

North Korea's Tunnels, Guns and Kimchi

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After an exchange of secret visits, North Korean armaments began to arrive in Burma. The curious relationship between Burma and North Korea was first disclosed in the Hong Kong-based weekly Far Eastern Economic Review on July 10, 2003. A group of 15 to-20 North Korean technicians were then seen at a government guesthouse near the old capital Rangoon. The report was met with skepticism, especially because of the 1983 Rangoon bombings. But, when North Korean-made field artillery pieces were seen in Burma in the early 2000s, it became clear that North Korea had found a new ally – several years before diplomatic relations between the two countries were restored in April 2007.

"While based on a 1950s Russian design, these weapons [the field guns] were battle-tested and reliable," Australian Burma scholar Andrew Selth stated in a 2004 working paper for the Australian National University. *"They significantly increased Burma's long-range artillery capabilities, which were then very weak."*

Since then, Burma has also taken delivery of North Korean truck-mounted, multiple rocket launchers and possibly also surface-to-air missiles for its Chinese-supplied naval vessels.

Then came the tunneling experts. Most of Pyongyang's own defense industries, including its chemical and biological-weapons programs, and many other military as well as government installations are underground. This includes known factories at Ganggye and Sakchu, where thousands of technicians and workers labor in a maze of tunnels dug under mountains. The export of such know-how to Burma was first documented in June 2006, when intelligence agencies intercepted a message from Naypyidaw confirming the arrival of a group of North Korean tunneling experts at the site.

Today, three years later, the dates on the photos published today confirm the accuracy of this report. By now, the tunnels and underground installations should be completed, as would those near Taunggyi. This well-hidden complex ensures there is no danger of irate civilians storming government buildings, as they did during the massive pro-democracy uprising in August-September 1988. Sources say that the internationally isolated military junta may also consider these deep bunkers as their last repair in case of air strikes of the kind that the Taliban in Afghanistan or Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq endured.

It is not clear how much, or what, Burma has paid for the assistance provided by the North Korean experts, but it could be food – or gold, which is found in riverbeds in northern Burma. Or some other mineral.

Burma, of course, is not the only foreign tunneling venture by North Korea. In southern Lebanon following the 2006 war, Israel's Defense Forces and the United Nations found several of the underground complexes, which by then had been abandoned by Hezbollah militants. By coincidence or not, these tunnels and underground rooms – some big enough for meetings to be held there – are strikingly similar to those the South Koreans have unearthed under the Demilitarized Zone that separates South from North Korea.

Under small, manhole cover-sized entrances hidden under grass and bushes were steel-lined shafts

with ladders leading down to big rooms with electricity, ventilation, bathrooms with showers and drainage systems. Some of the tunnels are 40 meters deep and located only 100 meters from the Israeli border. North Korea's possible involvement in digging these tunnels is however, difficult to ascertain.

According to Israeli investigative journalist Ronen Bergman, a senior officer in the Iranian Revolutionary Guards who had defected to the West revealed that, "thanks to the presence of hundreds of Iranian engineers and technicians, and experts from North Korea who were brought in by Iranian diplomats...Hezbollah succeeded in building a 25-kilometer subterranean strip in South Lebanon."

Beirut sources suggest that it is more likely that Hezbollah has used North Korean designs and blueprints given to them by their Syrian or Iranian allies - both of whom are close to the North Koreans. (Both Iran and Syria have acquired missile technology from North Korea, and what was believed to be a secret nuclear reactor in Syria built with North Korean help was destroyed by the Israeli air force in September 2007.) Either way, North Korean expertise in tunneling has become a valuable commodity for export. And Pyongyang is flexible about the method of payment as long as it helps the international pariah regime.

P.S.

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