

China's Violation of Sanctions Vis-à-Vis North Korea

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Abstract

China, at sea and at land crossings, is facilitating commerce with North Korea that clearly violates U.N. Security Council sanctions. Beijing is also interfering in sanctions-enforcement activity in its peripheral seas. Hong Kong, due to Beijing's policies, has become a major hub of illicit activities. China had done its best to disrupt the work of the U.N.'s Panel of Experts. American sanctions policy has been ineffective, in large part because Washington policymakers do not understand China's top-down communist system. China, despite what many think, is not deeply concerned about the growing Russia-North Korea relationship. Beijing may have even masterminded the North's recent sales of weapons to Russia for use in Ukraine and its sending of soldiers to the war there.

Keywords: U.N. Security Council, U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea, Pacific Security Maritime Exchange, East China Sea, Yellow Sea, Yalu River, Dandong, Kim Jong Un, U.N. Panel of Experts, Workers' Party of Korea, Vladimir Putin, U.S. Treasury Department, USA PATRIOT Act, China Aerospace Science and Industry Corp., Wuhan Sanjiang Import and Export Co.

Introduction

On March 30, 2024, South Korean authorities detained the *DE YI*, an unflagged vessel carrying 4,500 tons of anthracite coal from North Korea.

The 3,000-ton freighter started its voyage on March 18 from the Chinese port of Shidao and soon turned off its automatic identification system, presumably to conceal its activities. Before taking on the coal, *DE YI* carried machinery and electronic products that were offloaded on the water, near the North Korean port of Nampho, to the *Tok Song*, a North Korean flagged ship.¹ Its next stop was to be Russia's Vladivostok,² but the South Korean government held *DE YI* in the port of Busan.

Seoul sanctioned the *Tok Song* and Hong Kong's HK Yilin Shipping Co., the owner of *DE YI*, for "playing a pivotal role in actions violating U.N. Security Council resolutions."³ "The government will continue to take strong and consistent legal measures against ships and shipping

companies involved in the transportation of prohibited items and violation activities as per the U.N. Security Council sanctions,” South Korea’s foreign ministry stated.⁴

U.N. Security Council Resolution 2375 prohibits “engaging in ship-to-ship transfers to or from DPRK-flagged vessels of any goods or items that are being supplied, sold, or transferred to or from the DPRK.”⁵ Resolution 2371 prohibits the sale, supply, or transfer of the North’s coal. Resolution 2397 prohibits North Korea from exporting electrical equipment and machinery and member states from selling to the North industrial machinery. The North Korean regime continually violates these sanctions.⁶

Inexplicably, South Korea released the Chinese national captain of the *DE Yi* and most of the crew.⁷ Unfortunately, this gesture—that’s the most generous explanation of the South’s action—did not entice China into either responsible behavior or compliance with U.N. sanctions. On June 20, South Korean authorities seized a 2,900-ton vessel on suspicion of violating Security Council Resolution 2397. The foreign-flagged steamer was in fact carrying coal and iron ore from Russia to China, with a presumed prohibited stop in North Korean waters.⁸

These two incidents were by no means isolated. As the last report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1874 (2009) shows, illicit ship-to-ship transfers in both 2022 and 2023 have been concentrated along, among other locations, China’s coastline.⁹ Noted American sanctions expert Joshua Stanton, speaking to *Barron’s*, pointed out in July 2024 that China is a “safe haven” for North Korea’s prohibited activities.¹⁰

China is a safe haven in part because the Chinese military protects ship-to-ship transfers by interfering with sanctions enforcers. For instance, two Chinese fighter jets harassed Dutch frigate HNLMS *Tromp*, circling it several times in international airspace in the East China Sea on June 7, 2024. At the same time, two Chinese warplanes and a helicopter “approached” *Tromp*’s helicopter. “This created a potentially unsafe situation,” the Dutch Defense Ministry stated.¹¹

At the time, the frigate was part of an operation, conducted by PSMX, the Pacific Security Maritime Exchange, to monitor violations of sanctions on North Korea.

Beijing’s statements complained about the presence of the Dutch ship, for instance calling the actions of *Tromp* “heinous.”¹²

China has continued to participate in the sanctioned coal and iron ore trade in 2025, as noted in a report from the U.K.-based Open Source Centre.¹³

Pattern of Chinese Intercepts

The intercept of *Tromp* is part of a disturbing pattern. In May 2024, a Chinese fighter fired flares in front of an Australian helicopter that had lifted off from HMAS *Hobart*, which was monitoring sanctions violations in the Yellow Sea. Australia's defense minister charged that the Chinese engaged in "an unsafe maneuver which posed a risk to the aircraft and personnel."¹⁴

In the preceding October, a Chinese jet unsafely intercepted a Royal Canadian Air Force plane conducting a North Korea sanctions patrol—looking for violations of the oil rules—over the East China Sea.¹⁵ Australia and Canada are PSMX partners.

China's dangerous intercepts of sanctions enforcement efforts is nothing new; they have been occurring in earnest since 2018.¹⁶ "Through its actions," writes Wu Yang of the Washington, D.C.-based Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, "China abets North Korea's illicit maritime sanctions evasion by disrupting international sanctions enforcement initiatives."¹⁷

Beijing cannot actually admit that it is trying to prevent enforcement of U.N. rules, so its statements attempt to change the subject, routinely referring to the presence of foreign vessels and aircraft as threats to Chinese security. For instance, China's defense ministry called the flight of the *Tromp*'s helicopter "an act of infringement and provocation." The Netherlands, the ministry charged, was "flaunting military strength in the territorial sea and airspace of China."¹⁸ The Communist Party's *Global Times* said the Dutch activities were "against China" and were "instigated by the U.S."¹⁹

On the rare occasion that China's statements refer to enforcement measures, the Chinese comments are predictable and conclusory. For example, Beijing labeled as "false" the Dutch statement that it was "implementing a U.N. mission."²⁰

Although China is a party to the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea, Beijing does not accept the treaty's rules about activity in its exclusive economic zone or EEZ, the zone of water 12 to 200 nautical miles from the country's shore line, or in the airspace above that zone. This expansive—unsupportable—view of China's rights in its EEZ is

consistent with its notion that it is not bound by any laws whatsoever because Chinese leaders have the Mandate of Heaven to rule *tianxia*, or “all under Heaven.”

As noted, the Chinese defense ministry characterized international water and airspace as China’s sovereign territory. There is no justification for such an assertion other than Beijing’s view that it is the world’s sole legitimate ruler.

Chinese Smuggling Over Land Routes

The flow of sanctioned items between China and North Korea occurs over land as well as at sea.

Over land, the picture at first glance appears confused. At some China-North Korea border crossings, Chinese Customs inspection was especially thorough in 2024. In various crossings in China’s Jilin province, traders were required to take mattress springs and zippers out of their goods before exporting them to the North’s Ryanggang province, to meet a strict official reading of the sanctions.²¹ In Liaoning province’s Dandong, across the Yalu River from the North’s Sinuiju and the most well-known of the gateways, Chinese inspections also became rigorous.²²

As a result of tightened inspections at various entry points, the overland trade shifted from Liaoning to some portions of Jilin where Customs inspectors were willing to look the other way.²³ Moreover, traders resorted to old fashioned smuggling.

It does not matter that some border crossings were effectively closed to illicit traffic because other crossings remained wide open. Sanctions-busting trade, consequently, could continue. Beijing was not in the dark. For one thing, Xi Jinping has built a near-total surveillance state. Moreover, the Communist Party runs a top-down system that demands absolute obedience of officials. In such a system, the regime must know what is happening at its most sensitive borders.

In short, China’s Communist Party either is aware of the illicit trade or does not want to know about it. The regime, therefore, approves of such trade. China’s 870-mile border with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea is porous because both states want it to be when it suits their purposes.

The final report of the Panel of Experts lists illicit activity conducted throughout the People’s Republic of China. China, violating sanctions, allowed North Korean nationals to work on its soil in restaurant operations;²⁴ Chinyong Information Technology Cooperation Co.

maintained bank accounts in China used to launder illicit revenue;²⁵ North Korea's 53 Department, subordinate to the Ministry of the People's Armed Forces, maintained bank accounts in China;²⁶ Yantai Jinmin Industry and Trade Co., Zhang Jiashan, and Li Zhenyu served as conduits for prohibited money transfers;²⁷ the sanctioned Korean National Insurance Co. transferred money through China's largest bank, the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, for prohibited transactions;²⁸ Nam Chol Ung, based in Dalian, forged trade documents to sell oil to North Korea;²⁹ Chinese companies worked with Kim Song Ho, a DPRK official, on prohibited transactions, including operating restaurants;³⁰ and North Korean national Choe Song Ryong was working with Chinese companies on restaurants and other prohibited activities.³¹

Beijing has denied knowledge of wrongdoing and culpability in these cases, but none of these activities could have been conducted in China's surveillance state without the approval of senior leaders of the Communist Party.

Unfortunately for Beijing, North Korean propaganda likes to show off Chinese equipment. There were over a dozen Chinese computer numerically controlled machines in North Korea's newest factory, which makes "ultramodern precision munitions," shown in a photo taken during an inspection trip by Kim Jong Un. The machines bear labels from various Chinese brands, including Jianke.³² The importation of these machines constituted violations of Security Council Resolution 2397.

Hong Kong

There is a gaping hole in the international sanctions regime: China's Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong. Hong Kong is the "hub" of illicit activities while other countries are the "spokes," writes Samuel Bickett in "Beneath the Harbor: Hong Kong's Leading Role in Sanctions Evasion," a July 2024 report from the Committee for Freedom in Hong Kong Foundation.³³

The territory, as a British colony, had a history of sanctions-evading trade, serving for instance as a center for activity supporting North Korea during the Korean War.

America and other countries have treated the city more leniently than the rest of the People's Republic, especially because Beijing, which took back Hong Kong at the "handover" on July 1, 1997, promised a "high degree of autonomy" under its "one country, two systems" formula. As a

result of this indulgent treatment, Beijing saw an opportunity to make the territory a center for sanctions evasion.

“For North Korea, Hong Kong acts as a hub for illicit shipping operations by which oil and natural resources are traded to and from North Korea in violation of U.N. sanctions and caps,” writes Bickett. “Often, these transactions are carried out via ship-to-ship transfers at sea using vessels owned by Hong Kong companies. Many of these vessels, like the *New Konk*, regularly use laundered vessel identities and deactivate their transponders to mask their activities.”³⁴ As mentioned, South Korea sanctioned Hong Kong’s HK Yilin Shipping Co., the owner of the sanctions-busting *DE YI*.

Sanctions evaders also employ Hong Kong shell companies and banks to launder proceeds³⁵ and transfer technology to, among others, North Korea.

There’s no mystery why trade between Hong Kong and North Korea “has increased significantly in recent years.” “For years,” Bickell states, “the government has openly flouted its legal obligation to enforce the U.N.’s North Korea sanctions against evaders within its borders.”³⁶ This brazen attitude has become especially noticeable under current Hong Kong Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu.³⁷

Beijing effectively began the direct administration of Hong Kong with the adoption of the National Security Law in June 2020. Sanctions evasion there, consequently, is the result of policies directed from Beijing and accepted by Lee.

China’s Backing of North Korea

China, with its illicit activity, is not only sending a message to those countries monitoring sanctions violations. “It is also signaling to North Korea that its actions will be protected from scrutiny,” Yang, the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea analyst, writes about China.³⁸

The People’s Republic of China has effectively ended the U.N.’s sanctions regime on the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. Beijing at first helped the North by blocking the imposition of sanctions and then, when that effort became untenable, delayed and watered sanctions down. Then, Chinese diplomats worked with Russia’s to frustrate the operation of the Panel of Experts, the group charged with investigating sanctions violations, by either not responding to inquiries of that body or providing

obviously false replies. Chinese panel members obstructed the work of the Panel by blocking the publication of assessments they did not like.³⁹

True, Beijing did not veto the extension of the mandate of the panel in March 2024, but it did not have to. Its partner in crime, Russia, did that. With Russia, it sought to sunset—terminate—U.N. sanctions on the DPRK altogether.⁴⁰

In short, China has been a major factor in the breakdown, around the turn of the decade, of an ostensible consensus in the Security Council to enforce North Korea sanctions.

Moreover, while the U.S., South Korea, and Japan have recently sought to create alternatives to the Panel of Experts to monitor sanctions violations,⁴¹ China has expressed opposition to such proposals.⁴² Why would China be opposed to sanctions enforcement by others? Clearly, Beijing does not want any party monitoring its violations, which are, as documented here, substantial and continuous.

Yet why is China violating sanctions in the first place? For that, it's important to examine the nature of relations—the deep bond—between Beijing and Pyongyang.

The tie-up between the Chinese and Korean people's republics is perhaps the world's oddest bilateral relationship. Beijing, regardless of the circumstances of the moment, has supported the Kim family regime through its three generations. The Chinese have always treated the North as a protectorate, as theirs.

The attitude is, in fact, centuries-old. The two states are locked in a permanent embrace of location. The boundary separating them is arbitrary, drawn after conquest, and has a single ethnic group, Koreans, living on both sides.

From the northern side of this arbitrary line, the Chinese, for hundreds of years, viewed Koreans as inferiors, vassals to their grander kingdom. China's leaders, although they do not say so publicly, see the Korean peninsula as a part of their natural sphere of influence, certainly something as theirs to control.

That imperious attitude, of course, continued after the arbitrary division of Korea at the end of the Second World War. "As the Chinese see it, the Chinese Communist Party dispatched Kim Il Sung, the grandfather of the current strongman, from China to assume control of the Chinese vassal state that is today's North Korea," Charles Burton of the Sinopsis think tank in Prague told me. "Kim Jong Un's Workers' Party of

Korea is still considered by China to be a junior subsidiary of the senior Communist Party regime in Beijing.”⁴³

So China, decade in and decade out, protects its possession. Mao Zedong thought North Korea was so important that he abandoned plans to invade Taiwan and instead sent troops to fight Americans during the Korean War. Then, the Chinese and North Korean states were close, in part because Mao and Kim Il Sung shared much in common, including membership in the Communist Party of China.

The pair even formalized their partnership by inking the PRC-DPRK 1961 Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance, which has a mutual-defense clause. The pact was extended in 2021 for 20 years.⁴⁴ Until June 2024, when Pyongyang signed a comprehensive treaty with Moscow, China and North Korea were each other’s only military ally.

Subsequent leaders on both sides of the border have never been as close as Mao and the first North Korean supremo, and so the two regimes diverged over time. They diverged so far that two decades ago Beijing, either unnerved by North Korea’s nuclear weapons programs or hoping to appease the U.S., began to favor sanctions on the North. Beijing did not block the U.N. from first imposing, in October 2006, sanctions on North Korea after the country’s first known detonation of an atomic device.

Then, China was willing, for whatever reason, to work with the international community. That is not to say that Chinese leaders were ready to abandon the North. It appears Beijing thought that its central role in the Six-Party Talks allowed it to protect the Kim regime by preventing effective action against Pyongyang. In any event, China subverted, from the inside, the international community’s denuclearization efforts.

At this time, however, China apparently feels it no longer needs to hide its actions as Xi Jinping evidently believes now is the moment for his regime to assert itself. “Change is coming that hasn’t happened in 100 years,” the Chinese leader told Vladimir Putin after their 40th in-person chat, in Moscow on March 22, 2023. “And we are driving this change together.”⁴⁵

And Xi does not see it in his interest, in a period of intensified rivalry with the United States, to help any American project, especially when it comes to North Korea. Kim Jong Un, in the world as Chinese leaders perceive it, is someone who directly serves their interests of bedeviling America and its partners in Asia.

This perception of interests means that Chinese leaders are patient, tolerating insolent, rude, and downright insulting behavior from their

North Korean comrades. From the south side of that line separating China and Korea, the North Koreans bitterly resent their condescending overlords, as subjects tend to do.

In recent times, Kim Jong Un has often gone out of his way to show how he really feels about his large Chinese neighbor. Kim, after meeting Vladimir Putin in Pyongyang in June 2024, reportedly instructed his diplomats “not to be concerned about China’s feelings.”⁴⁶ At the same time, he has restricted the movements of Chinese nationals, prohibited the use of the renminbi in markets, and confiscated storage media containing Chinese movies.⁴⁷ While North Korea refused Beijing’s offer of humanitarian assistance for Yalu River flood victims in late July 2024,⁴⁸ Kim expressed gratitude for Moscow’s help.⁴⁹

The North Koreans believe they can get away with most anything because they know that a ruthlessly pragmatic China believes they are useful for the attainment of Chinese goals. China is not a charity, Kim rulers understand. The Chinese will support the North, almost no matter what it does, because China needs its small and prickly ally, especially at a time when Xi Jinping has taken on much of the world with his so-called Wolf Warrior diplomacy.

Washington’s Tolerance of China’s Brazen Behavior

“China has been implementing the U.N. Security Council resolutions in good faith,” the Chinese foreign ministry declared in July 2024 during a regular press briefing. “China is committed to honoring its international obligations and maintaining peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula.”⁵⁰

On the contrary, these days Beijing almost flaunts violations of Security Council sanctions. Perhaps the most blatant Chinese violation involves North Korean workers. China had demanded that Pyongyang take back all its guest workers, something required by Security Council Resolution 2397, which set a deadline of the end of 2019. North Korea’s Covid rules hindered the repatriation, and China was all too happy not to insist.⁵¹

China and North Korea, as reported by the Daily NK website in August 2024, reached an agreement on the repatriation and replacement of North Korean workers in China,⁵² a brazen flaunting of Resolution 2397.

The employment of North Korean labor by Chinese companies has continued to this day and appears widespread. For instance, a recent report reveals that a fleet of Chinese fishing vessels used North Korean crews in

clear violation of U.N. sanctions. To avoid detection, North Koreans were kept at sea for as long as 10 years “without ever stepping foot on land.”⁵³

Beijing could get away with flouting the sanction because the Biden administration was reluctant to impose costs on China and, for the most part, ignored the peninsula. It was notable, therefore, that the Office of Foreign Assets Control of the U.S. Treasury Department in June 2023 sanctioned Beijing-based Choe Chol Min, a procurement agent in China for North Korea, and others.⁵⁴

More significant, on July 24, 2024, Treasury imposed financial sanctions on five Chinese entities and six Chinese individuals for providing missile and space-related products to North Korea.⁵⁵ “Critics say the action is a rare and belated acknowledgement by the U.S. government that the North Korean nuclear missiles threatening U.S. cities were built with Chinese technology and components,” wrote Bill Gertz of the *Washington Times*. The measures, he pointed out, “are largely symbolic since they block all property and funds of the Chinese entities in the United States. Most of the companies and people linked to the missile proliferation are unlikely to have assets here.”⁵⁶

Therefore, these sanctions, like others, were designed to be ineffective. For one thing, China’s regime has for decades been deceiving Americans by shifting sanctioned activity from one entity to another as it pleased. U.S. administrations have treated China as if it were organized in the same fashion as the United States, assuming that companies and banks are independent entities.

In China, however, the Communist Party runs a totalitarian, unitary state and demands absolute obedience from all parties in society. Banks and other enterprises operate in separate corporate shells and may have separate owners and administrators, but they are by no means separate.

It is time, therefore, for Washington to recognize that China will continue to evade sanctions until it suffers real costs. One real cost would involve sanctioning all Chinese banks, all other Chinese financial institutions, and all Chinese corporates, treating them as one single organization. American officials must recognize the nature of the Chinese system and stop playing what has unfortunately become a game of sanctions Whack-A-Mole.

Although a country-wide sanction sounds drastic, China has in the past forced the U.S. into playing an impossible-to-win game. When the first Trump administration designated the small Bank of Dandong to be of “primary money laundering concern” under Section 311 of the USA

PATRIOT Act in June, 2017 for handling North Korean transactions, Beijing moved prohibited financial activity to all of its Big Four banks.⁵⁷

And history is now repeating itself, except in reverse. As the U.S. pressured China in 2024 to get its big banks out of the business of servicing Russia's war effort in Ukraine, Beijing moved the business to its small banks and underground channels.⁵⁸

The failure to impose real costs itself has had a real cost. On August 4, 2024, Kim Jong Un delivered a speech announcing the deployment of "250 new-type tactical ballistic missile launchers" to positions near the Demilitarized Zone. The launchers can carry four tactical nuclear weapons apiece, so Kim was not exaggerating when he boasted they have "great military significance."⁵⁹

The North Korean leader praised "our munition industry workers" for developing the launchers "by their own efforts and technology."⁶⁰ North Korea has several factories where these transporter-erector-launchers could have been made, including a newly discovered one near Pyongyang,⁶¹ but China military analyst Richard Fisher of the International Assessment and Strategy Center believes it is far more likely that the launchers are of Chinese origin and were built with Chinese parts and advice.⁶²

Building launchers is complicated, and North Korea would have, at some stage in the process, needed help. Fisher says the United States could have sanctioned China in 2012, when American satellites first detected the transfer of 16-wheel transporter-erector-launchers from China's state-owned China Aerospace Science and Industry Corp. to North Korea. Washington eventually sanctioned Wuhan Sanjiang Import and Export Co., a subsidiary of the Chinese company, in October 2017,⁶³ but that was long after the fact. "This is both an overdue warning and a stunning illustration of U.S. government dysfunction," Fisher says, referring to America's failure to sanction China earlier.⁶⁴

Says the U.S. Treasury, "The ultimate goal of sanctions is not to punish, but to bring about a positive change in behavior."⁶⁵ A better way to say this is that sanctions' ultimate goal is to protect the American people. Sanctions have, without question, failed to do so.

Now, thanks to China, North Korea has a means to transport—in other words, hide—intercontinental ballistic missiles that can strike the United States. And the U.S. did nothing effective to stop the transfer of dangerous equipment from China to North Korea, either in 2012, now, or any time in between.

China as Enabler and Mastermind

China's sanctions violations in 2024 look like small beer compared to those of Moscow. After all, Russia has been acquiring—with cash or through barter arrangements—North Korea's artillery shells and missiles in large quantities for the Ukraine war. Furthermore, the North, beginning in fall 2024, sent thousands of combat soldiers to fight for Moscow.

The North's involvement has had a substantial effect on the battlefield. "North Korea's contribution has been strategically vital," said Hugh Griffiths, who served as a coordinator of the U.N. Panel of Experts, to Reuters. "Without Chairman Kim Jong Un's support, President Vladimir Putin wouldn't really be able to prosecute his war in Ukraine."⁶⁶

The North's weapons can be inaccurate, but they are nonetheless deadly. On August 11, 2024, for instance, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky announced the overnight attack that killed a father and his four-year-old son in a suburb of the capital. Russian forces fired four KN-23 missiles acquired from North Korea.⁶⁷

The DPRK has denied violating U.N. Security Council resolutions by supplying missiles to the Russian Federation, but satellite imagery and other evidence show that Pyongyang has sent 28,000 containers to Russia, most of them after Kim and Putin met near Vladivostok in September 2023.⁶⁸

The dominant narrative is that Beijing is concerned about the growing ties between Moscow and Pyongyang. As the *New York Times* put it in a June 2024 headline, "Russia and North Korea's Defense Pact Is a New Headache for China."⁶⁹ "At the moment," writes Victoria Herczegh, an analyst at Geopolitical Futures, "China looks to be losing its influence over North Korea to Russia."⁷⁰

China may not see it that way, however. The North's critical dependence on China—China accounted for 95% of the North's trade before the recent arms deal with Russia⁷¹—suggests the Chinese are not that worried about Pyongyang's move to bulk up their Russian ties. As former Russian diplomat Georgy Toloraya puts it, Russia is "an ambulance" providing emergency treatment to the North Koreans while China is "the doctor who treats her day by day."⁷²

Kim Jong Un may hate the Chinese—as Koreans have for the better part of a millennium—but he also knows he cannot move too far out of the Chinese orbit.⁷³

The Chinese are in fact confident when it comes to Korea. “North Korea fully depends on China’s economic aid to survive, as is increasingly the case with Russia,” Burton, also a former Canadian diplomat in Beijing, says. “So Beijing has leverage to ensure that any independent Russia-North Korea alliance will not go very far.”⁷⁴ In short, Beijing believes that neither Vladimir Putin nor Kim Jong Un is strong enough to betray China.

There is, despite everything, an inclination in American policy circles to think the best of Chinese leaders, so it’s hard for Washington policymakers to believe that China actually approves of the growing links between Moscow and Pyongyang. There are, however, reasons to speculate that it does. Said Sari Arho Havren of the Royal United Services Institute to *Newsweek*, “While North Korea can be unpredictable, this move by Putin and Kim also benefits Beijing: Xi does not want to see Russia defeated in Ukraine, and Xi can also maintain the appearance of limiting direct military support for Russia himself.”⁷⁵

That assessment appears correct. As an initial matter, Beijing believes it must prevent a Russian defeat. The *South China Morning Post* reported that in early July 2025 Foreign Minister Wang Yi told the EU’s foreign policy chief that, in the words of the paper, “Beijing did not want to see a Russian loss in Ukraine because it feared the United States would then shift its whole focus to Beijing.”⁷⁶

Moreover, Xi Jinping is almost certainly pleased that he is accomplishing many objectives with one sly maneuver. The North Korean regime is selling inventory and receiving payments for providing troops, reducing the need for Chinese aid; Russia is getting weapons and soldiers for the Ukraine war and therefore tying up states that Beijing perceives to be foes; and China is out of the spotlight as most everyone assumes it is aggrieved by the arrangement. Therefore, Vladimir Putin, not Xi, is taking the heat for violating a raft of Security Council resolutions.

Many scholars downplay the sustainability of the relationships among the three regimes, but as James Fanell of the Geneva Center for Security Policy points out, “China, Russia, and North Korea are more aligned today than at any time since the Korean War.”⁷⁷

The ties binding the three states may or may not create a “new Axis,” but these linkages suggest that China had a hand in the North Korea-Russia deal, for the simple reason that neither of the other two parties could have entered into their arrangement without Beijing’s approval. Not every Russian sanctions violation is a Chinese one, but this one could very well

be. China, due to its position with both North Korea and Russia, was the enabler of the arrangement.

NATO in its July 2024 declaration called China a “decisive enabler” of Russia’s war against Ukraine.⁷⁸ China might even have in fact masterminded the Pyongyang-Moscow pact. After all, Beijing had both the ability to engineer the deal and a strong incentive to do so.

Conclusion

The People’s Republic of China, throughout its existence, has considered the survival of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea to be in its interest. There have often been disagreements, spats, and even breakdowns in the relationship between Beijing and Pyongyang, but the two regimes have always found ways to work out difficulties and help each other when necessary.

Kim needs help at this moment, and China, as always, stands ready to provide it. In this case, China is helping by permitting Russia to take the lead—and all the criticism from around the world for doing so.

Notes:

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² Kim Han-joo, “(LEAD) S. Korea Slaps Sanctions on Hong Kong Shipping Firm, N. Korean Cargo Ship,” *Yonhap News Agency*, July 18, 2024, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20240718006151315>.

³ Ji, “Detained Ship Carrying 4,500-Ton of N.Korean Coal: Seoul.”

⁴ Kim, “(LEAD) S. Korea Slaps Sanctions on Hong Kong Shipping Firm, N. Korean Cargo Ship.”

⁵ Resolution 2375, United Nations Security Council, September 11, 2017, [https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/2375%20\(2017\)](https://docs.un.org/en/S/RES/2375%20(2017)).

⁶ For more on sanctions violations, see Seulkee Jang, “New Photos Show N. Korea Continues to Violate International Sanctions,” *Daily NK*, July 19, 2024, <https://www.dailynk.com/english/new-photos-show-north-korea-continues-violate-international-sanctions/>.

⁷ Ji, “Detained Ship Carrying 4,500-Ton of N.Korean Coal: Seoul.”

⁸ Park Boram, “(LEAD) Another Cargo Ship Seized on Suspicion of Violating U.N. Sanctions on N. Korea,” *Yonhap News Agency*, June 20, 2024, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20240620005451315>.

⁹ “Report of the Panel of Experts Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 1874 (2009), transmitted by letter of February 2, 2024 to the Chair of the Security Council Committee established pursuant to Resolution 1718 (2006)” (Paragraph

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¹¹ Brad Lendon, "Chinese Military Harassed Dutch Warship Enforcing UN Sanctions On North Korea, Netherlands Says," *CNN*, June 10, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/06/10/asia/chinese-military-harass-dutch-warship-intl-hnk-ml/index.html>.

¹² "China's Defense Ministry Says Dutch Ship Incident 'Heinous,'" *Reuters*, June 11, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/chinas-defence-ministry-says-dutch-ship-incident-heinous-2024-06-11/>. For other Chinese statements on the *Tromp* incident, see "Chinese Defense Spokesperson Remarks on Provocations of Netherlands Navy," China Military Online, June 11, 2024, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/16315243.html; Liu Xuanzun and Guo Yuandan, "PLA Warns Off Dutch Naval Helicopter Over Its Infringing Provocation: Spokesperson," *Global Times* (Beijing), June 11, 2024, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202406/1313918.shtml>.

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