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N Korea: In Deep, Illicit Water



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Mansudae Grand Monument, Pyongyang

North Korea's illicit arms trade supplies anxious buyers willing to risk shipments that travel hundreds, sometimes thousands, of miles through the high seas, Jody Ray Bennett writes for ISN Security Watch.

By Jody Ray Bennett for ISN Security Watch

On a routine search in July, port [security forces in Abu Dhabi seized](#) “10 container loads of weapons, including rocket-propelled grenades and trigger mechanisms” found in the cargo aboard the [ANL-Australia](#), a large [shipping and cargo vessel](#) flying a flag from the Bahamas.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported on 31 August that an [unnamed UN diplomat explained](#) that authorities in the UAE notified the UN sanctions committee, after correspondence revealed that the military hardware was manufactured in North Korea, routed through Shanghai and [picked up by the ANL-Australia](#), which was under operation by the Milan, Italy-based shipping company, [Otim](#). The cargo was en route to Iran.

The shipment was considered in violation of the newest UN sanctions levied against North Korea as a result of its nuclear tests that were conducted last May. [According to the Wall Street Journal](#), this shipment would have been legal under previous sanctions regimes. It is still unclear whether or not management at Otim or ANL had prior knowledge of the arms shipment, but [Korean news reported](#) that a spokesperson from Otim said the cargo was sealed and could not be inspected even after the North Korean exporter provided documents that identified the cargo as “oil pumping equipment.”

“These shipments show North Korea's ongoing program for exporting arms, including conventional weapons,” Donald Kirk, journalist and author of [Korea Betrayed: Kim Dae Jung and Sunshine](#), told ISN Security Watch.

“We have no way of knowing what's going by air across China. North Korea is attempting to undercut if not do away with effective sanctions by diplomacy with a wide range of countries, notably the US, China and Russia – each of which it approaches in different ways.”

A heightening security?

Passed in June, [UN Resolution 1874](#) requires all states to “inspect, seize and dispose of [...] armoured combat vehicles, large calibre artillery systems, attack helicopters, warships and missiles and spare parts [...] by denying fuel or supplies to service the vessels [...] on the high seas, at seaports and airports.”

The resolution enabled the Indian navy to detain and search another North Korean vessel, the [Mu San](#), in early August, finding 16,000 tons of sugar bound for the Near East. [According to a report by the New York Times](#), Indian authorities did not receive a reason from the crew as to why it was in Indian waters or why it made an unauthorized stop in the Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal. The daily reported that “India has watched warily for signs that North Korea is helping Myanmar build a nuclear reactor [and due to] the ship's proximity to Myanmar, a North Korean ally, and the fact that it had no apparent reason to be in the area raised suspicions.” No illegal cargo was found.

Trade sanctions against the DPRK have been imposed on its imports as well. During the seizure of the ANL-Australia by the UAE, Italy's [Ministry of Economic Development](#) announced that after investigation, it had officially blocked a €13 million (roughly \$18 million) order for two luxury yachts by a Chinese firm that were to bound to the DPRK. In the middle of last September, [Italian customs agents also confiscated](#) “150 bottles of brandy and 270 bottles of whisky” bound for North Korea, worth approximately €12,000. The brands were not identified.

Tehran's strategy

ISN Security Watch was referred to the [latest report from the European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center \(ESISC\)](#). The analysis, written by ESISC President [Claude Moniquet](#), details the unique and intriguing arms procurement practices by Iran since the Iranian Revolution. The analysis uniquely points out that shortly after the 1979 Revolution, Iran's Defense Ministry was confronted with a problem: “most of its armoured vehicles and, above all, of its air force was equipped with American equipment – (this was particularly the case with more than half of the fighter planes and bombers), but the state of relations with Washington prohibited Tehran from resupplying itself with spare parts and munitions from its former protector.”

Since then, Iran has been involved in a dubious rush to obtain arms and parts to sustain old hardware and develop new technologies. This often leads to purchases of equipment, parts and munitions on the illicit, illegal, international market. Moniquet rightly connects the ANL-Australia fiasco with the perhaps even less popular [arrest](#)

[two weeks later of Jacques Monsieur](#), the [Belgian arms trafficker](#) accused of illegal export of arms and equipment to Iran.

Monsieur, nicknamed 'The Fox,' [attempted to "purchase F-5a spare parts](#) and engines from an intermediary who turned out to be an undercover agent of the American intelligence services."

While Tehran never received its order, it highlights the degree to which leadership in states like Iran, Myanmar and Syria are willing to turn to North Korea for trade, whether in violation of imposed sanctions or otherwise.

"These Arms sales go to Middle Eastern countries, notably Iran but also Yemen, Syria and Libya, to name a few, as well as Myanmar [Burma]. Basically, North Korea will sell conventional weapons – including missiles – anywhere there's a market, Kirk told ISN Security Watch.

That these states turn to an isolated and suspicious North Korea thousands of miles away to order small arms by sea vessels that get stopped and checked by the likes of UAE authorities, indicates the pressure felt in Tehran and elsewhere to develop, sustain and deploy military strength. In this sense, Tehran has irrationally chosen Pyongyang to supply the Islamic Republic's rational pursuit of defense (or nuclear capability) in order to protect itself from US attack while balancing Israeli power in the Middle East.

As a result of the ANL-Australia affair, the US Treasury Department and [US Department of State continued targeting](#) DPRK interests and restricting American companies from doing business with a list of state companies, specifically citing examples of these companies' financial and trade involvement with Iranian military development.

[According US news reports](#) in May, the US government has officially identified "Iran and Pakistan [using] North Korean materials to develop domestic ballistic missiles [and] Syria, Yemen, Libya and Egypt [purchasing] North Korean missile components in recent years."

"North Korea desperately needs money. Arms exports, notably that of missiles, have been lucrative," Kirk explained to ISN Security Watch.

"North Korea's role in the international arms trade, including possible nuclear proliferation, will inevitably lead to a northeast Asian arms race. The root causes go back to the division of the Korean peninsula in August 1945 and the Korean War (1950-1953) and the DPRK's ongoing effort to unite the Korean peninsula on its own terms," he said.

Joshua Stanton, a lawyer in Washington, DC who blogs at [OneFreeKorea](#), told ISN Security Watch: "The single most interesting unexplored question to arise from arms sanctions and UNSCR 1874 was raised by the interception of [the] Iran-bound North Korean arms shipment in the United Arab Emirates.

"Why was North Korea shipping rocket propelled grenades and detonators to Iran, a country that manufactures both items? Iran is a fairly sophisticated producer of weapons - why buy such simple, cheap items from North Korea? Iran wanted a 'plausibly deniable' source for weapons it intended to supply to a terrorist organization."

Stanton added, "A direct North Korean attack using WMDs via a missile or aircraft is not a serious security concern. Such an attack would invite a devastating response and is therefore deterrable. The real concern is proliferation, such as North Korea's proliferation of nuclear technology to Syria, and possibly Iran and Burma, and its open and notorious sales of missiles to any willing purchaser."

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