

North Korea could set off global nuclear arms race, CIA says



Mike Pompeo said that once North Korea achieves the ability to mass-produce nuclear weapons — estimated at sometime in the near future — it could spur other countries to want the same capability. | Win McNamee/Getty Images

Pompeo says the U.S. is working overtime to prevent Pyongyang from selling weapons and transferring missile technology.

CIA Director Mike Pompeo said Tuesday that the U.S. intelligence community was concerned that a cash-starved and expansionist North Korea could sell its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile technology to other countries, including Iran, and that failure to uncover such transfers could trigger a global nuclear arms race.

Pompeo's comments came in response to a question about whether Tehran could use its existing cooperation agreements with North Korea to clandestinely advance its own nuclear weapons program without being discovered by the United States or the international enforcers of the 2016 six-party Iran nuclear deal. One option: sending its scientists to Pyongyang to obtain advanced training, or even warhead designs.

"It's a real risk," Pompeo said during an appearance at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, noting that it was his one-year anniversary on the job. "We think we have a pretty good understanding of what's taking place there today. Having said that, I am the first person to admit that intelligence organizations can miss important information."

"These are terribly difficult problems in incredibly tight spaces, and when you are moving information, it is sometimes difficult to detect that that information has moved," Pompeo said of such technology transfers. "So if someone asks me as the senior intelligence leader of the CIA, can you guarantee this [would be uncovered], I would say absolutely not."

Pompeo said the CIA and other U.S. intelligence agencies were working overtime to prevent that. They are also scrambling to provide President Donald Trump with options to contain North Korea's broader nuclear ambitions, he said, and in a way that doesn't escalate the already intensifying confrontation into open warfare.

One of his biggest concerns, Pompeo said, is that once North Korea achieves the ability to mass-produce nuclear weapons — estimated at sometime in the near future — it could spur other countries that have resisted such efforts to want the same capability.

"One of the risks of allowing the North Korean regime to continue to have this nuclear capability is this proliferation risk, that this technology they have developed and then figured out how to manufacture ... would then be proliferated elsewhere in the world," Pompeo said. "And, secondarily, it doesn't take too much imagination to understand that if they continue to have that nuclear weapons system, and if the Iranians make advances in theirs, that many other countries around the world will decide me too, that I want to have one of those things that that guy has."

Pompeo said he couldn't identify countries that U.S. officials believe might be susceptible to wanting to join the nuclear club. "But you can go through a list" of likely suspects, he said.

Several former U.S. officials familiar with North Korea's nuclear weapons program said Pompeo's acknowledgment of the proliferation threat — and the timing of it — was significant.

"They need to raise money wherever they can, and if they are perceived as having

a valuable and reliable nuclear weapons technology or ballistic missile technology or cybertechnology, there is going to be a market for that, especially with the increase in global instability,” said one recently departed senior U.S. intelligence official.

That global instability “opens up seams” of opportunity for North Korea and other rogue nations to engage in illicit weapons transfers, especially given the lack of effective international efforts to counter them, the former official said. “I would agree that there is real opportunity now for North Korea to put itself on the market.”

Vann Van Diepen, who spent 25 years as a top U.S. counterproliferation official, said the illicit transfer of nuclear weapons technology has been a grave global security threat for decades, especially since the Pakistani metallurgist Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan was caught selling Pakistan’s uranium enrichment capability to North Korea, Iran and Libya in 2003.

North Korea has been actively selling sophisticated military technology, including ballistic missile know-how, since long before that. Moreover, in 2007, the Israeli military bombed a suspected North Korean nuclear reactor in Syria that the United States believed would produce plutonium for nuclear weapons.

Given that North Korea’s economy has been crippled by international sanctions, “there is certainly the possibility that they could decide to sell nuclear materials, or nuclear weapons for money,” said Van Diepen, who worked at the State Department and in intelligence community. He retired in 2016 after seven years as principal deputy assistant secretary of state for international security and nonproliferation.

Van Diepen said Pompeo’s remarks were significant for several reasons. The CIA director, he said, seemed to be suggesting that a nuclear arms race could be triggered by the actual sale or transfer of weapons technology, or simply by other countries suddenly feeling threatened as never before by Pyongyang’s recent nuclear provocations, or future ones from Iran.

“In a way, he’s provided for both. The first argument is that if they get more of it, that they’ll be prepared to sell it,” Van Diepen said of North Korea’s nuclear weapons arsenal. “He also seems to be saying that if they grow their own program and potentially sell to others, it could lead others to want one. That’s

what is known as a proliferation cascade.”

The most obvious countries to want nuclear weapons under such circumstances, Van Diepen and others said, would be Japan, South Korea and other neighbors of North Korea, as well as Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries threatened by Iran.

In his remarks, the CIA director forcefully defended the U.S. intelligence community against recent accusations that it missed North Korea’s rapid advancement in its development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles capable of delivering them onto U.S. targets.

But Pompeo’s acknowledgement that U.S. spies could easily miss the transfer of nuclear weapons technology from North Korea to other nations was both noteworthy and accurate, according to Van Diepen.

“A discreet transaction would be extremely hard to detect,” Van Diepen said. “Selling one nuclear weapon, it could easily be concealed in a freight container. And the technology could fit on a thumb drive.”

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