Tokyo

The lessons from the Iranian attack on Israel could be especially valuable to North Korea as both Pyongyang and its rivals build up their militaries to prepare for an eventual conflict.

Kim has pushed Pyongyang to develop hypersonic technology and short-range missiles that can confuse radars by changing direction midflight. More of North Korea's newest missiles rely on solid, rather than liquid fuel, allowing for a potentially faster deployment. Pyongyang is believed to have hidden weapons inside caves and mountains, and has showcased an ability to fire missiles from railroad cars.



A North Korean military test in early April. Missiles sent by Pyongyang could arrive in South Korea or Japan within minutes. PHOTO: KIM JAE-HWAN/SOPA IMAGES/ZUMA PRESS

In response, South Korea and Japan are spending tens of billions of dollars to upgrade their missile-defense systems. For the first time, the two countries and the U.S. started late last year to knit together their missile-radar systems, though integrated defenses remain a distant goal, military experts say.

Currently, South Korea possesses its homegrown Cheongung-II interceptor, complementing the U.S. Patriot missile interceptors and the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense system. South Korea plans to upgrade a deterrence system aimed at launching pre-emptive strikes and intercepting North Korean missiles by deploying more drones, spy satellites and homegrown medium- and long-range surface-to-air missile systems.

If Pyongyang were to launch a missile-and-drone attack in the region now, Washington and its allies may not be able to block even half of the barrage, according to Bang Jong-kwan, a former South Korean Army Major General.

“North Korea will watch closely how Iran’s tactic of putting pressure on air defenses could be applied on the Korean Peninsula,” he said.

Washington and Seoul have the ability to detect and intercept combined attacks by North Korea, though there are plans to upgrade defense systems, a Seoul military spokesman said in April.

Japan relies on both land-based Patriot-missile batteries and sea-based Aegis-equipped naval destroyers. Tokyo has also agreed to jointly develop with Washington interceptors that could take out hypersonic glide vehicles and ballistic missiles.

Japan has pledged a significant boost to its military budget—up nearly 50% this fiscal year from two years ago—as Tokyo looks to beef up defenses against regional threats such as North Korea. The expansion includes new systems, such as American Tomahawk missiles, which would give Japan the ability to target foreign military facilities if an attack appeared imminent.

Unlike Israel, South Korea and Japan don't have much experience responding to a barrage of missiles launched all at once, said Grant Newsham, a senior research fellow at the Japan Forum for Strategic Studies.

"I suspect both South Korea and Japan would have trouble responding to a no-notice North Korean missile attack," said Newsham, a retired U.S. Marine colonel.

—*Chieko Tsuneoka contributed to this article.*

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