EMERGING INSIGHTS

From Missions to Missiles
The Role of North Korea’s Diplomatic Corps in Sanctions-Busting

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UN sanctions regime on North Korea is one of the most extensive multilateral sanctions regimes in history. In an effort to halt North Korea’s nuclear and missile programmes, restrictive measures have targeted WMD programmes and been used to counter Pyongyang’s revenue-raising activities that finance these programmes and keep the Kim regime in power. Since the 1970s, involvement in criminal activities and the procurement of commodities and arms has put the country’s diplomatic corps in a good position to evade sanctions.

This paper provides a loose typology of North Korean diplomatic involvement in sanctions-busting, arguing that it mainly falls into three areas: revenue-raising; procurement; and supporting roles. The paper uses examples to illustrate this framework and outline the full scope of North Korea’s diplomatic corps’ sanctions-busting. The paper argues that diplomatic networks – the missions, diplomats and their respective networks – are key nodes in the country’s sanctions-busting efforts, providing the skeleton of a near-to-global presence that has been used to undertake and support operations.

States have taken steps to reduce the size of North Korea’s networks and eject diplomats that have been found to be undertaking sanctioned activities. Further recommendations are provided in the paper’s conclusion, including:

• Treat the problem as transnational – the issue of North Korea’s diplomats operating regionally requires solutions that involve states working together.
• Find means to effectively share information – efficient information sharing can help to disrupt reposting of malfeasant officials.
• Scrutinise and limit diplomats’ financial affairs – states should implement the 2019 suggestions of the UN Panel of Experts on North Korean sanctions.
• Leverage open source intelligence – governments, intelligence agencies and those in non-governmental research organisations must dig into the often small social and economic circles surrounding North Korean embassies.
• Include diplomatic sanctions-busting in outreach efforts – given the central role of missions and diplomats in sanctions-busting, this should be factored into awareness-raising efforts.
• Undertake broader capacity building – this will continue to aid sanctions implementation and enforcement.
INTRODUCTION

The UN sanctions regime on North Korea is one of the most extensive multilateral sanctions regimes in history. In an effort to halt North Korea’s nuclear and missile programmes, restrictive measures have targeted WMD programmes and been used to counter Pyongyang’s revenue-raising activities that finance these programmes and keep the Kim regime in power.

The structure of North Korea’s authoritarian government and strict limits on how North Korean citizens live their lives has meant that the country’s international connections have tended to be relatively limited and closely linked to the North Korean state. As sanctions have restricted the ability of a wider range of North Korea’s entities to operate in foreign markets, the network of diplomats and embassies – as well as other North Korean operators accredited as diplomats – have become more important to the country.

A history of involvement in criminal activities and procurement of commodities and arms has, from the 1970s, put the country’s diplomatic corps in good stead to evade sanctions. The UN Panel of Experts on North Korea sanctions, set up in 2009 to monitor the implementation of sanctions, has repeatedly referenced the role of North Korea’s diplomatic corps in sanctions-busting activities. For example, in 2018, a UN Panel report noted that:

investigations show that diplomats of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea continue to play a key role in the country’s prohibited programmes, in particular trade representatives and missions which provide logistical support for arms transfers, military technicians and intelligence operations, acting as fronts for designated entities and individuals and engaging in commercial activities that violate the resolutions and the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations.1

In 2019, the UN Panel noted that diplomats continued to play a ‘key role in sanctions evasion’.2 Cases involving North Korean diplomats and diplomatic missions have been included in every Panel report, including the most recent released in March 2022.3

States have taken steps to reduce the size of North Korea’s networks and to eject diplomats found to be undertaking sanctioned activities. The 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (VCDR) provides protections for diplomats and missions who might otherwise face harassment, insecurity

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or persecution. North Korea’s diplomatic corps has been able to bust sanctions and commit criminal acts and hide behind the various immunities and privileges codified in the Convention.

Despite efforts to shrink, restrict and disrupt the role of North Korean diplomats in sanctions-busting, these networks still remain at the heart of North Korea’s efforts. Its nuclear and missile programmes continue to advance in light of their contribution. What more can be done to restrict these aspects of these networks?

This paper seeks to build on existing work on North Korea’s diplomats and their sanctions-busting activities; the existing literature is largely quite dated or focuses on specific parts of the role of diplomats in breach of the embargoes on arms and procurement and sales of WMD and dual-use technologies. It also provides a loose typology of North Korean diplomatic involvement in sanctions-busting, arguing that it mainly falls into three areas: revenue-raising; procurement; and supporting roles.

North Korea’s diplomatic networks are key nodes in the country’s sanctions-busting efforts

This paper aims to provide insights to government officials, the private sector and other researchers on the scope of the sanctions-busting activities of North Korea’s diplomats and to provide recommendations as to how the risks can best be mitigated. It uses fresh data from the UN Panel Reports and other open access sources, complemented by interviews with former government officials and other experts, to explore a number of cases of sanctions-busting activities undertaken by the North Korean diplomatic corps. The information landscape with regard to North Korea is challenging, and the UN Panel reports are relied upon extensively because their data presents an unparalleled insight into North Korea’s illicit networks and sanctions-busting. The cases used to illustrate the typology cover a wide swathe of sanctions-busting activity and cover many of the geographical areas where North Korea retains diplomatic missions.

The paper argues that North Korea’s diplomatic networks – the missions, diplomats and their respective networks – are key nodes in the country’s sanctions-busting efforts. The networks provide the skeleton of a near-to-global presence that has been used to undertake and support North Korea’s sanctions-busting operations. The competitive advantages that these actors have, which stem from their pre-existing locations, diplomatic immunity and


privileges, render them well placed to undertake sanctions-busting and to support these networks. A series of recommendations to further limit the scope for North Korean diplomats to breach UN sanctions is made.

This paper begins by outlining the background and context to North Korea’s diplomatic networks and illicit activity. It then presents a loose typology of the role of North Korean diplomats in sanctions-busting in terms of revenue-raising, procurement and supporting roles. The next section asks why diplomatic assets and privileges are used in this way. The paper then considers some of the existing measures taken to counter the diplomatic aspects of North Korea’s sanctions-busting networks. It closes with conclusions and recommendations.

NORTH KOREA’S DIPLOMATIC NETWORKS: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

As is the case for many states, North Korea’s diplomatic corps has long been used in a wide variety of roles in service of the North Korean state. The spectrum of roles here, however, includes a range of activities that do not reflect those undertaken by most diplomatic corps: direct revenue-raising; involvement in sanctions-busting; and even serious organised criminal activity. This section provides some historical background and context, discussing North Korea’s diplomatic network, the types of personnel, and the connection between historical illicit activity and the sanctions-busting era.

For a country that has a popular image as being largely cut off from the world, North Korea has a relatively large diplomatic network. Although far fewer countries hosted North Korean diplomatic missions in 2022 than during the twilight years of the Cold War and its immediate aftermath, the country still has a diplomatic presence in almost 50 countries. This is around half the size of its presence in the 1980s and early 1990s, when it had missions in around 100 countries.6 The economic, social and humanitarian crisis – the Arduous March – faced by the starving North Korean population in the 1990s likely precipitated the downsizing of the Cold War diplomatic network.

The current network, in 2022, is mostly comprised of embassies and consulates in the Middle East, Asia, Africa and Europe.7 There are a limited number of North Korean diplomatic missions located in the Americas compared with these other regions. A handful of countries – perhaps the most important countries in North Korea’s view – host both embassies and

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consulates. They include China and Russia, which both host an embassy and multiple consulates and trade representative offices. North Korea also has a small number of trade delegations in countries that do not host embassies or consulates, and three representative missions to the UN located in New York, Vienna and Geneva.

While North Korea does not have a formal diplomatic mission in Japan, it has a de facto embassy in the form of the Chongryon – the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan. The organisation, its personnel and premises benefit from a kind of unofficial immunity due to its semi-official role in facilitating communication with the North Korea regime. Over the years it has been implicated in a variety of illicit activities, including the transfer of funds and WMD-related goods to North Korea.8

There are some recent signs that North Korea’s network may expand slightly. In July 2022, North Korea recognised the independence of the two Russian-backed separatist regions of Ukraine – Donetsk and Luhansk9 – although Pyongyang’s intentions to establish diplomatic outposts there remain unclear, as does the future of these regions in the face of Ukrainian military successes. The document stating North Korean recognition of these regions’ independence was given to representatives of the breakaway regions in Moscow. While some analysts have suggested that this recognition could be of value to North Korean sanctions-busting, it is more likely that it was intended as symbolic in nature.10

As with most countries’ diplomatic missions, North Korean personnel based at and surrounding diplomatic missions fall into a number of categories. The haziness of these categories is undoubtedly exploited by the North Korean state when it undertakes illicit activities. Accredited diplomats – those accredited by host nations – receive the full range of diplomatic immunities and privileges under the VCDR 1961 (for further discussion, see section below, ‘What Competitive Advantages Do Diplomatic Assets Offer’).11 Other types of staff based at embassies receive different levels of immunity and privileges, dependent on protocols set out by host states and which are inconsistent across states.12 For example, at larger missions,

11. North Korea acceded to the treaty in 1980. There are 193 parties to the treaty.
administrative and technical staff and consular staff would tend to receive lower levels of immunity.\textsuperscript{13}

Specifics related to the shape of North Korea's diplomatic corps are worth noting. North Korea likely has few, if any, consular staff because the country issues few visas and has to look after a small number of North Korea nationals overseas. Unlike many states around the world that commonly employ 'locally engaged' staff in their missions to fill many of the lower-level administrative roles, North Korea probably employs few, if any, staff for political/ideological, security and financial reasons.

This paper considers a wider range of roles that come under the heading of 'diplomatic personnel' because of their proximity to embassies and their role in sanctions-busting. This includes intelligence operatives, primarily from the Reconnaissance General Bureau (RGB), North Korea's main intelligence agency, listed in 2016 by the UN for its involvement in breaches of the arms embargo.\textsuperscript{14} The practice of posting intelligence officers overseas in embassies, often under official cover, is commonplace for states. Diplomatic accreditation is also given to a range of other individuals, including overseas representatives of North Korean entities sanctioned by the UN. Representatives of the state's arms trading companies, including Korea Mining and Development Trading Corporation (KOMID) and Green Pine Associated Corporation, have received diplomatic accreditation.\textsuperscript{15} Furthermore, former North Korean diplomats – those that benefited from accreditation in the past – have also played a key part in North Korean networks, using overseas expertise and familiarity to commercial advantage in the sanctions era.\textsuperscript{16}


\textsuperscript{16} A key example is Yun Ho Jin, who served as representative to the International Atomic Energy Agency in the early 1990s. Concurrently, he was involved in nuclear-related illicit procurement from European suppliers, and in 2009 was listed by the UN Security Council as ‘the director of Namchongang Trading Corporation, [and] oversees the import of items needed for the [DPRK’s] uranium enrichment program’. See UN Security Council, ‘Yun Ho Jin’, 29 October 2014, <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/sanctions/1718/materials/summaries/individual/yun-ho-jin>, accessed 3 October 2022.
North Korean sanctions-busters working at and around the missions are known to use three of the four types of North Korean passport issued by Pyongyang for travel and identification. Accredited diplomats use ‘diplomatic passports’ – issued to ‘diplomats, high-level officials ... of the Foreign Ministry and KWP [Korean Workers Party] and its subordinate offices’. Others use ‘official passports’, issued to those working ‘on official duty’, and ‘service passports’, ‘issued to government officials other than diplomats working at embassies or trade representative offices’. These passport types can provide a sense of legitimacy or importance to the traveller, but may also allow operatives to benefit from confusion around immunities and privileges.

Since the 1970s, North Korean diplomatic missions have allegedly been self-financing – raising revenue to cover their own running costs and returning surplus funds to North Korea. Their revenue-raising efforts have included the full spectrum of normal licit business activity, sanctionable activities since the introduction of the UN sanctions regime in the 2000s, and straightforward criminal activity. Their role in relation to revenue-raising first came to light in the 1970s with a spate of drug-trafficking cases.

Understanding the financial contribution that these assets make to the North Korean state and the Kim regime is challenging – with few estimates available. According to one 2015 account, North Korea’s embassies and diplomats have collectively provided $50–100 million per annum to the Kim regime’s finances. This account, which draws on unclear sourcing, was released just prior to the UN imposing many of the sectoral sanctions. Concern over diplomatic abuses reached their height at the UN in 2016–17. Although this is a fairly small amount, the study also suggests that

17. The fourth type of passport, ‘ordinary passport’, is seldom issued.
20. As explored below, other North Korean operatives are known to have used foreign passports (with a lack of clarity regarding their authenticity) as well as to hold multiple forged passports. See UN Security Council, ‘Final Report of the Panel of Experts Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2345 (2017),’ p. 191.
the Kim family is rumoured to hold $4–5 billion dollars, and highlights four or five other sources that also provide between $100 and $300 million annually to the North Korean regime.23

Other sources also suggest that a figure in the region of $50–100 million would be a small part of the North Korean regime’s revenue. At the time that wider sectoral UN sanctions were put in place in 2017, the US government suggested that the new measures would reduce North Korea’s annual export revenue by $1 billion, at a time when the export revenue was estimated at $3 billion.24 However, a full understanding of the economic contribution of North Korea’s missions is not possible, as it is impossible to obtain a full understanding of their activities.

Viewing the role and value of the missions and diplomats in sanctions-busting in purely economic terms also ignores the other range of roles that they play. In acting as North Korea’s connections to the commercial and industrial worlds outside the country, embassies and diplomatic personnel have also traditionally played more specific roles beyond revenue-raising. They have been nodes in a global network for procurement of a wide range of goods and commodities that the Kim family, the Pyongyang elites and the North Korean state require from outside the country. This procurement of goods, which has been seen since at least the 1970s, has ranged from luxury, prestige and cultural items to industrial and dual-use goods.25

When the UN Security Council placed sanctions on North Korea in 2006, the country’s diplomatic networks were ready to rise to the challenge. While North Korea had previously faced a patchwork of restrictions – unilateral sanctions and export controls imposed by various countries, as well as transnational crime prevention efforts – the UN sanctions regime placed universal restrictions on North Korean activity, expanding over the following decade to encompass further business areas. North Korea’s missions and diplomatic corps were already based in many key markets and jurisdictions with closer diplomatic and economic ties to North Korea. They were already experienced in three key areas: revenue-raising; procurement; and supporting illicit networks.

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25. For example, the activities of diplomat Kim Jong Ryul in Europe in the 1970s. See Ingrid Steiner-Gashi and Dardan Gashi, Im Dienst des Diktators: Leben und Flucht eines Nordkoreanischen Agenten (Vienna: Ueberreuter Verlag, 2010).
WHAT ROLES DO DIPLOMATS PLAY IN SANCTIONS-BUSTING? A LOOSE TYPOLOGY

Following a broader historical context to sanctions-busting by North Korean diplomats in the previous section, this section provides a loose typology of the roles played by North Korea’s missions and personnel in three main areas: revenue-raising; procurement; and broader network-supporting roles. Recent examples illustrate the different types of activity.

REVENUE-RAISING

North Korean diplomats frequently run businesses and are involved in other commercial activities to raise hard currency. This seeks to offset some of the effects of sanctions, providing funding for the WMD and military programmes, as well as helping the self-funding embassies and other diplomatic missions to sustain themselves. These sanctions-busting business activities are hugely diverse, from involvement in operations smuggling North Korean commodities into or out of the country to running or assisting service businesses and directly renting embassy properties for profit to selling goods obtained as part of the embassy’s tax-free allowances.

Trading Sanctioned Commodities. The expansion of UN sanctions on North Korea in 2016 and 2017 saw a wider range of North Korean industrial sectors targeted by sanctions, which up to this point had been heavily focused on the programmes themselves. It included 2016 sanctions on exports of coal, iron, iron ore, gold, titanium ore, vanadium ore, and rare earth minerals, as well as a 2017 cap on imports of petroleum products. North Korean diplomats have been involved in continuing to facilitate exports and imports of these commodities, with oil imports facilitating economic and military activities in country, and exports – especially of coal – providing significant revenue.

In a 2019 UN Panel report, it was noted a ‘key figure’ in one of the identified coal shipments was an ‘Indonesian commodity trader and broker who had regular meetings with diplomats at the Embassy of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea in Jakarta’, and was introduced to a number of North Korean businessmen through the mission. A 2017 report by the UN Panel noted that the North Korean embassy in Moscow was ‘abusing its diplomatic status by operating as a front for its clandestine vanadium sale operations’, with the address being used by Korea Kumsan Trading Corporation, an entity that ‘controls mines and chemical factories that extract and refine prohibited minerals, including vanadium, gold, zinc, copper and iron, with its main export being vanadium pentoxide’.

**Overseas Businesses.** North Korea’s missions and personnel have also been involved in the operations of North Korean overseas businesses. The Malaysia–Korea Partners (MKP), a series of joint-venture companies established from 1996 that operated in 20 countries, allegedly fulfilled contracts worth over $350 million in information technology, construction, mining, coal trading, security and transport.\(^{29}\) The UN Panel noted in 2018 that the MKP case highlighted ‘evasion and breaches of a wide array of sanctions provisions’ including the ‘use of diplomats of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea in business facilitation’.\(^{30}\) The South African aspect of MKP’s operations, for example, suggests that officials were relied on to ‘make introductions and facilitate relationships’.\(^{31}\)

**Leasing Diplomatic Real Estate.** North Korean diplomats have also directly used the diplomatic premises and privileges themselves to generate revenue. A number of embassies have historical real estate owned by North Korea that can be rented out for income. For example, the large embassy property in Berlin long hosted a youth hostel that owed the North Korean embassy rent of €38,000 a month. A German court ruled the hostel should close in 2020 after a long and dragged-out controversy.\(^{32}\) Other North Korean embassies have also rented property to local businesses, including those in Bulgaria, Poland, Romania and Pakistan.\(^{33}\)

**Abusing Diplomatic Allowances.** North Korea’s diplomatic corps’ revenue-raising efforts also encompass low-level illicit economic activity. For example, diplomatic alcohol allowances – a direct product of diplomatic privileges – have seemingly been abused by North Korean diplomats to raise funds. The greatest profits are to be seen in markets with limits on alcohol sales, for example Pakistan, where a 2017 burglary of a North Korean diplomat’s residence saw alcohol stolen worth $150,000 on the black market.\(^{34}\) Former officials have expressed suspicion that such activities are widespread across North Korean missions that order large quantities of alcohol, despite being small and with limited social events serving alcohol.\(^{35}\) These direct abuses of diplomatic real estate and other allowances are likely to provide

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\(^{34}\) The diplomat was named as Hyon Ki Yong. See Drazen Jorgic, ‘In Pakistan, North Korean Diplomat’s Alcohol Stash Raises Bootlegging Suspicions’, *Reuters*, 8 November 2017.

\(^{35}\) Author online interview with former diplomat, June 2022.
minimal income – in the low millions of dollars annually – when compared to other activities.

**Arms Dealing.** North Korea’s diplomats frequently play the role of arms dealers. Representatives of North Korea’s UN-designated arms dealing companies are also provided with accreditation and posted to embassies overseas. This is not an unusual role for diplomats, both for unsanctioned arms supplying states and also within sanctioned states. For North Korea, arms trading represents a means of revenue generation. The country has a large military-industrial complex and having been sanctioned for many years has developed domestically a wide range of equipment and upgrades for ageing designs. North Korea is also able to offer some key niche capabilities, such as maintaining and modernising Soviet-era systems.

The UN Panel has noted that diplomats ‘or officials travelling on diplomatic or service passports’ have facilitated ‘numerous violations of the arms embargo’.36 The precise roles played by diplomats in relation to the arms trade are wide ranging: acting as trade representatives for North Korea’s arms trading companies; acting as brokers for arms deals; brokering refurbishment and training contracts; and acting as market researchers or touting for business at arms fairs. Also, more ad hoc roles may be played by diplomats. For example, a diplomat was involved in negotiating the release of a huge shipment of impounded rocket-propelled grenades seized in Egypt in 2016.37

**PROCUREMENT**

**WMD, Dual-Use and Military Technologies.** Diplomats have long been involved in procuring technology for North Korea’s WMD and military programmes. Most recently, the UN Panel report released in 2022 noted a Moscow-based diplomat, O Yong Ho, had been involved in procuring a range of technologies for North Korea’s missile programme between 2016 and 2020. Member state information suggests that the diplomat was an ‘employee of the office of the Commercial Counsellor of the Embassy of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea in Moscow in charge of procurement of civilian production-related and consumer goods in the country’.38

The Moscow-based diplomat successfully procured, or attempted to procure, aramid fibre, manufacturing equipment, a spinning nozzle, chemicals and stainless steel used in missile fuel production and construction of submarine hulls.39 He sought to obtain 3,000 tons of steel for submarine hulls, and he

allegedly ‘brought a delegation of North Korea officials to Russia in late 2016 to inspect the steel’. Information released with US sanctions suggests that the diplomat worked with a specific Russian national and his company to do much of this procurement.

This example of WMD-related procurement is the latest of many, with a number of allegations surrounding North Korea’s embassy in Berlin. Publicly released German intelligence reports refer to the role of the embassy from the mid-2000s, with the UN Panel also noting diplomats were involved in efforts to acquire computer numerically controlled machine tools in this timeframe. In 2012 and 2013, Ri Yun Thaek, a Berlin-based diplomat, was expelled for attempting to procure a multi-gas monitor, an item of potential use in chemical weapons production. More recently, in 2018, a senior German intelligence official suggested that the Berlin embassy had been used to acquire missile- and nuclear-related dual-use technologies since 2016.

Information and Intangible Technology. North Korean diplomats have also played roles in facilitating sanctioned scientific collaboration, obtaining export-controlled information and attempting to steal technical secrets to benefit the weapons programmes. This is essentially a form of procurement – specifically of ‘intangible’ technology consisting of sensitive information, knowledge and expertise. Some of these roles are played by diplomats, whereas generally they are more typical of intelligence officers seeking to gather commercial, industrial or technical intelligence.

Moscow-based North Korean diplomats have participated in the activities of the Scientific Council and Committee of the Plenipotentiaries of the Russian-based Joint Institute for Nuclear Research, an international scientific research organisation between governments. The organisation hosts scientists from 18 countries, including many states using nuclear science purely for peaceful

40. Ibid., p. 158.
43. Based on information provided by the German government. See UN Security Council, ‘Final Report of the Panel of Experts Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2407 (2018)’, p. 34.
applications. North Korean diplomatic attendance illustrates that North Korea’s missions can facilitate sensitive scientific and research collaboration through building networks abroad. Indeed, the country has been shown to have a great interest in sanctions-prohibited international academic research projects in a wide range of scientific and technical areas.46

Diplomats have also played a more direct role in trying to acquire – through espionage and theft – technical information of use in WMD and military programmes. The Moscow-based diplomat whose activities were outlined in the 2022 Panel report was also involved in procuring information related to solid fuel missile production, cruise missiles and manufacturing equipment.47 Diplomats from the Trade Representative Office in Belarus – Ryu Song Chol and Ri Thae Gil – were caught in a sting in Ukraine in 2011 trying to access what they believed was a secret academic thesis on rocket technology.48

**Luxury Goods.** Procurement of luxury goods is another area in which diplomats may be involved, with sought-after items a means for the regime to maintain the support of Pyongyang elites. Luxury goods procurement by North Korea has been outlawed by UN sanctions since 2006, although member states have not been able to reach agreement on a ‘luxury’ goods list. There is some evidence of North Korean diplomatic involvement in these procurement networks, many of which share features with those for dual-use goods and other commodities.49

In 2018, the US Treasury designated a North Korean diplomat – Ri Song Un, an economic and commercial counsellor at the Mongolian embassy – for efforts to procure luxury goods and weapons from Turkey.50 Some other examples also indicate that diplomats are involved in trading luxury goods to raise revenue, and perhaps to dispose of surplus or ‘old-fashioned’ merchandise. In 2017, Bangladesh Customs Intelligence seized a Rolls-Royce Ghost limousine, falsely declared in documentation, that appeared to have been imported for resale by a North Korean diplomat.51

**Other Goods.** North Korea’s diplomats have also been involved in procuring other items, in fact the full gamut of items required by North Korean government, industry and elites. These goods are wanted either as they cannot be produced inside the country, because sufficient quantities

cannot be produced, or because North Korea’s industry is prioritising other efforts. While many of these goods are not explicitly covered by UN sanctions lists or export controls, they could be if destined for sanctioned end users, for example.

In 2016 a shipment of four generator units was interdicted by the Netherlands, with the subsequent investigation highlighting the role of Kim Chol Yong, a North Korean diplomat based in an EU member state. This was the third consignment arranged by the diplomat, with the shipment destined for a North Korea-based trading company associated with designated entity Office 39. North Korea has long used its diplomatic networks to obtain uncontrolled commodities – at least since the 1970s – perhaps because they cannot be manufactured to such high-quality levels in the country.

A further example of more general procurement, highlighting the role that diplomats’ family members frequently play in these networks, concerns the wife of Kim Su Gwang, an RGB officer accredited as a deputy trade representative in Belarus, who was involved in procuring unspecified goods while her husband spent most of his time outside Belarus. A 2019 Panel report notes that she ‘purchased items in neighbouring countries for shipment back to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, using the name of a Chinese company based in Beijing and by transferring funds for the purchases through an account at a Chinese bank in Shanghai’.

SUPPORTING ROLES

**Financial Support.** Diplomats and missions have frequently been shown to provide financial support to North Korea’s sanctions-busting networks. Diplomats overseas are permitted to hold bank accounts with local financial institutions to allow them to operate their overseas embassies and consulates. As the Panel has noted, ‘diplomatic missions of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea open accounts that, in effect, perform the services

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that a financial institution would’. North Korean diplomats have also been known to try to access funds of North Korean entities frozen by banks.

North Korean diplomats have used various means to open bank accounts at financial institutions – particularly a wider range of accounts for potential sanctions-busting activities – beyond those required for more legitimate activities related to the diplomatic mission. These include well-tried modus operandi of those involved in financial crime, such as using multiple aliases, addresses and front company names. North Korean diplomats have also been known to use the names of family members to open bank accounts.

There are also cases where representatives of North Korean financial institutions have been posted abroad and accredited as diplomats. This itself would not normally be an illegal act, but these representatives are essentially overseas agents of sanctioned entities. For example, Han Jang Su, a representative of North Korea's Foreign Trade Bank (North Korea's primary foreign exchange bank), was posted as a ‘Third Secretary of the Commercial Counsellor’s Section’ at the North Korean embassy in Moscow from 2017, shortly before he was included in a UN travel ban. In 2013 the US designated the Foreign Trade Bank and it was included in a UN sanctions resolution in the same year. The diplomat’s activities in Moscow on behalf of the bank are unclear, and the Russian government told the UN Panel that he remains in Russia legally.

Beyond providing access to banking, diplomats have been involved in moving funds using means outside the global financial system. For example, diplomats have been heavily involved in couriering cash and gold. In 2015 and 2016, two diplomats – Kim Yong Chol and Jang Jong Son – based at the North Korean embassy in Iran, who were also representatives of UN-designated North Korean arms company KOMID, took more than 282 flights between Tehran and Dubai as couriers. More recent reports suggest that smuggling on this route has been occurring since at least 2009 and has continued into the 2020s.

Diplomats have also been involved in moving funds using means outside the global financial system.

Logistical Support. Diplomats have also been known to provide logistical support to North Korea's networks. This has been a historical role played...
by diplomats, particularly alongside their role in procurement. For example, cases from the Cold War era and immediately after showed North Korean diplomats involved in putting procured goods onto aircraft and sometimes flying back to North Korea with them.\textsuperscript{63} While diplomats used to play logistical roles, more recently they have often been less directly involved in handling the goods themselves, and frequently rely on commercial shipping methods.\textsuperscript{64}

Diplomats and missions have continued to play a role in organising logistics, and missions have even been listed as consignees for some shipments. In the Chong Chon Gang case, where a large shipment of arms was interdicted in Panama on a North Korean ship in 2013, officials from the North Korean embassy in Cuba were implicated in the transfer by documents left on the ship. The Chinpo Shipping Company, a facilitator in the financial aspects of the transfer, was also co-located with the North Korean embassy in Singapore.\textsuperscript{65} The North Korean embassy in Syria was listed as a consignee on a large number of shipments of dual-use and military goods between 2012 and 2017.\textsuperscript{66}

**WHAT COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGES DO DIPLOMATIC ASSETS OFFER?**

After almost 50 years of using diplomatic missions for revenue-raising, procurement and support of its networks, and their use becoming arguably more important in the UN sanctions era, it is important to ask why these diplomatic assets have come to be used so extensively in North Korea’s networks. Whether the result of deliberate strategy by Pyongyang, entrepreneurialism and adaptation by the missions, or a combination of the two, there are clear rationales for this use of these assets. The concept of ‘competitive advantage’, certain attributes that allow actors to outperform competitors, which is frequently used in the business world, has salience in this context. What competitive advantages do the missions and personnel have relative to other entities from the private sector – private intermediaries and brokers, for example – that make their use appealing?

**COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGES**

At a very basic level, these outposts are already positioned, have networks surrounding them and are often based in countries with which North Korea has its most important pre-existing diplomatic and commercial relationships. These jurisdictions may be key industrialised markets that provide opportunities for procurement, or more laxly regulated, providing a

\textsuperscript{63} Steiner-Gashi and Gashi, \textit{Im Dienst des Diktators}.

\textsuperscript{64} Hastings, \textit{A Most Enterprising Country}, pp. 62–63.


more permissive environment in which North Korean diplomats can operate. There are, however, also a number of competitive advantages that merit consideration beyond the basic existence of these assets.67

First, those with diplomatic status have immunities under the VCDR 1961 that mean they can operate without concern about detention or prosecution. The VCDR dictates that diplomats are ‘inviolable’, being not liable to arrest, with only the sending state able to waive this immunity.68 States are only able to declare diplomats as personae non grata and expel them.69 These immunities represent a competitive advantage for North Korea’s diplomats in relation to sanctions-busting.

Although there are relatively few arrests, prosecutions or indeed other actions taken against sanctions-busters, diplomatic immunity means that even outrageous involvement by North Korean diplomats will see them expelled at worst and possibly banned from entry to other states after information is shared with partners. It also means that states seeking to counter sanctions-busting could not compel diplomats to provide evidence to a criminal investigation or in a sanctions-busting court case, thus providing a layer of protection for these types of networks. There is some evidence to suggest that immunity has made it complicated for states to deal with sanctions evasion by North Korean diplomats.70

Second, the VCDR provides other diplomatic privileges that can be exploited for sanctions-busting purposes. They include the use of diplomatic pouches, mission premises and embassy vehicles, which are sacrosanct and cannot be searched, and all of which could be used to help to facilitate the transfer of small items and could be particularly useful means for transferring high-value sanctioned goods.

Recent cases suggest that these privileges and related advantages do not solely benefit North Korea’s operatives with North Korean diplomatic status. Sok Kha, a North Korean national and allegedly an RGB officer, whose operations in Cambodia were revealed in 2021, was found to be

67. Basic framework adapted from Salisbury, ‘Spies, Diplomats and Deceit’.
68. See the VCDR, Article 29: ‘The person of a diplomatic agent shall be inviolable. He shall not be liable to any form of arrest or detention’; Article 31: ‘A diplomatic agent shall enjoy immunity from the criminal jurisdiction of the receiving State’; Article 32: ‘The immunity from jurisdiction of diplomatic agents and of persons enjoying immunity ... may be waived by the sending State’.
69. Article 9 of the VCDR reads: ‘The receiving State may at any time and without having to explain its decision, notify the sending State that the head of the mission or any member of the diplomatic staff of the mission is persona non grata or that any other member of the staff of the mission is not acceptable.’
70. For example, Germany told the UN Panel that it had resorted to expulsion of a diplomat for involvement in WMD-related procurement, because legal action was impossible ‘owing to his diplomatic status’. See UN Security Council, ‘Final Report of the Panel of Experts Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2407 (2018)’, p. 34.
holding a Cambodian diplomatic passport. The Cambodian authorities have claimed that the passport and supporting documents were fake. Although he held a Cambodian diplomatic passport, it is unclear whether Sok Kha was accredited outside Cambodia, and it is unlikely that he was. Indeed, the benefits afforded by non-North Korean diplomatic passports are likely greater than those issued by Pyongyang. They would certainly attract less attention, although they would be less easy for North Koreans to obtain. In another example, a Malaysia-based North Korean operative, Ri Jong Chol, who was not believed to be an accredited diplomat and was linked to Kim Jong Nam’s assassination in 2017, allegedly had use of a car with diplomatic plates.

Other factors also merit consideration regarding diplomats’ competitive advantages. Given their status as trained government officials and their proximity to the state, diplomats may be viewed as being able to provide enhanced levels of secrecy and operational security for the activities of sanctions-busting networks. Also, there is the question of whether more trust can be put in these officials to serve the interests of the North Korean state than in North Korean or other nationals in the private sector acting as intermediaries, brokers or conduits.

Secrecy and operational security, however, do not always appear to be a particular strength of North Korean officialdom. Similarly, while diplomats may be more loyal (and North Korean officials may feel they can trust them more) than private sector entities, in recent years there have been a number of diplomat defections, and the skimming-off of funds by diplomatic procurement agents before defection is not without precedent.

The air of legitimacy and respectability surrounding embassies as key organs of international diplomacy may allow North Korea to hide its activities in plain sight. Do diplomats have an aura of standing and reputation over and above private sector actors that they can use to their benefit? There is some evidence that North Korea has claimed embassy links for its activities when any such connections are less than explicit, suggesting a perceived benefit

74. For example, Thae Yong Ho, former deputy head of the North Korean embassy in London, and one of the most senior diplomatic defectors, defected in 2016. Kim Jong Ryul, a European-based diplomat, defected in the 1990s, having taken a 3% cut of all the procurement deals he undertook for dual-use goods, commodities and luxury items. See Julia Damianova, ‘North Korea’s Personal Shopper Has Tales to Tell’, LA Times, 4 April 2010.
However, North Korea’s diplomatic corps certainly has one of the worst reputations globally, if not the worst, for criminal activity. As well as having competitive advantages of immunity and privilege, the corps undoubtedly also attracts a disproportionate amount of interest from intelligence agencies and others in host countries.

MISSION AND DIPLOMAT SPECIALISATION

Following on from these broader competitive advantages held by diplomats, there are a number of rationales for specific missions featuring heavily in specific types of sanctions-busting activities.

North Korea’s diplomatic missions have tended to be larger in states with which they have stronger and more important historical relationships. A larger mission could mean greater self-funding requirements, and more staff to undertake sanctioned activities. Although some cases of sanctions-busting have emanated from North Korea’s larger missions in China and Russia, they are fewer than would be proportional to the size and importance of those missions. Investigations in these jurisdictions, however, are challenging, with the Russian and Chinese governments only cooperating with the UN Panel in a limited way.

Beyond Pyongyang’s core Cold War partners, North Korea has many diplomatic missions based in the developing world, particularly in Africa and Asia. These missions have featured prominently in North Korea’s arms-dealing networks, since they are located in prospective customer states. They have also assisted in facilitating a wide range of other revenue-raising activities in breach of sanctions – from security assistance projects and large construction contracts to the erection of statues. Missions in specific markets have been useful for procurement of certain types of products in breach of sanctions – notably those in Europe for dual-use technologies and luxury goods.

Regional hubs have also been used by North Korea to span different markets, with diplomatic personnel frequently operational across multiple jurisdictions. In some sense this reflects the way North Korea, and other smaller diplomatic networks, have operated, with some diplomats accredited to countries without missions and based at embassies in nearby jurisdictions. This has allowed North Korea to leverage its network more efficiently – both for diplomatic and more illicit and unorthodox missions – given it only has locations in around a quarter of the world’s jurisdictions. Operating across borders in neighbouring jurisdictions may also allow diplomats to operate with a greater degree of anonymity.

75. For example, when $450,000 was seized at Kuala Lumpur International Airport from North Koreans associated with a military communications company, Pan Systems Pyongyang, they claimed it belonged to the North Korean embassy in Malaysia. See UN Security Council, ‘Final Report of the Panel of Experts Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2276 (2016)’, p. 78.
North Korea has also made use of specialisations within specific mission staff. A number of embassies have historically hosted science and technology attachés who likely play a greater role than diplomats in WMD-related and dual-use procurement. Similarly, military attachés likely play a greater role in the sale of arms, weapons maintenance and military training packages.

MEASURES TO COUNTER DIPLOMATIC SANCTIONS-BUSTING

Given the important and persistent roles played by North Korea's diplomatic corps and missions, what more can states do to address their role in sanctions-busting? The UN Security Council has raised the issue and enacted sanctions resolutions to counter the role of diplomatic missions in North Korea's sanctions-busting, especially around 2016 and 2017. UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2270 (2016) decided that member states should expel North Korean diplomats and others acting in a ‘governmental capacity’ and working on the behalf of designated entities or assisting in sanctions evasion.

UNSCR 2321 (2016) went further, calling on states to reduce the staff counts at North Korean diplomatic missions and to limit bank accounts to one per mission and one per diplomat. It also restated that under the VCDR diplomats should not ‘practice for personal profit any professional or commercial activity’ and that North Korea’s diplomats are ‘prohibited in the receiving State from such practice of professional or commercial activity’. Furthermore, the resolution decided that states should prohibit the use of mission-leased or -owned property for any purpose other than diplomatic or consular activities. UNSCR 2371 (2017) further demanded North Korea comply with its obligations under the VCDR.

The UN sanctions list has three diplomat-related entries: two Syria-based representatives of Tanchon Commercial Bank with diplomatic passports; and Namchongang Trading Corporation, a procurement entity for the nuclear programme run by a former diplomat who served as the North Korean representative to the International Atomic Energy Agency in the early 1990s. However, there have been no additions to the sanctions list since 2017, which was around the time diplomats became a greater focus in the

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76. Author online interview with former intelligence official, May 2022.
77. UN Security Council, ‘Resolution 2270 Adopted by the Security Council at its 7638th Meeting, on 2 March 2016’.
79. UN Security Council, ‘Resolution 2371 Adopted by the Security Council at its 8019th Meeting, on 5 August 2017’.
sanctions resolutions and for the Panel, largely due to Chinese objections on the Security Council and Sanctions Committee.81

UN sanctions are implemented at the national level through an interagency process typically involving government departments and customs, enforcement and intelligence agencies. States gather intelligence on sanctions evasion, including by diplomats, with some intelligence sharing occurring with allies and partners, particularly among the Five Eyes intelligence alliance and within the EU.82 States that take a particular interest in countering North Korean sanctions-busting – the US is the pre-eminent example – frequently engage, use démarche and put pressure on partners to act against sanctions-evasion activity.

The US and the EU have also designated North Korean diplomats in their respective sanctions regimes. Diplomatic immunity prevents US law enforcement from using many of the extraterritorial law enforcement tools that it has used against other aspects of North Korean and other sanctions networks.83 The EU has sanctioned a number of the diplomats that are identified in the Panel reports but remain unlisted by the UN. These include: diplomats involved in arms dealing for designated entities in Angola; accredited RGB officers involved in facilitating financial transfers in and out of the EU; a Cairo-based diplomat involved in the arms trade; and a third secretary at the Beijing embassy linked to an online advertisement for Lithium-6, an isotope used in nuclear weapons.84 Given recent challenges in obtaining consensus for new sanctions measures at the Security Council, especially in light of the conflict in Ukraine, further measures against North Korea’s diplomats are likely to be unilateral or coordinated between like-minded states rather than at the UN.85

North Korean diplomats have been expelled from, or asked to leave, other states because of involvement in illicit procurement, sanctions-busting or links to designated entities. These include: the expulsion of Ri Yun Thaek from Germany in 2012–13 for WMD-related illicit procurement (the gas monitor discussed above); the ejection of two Myanmar-based and two Uganda-based diplomats in 2016 and 2017, all four having acted as KOMID

81. Author online interview with former diplomat, June 2022.
82. Ibid.
84. This includes Kim Hyok Chan and Chol Young Jon for activities in Angola, Su Gwang Kim for financial transfers in a number of different states, An Jong Hyok representing state arms trading companies based in Cairo, and Yun Chol for advertising the Lithium-6. See EU Sanctions Map, <https://www.sanctionsmap.eu/#/main>, accessed 3 October 2022.
Diplomatic immunity also presents challenges when it comes to expulsion – with the German government noting difficulties in taking legal action against Ri Yun Thaek due to his diplomatic status. In the case of the two diplomats in Myanmar – and likely the ones in Germany, Uganda and Angola – expulsion only occurred following the engagement of and pressure from the US government. As discussed above, the practice of cycling diplomats through different deployments also often sees those sent home reposted to new jurisdictions.

A number of states have reduced the size of North Korean missions or downgraded their relationships, although often more as a response to North Korea’s nuclear and missile testing than sanctions-busting. For example, in the aftermath of the country’s 2017 nuclear test, ambassadors and sometimes other diplomats based in Kuwait, Peru, Mexico and Spain were asked to leave by their host governments.

Surprisingly few states have closed North Korea’s missions completely, likely seeing benefits to maintaining diplomatic relations. Malaysia closed North Korea’s embassy in Kuala Lumpur in 2021, almost four years after North Korean agents assassinated Kim Jong Nam with VX nerve agent at Kuala Lumpur International Airport in 2017. The diplomatic spat escalated over Malaysia’s willingness to extradite a key North Korean procurement agent to the US.

Concerns over reciprocal actions against missions in Pyongyang are clear, especially when respective missions are already small, and further reductions

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would restrict diplomatic operations to a very basic level.\textsuperscript{91} Any discussion about states with missions in Pyongyang taking further measures to inspect documents or goods transferred by North Korea in diplomatic bags also leads to concerns over reciprocity.\textsuperscript{92}

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: FURTHER STEPS TO COUNTER DIPLOMATIC MALFEASANCE

This paper has argued that North Korea's diplomatic corps – the missions, diplomats and their respective networks – are key nodes in the country's sanctions-busting efforts. It has presented a loose typology of the roles played by these assets in revenue-raising, procurement and supporting sanctions-busting networks. It has discussed the main competitive advantages these actors have which stem from their existence in useful locations and history of illicit activity, and their diplomatic immunity and privileges. Together these characteristics make these assets well placed to undertake sanctions-busting and to support North Korea's overseas networks.

Disrupting these aspects of North Korea's networks is clearly challenging, due not only to the issues of immunity, but also to fear of reciprocal measures. The paper has sought to provide insights as to the scope of the sanctions-busting activities of North Korea's diplomats for government officials, the private sector and other researchers.

The paper provides six recommendations for further action to counter the diplomatic aspects of North Korea's sanctions-busting networks.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. \textbf{Treat the problem as transnational}. Given the way that some diplomats have operated regionally, dealing arms or conducting espionage in neighbouring countries, and the role played by embassies in third countries, the risks posed by North Korea's diplomats and missions should be treated as transnational rather than national. The North Korean diplomats' role in these networks is more akin to actors in transnational criminal networks than to a threat that can be addressed by any single jurisdiction's laws and enforcement bodies. Means should be sought to restrict the ability of North Korea's diplomats to operate regionally – by encouraging the sharing of intelligence, financial and banking information and encouraging dialogue between states on the risks to this end.

\textsuperscript{91} Author online interview with former diplomat, June 2022.

\textsuperscript{92} \textit{Ibid.}
2. **Find means to effectively share information.** Efficient information sharing can help to disrupt repostings of malfeasant officials, thereby degrading the network’s ability to build expertise and connections over time. For example, when Ri Yun Thaek was expelled by Germany, other EU states were informed, resulting in his later non-accreditation by missions in Austria and Bulgaria.93

3. **Scrutinise and limit diplomats’ financial affairs.** Steps can be taken to further the scrutiny and oversight of diplomats’ financial affairs. In 2019 the UN Panel of Experts recommended that governments take further steps to oversee the financial affairs of North Korea’s diplomats. This includes providing financial institutions with the details of diplomats’ family members to stop accounts in their names being used, centralising diplomats’ banking at a single institution and advising banks to reject applications to open accounts made by diplomats accredited in other countries.94

4. **Leverage open source intelligence.** Governments, intelligence agencies and those in non-governmental research organisations must dig into the often small social and economic circles surrounding North Korean embassies, diplomats, family, the diaspora and likely a handful of companies and local contacts. Open source research has uncovered examples of links between North Korea’s diplomats and illicit trade, for example the Lithium-6 case mentioned above.95 Building up the capability of local research organisations and investigative journalists could help to uncover these networks.

5. **Include diplomatic sanctions-busting in outreach efforts.** The above recommendations and the implementation of sanctions across the board is contingent on further and continuing outreach to countries across the world. Since governments deem the missions a key feature of North Korean proliferation and arms-trafficking networks, these aspects should be given further attention in outreach efforts relating to sanctions. Case studies should include diplomatic cases, and true scepticism about the activities of North Korea’s missions should be encouraged.

6. **Build broader capacity.** Broader capacity building to aid sanctions implementation will help and should be continued. This includes helping states to develop regulatory frameworks for export control, border control and proliferation finance, as well as the tools to implement and enforce these controls. It also includes efforts to counter corruption. It is clear that these networks – including their diplomatic elements – thrive in jurisdictions where corruption is rife.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Summary of Typology

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Broad Area</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Example(s)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Revenue-raising</td>
<td>Trading sanctioned commodities</td>
<td>Oil, coal, vanadium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Involvement in overseas businesses</td>
<td>Malaysia–Korea Partners</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leasing diplomatic real estate</td>
<td>Rental to businesses</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Abusing diplomatic allowances</td>
<td>Sale of alcohol</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Arms dealing</td>
<td>Representation of KOMID or Green Pine</td>
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<tr>
<td>Procurement</td>
<td>WMD and military technologies</td>
<td>Purchase of dual-use machine tools</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Information and intangible technology</td>
<td>Stealing missile secrets</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Luxury goods</td>
<td>Purchase of luxury cars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other goods</td>
<td>Purchase of goods clearly not for personal or embassy use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Network support</td>
<td>Financial support</td>
<td>Opening bank accounts, insuring shipments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Logistical support</td>
<td>Acting as consignee on shipments</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Appendix 2: Diplomatic Red Flags for Governments and the Private Sector

- Use of North Korea-issued identification (diplomatic, official, service or ordinary passports) for opening bank accounts, registering companies, travel.
- Refusal by officials to provide clarity regarding diplomatic or official status – or other attempts to benefit from ambiguity.
- Use of diplomatic mission addresses, phone numbers or other identifiers for anything other than official diplomatic business.
- Use of addresses of North Korea-owned property overseas by non-Korean entities.
• Use of diplomatic residential addresses in commercial or banking activity.
• Attempts by North Korean diplomats to open bank accounts or register companies.
• Use of aliases or alternative identities by North Korean diplomats.
• Involvement of former North Korean diplomats in commercial activities outside North Korea.
• Any engagement between North Korean diplomats and businesses in the host country.
• Any engagement between North Korean diplomats and local technical universities and research organisations.
• Any purchases by North Korean diplomats that are not consumables or household goods.
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