

# How North Korea Skirts Sanctions With Its Illicit Arms Trade

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Earlier this year, a ship from North Korea laden with 30,000 rocket-propelled grenades was seized off the coast of Egypt (<http://wapo.st/2AAU5w9>). The United Nations called it the “largest seizure of ammunition in the history of sanctions against the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.” In an email interview, Andrew C. Winner, chair of the Strategic and Operational Research Department and a professor of strategic studies at the Naval War College, discusses the nature of North Korea’s arms industry and efforts to curb the sale of North Korean weapons amid international sanctions against Pyongyang. The views expressed here are his own and do not represent the views or policies of the Naval War College, the U.S. Navy or the Department of Defense.



*Canisters containing missiles are displayed in Kim Il Sung Square, Pyongyang, North Korea, April 12, 2017 (AP photo by Wong Maye-E).*

***WPR: How did North Korea develop into a manufacturer and seller of illicit arms, and who are its largest partners in this trade?***

**Andrew Winner:** The growth of North Korea’s conventional arms production and export capability are driven by both ideology and necessity. The ideology of “juche” or self-reliance developed by North Korea’s founder, Kim Il Sung, was part and parcel of consolidating and supporting totalitarian rule. For decades, arms manufacturing was coupled with supply from supportive states such as the Soviet Union and China. North Korea’s manufacture of inexpensive conventional arms was also a source of supply for states with little cash and an urgent need for weapons, such as Iran and Libya in the 1980s.

The demand for such arms increased in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, which was often a supplier of subsidized weaponry for a variety of states in the Middle East and Africa. The Soviet collapse provided an opportunity for further sales by Pyongyang, but it also increased the need for even greater self-reliance. With the death of Kim Il Sung, his son Kim Jong Il intensified a military-first version of juche that focused on self-reliance in arms—both in terms of supplying its own army and earning revenue for the isolated state that had lost one of its main patrons. While North Korea often sold conventional arms to pariah regimes in the 1980s and 1990s, its arms sales did not explicitly become specifically prohibited by

the international community until United Nations Security Council Resolution 1695 was passed in July 2006. That resolution only related to the import or export of missiles and missile-related technology. The Security Council's banning of conventional weapons sales by North Korea did not take place until the passage of Resolution 1718 in October 2006, after the North's first nuclear weapon test. At that point, the Security Council cracked down not only on the supply of items that could support Pyongyang's weapons of mass destruction and missile programs directly, but also Pyongyang's broader sources of revenue, particularly conventional weapons sales.

***WPR: How vital is this trade to the regime's resilience in the face of sanctions?***

**Winner:** During the 1980s and 1990s, arms sales provided a substantial portion of North Korea's export revenues. Since the passage of Resolution 1718 in 2006 and subsequent resolutions tightening sanctions on the regime, sales and revenues have fallen, although exactly how much is difficult to ascertain. While many countries either will no longer buy from North Korea or allow vessels carrying its exports to pass through their ports without inspection and seizure, the October diversion and seizure of a North Korea-crewed vessel carrying 30,000 rocket-propelled grenades to Egypt shows that states continue to be willing to flout sanctions and pay for North Korean military goods.

While North Korea does not produce much beyond cheap military goods that are viable on the international market, they continue to find ways to make money. In addition to coal exports to China—which may be pinched further by the U.N. resolution passed in August—North Korea continues to earn money through selling the forced labor of its citizens and computer hacking for profit. Even though sanctions have seriously constrained what the regime can earn through arms sales, this alone is not sufficient to either bring down the regime or bring it to the bargaining table regarding its nuclear weapons.

***WPR: How robust are efforts to eliminate the arms trade, and who is spearheading them?***

**Winner:** The United States has led the effort, through the United Nations, to curtail North Korea's trade in conventional weapons, as well as its trade in items that contribute to weapons of mass destruction and missile development. Despite multiple North Korean nuclear tests, missile tests and highly provocative actions, such as the sinking of a South Korean warship in 2010, it has taken over a decade since Resolution 1718 to develop a robust sanctions regime capable of really squeezing the trade of North Korea's arms and other illicit goods and services.

None of the U.N. Security Council resolutions, even those passed under Chapter VII of the U.N. Charter, which are considered legally binding on states, is self-enforcing. They rely on states to act individually or in concert to pass national implementing legislation and to act on potential sanctions violations. The Security Council resolutions set up a panel of experts and require reports from member states on

sanctions enforcement. Together, these mechanisms have helped to shine a light on North Korean attempts to evade sanctions, as well as on those states that are being lax in their own enforcement. The reports have provided unclassified details on North Korean sanctions evasion that will be useful in drafting the next round of resolutions to close loopholes and tighten enforcement. It has taken numerous resolutions, drafted and passed over the course of a decade, coupled with poor North Korean behavior that has galvanized votes, to develop a robust regime that curtails much, but not all, of North Korea's trade in arms. No regime of this sort will be perfect. North Korea has too many incentives to find ways around enforcement efforts, and there are states and individuals that will still—for profit or reasons of political affinity—conduct clandestine trade in arms with Pyongyang.