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North Korea in Africa: Historical Solidarity, China's Role, and Sanctions Evasion

By Benjamin R. Young



The *Unknown Soldier* statue, constructed by North Korea, at the Heroes' Acre memorial near Windhoek, Namibia. (Photo by Oliver Gerhard/Shutterstock)

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Summary

- North Korea's Africa policy is based on historical linkages and mutually beneficial relationships with African countries. Historical solidarity revolving around anticolonialism and national self-reliance is an under-emphasized facet of North Korea–Africa partnerships.
- As a result, many African countries continue to have close ties with Pyongyang despite United Nations sanctions on North Korea. In particular, North Korea is active in the

African arms trade, construction of munitions factories, and illicit trafficking of rhino horns and ivory.

- China has been complicit in North Korea's illicit activities in Africa, especially in the construction and development of Uganda's largest arms manufacturer and in allowing the illegal trade of ivory and rhino horns to pass through Chinese networks.
- For its part, North Korea looks to Africa for economic opportunity,

owing to African governments' lax sanctions enforcement and the Kim family regime's need for hard currency.

- To curtail North Korea's illicit activity in Africa, Western governments should take into account the historical solidarity between North Korea and Africa, work closely with the African Union, seek cooperation with China, and undercut North Korean economic linkages in Africa.



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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report examines the ideological, economic, and national security underpinnings of North Korea–Africa relations and the reasons why many African countries maintain ties with Pyongyang despite international efforts to isolate the Kim regime. Commissioned by the North Korea program at the United States Institute of Peace, the report argues that understanding the historical and current rationale for North Korea–Africa ties can help inform appropriate strategies for encouraging African governments to cut ties and enforce sanctions.

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The views expressed in this report are those of the author alone. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace. An online edition of this and related reports can be found on our website (www.usip.org), together with additional information on the subject.

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North Korea's then ceremonial leader Kim Yong Nam, left, is escorted into Uganda's parliament by its Speaker, Rebecca Kadaga, center; then Commissioner Rosemary Seninde, center right; and Uganda's then Foreign Affairs Minister Asuman Kiyingi, right, on October 30, 2014. (Photo by AP)

Introduction

Since the 1960s, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, the official name of North Korea) has seen Africa as a place of ideological solidarity and economic profit. From engaging in arms deals with African governments to illicitly trafficking ivory from Africa to Asia, the North Korean regime was and remains active on the continent. Bilateral DPRK-Africa trade, which generated an average \$216.5 million per year from 2007 to 2015, provides vital funding for the heavily sanctioned regime.¹ As a source of financing, it may have helped North Korea build its nuclear weapons program; at a minimum, it offers the Kim family regime a way to circumvent sanctions and mitigate international pressures to change its behavior.²

This report looks at three key elements of North Korea's Africa policy. First, it analyzes the historical connections and ideological linkages between Pyongyang and African nations such as Namibia, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. Based on past DPRK support during their anticolonial struggles, these three countries have had long-standing relationships with the Kim family regime. Next, it investigates the role of China in North Korea's Africa policy by highlighting a joint Sino-North Korean arms factory in Uganda and illegal ivory trafficking from Africa to China by North Korean diplomats. Finally, it addresses the ways in which Pyongyang evades international sanctions in Africa and the reasons why some African governments do not fully enforce these sanctions. It concludes with policy recommendations for curtailing North Korea's illicit activities in Africa, which may hinder Pyongyang's ability to further develop its nuclear program.

Owing to the secrecy surrounding North Korea's foreign relations and the regime's illicit activities, North Korea–Africa relations are difficult to investigate. Rampant corruption and the lack of transparency by many African governments obfuscate efforts to trace North Korea's activities on the continent. Moreover, outside of governmental purview, African private businesses and criminal networks sometimes engage with Pyongyang on their own initiative. All of these factors contribute to a situation on the African continent where North Korea's clandestine activities are underreported and underinvestigated. Using journalistic reports, archival documents, policy papers, and other publicly available records, this report aims to overcome some of these limitations and shed further light on DPRK-Africa ties.

Historical Solidarity

Historically, North Korea and Africa have shared values of anticolonialism, national self-reliance, and independence.³ These shared values became the cornerstone of DPRK-Africa relations during the Cold War era. Bilateral relations were also founded on North Korea's desire for profit and to undermine South Korea's international legitimacy. From the African side, national security concerns and shared historical experiences continue to shape many governments' interactions with the Kim family regime.

From the 1960s to the late 1980s, North Korean leader Kim Il Sung championed Third World decolonization. Drawing on the legacy of the Korean experience under Japanese colonialism and the DPRK's claims to have thwarted American imperialism during the Korean War, he vocally supported national liberation movements. As a fervent supporter of anticolonialism and anti-imperialism, Kim Il Sung advised Third World nations to emulate North Korea's postcolonial development model. Under the rubric of North Korea's nationalistic Juche ideology, this model officially promoted the principles of self-reliance, self-sufficiency, and self-defense.⁴ In 1968, Kim issued a treatise in which he espoused the idea of the Third World as the vanguard of world revolution: "Today Asia, Africa and Latin America have become the most fierce anti-imperialist front. Imperialism has met with the strong resistance of the Asian, African and Latin American peoples and suffered the heaviest blows from them."⁵ Kim's rhetoric extended into material support as Pyongyang supplied arms, military advisers, and ammunition to African liberation movements during the Cold War era. During this period, the North Korean regime could afford to provide economic assistance to Africa, as the DPRK's rapid postwar industrialization gave Pyongyang economic advantages over Seoul. As both North and South Korea rebuilt from the ravages of world war and civil war, for the first three decades the former's gross national product per capita exceeded that of the latter.⁶ Yet despite Pyongyang's theoretical promotion of self-reliance, North Korea's postcolonial development was heavily dependent upon financial and material aid from the Soviet Union.⁷

Also during this era, North Korea was active in southern Africa and assisted the anti-apartheid and independence activities of South Africa's African National Congress (ANC) and Namibia's South West African People's Organization (SWAPO). North Korean military specialists helped to set up guerrilla training camps in neighboring Angola. The ANC and SWAPO insurgents who trained in these camps used their military skills to combat the white minority regimes in their home countries.⁸



Students from the Laureate International School in Tanzania walk past a statue of the late North Korean leaders Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il surrounded by children at the Songdowon International Children's Camp near Wonsan, North Korea, on July 29, 2014. (Photo by Wong Maye-E/AP)

In 1982, SWAPO leader Sam Nujoma visited Pyongyang and met with Kim Il Sung. Some estimates state that Kim sent three to four thousand military personnel to Angola in 1984 in order to help his African allies.⁹ This historical memory of North Korean aid during Namibia's independence struggle is one of the reasons why Windhoek still maintains close ties with the Kim family regime.

Meanwhile, in eastern Africa, the North Korean government established a close military partnership with Idi Amin's regime in Uganda. In 1975, the DPRK agreed to educate thirty to forty Ugandans at its military academy while also agreeing to sell arms to Amin's government. Amin also requested North Korea's assistance in plans to build a munitions factory in Uganda.¹⁰ After Amin's demise in 1979, the North Korean government supported Milton Obote's new government with military cooperation and educational exchanges.¹¹ Obote was overthrown in July 1985 by General Tito Okello, who then fell to Yoweri Museveni's rebel forces in January 1986. Despite leadership changes, Pyongyang continued to support the Ugandan government with arms deals and security training. North Korea supplied cheap arms and military advisers for which the Ugandans paid in much-needed hard currency.

Museveni's earlier experience with North Korea contributed to more positive bilateral ties. During the late 1960s, he received military training in North Korea, "learning how to operate

Historical solidarity, in addition to economic and security benefits, often contributed to North Korea's long-standing partnerships with different African governments—even as coups and other internal struggles brought new leaders into power.

a Kalashnikov and a pistol.”¹² After emerging victorious from the Ugandan Bush War and taking office, Museveni formed a mutually beneficial partnership with the Kim regime and asked Pyongyang for assistance in police training. In the late 1980s, the Ugandan government also purchased surface-to-air missiles and rocket launchers from Pyongyang. Even after the end of the Cold War, Museveni and the Kim family continued their close ties. North Korean

advisers remained in Uganda to train police there; evidence also indicates that the DPRK provided assistance in building a munitions factory in Nakasongola.¹³ Despite United Nations sanctions and increased international pressure on curbing North Korea's illicit activities abroad, Kampala reportedly continues its covert military ties with Pyongyang. A 2018 *Wall Street Journal* report concluded that North Korea continues to sell weapons such as antitank systems, rocket-propelled grenades, and small arms to the Ugandan government.¹⁴

Zimbabwe also established close ties with the North Korean government in the early 1980s after the Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU–PF) consolidated its victory in the first election held after the former British colony's official independence in 1980. ZANU–PF leader Robert Mugabe, who became Zimbabwe's first prime minister, identified North Korea as a helpful partner in strengthening his nascent government's internal security. Pyongyang sent around a hundred military advisers to Harare to train Mugabe's infamous Fifth Brigade, which then went on to massacre thousands of “dissidents” in Matabeleland starting in 1983. During this period, the North Koreans also supplied Zimbabwe with small arms and twenty armed personnel carriers.¹⁵ North Korean architects also helped to build National Heroes' Acre, a burial ground for those who died in Zimbabwe's revolution, near Harare.¹⁶ After the Cold War, close Pyongyang–Harare ties continued and the two governments preserved their military and economic partnerships. In 2013, the two governments allegedly entered into an agreement in which Harare supplied the DPRK with yellowcake uranium while the North Koreans offered arms in return.¹⁷ Zimbabwe has also shipped zoo animals to Pyongyang.¹⁸

Many political analysts have highlighted the economic benefits of cheap DPRK-made arms and military assistance that Kim Il Sung provided to these African governments, but they often ignore the importance of historical solidarity. For many African governments, especially Namibia, Uganda, and Zimbabwe, North Korea was not some remote pariah country in East Asia. Instead, the DPRK was an anti-imperialist stalwart that helped their national liberation movements and provided selfless assistance to their fight against colonial power and white minority rule, even though it was not a wealthy nation. Despite its small size and stagnant economy, North Korea often stood up to the West, and this independent stance resonated with recently decolonized nations in Africa. From North Korea's seizure of a US intelligence ship, the USS *Pueblo*, in 1968, to the killing of two US Army officers in a violent altercation in the Joint Security Area of the Demilitarized Zone in 1976, Pyongyang appeared resolute in its defiance toward a US military presence in East Asia.¹⁹ Historical solidarity, in addition to economic and security benefits, often contributed to North Korea's long-standing partnerships with different African governments—even as coups and other internal struggles brought new leaders into power. Although North Korea's Africa policy

was typically not based on personal relationships with individual leaders, the Kim family regime preferred to maintain close partnerships with governments born out of guerrilla movements and anticolonial struggles, such as Museveni's Uganda and Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe. According to the North Korean mindset, these leaderships' like-minded approach to armed struggle and national independence made them more revolutionary and genuine in their efforts to promote global anticolonialism. The recent memory of Western colonization and familiarity with Pyongyang's Cold War-era assistance made North Korea a valuable partner for some governments in Africa, particularly those that emerged from national liberation struggles.

In discussing their respective governments' contemporary relations with North Korea, African leaders often referenced their country's historical linkages with the Kim family regime. As Museveni explained at a 2014 state dinner for the DPRK's ceremonial head of state Kim Yong Nam, the North Koreans are "friends who have helped Uganda for a long time."²⁰ Namibia's minister of presidential affairs Frans Kapofi told the *Washington Post* in 2017, "We've relied on [the North Koreans] for help to develop our infrastructure, and their work has been unparalleled." Tuliameni Kalomoh, a senior adviser in the Namibian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the country's former ambassador to Washington, summed up his government's approach to North Korea by noting, "Our world outlook was determined by who was on our side during the most crucial time of our struggle, and North Korea was there for us."²¹ In 2018, Namibian President Hage Geingob told journalists prior to his visit to China, which coincided with a trip by Kim Jong Un to Beijing, "We are friends with North Korea. They have helped us but, as you know, we have to apply and implement the UN sanctions which affected us very badly. [I]t is a very complicated matter."²² Prior to his death in 2019, Robert Mugabe often thanked his North Korean allies for their support during Zimbabwe's anticolonial struggle. He noted in 2009 that deceased North Korean leader Kim Il Sung "provide[d] us with training facilities for our cadres; we thank him today as we did yesterday."²³ This historical solidarity and memory of joint revolutionary struggle provides the foundation and leverage for Pyongyang to continue to engage in illicit activities in Africa, including sales of weapons and military equipment. And for many African governments, this shared history of armed struggle and sacrifice has sometimes appeared to matter more than the economic risks of violating UN sanctions against the DPRK.

The Role of China in North Korea's Africa Policy

Although the role of China in North Korea's Africa policy is underresearched, it appears that Beijing has been complicit in North Korea's continuation of its illicit activities in Africa. It is no secret that North Korea relies massively on China for its total foreign trade. During the Cold War, both Moscow and Beijing had provided financial and technical support to Pyongyang, but with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, China assumed a much greater role in its neighbor's economy. According to a 2018 report from the Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency, China accounted for 80.2 percent of North Korea's exports and 97.2 percent of its imports.²⁴

However, North Korea also relies on China for some of its illicit activities in Africa, including arms trade and the illegal trafficking of ivory and rhino horn from Africa to China.

In Uganda, Chinese and North Korean military specialists worked together at the Nakasongola arms factory. Built in 1996 with the help of Chinese state-owned companies, this Ugandan arms factory initially was used to make bullets, land mines, and small arms.²⁵ In the mid to late 1990s, the Nakasongola arms factory “reportedly catered to the warring Burundian government and Tutsi militia,” but the Ugandan government insisted the factory was solely for domestic security purposes.²⁶ According to scholar Andrea Berger, North Korean and Chinese activity at the arms factory has been difficult to verify. However, the North Koreans had a history of working in Nakasongola District, and locals complained in 2004 that North Koreans working there had overfished in nearby lakes, depleting fish stocks.²⁷ In the 1980s, North Korean military advisers reportedly provided counterinsurgency training there for Ugandan soldiers.²⁸ After its opening, the Nakasongola arms factory expanded into the repair and construction of medium-sized weaponry, such as tanks.²⁹ According to the Africa Europe Faith and Justice Network, the arms factory is the largest weapons manufacturer in Uganda and is owned by Chinese (government and private sector) interests.³⁰

China’s intersection with North Korea’s Africa policy has also extended into the illegal ivory trade. North Koreans holding diplomatic passports have been deeply involved in the illegal trafficking of ivory and rhino horn from Africa to China. According to a 2017 report by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, “North Korean diplomatic passport holders have been implicated in at least 18 cases of rhino horn and ivory smuggling in Africa since 1986.”³¹ Once the ivory and rhino horn have been smuggled out of Africa, the North Koreans then sell the illicit goods to Chinese gangs and criminal networks. As recently as September and October 2016, two North Koreans traveling on diplomatic passports were stopped in an Ethiopian airport on their way to China. Ethiopian authorities found large amounts of worked ivory and ivory bangles in their possession.³² It is unknown whether the Chinese government directly supports North Korea’s role in the illegal ivory trade, but it is assumed that Beijing, at least prior to the Chinese Communist Party’s 2017 ban on the legal sale of ivory, permitted North Korean diplomats to sell their smuggled wares in China.³³

The North Korean government disguises its illicit operations abroad under diplomatic or business covers. For example, North Korean state-owned businesses in China or African countries may publicly sell artwork, Korean food, or other cultural wares. However, these ventures are sometimes fronts for the illegal arms trade or the trafficking of illegal goods, such as ivory and methamphetamine. A high-level North Korean defector who ran a DPRK front company in Beijing recalled the extensive involvement of Pyongyang’s diplomats in illegal ivory smuggling: “Diplomats . . . would come from Africa carrying rhino horn, ivory and gold nuggets. Every embassy [in Africa] was coming two or three times every year.” The unnamed individual also noted the procedures used to hand off the materials: “They would fly to Beijing and meet directly with Chinese smugglers or I would arrange it and we would exchange it into hard currency. They were making cash off the horn and ivory in China and maybe one percent of the rhino horns went to DPRK.”³⁴ In China, the North Korean diplomats built connections to East Asia’s black markets, which often involve Chinese triad gangs, traditional medicine salespeople, and corrupt



A ranger from the Kenya Wildlife Service walks past fifteen tons of elephant tusks that were set on fire during an anti-poaching ceremony at Nairobi National Park on March 3, 2015. (Photo by Khalil Senosi/AP)

government officials. North Korea's lack of an internal market for ivory and rhino horn and the Kim family regime's need for hard currency means that the DPRK diplomatic personnel often serve as intermediary traffickers of the smuggled goods from Africa to Chinese black markets.

Even though China's rapid economic rise has allowed it to accumulate significant and growing influence in contemporary Africa, it is wrong to assume that DPRK's Africa policy is under Chinese control. In fact, journalists and researchers have suggested that the current expansion of North Korea's illicit activities in Africa owes much to the Kim family regime's interest in avoiding the risks inherent in total economic reliance on China. As scholar Marcus Noland told CNBC in 2017, "In recent years, North Korea has sought to increase its trade relationship with Africa, both as a sanctions evasion technique since African enforcement tends to be lax, and as a way of reducing the country's enormous dependence on China."³⁵ Nevertheless, China has enabled North Korea's Africa policy. Beijing operates on a fine line between outright supporting North Korea's illicit activities in Africa and maintaining plausible deniability in international forums. The international community has pressured China to crack down on North Korea-related sanctions, but Beijing often tries to obscure its role in the illegal trade or only intermittently enforces sanctions on Pyongyang.

Mutually Beneficial Relations and Shared Anti-Imperialism

In addition to historical solidarity, North Korea's continuing presence in Africa stems from a permissive environment and mutually beneficial relationships. Many African governments lack the capacity and will to enforce sanctions, and their need for cheap North Korean arms and construction services allows Pyongyang to retain an economic space on the continent. According to a 2016 report from the South Africa-based Institute for Security Studies, "From 2007 to 2015 the value of trade activities between African states and the DPRK amounted to an average US\$216.5 million per year, against an average US\$90 million per year from 1998 to 2006."³⁶ The DPRK's increased trade with Africa enables it to use the continent as a buffer against both international sanctions and total economic reliance on China. North Korean arms and construction services come with no strings attached, unlike Western aid that may not be available to countries accused of human rights violations or may include restrictions intended to prevent the weapons from falling into the hands of local terrorists. In addition, UN sanctions carry a whiff of neocolonialism—one that is anathema to many of North Korea's closest allies in Africa, such as Uganda's Museveni, who often espouses anti-Western rhetoric in his addresses to the region.

North Korea has filled a void in African construction work as an affordable builder of monuments and statues. At least fifteen African nations have awarded contracts to North Korea's state-run construction company, Mansudae Art Studio. From building a Peace Park in Angola to constructing the Tiglachin Monument in Ethiopia, a tribute to Ethiopian and Cuban soldiers who fought in the Ogaden War in the late 1970s, North Korean architects and engineers have left a visible footprint in Africa's public spaces.³⁷ For African governments, North Korean-built memorials are aesthetically pleasing and relatively inexpensive visual tributes to key figures and events in their national histories. Since 2016, however, the UN Security Council has prohibited statue exports from the DPRK, which has significantly hurt North Korea's statue-building enterprises in Africa.³⁸

North Korean medical workers have also been earning currency in Africa. In Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, twelve North Korean medical clinics have been operating since 1991, earning between \$1 million and \$1.3 million a year. However, reports have accused these clinics of medical malpractice and providing unsafe drug prescriptions.³⁹ Despite complaints about poor North Korean medical practices, the relationships between the North Korean regime and local Tanzanian health officials appear to be allowing operations to continue.⁴⁰ North Korean doctors have also been active in Libya and Nigeria, and not merely in health care.⁴¹ In 2015, North Korean doctors were allegedly caught smuggling gold and medical supplies out of Libya.⁴²

In 2016, the Institute for Security Studies reported that only 15 percent of African nations were in compliance with reporting requirements on North Korea-related sanctions.⁴³ Compliance decreased in 2020, with only five African governments (Algeria, Angola, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Uganda) submitting implementation reports regarding North Korea-related sanctions.⁴⁴ Angola is a particularly notable exception, having deported 296 North Korean workers in 2019 and terminated a medical cooperation agreement with North Korea in 2020.⁴⁵ Angola's expulsion of North

From repairing surface-to-air missile systems in Tanzania to supplying 9 mm firearms to the Democratic Republic of Congo's Presidential Guard, North Koreans continue to operate in the margins of the African economy.

Koreans was in accordance with 2017's UN Security Council Resolution 2397, which stated that all UN member countries must send North Koreans earning hard currency abroad back home by December 22, 2019.⁴⁶

The UN's lack of enforcement mechanisms, however, means that poor reporting compliance will continue to be a problem. With little to fear from failing to comply with UN sanctions, cash-strapped African governments will thus continue to find North Korea's cheap arms and affordable construction services from the DPRK's state-owned companies too appealing to overlook. The precise costs of North Korean weapons and construction projects are hard to verify, but it is assumed that Pyongyang offers discount rates to appeal to its African clients. A 2017 UN Panel of Experts report detailed the numerous sanctions-busting activities of North Korean state-owned enterprises in Africa. From repairing surface-to-air missile systems in Tanzania to supplying 9 mm firearms to the Democratic Republic of Congo's Presidential Guard, North Koreans continue to operate in the margins of the African economy.⁴⁷ North Korean arms factories have recently been found in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Madagascar, and Uganda. The UN has also reported possible arms-related deals between the DPRK and Eritrea, Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda.⁴⁸ As recently as September 2019, North Koreans were found working in clear violation of UN sanctions on construction projects in Senegal.⁴⁹ Although Resolution 2397 required African countries to repatriate all North Korean workers by December 2019, it is unclear whether UN sanctions have helped to halt North Korea's illicit activities in Africa or simply pushed them underground.⁵⁰

It is important to note that in addition to African states' low capacity for sanctions enforcement and the mutually beneficial nature of DPRK-Africa relations, the rejection of Western colonialism also makes UN sanctions objectionable. Many of North Korea's closest partners in Africa are fervently anti-Western or, at the very least, uneasy about Western influence on the continent. For example, Uganda's Museveni is well known for his disdain of Western culture and pressure. In 2014, he signed into law a bill that imposed harsh penalties on gay Ugandans, toughening the country's already punitive laws against homosexuality. At a press conference announcing the "anti-gay law," Museveni said to thundering applause, "Arrogant western groups are to blame. Leave us alone. We don't need your [donor] money."⁵¹ After Western donors cut off aid to Uganda in response to the new law, Museveni implored his citizens to become self-reliant. This anti-Western mentality, reminiscent of North Korea's own autarkic *Juche* ideology, is part of Uganda's political culture that Western policymakers and government officials often ignore. The lasting effects of Western colonialism and Uganda's subsequent ideologically charged rhetoric of self-reliance still factor into Kampala's foreign policy. Thus, UN sanctions targeting North Korea may have difficulty gaining traction if African governments do not have a rationale for supporting them. From the perspective of some of these governments, UN mandates may be too reminiscent of Western colonialism for them to want to enforce.

African states' own experiences with UN and US sanctions may also influence their approach to North Korea-related sanctions. Nine states—Burundi, the Central African Republic, Congo, Libya, Mali, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Zimbabwe—are currently sanctioned by the US



The Tiglachin Monument, a memorial to Ethiopian and Cuban soldiers involved in the Ogaden War, located in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, was built by a North Korean state-run construction company. (Photo by Stefan Boness/Shutterstock)

government for human rights violations, antidemocratic abuses of power, or fueling conflict.⁵² Since the US government is the main driver of North Korea–related sanctions in the UN Security Council, African states that are also sanctioned by Washington may see little incentive in advancing US foreign policy interests. Furthermore, there is widespread African distrust of sanctions as effective policy. Many African governments believe sanctions do not work as mechanisms that change state behavior, and sanctions on one country may affect the entire continent’s development. For example, Tanzanian president John Magufuli, who is also the chair of the Southern African Development Community, said in August 2019 that the sanctions on Zimbabwe “have not only affected the people of Zimbabwe and their government but the entire region. It is like a human body, when you chop one of its part[s] it affects the whole body.”⁵³

Zimbabwe’s government also has a history of not trusting the West. During his more than thirty-year reign, Robert Mugabe was infamous for his rants at the UN against Western imperialism and for his xenophobia. As recently as October 2019, anti-Western demonstrations protesting newly imposed US and European Union sanctions on the Zimbabwean leadership took place in the capital city of Harare.⁵⁴ Mugabe’s successor and current President Emmerson Mnangagwa called Western sanctions a “cancer” that is sapping the strength of the national

economy.⁵⁵ Under increased international scrutiny and Western pressure, Mnangagwa booted North Korean workers associated with the Mansudae Overseas Project Group of Companies out of the country in 2018.⁵⁶ However, Mnangagwa was directly involved in Gukurahundi, the campaign of genocidal terror perpetrated by the North Korean-trained Fifth Brigade against Zimbabwe's Ndebele minority population in the 1980s.⁵⁷ Thus, it is no surprise that Harare and Pyongyang continue their covert, mutually beneficial relationship. Both governments see themselves as being unfairly punished by Western sanctions.

Policy Recommendations

UN Security Council resolutions that mandate sanctions against North Korea do not, by themselves, guarantee that they will be enforced by African governments. Many factors—including the lack of capacity or will to enforce sanctions, national security reasons for ignoring or even flouting sanctions, the absence of international mechanisms to ensure compliance, the belief that sanctions are ineffective or detrimental to national or broader African interests, and historical solidarity with North Korea—contribute to weak sanctions enforcement. Western heavy-handedness and threats may further alienate African governments from wanting to enforce UN sanctions. Also, nominal or half-hearted efforts at enforcement without effective buy-in from the host governments may merely push illicit North Korean activities underground.

The best approach going forward may be a comprehensive effort that addresses as many of the impediments described above as possible. To start, since the United Nations does not have strong enforcement mechanisms, the United States may want to explore the leverage found in other international forums, such as the IMF and World Bank, as a means to bolster North Korea-related sanctions compliance among African nations. To enhance, or at least complement, African states' capacity for sanctions enforcement, the United States and the United Nations should also work closely with the African Union, which has unique political influence as a continental body representing fifty-five member states. It could take the lead on enforcing sanctions on North Korean activity in Africa and could consider sending, with international assistance, inspectors to ensure that governments are complying with the mandates. In the interests of promoting peace, security, and stability across the continent, the African Union is well suited to point out North Korea's destabilizing presence, which includes its involvement in illegal arms sales, military advisement, and ivory trafficking. As Nicolas Kasprzyk of the Institute for Security Studies explains, "The African Union's Peace and Security Council (PSC) is ideally positioned to assist African states in their efforts to implement sanctions regimes, and particularly with respect to the DPRK."⁵⁸ Kasprzyk also notes that a "long-awaited sanctions committee within the PSC" may eventually become operational. The United States and the United Nations should consider encouraging the African Union to utilize the PSC as the primary North Korea-related sanctions enforcement agent on the continent. This arrangement, while potentially subject to similar criticisms about Western coercion, would at least elevate the African Union's role and might mitigate the potential for conflict among Washington, the United Nations, and African nations. In addition, the African Union's technical capacity could assist African governments that lack the

Washington should continue to pressure Beijing to enforce sanctions on North Korea, especially in regions where China has significant presence and clout, such as sub-Saharan Africa.

resources and expertise to properly police North Korean sanctions-busting activities.

Another possible way to increase African support for the implementation of UN sanctions is to encourage more active African involvement in their creation and development. African governments need to be persuaded that the proliferation of North Korean arms and military services on

the continent is both destabilizing and dangerous to the continent as a whole and to their populations specifically. A substantially decreased North Korean presence will assist peacebuilding efforts across Africa. North Korean government officials actively sow discord and military conflict in Africa by selling cut-rate arms to the highest bidder. North Korean agents take advantage of Africa's political instability and internal strife by selling arms and thus earning hard currency for the Kim family regime, which may be funneled into Pyongyang's nuclear development program. In addition, by supporting North Korean activity in their countries, African governments are also complicit in the human rights abuses inflicted on North Korean workers in Africa. North Korean workers abroad are greatly restricted in their freedom of movement and cannot leave their work camps on their own. They are forced to work long hours, and their salaries go directly to the government in Pyongyang, which reportedly takes as much as 70 to 90 percent of their paychecks. These exploitative "loyalty taxes" go directly to the Korean Workers' Party, where some (if not most) of the money supports the Kim family regime's nuclear ambitions. As a 2018 report by C4ADS concluded, "The Kim regime sends citizens to work abroad under heavy surveillance, confiscates their wages, and uses the funds to support a nuclear program and domestic economy dependent on foreign currency."⁵⁹

The United States and its allies should also consider offering African governments greater incentives, such as security assistance and aid, in order to wean countries off dependence on North Korean services. In fact, South Korea's previous president Park Geun-hye attempted this strategy in 2015 with Uganda when she offered military and security assistance to Museveni's government, including ten cooperation agreements in the areas of military, health, and education, as a way to discourage continued cooperation with Pyongyang.⁶⁰ South Korea's substantial assistance to Uganda seemed to have been premised on Kampala's immediate halt of military ties with Pyongyang, which included training in marine warfare, weapons handling, and physical fitness. In 2016, this effort, as part of an international pressure campaign driven by the Obama administration, led the Ugandan government to cut its military ties with the DPRK.⁶¹ According to Ugandan news media, twenty-four North Korean military advisers at the Uganda Air Force Aviation Academy in Nakasongola District departed Uganda in September 2017.⁶² However, according to a 2018 report by the *Wall Street Journal*, other North Korean advisers "just moved underground," secretly remaining in Uganda to continue to assist government security forces.⁶³

Park's Africa strategy ultimately did not have time to come to fruition as she was removed from office in 2017, and her successor, Moon Jae-in, has not taken as aggressive an approach to supplanting North Korean influence in Africa.⁶⁴ In addition, the Trump administration called for greater African economic self-sufficiency, which emphasized free trade and business rather than aid and grants as the best pathway toward African development. Due to the ongoing COVID-19

pandemic and internal instability in many African states, the Biden administration should consider reinvigorating security assistance as a part of US-Africa relations. American aid and grants allow developing countries the opportunity to stabilize their internal situations and pursue proper legal channels for economic development. On the other hand, if the United States and South Korea opt to retreat financially from the continent, the risk of interstate conflict may increase, opening up the possibility for the North Korean arms trade to thrive. The United States should commit to both aid and trade as dual development policies for the African continent.

In addition, Washington should continue to pressure Beijing to enforce sanctions on North Korea, especially in regions where China has significant presence and clout, such as sub-Saharan Africa. China's influence on North Korea's Africa policy may be limited and indirect, but Washington and Beijing have significant scope to cooperate more closely on North Korea-related sanctions. Unfortunately, Washington's adversarial view of China's presence in Africa, seeing it as "debt diplomacy," may further decrease Beijing's willingness to crack down on North Korea's unlawful activities.⁶⁵ Furthermore, as an ardent supporter of Cold War-era African decolonization movements, China has revolutionary affinity for many of these postcolonial African states.⁶⁶ Thus, much like Pyongyang, Beijing has historical and ideological ties to many of the same nations, which makes it even more difficult to ensure Chinese cooperation on enforcing North Korea-related sanctions in Africa. In the future, Pyongyang could try to use its political ties with China and Beijing's economic power on the continent to expand its illicit activities in Africa. For example, North Korean workers could work on or at the periphery of Chinese construction projects in Africa. Chinese business deals and criminal networks also could facilitate greater trade in illicit African (or North Korean) goods. It would benefit the United States and other Western governments to forestall such moves by keeping an eye on the role that China plays in North Korea's Africa policy.

Finally, the West needs to acknowledge its colonialist past on the African continent and understand the reasons North Korea serves as a mutually beneficial partner for many African governments. Western perspectives of North Korea differ greatly from the African perspectives that shape and inform North Korea-Africa relations. During the Cold War, North Korea was widely seen as an admirable model of Third World development and rapid industrialization.⁶⁷ Its independent, anti-imperialist stance and its confident, often defiant attitude toward larger powers—particularly the global superpower, the United States—gave it an authoritative postcolonial voice among the many African movements embroiled in the national liberation struggles of the decolonization era. This perception has carried forward into the present day. Even though North Korea's international reputation has taken a decidedly negative turn since the end of the Cold War, some African governments still maintain a relatively positive view of the Kim family regime. Taking these different perspectives into account may help inform new strategies for encouraging African governments to cut ties with Pyongyang and enforce sanctions.

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