

A “Runaway Train”? Human Rights and China’s Response to the North Korean Meth Trade

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In August 2014, South Korean and Chinese press reported that the Chinese government had executed a North Korean national on charges of trafficking methamphetamine.^[1] This was an unprecedented act by the Chinese government, which had frequently executed other foreign nationals for drug offenses but had long refrained from executing North Koreans. The execution was a sharp change in policy for a country that had long refused to acknowledge North Korea’s role in the illicit drug trade, and an implicit acknowledgement that they may no longer be willing to turn a blind eye to North Korea’s illicit activities.

The trafficking of methamphetamine (called “bingdu,” or “ice”) from North Korea to China has been a lucrative source of revenue for the cash-strapped North Korean regime. The trade produces an estimated USD \$100 million to \$200 million per year, much of which is taken by the North Korean government’s infamous “Bureau 39,” which imposes informal taxes on methamphetamine production within the country.^[2] The drug is smuggled via a complex web of North Koreans, Chinese and Chinese-Koreans, and South Koreans, who ferry the drugs in teams of three across the North Korean border, and then distribute the drug within China or smuggle larger shipments to Japan and South Korea.^[3] This network, known as the “3-3-3 system,” has contributed to a sharp rise in methamphetamine consumption in China-DPRK border towns, as well as a corresponding crackdown from the Chinese government on drug abuse and trafficking.^[4]

While the drug trade may generate significant profit for certain traffickers and government officials involved, it comes ultimately at the cost of most North Korean citizens. In response to increased drug smuggling, the Chinese military has clamped down on security along the border by setting up barbed wire fences along border towns Helong and Chiangbai, establishing regular foot and vehicle military patrols, and establishing new monitoring stations along the Tumen and Yalu rivers.^[5] One

ethnic Korean man living in the Chinese Changbai Prefecture explained that “Now, China is more cautious about drugs trafficked from North Korea than defections.”^[6]

The net effect of this is that North Koreans—defectors, undocumented workers, and smugglers alike—will face greater challenges to their day-to-day lives. For defectors or would-be defectors, tightened borders result in fewer access points into China. For undocumented workers and cross-border traders, increased surveillance along the border affects their ability to sell goods in Chinese border towns, impacting their livelihoods and placing them at increased risk of arrest.^[7] And for the traffickers—many of who become drug mules out of abject poverty—the threat of capital punishment may now be another risk they face.

A Brief History of the North Korea Methamphetamine Trade:

Production of methamphetamine in North Korea reportedly began in 1996, when heavy rains ruined the year’s poppy harvest and rendered opium production unprofitable.^[8] Soon after, North Korea switched the bulk of its illicit drug production to methamphetamine, quickly becoming a major exporter to China, Japan, and South Korea.^[9] By 2002, a third of the methamphetamine seized by Japanese authorities originated from North Korea.^[10]

However, around 2004 to 2005, the North Korean regime suddenly ceased production, either in an attempt to improve its reputation or because North Korean factories could no longer access the chemicals needed to mass-produce the drugs.^[11] Soon after, chemists that were formerly employed by the government had dispersed and formed private “kitchen factories.”^[12] Researchers working for fertilizer and steel factories in Hamhung city, as well as pharmaceutical students in elite Pyongyang universities, made use of their access to chemicals and laboratory equipment to manufacture methamphetamine in large quantities.^[13]

Whereas the production and export of methamphetamine was tightly controlled when the practice was officially sanctioned by the state, it had become a “runaway train” under the emerging black market economy.^[14] Producers began exporting the drug in larger volumes, smaller packages, and in lower quality, thereby making the drug more widely available and price-accessible.^[15] Between

2005 and 2007, the amount of methamphetamine confiscated along the North Korean border had quadrupled by some estimates.^[16]

China's Response:

For its part, the Chinese government has largely tolerated North Korea's illicit activities in the interest of preserving good relations with Pyongyang. Chinese state media consistently refused to name North Korea as a producer of methamphetamine, reporting instead that the drugs flow in from "some neighboring countries."^[17] One anonymous Chinese official working for the Jilin Narcotics Unit was quoted in Aboluo News: "We don't publicize [the North Korean drug trade] because we don't want to harm the good relations between China and the DPRK."^[18]

The Chinese government's tolerance of North Korea's drug trafficking is surprising, given the number of Chinese nationals affected and the domestic and international embarrassment Beijing suffers for failing to rein in the issue. Beijing is often left as a "scapegoat" for North Korea's illicit dealings. As a case in point, in 2006 when Japanese officials from Yokohama found 14 kilograms of heroin aboard a ship that departed from the Chinese port city of Dalian, they assumed that the drugs originated from China, when they were in fact produced in North Korea.^[19] Japanese officials later learned that for a three-year period of time, it had mistakenly attributed all drug shipments that had originated from North Korea to China instead, because Chinese ships often ferried the drugs overseas.

In recent years, China has gradually taken steps to confront North Korea over its drug policies. 2004 marked the first time a senior Chinese government official—the Deputy Secretary General of the National Narcotics Control Commission, Liu Yuejin—publicly acknowledged that "there are indeed cases of drug trafficking from the DPRK to China," though he hedged his statement by noting that North Korea's drug trade only makes up "a small proportion" of the total volume of drugs that comes into China.^[20] In 2010, Chinese officials announced that they seized USD \$60 million of North Korean-produced drugs.^[21] According to Dong-a Ilbo, this was the first time that Chinese

officials put out a dollar figure on drugs coming out of North Korea.[22] The same year, Chinese officials arrested a DPRK official on suspicion of drug dealing in a Chinese border city.[23]

These anti-drug efforts culminated in 2014, when Chinese President Xi Jinping announced a “war” on drugs across the country.[24] The Chinese Public Security Ministry soon after launched a well-publicized crackdown on drug users, targeting high-profile celebrities, and doubling down on law enforcement and counter-narcotics operations at China’s borders. In a span of 50 days, Chinese authorities arrested 24,000 suspects on drug offences and investigated 100,000 more.[25] Undoubtedly, the increased security along the North Korean border and harsher penalties against North Korean drug traffickers are tied into this broader campaign.

No Easy Solutions:

Tightened borders and stricter law enforcement on the drug trade have seemingly slowed the flow of drugs into China.[26] However, while interdiction may cut down on drug flow in the short term, it does little to address the root causes of the North Korean methamphetamine industry. Dire economic necessity at all levels—for the North Korean regime as well as for the individual citizen—is the most compelling factor for the continuation of the drug trade. Compounding that with North Korea’s ideology of self-reliance, an increasingly decentralized economy, and rampant government corruption, what one finds is a deeply entrenched problem with no clear solution.

Perhaps one of the largest barriers to addressing North Korea’s methamphetamine problem is limited understanding of the actors involved. As there is a lack of verifiable information on the methamphetamine trade, it is difficult for scholars and researchers to parse the roles of the North Korean military and government, organized criminal syndicates, and ordinary producers and smugglers. Few outside of North Korea are certain of how involved the North Korean regime remains in the drug trade, if at all. If it is truly the case that the North Korean government has limited control on the production of drugs within the country and the distribution of drugs outside the country, then state-to-state cooperation between China and North Korea on the issue may be a fruitless endeavor.

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[3] “China angry at NK drug trafficking,” Korea Times, July 8, 2011.http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2011/07/116_90527.html (Accessed November 8, 2015)

[4] Michelle FlorCruz, “North Korea Crystal Meth Production And Smuggling to China Decrease With Tightening Borders: Report,” International Business Times, June 29, 2015.
<http://www.ibtimes.com/north-korea-crystal-meth-production-smuggling-china-decrease-tightening-borders-1987913> (Accessed November 14, 2015)

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[9] Ibid.

[10] Fyodor Tertitskiy, “Ice Age: Drugs in North Korea,” NK News, March 9, 2015.
<http://www.nknews.org/2015/03/ice-age-drugs-in-north-korea/> (Accessed November 14, 2015)

[11] Perl, op cit.

[12] Simon Parry, "High alert: North Korea's crystal meth epidemic," South China Morning Post, October 6,

2013. <http://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/article/1323432/high-alert-north-koreas-crystal-meth-epidemic> (Accessed November 11, 2015)

[13] Matthew Clayton, "Drugs in the DPRK 2006-2011: A quantitative analysis," March 2012, p.

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2014. <https://news.vice.com/article/north-korean-meth-motorcycle-gangs-army-snipers-and-a-guy-named-rambo> (Accessed November 14, 2015)

[14] Perl, op cit., p. 16.

[15] It should be noted that after an initial spike from 2004-2007, overall methamphetamine production and export seems to have dropped off, likely because of drug crackdowns in North Korea. Kang Mi Jin, "North Korea clamps down on domestic drug addicts," *The Guardian*, June 29,

2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/29/north-korea-crystal-meth-drug-addicts> (Accessed November 12, 2015); and Tania Branigan, "The North Korean Walter Whites funneling crystal meth into China," *The Guardian*, November 28, 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/28/sp-north-korean-walter-whites-crystal-meth-china> (Accessed November 14, 2015)

[16] Tertitskiy, op cit.

[17] "Zhōnggòng sòng dà mǐ jīn sān sòng bīng dú běi hán dú pǐ n gōng zhàn dōng sān shěng tú" 中共送大米金三送冰毒 北韩毒品攻占东三省 图, *Apollo News*, February 13, 2013. <http://www.aboluowang.com/2013/0213/284066.html>

[18] Ibid.

[19] 朝鲜:毒品走私"强国," "Chaoxian: dupin zousi 'qiangguo,'" [North Korea: Drug Trafficking Superpower], *Sina Weibo*, April 4,

2015. http://www.weibo.com/p/1001603828046061764880?from=page_100606_profile&wvr=6&mod=wenzhangmod (Accessed November 13, 2015)

[20] This is true in the national context, though North Korean methamphetamine takes up a greater share of the methamphetamine seized in the Northeast. The vast majority of the methamphetamine that is brought into China comes from the "Golden Triangle" region, which comprises Burma (Myanmar), Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. Myanmar alone was the source of 92.2% to 95.2% of methamphetamine seized by China in 2013. In a

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[24] Shannon Tiezzi, “China’s War on Drugs,” The Diplomat, August 14, 2014. <http://thediplomat.com/2014/08/chinas-war-on-drugs/> (Accessed November 12, 2015)

[25] 百城禁毒会战50天破案两万余起, “Bai cheng jindu huizhan 50 tian po an liang wan yu qi,” [50 Days Into the “Crackdown in a Hundred Cities,” More Than 20,000 Cases Cracked] Ministry of Public Security of the People’s Republic of China, November 19, 2014. <http://www.mps.gov.cn/n16/n1237/n1342/n803680/4270274.html> (Accessed November 11, 2015)

[26] FlorCruz, op cit.