Last month was the fifth anniversary of North Korea's assassination of Kim Jong-nam using VX, a deadly nerve agent. On 13 February 2017, the half brother of Chairman Kim Jong-un was attacked by North Korean proxies in the Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Malaysia. Experts say that the deployment of a horrific weapon outside of North Korea underlines the continuing threat posed by Pyongyang's chemical weapons.

The assassination of Kim Jong-nam demonstrates how Pyongyang is willing to use chemical weapons towards protecting the Kim family. Kim Jong-nam had been living in exile in Macau for several years, but his comments to foreign journalists critical of the regime made him a target for elimination by his half-brother. Using chemical weapons to
silence critics of the regime is what sets North Korea apart, according to Dr. Jieun Baek, a fellow at the Belfer Center at Harvard University. “Many nations have chemical weapons as part of their military arsenal,” she said. “What makes [North Korea] unique is their flagrant misuse of it in non-wartime.”

But Pyongyang using chemical weapons during a war is something that experts say is a very real possibility. “Their operational plan is based on breaking through the defensive belts of the ROK military north and east of Seoul,” says Col. David Maxwell, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. “They’ll use chemical weapons with all their other munitions to be able to do that.” One military objective would be to use chemical weapons to shape the movement of enemy personnel. “They know that we’re not likely to use an area that’s contaminated,” said Col. Maxwell. “They can use that to deny us areas that they want us to stay out of [and] they may exploit that.”

A second North Korean objective would be to destroy enemy military infrastructure. This would include bases in South Korea that support the alliance’s capabilities in the air. “What [the North Koreans] want to do is use chemical weapons to prevent our ability to refuel and rearm aircraft, to maintain them in what we call ‘sortie generation,’” said Col. Maxwell. “They want to use chemical weapons to stop our operations, or at least degrade them, because they don’t have very good air defense capabilities.”

South Korean ports would also be targets for a North Korean chemical weapons attack. “We believe their campaign plan calls for a rapid occupation before South Korea can mobilize all its forces, and before the U.S. can reinforce the Peninsula,” says Col. Maxwell. He explained that attacking ports in Pohang, Pusan, and Pyeongtaek would be necessary to ensure the Americans and South Koreans could not quickly mobilize troops to push back a North Korean advance, just as during the Korean War. “Once the chemical weapons have attacked the port, unless the military comes in and decontaminates them, I would think it would stop port activities,” said Col. Maxwell.

As seen in Kuala Lumpur, North Korean chemical weapons also have a terror component as well. One analysis previously published by the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists projected up to 25% of the population of Seoul would be killed if the North launched a “sea of sarin” attack using 240 pounds of the gas. Taking shelter from gaseous chemical weapons or washing off liquid contaminants are doable actions that would save lives in
While most popular attention is focused on North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missiles, American and South Korean officials have indicated the chemical weapons program is also a threat. In Congressional testimony last year, Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Homeland Defense and Global Security Jennifer Walsh identified Beijing, Moscow, Tehran, and Pyongyang as significant threats because of their weapons of mass destruction. "North Korea's continued pursuit of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons jeopardizes international stability and weakens the global nonproliferation regime," she said. According to the 2018 Defense White Paper by the ROK Ministry of National Defense, the North has an estimated stockpile of 2,500 to 5,000 tons of chemical weapons, manufactured under a program that began in the 1980s. In a 2017 report by 38 North, there are 18 locations associated with the manufacture of blood, tear, blister, asphyxiant, nerve, and emetic agents.

Considering these serious implications of North Korea's chemical weapons, it is a bit ironic that it will lead the United Nations Conference on Disarmament. The Korea JoongAng Daily reported previously that the body announced North Korea would assume the Conference's leadership from May 30 until June 24 this year. Although the position is ceremonial, rotating among the 65 members of the Conference, experts say the venue has the potential to address North Korea's chemical weapons.

Among the arms control treaties the body has helped developed is the Chemical Weapons Convention, which entered into force in April 1997 and counts the U.S. and South Korea among its signatories. "Why not try to maximize our own interests by using this forum, with North Korea as the chair, to address North Korea's chemical weapons?" asked Dr. Sung-yoon Lee, from Tufts University. Experts like Dr. Siegfried Hecker have previously suggested that these kinds of negotiations could be "confidence-building" measures that could lead to movement on the North's nuclear weapons.

Given North Korea's diplomatic track record, it is hard to be optimistic about such negotiations. "I think Pyongyang's negotiating behavior throughout history, and most
recently the summitry with the Trump and Moon administrations, indicate the margin for Pyongyang’s flexibility is quite narrow,” said Soo Kim, a policy analyst at the RAND Corporation and professor at American University. “It may simply be another opportunity for the regime to toy with the policy ambitions and vulnerabilities for his own narcissistic satisfaction.”

And even if North Korea were to join the Chemical Weapons Convention, North Korea has not always fulfilled its obligations. Dr. Lee points out that it was “brazen” in developing nuclear weapons despite its membership in the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. “But getting more legally bound to these international norms is not a bad idea,” he said. North Korea has tried to address challenges faced by disabled people after signing the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It is not impossible for the U.S. and other like-minded states to “use this farcical opportunity to ensnare North Korea into at least signing onto the chemical weapons ban treaty,” said Dr. Lee.

Going forward, experts say that chemical weapons remain just one aspect of the threat posed by North Korea. Professor Kim warns against ranking Pyongyang’s myriad capabilities in terms of advancing its goals. “The forest is clearly important in understanding North Korea,” she said, “but the composition of the forest – the types of trees and their unique characteristics – are just as important in learning how to deal with the DPRK.” Given the wide range of Pyongyang’s toolkit, policymakers in Seoul and Washington should “not underestimate North Korea’s creativity in using both conventional and non-conventional weapons in pursuit of their ultimate goal, which is to keep power in the Kim family,” adds Dr. Baek.

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