

## North Korea and Prospects for Chemical Weapons Disarmament

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### Summary

North Korea's refusal to join the chemical weapons convention (CWC) and its illicit transfer of chemical warfare suits to Syria in 2009 has raised serious proliferation and international security concerns. Pyongyang is world's third largest possessor of chemical weapons and seeks to use these weapons in the event of war with United States and Republic of Korea. However, the prospects for progress on Pyongyang's chemical weapons disarmament appear unlikely in the near future. This is mainly due to the impasse over DPRK's refusal to roll back its nuclear and missile programmes in return for economic aid and normalisation of relations. Global system is prepared and adept to tackle any such outbreak.

Since its entry into force, the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) has made significant progress towards universality with as many as 192 states acceding to the Convention by the end of 2015.<sup>1</sup> After Syria's decision to join the Convention and destroy its chemical weapons, there has been growing calls for states not party to the Convention to follow suit. However, efforts to achieve universal membership in the CWC are likely to face some serious last mile challenges from the hold-out states given their unwillingness to renounce chemical weapons for a variety of politico-military objectives. Among the four non-member states including Israel, Egypt, South Sudan and North Korea, the authoritarian regime in Pyongyang under Kim Jong Un, perhaps presents the most vexing diplomatic challenge. Pyongyang's continued belligerent acts, and its failure to respect obligations from previous agreements has brought negotiations on its Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) programmes to a standstill.

Although, North Korea reportedly claims that it does not possess chemical weapons, it is widely believed that Pyongyang is world's third largest possessor of chemical weapons. North Korea's WMD activities have presented the greatest proliferation challenge due to illicit transfers of sensitive nuclear and missile technologies to countries such as Pakistan, Iran, Egypt, Libya and Syria. In 2009, the South Korean as well as Greek authorities' interdicted cargos included chemical warfare protective suits destined for Syria, which mounted concerns over North Korea's chemical-weapons related proliferation activities.<sup>2</sup> Currently, as many as twenty-six different entities including personnel from North Korea are

sanctioned under various U.S. laws and executive orders.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the repeated entreaties and communications from the Organization for Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), as well as the international community at large, the North Korean regime has remained defiant about joining the CWC.<sup>4</sup> Also, according to the 2014 report of the OPCW, North Korea did not participate in any bilateral consultations that the OPCW has held so far with states that are not party to the Convention.<sup>5</sup> Since the suspension of six-party talks in 2009, the North Korean regime has largely remained aloof to any diplomatic overtures for rolling back its WMD programmes in return for economic aid and normalisation of relations. On the contrary, the pressure tactics seem to have only emboldened the military regime to expand and pursue WMD programmes with greater resolve.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) chemical weapons programme is often dubbed as 'irrational' given the questionable military value attached to these weapons. Also the DPRK leadership's possible belief that chemical weapons are essential for its survival has been called into question, since the possession and use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime in Syria drew strong international reaction and only proved detrimental for the regime's survival.<sup>6</sup> Notwithstanding such arguments, for North Korea's war-planners chemical weapons are of great military significance in launching early offensive breaking enemy defences and to overcome US- RoK allied forces in a potential conflict.<sup>7</sup>

The chemical weapons have traditionally been at the core of North Korea's military strategy that seeks to offset perceived conventional asymmetry through early deployment of these weapons in the event

of war with its Southern neighbour. The origins of chemical weapons in North Korea's military doctrine can be traced back to mid-1960 after the end of Korean War when the regime faced serious existential threats mainly, from the United States and other regional rivals. Since then the DPRK has consistently expanded and intensified the building of its chemical weapons production facilities and stockpiles.

Although, there are varying estimates of North Korea's current capabilities, it is widely reported that the DPRK possesses about 2500-5000 tons of stockpiles including mustard, phosgene, blood agents, sarin, tabun and V-agents (persistent nerve agents).<sup>8</sup> According to reports, the DPRK is capable of producing most types of chemical weapons indigenously, and is estimated to be capable of producing up to 12,000 tons of Chemical Weapons at the maximum capacity.<sup>9</sup> To launch chemical strikes, North Korea has acquired a multitude of delivery platforms including both short and medium range missiles and artillery guns.

Furthermore, North Korea's acquisition of nuclear weapons in 2006 appears to have little impact on war-fighting plans of its army which continues to emphasise quick offensive strikes using chemical weapons and other conventional capabilities.<sup>10</sup> DPRK's tiny nuclear arsenal is incapable of providing the country any tangible deterrence against highly sophisticated US nuclear forces. The North Korean military, therefore, relies on deploying chemical weapons both for defensive as well as offensive purposes during conflicts with its neighbours. The nuclear weapons, nevertheless, provide the regime a much-needed strategic deterrent to ensure its survival.

Given such salience of nuclear weapons in DPRKs national objectives, it is near-impossible that the regime will agree into

giving up its nuclear arsenal. The DPRK's insistence that it be recognized as a nuclear-armed state has presented a serious challenge to the international community to pursue a de-nuclearisation dialogue with Pyongyang any further. At present, no policy consensus seems to be emerging on reviving talks with the DPRK. As diplomacy remains stalled and North Korea continuing to expand its military capabilities, deterring use of WMDs through threats of unacceptable retaliation remains the preferred policy of the United States and DPRK's regional rivals. Amidst this diplomatic impasse, the prospects for progress on chemical weapons disarmament, too, are unlikely in the near future.

Mitigating threats from DPRKs chemical arsenal, however, would require renewed diplomatic efforts to seek rapprochement with the estranged regime in Pyongyang. It is only through dialogue and realistic give-and-takes that, the international community can seek a meaningful closure to DRPK's chemical weapons programme. Negotiations with North Korea understandably, will require a sustained diplomatic effort over a period of time. The international community must, nevertheless, be willing to engage with Kim Jong Un regime in the interest of a world free of chemical weapons and warfare.

## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> See, Organization for Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), at : <https://www.opcw.org/about-opcw/>, accessed on May 23, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Security Council - S/2013/337, "Note by the President of the Security Council", June 11, 2013, at: [http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_2013\\_337.pdf](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2013_337.pdf), accessed on May 23, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Non-proliferation Sanctions", May 3, 2016, at: <http://www.state.gov/t/isn/226423.htm>, accessed on May 27, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> In March 2014, the Director-General of OPCW addressed letters to the Foreign Ministers of the six non member states and urged their accession to the Convention at the earliest. See, Report of the OPCW on the Implementation of the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling and Use of Chemical Weapons and on their Destruction in 2014, at: [https://www.opcw.org/fileadmin/OPCW/CSP/C-20/en/c2004\\_e\\_.pdf](https://www.opcw.org/fileadmin/OPCW/CSP/C-20/en/c2004_e_.pdf), accessed on May 23, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pp.29 at: [https://www.opcw.org/fileadmin/OPCW/CSP/C-20/en/c2004\\_e\\_.pdf](https://www.opcw.org/fileadmin/OPCW/CSP/C-20/en/c2004_e_.pdf), accessed on May 23, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Antoine Bondaz (2013), "Why North Korea Should Dismantle Its Chemical Weapons Arsenal", Carnegie *Tsinghua*, November 27, 2013, at: <http://carnegietsinghua.org/publications/?fa=53712>, accessed on May 23, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Federation of American Scientists, "Doctrine – North Korea", at: <http://fas.org/nuke/guide/dprk/doctrine/>, accessed on May 26, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> See, Chemical Weapons – North Korea, Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI), at: <http://www.nti.org/learn/countries/north-korea/chemical/>, accessed on May 23, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph S. Bermudez Jr. (2013), "North Korea's Chemical Warfare Capabilities", *38 North*, October 10, 2013, at: <http://38north.org/2013/10/jbermudez101013/>, accessed on May 23, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid 7.