



Dealing With North Korea's Sanctions-Evasion Tactics

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By Nah Liang Tuang

SYNOPSIS

Even as the enforcement of UN sanctions fragments, North Korea continues to rely heavily on regional maritime smuggling. Indo-Pacific partners must respond by enhancing minilateral intelligence sharing and cooperation in monitoring transport hubs.

COMMENTARY

For decades, international policy towards the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has been anchored in a single objective: denuclearisation. Yet as geopolitical realignments push traditional diplomatic frameworks to an impasse, demanding complete disarmament is politically unfeasible. At the same time, any regional recognition of North Korea as a nuclear power would face insurmountable resistance in allied capitals. Consequently, the most pressing analytical focus for regional policymakers is no longer Pyongyang's nuclear arsenal itself, but the evolving, opaque logistical networks that sustain and modernise it.

The rapid deterioration of the multilateral sanctions-enforcement architecture since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has enabled Pyongyang to aggressively adapt its sanctions-evasion tactics, heavily utilising Indo-Pacific maritime routes. For Southeast Asian states and wider regional partners, this transition requires moving from passive compliance to proactive, localised monitoring of transport hubs.

The Breakdown of Multilateral Enforcement

The architecture of international sanctions against North Korea has been fundamentally fractured. The watershed moment came in March 2024, when the Russian Federation [vetoed](#) a United Nations Security Council resolution to extend the mandate of the UN Panel of Experts (PoE).

For fourteen years, the PoE served as the definitive, objective investigative body tracking North Korean sanctions evasion, illicit finance, and nuclear proliferation. By [dismantling](#) this mechanism, Moscow effectively removed the primary multilateral accountability instrument, replacing international consensus with bilateral transactionalism.

This diplomatic shield is a direct by-product of the deepening military integration between Russia and North Korea. In exchange for artillery, munitions, and tactical support for the European theatre, Pyongyang secured a vital geopolitical patron. This relationship has created a barter economy that bypasses international financial channels, making traditional banking sanctions increasingly obsolete.

In response to the PoE's disbandment, eleven nations launched the [Multilateral Sanctions Monitoring Team](#) (MSMT) in late 2024 as a stop-gap measure. However, while the MSMT provides critical visibility into Pyongyang's activities, it lacks the universal mandate and operational reach of a UN-backed entity. This structural deficit places an outsized focus on regional transit hubs, where illicit state-sponsored networks now operate with increasing impunity.

The Evasion Shift to Illicit Regional Maritime Tactics

Even as state collaborators ship goods in open contravention of UN conventions, directly to North Korea, there will inevitably be situations in which Pyongyang needs to import items or components for military or nuclear manufacturing, such as dual-use semiconductors or specialised alloys. In these instances, North Korea will have to resort to smuggling networks.

As direct conventional pathways face heightened scrutiny, North Korea's procurement apparatus has pivoted heavily towards complex maritime tactics. The regime systematically integrates foreign-flagged vessels and bulk carriers into its [shadow fleet](#) to evade customs authorities. Key [evasion strategies](#) include manipulating Automatic Identification Systems (AIS), engaging in identity laundering, and conducting coordinated ship-to-ship (STS) transfers in lightly policed waters.

Southeast Asian maritime nodes are highly vulnerable to this tactical shift. North Korea has a long history of exploiting seemingly innocent commercial manifests and regional front companies to move [sanctioned commodities](#), ranging from coal to refined petroleum. Because DPRK-linked vessels frequently use flags of convenience to obscure beneficial ownership, distinguishing legitimate regional commerce from Pyongyang's military procurement supply chain poses a major operational challenge. Without centralised intelligence from the UN PoE, regional

customs and enforcement agencies risk flying blind across the broader Asian logistics network.

Policy Prescriptions

These DPRK tactics necessitate a recalibration of how Indo-Pacific states approach sanctions enforcement. Passive reliance on UN resolutions is no longer sufficient; middle powers must adopt active, localised defence mechanisms to protect their maritime sovereignty.

First, regional governments must cultivate and rely on bilateral and minilateral intelligence-sharing networks focused on maritime domain awareness. Minilateral linkages among actors such as Singapore and Japan, Malaysia and South Korea, or ASEAN and Australia can facilitate the rapid exchange of commercial intelligence on suspect vessels, front companies, and dual-use procurement networks. Pooling regional intelligence outside the paralysed UN system enables smaller powers to track and disrupt dark fleet movements before illicit cargo reaches their destination.

Second, ASEAN member states must implement stringent Port State Control (PSC) scrutiny across all major logistics and maritime hubs. Given North Korea's repeated attempts to smuggle contraband through the region, treating sanctions enforcement purely as a banking compliance issue is a strategic error. The focus must be aggressively expanded to physical logistics. Port authorities should mandate rigorous inspections of suspect cargo manifests, penalise vessels exhibiting unusual AIS blackout patterns, and strictly vet flag-hopping schemes to raise the operational costs of illicit transshipments.

Finally, similar hub monitoring must be strongly encouraged among wider Asian partners. Fortifying ASEAN ports alone merely displaces illicit transshipment elsewhere in the broader supply chain. Comprehensive monitoring regimes must be championed at non-ASEAN transshipment hubs across South and East Asia. Diplomatic engagement should emphasise that allowing North Korean smuggling networks to operate unabated poses severe reputational risks to any host nation's maritime infrastructure and that this requires a unified, pan-Asian commitment to maritime integrity.

Conclusion

The traditional avenues of North Korean policy analysis may appear stagnant, yet the operational reality of the regime's survival is highly dynamic. As the multilateral enforcement architecture fragments, responsibility for containing North Korea's proliferation networks falls squarely to Indo-Pacific middle powers and logistics hubs. By prioritising minilateral intelligence sharing and rigorous maritime surveillance, regional actors can adapt to Pyongyang's tactical shifts in smuggling and help maintain regional stability.

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