

North Korea and the Incident in the Syrian Desert

- [Arms Control Today](#)

[Daryl G. Kimball](#)

Seven months after Israeli Air Force jets bombed a remote facility near al-Kibar in Syria, the United States released intelligence information April 24 suggesting that the site housed a nuclear reactor for a military program being built with assistance from North Korea. The assessment comes as Pyongyang and Washington have reached a tentative agreement on a declaration of North Korea's nuclear program, an issue which has stalled talks aimed at verifiably denuclearizing North Korea.

The charges of a Syrian-North Korean nuclear connection raise new and troubling questions about Pyongyang's past proliferation behavior and Damascus' intentions, which must be fully investigated by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Yet, it would be a grave mistake to allow it to derail the ongoing diplomatic process that has led to the dismantling of North Korea's nuclear weapons program and still provides important, if limited, leverage to halt further North Korean proliferation activities.

In the past year, the six-party negotiations have finally yielded significant results. In July 2007, the IAEA confirmed that North Korea shut down its Yongbyon reactor and plutonium-separation plant. Since October, U.S. officials have been on the ground with North Korean scientists to disable those facilities.

Now, under a tentative deal, North Korea has agreed to produce a declaration on its weapons program and acknowledge U.S. concerns about its proliferation activities and alleged uranium-enrichment program. Within weeks, U.S. experts may begin the process of verifying North Korea's declaration. In exchange, the Bush administration has pledged to seek to remove Pyongyang from the state sponsors of terrorism list and lift certain sanctions.

Some fear the Syria revelations make it appear as if Washington is rewarding bad behavior. Instead, the United States should remain focused on the priority task of taking out of circulation whatever nuclear bombs, bomb material, and uranium-enrichment items North Korea has and redirecting its scientists to nonlethal pursuits.

When confronted with a similar situation in 2002, the Bush team miscalculated. On the basis of preliminary intelligence, Washington accused North Korea of pursuing a uranium-enrichment program in violation of previous denuclearization commitments. To show his displeasure, President George W. Bush cut off delivery of heavy fuel oil shipments to North Korea, even though it was clear this might lead Pyongyang to kick out IAEA inspectors and restart plutonium production, which had been frozen eight years earlier.

Pyongyang's plutonium supply grew from one to two bombs worth to about 10. Then, after delays in the six-party talks and U.S. financial sanctions in 2006, Pyongyang engaged in a fit of missile tests and set off a nuclear test explosion. Only after a February 2007 agreement outlining an "action-for-action" series of steps to achieve denuclearization and the normalization of relations has the situation somewhat eased.

The six-party process is imperfect but invaluable because it also provides much needed leverage to snuff out North Korea's nuclear proliferation activities. In the wake of the Sept. 6, 2007, Israeli strike on Syria's facility, the United States demanded and got North Korea to reaffirm "its commitment not

North Korea and the Incident in the Syrian Desert

Published on Arms Control Association (<https://www.armscontrol.org>)

to transfer nuclear materials, technology, or know-how" in an October 2007 six-party statement.

As Bush said Sept. 20 when he was asked a question about reports of North Korean-Syrian ties, "[T]o the extent that they are proliferating, we expect them to stop that proliferation if they want the six-party talks to be successful." Now, U.S. leaders and allies need to back up this demand with tough diplomacy.

Indeed, any North Korean-Syrian nuclear or missile cooperation would be a violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1718 of October 2006, which requires states to cease trade of these items with North Korea. If Syria was in fact building a reactor, it would also have been a clear violation of its safeguards obligations because it failed to inform the IAEA of the project.

Following Israel's September raid, any such assistance would appear to have ended, along with the facility. Israel's action, however, will make it far more difficult for the IAEA to find any hard physical evidence of the existence of a reactor, which Syria denies. It also increases the risk of a possible future attack on Israel's secret military reactor at Dimona.

Israeli concern about Syrian nuclear activities is understandable. But rather than launching a risky and illegal airstrike, Israel or the United States should have used their information about the al-Kibar reactor to call on the IAEA or the Security Council to demand an inspection and the dismantlement of the facility, as well as other potential secret nuclear sites in Syria.

Policymakers should use the release of the intelligence on the Syrian facility to increase pressure on North Korea to accept measures that help verify it has ceased its proliferation activities, rather than use it as a pretext to delay or derail the process of verifiably denuclearizing North Korea.

[Click here to
comment on this
article.](#)

Source URL: https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2008_05/focus