North Korea's Chemical Weapons Programme

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The North Korean chemical weapons programme is shrouded in mystery. North Korea is capable of producing all of the traditional warfare agents.

Recently, concerns have been voiced about the North Korean biological and chemical weapons programme. Both the biological and chemical weapons programmes in North Korea were started in modern times. A study of these programmes can provide insights as regards to the imperatives for a state for initiating a biological and chemical weapons programme in modern times.

Very little information is available in the public domain when it comes to the North Korean biological and chemical weapons programme. The reasons were, first, the inaccessibility of North Korea in terms of its political and military contacts. Second, North Korea is a party to the global biological disarmament treaty, Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC); however, this treaty lacks verification mechanism. North Korea is not a member of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), which has a rigorous verification and inspection mechanism. Third, no information is available regarding the research centers, industry capacities in North Korea. Virtually, nothing is known about the North Korean biological weapon programme.

North Korea began to develop its chemical industry following the Korean War. According to a study by the South Korean Ministry of National Defence (MND), North Korea did not embark upon the pursuit of chemical weapons until after 1961, when Kim II-Sung issued his "Declaration of Chemicalisation". According to US sources, Pyongyang was able to produce large quantities of chemical agent by the late 1980s.

According to maps provided in several MND white papers, North Korea has eight chemical research institutions spread throughout the country. Some of these institutions are in proximity to three chemical production

facilities. These maps also indicate that North Korea possesses six chemical storage facilities concentrated near the border with South Korea.

Reports point out that North Korea is generally thought to be capable of producing all of the traditional chemical warfare agents (nerve, blister, blood and choking), although it may require imports of some specific precursors to produce nerve agents which are relatively more difficult to fabricate than the first generation blister, blood and choking agents. In January 2004, the BBC reported that North Korea had been testing chemical weapons on prison inmates. Defector Kwon Hyok told BBC News that he was the head of security at "prison camp 22" in Haengyong in 1993 and had witnessed chemical experiments carried out on political prisoners in gas chambers.

North Korea is capable of using a variety of delivery systems to disseminate chemical agents, including artillery, multiple rocket launchers, mortars, aerial bombs, and missiles, as well as Special Forces. The role of chemical weapons in North Korea's military planning is unknown, but it is believed that it may be based partially on old Soviet doctrine.

Chemical weapons are weapons for all eventualities, designed for immediate tactical advantage on the battlefield or long-term strategic gains. They can be employed to harass an enemy or to attack a fortified position. The US and South Korean forces operate on the assumption that North Korea would use chemical weapons against both military and civilian targets. The North Korean case brings out the fact that geographical proximity between two hostile countries renders the use of nuclear weapon neglible, at the same time makes the threat of use of chemical weapons more credible.

References:

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