
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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“China–North Korea Arms Trade from the
Perspective of Chinese Scholars”

This article examines the historical context and evolving dynamics of China–North Korea arms trade and its future scenarios, shedding light on the motivations, methods, and implications of this strategic partnership.

MAIN ARGUMENT

An assessment of open-source materials authored by Chinese scholars and experts indicates that, despite international sanctions on weapon sales to North Korea, arms exports play a significant role in enhancing China’s geopolitical influence, countering the U.S., and securing a Chinese presence on the Korean Peninsula. Arms exports from China to North Korea are likely to shift from individual products to integrated systems, influenced by the adoption of systems thinking in both the Chinese and the North Korean defense sectors. Additionally, arms trade may evolve toward taking place within China’s expanding multilateral frameworks, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Belt and Road Initiative. China may also see a role for North Korea as an intermediary for arms sales to other sanctioned states, mirroring its historical role as an intermediary for North Korea.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- If arms sales from China to North Korea transform into system-based packages, then policymakers should anticipate changes in the nature and coordination of North Korean weaponry, necessitating a reassessment of defense strategies.
- If China integrates arms trade into multilateral frameworks, then it is recommended that the U.S. monitor and assess the impact of these organizations on regional security dynamics and consider diplomatic measures to mitigate their securitization.
- If North Korea acts as an intermediary for Chinese arms sales to sanctioned states, then robust intelligence efforts and international collaboration should be prioritized to enforce arms control regimes and curb illicit activities.
- If Chinese assistance enhances North Korea’s military capabilities, then counterstrategies for North Korean systems warfare and advanced technologies will be important for the U.S. so that it can continue to operate effectively in networked environments on the Korean Peninsula.