



**Statement before the House Foreign Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on East Asia and the Pacific**

***“Lives, Not Leverage: The Long Arm of
China and North Korea’s Repression”***

A Testimony by:

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Chairperson Kim, Ranking Member Bera, and distinguished members of the committee, it is an honor to appear before on the topic of China and North Korea human rights abuses and transnational repression.

I will speak on three perspectives of this topic. The first is how China facilitates abuses of North Koreans on the border. The second relates to the Chinese business drivers of North Korea coerced labor entering global supply chains. And the third relates to China-North Korea cooperation in perpetrating human rights abuses derivative of the Ukraine war.

China's Role in North Korean Human Rights Abuses

China facilitates North Korea's human rights abuses in several ways. One, China traffics North Koreans seeking escape, refuge, or work across the Chinese border. Two, China forcibly repatriates North Korean refugees. Third, Beijing co-opts entities within the United Nations to block progress on initiatives advocating for North Korean human rights.

On the coercive expulsion of political refugees or refoulement, China has been actively engaged in sweeping up and forcibly repatriating North Koreans who enter its territory, pursuant to a 1986 bilateral agreement with Pyongyang. Beijing's longstanding policy is to deny refugee status to North Koreans.¹

Since the late 1990s, Beijing has forcibly returned tens of thousands of refugees to North Korea, and the practice has not slowed: Human Rights Watch has documented at least 1,076 forcible returns since 2020, including at least 406 between January 2024 and September 2025.² Their only crime was to have sought a better life outside of the repressive country, and many seek to live across the border in South Korea, one of Asia's most vibrant and prosperous democracies.

The overwhelming majority of North Korean refugees exit through China. Numbers are very hard to come by, since no organization is allowed to conduct a systematic survey, and they have become harder still: data is no longer available from the UNHCR regarding North Koreans in China.³ When I wrote about this in 2012 in *The Impossible State*, the Chinese official estimate was about 10,000; but activists, press, and other governments put the number as high as 100,000 to 300,000; and the United Nations put it between 30,000 and 50,000.⁴ I cannot give a comparable range today. North Korea, of course, does not report any migration statistics. Beijing therefore decides what happens to almost every North Korean who gets out. The majority of these North Korean migrants are women, as high as 75 to 80 percent in 2012, and the share has risen since: in 2020 women outnumbered men 845 to 202, and fifty-nine of the sixty-three who reached South Korea

¹ Melanie Kirkpatrick and Victor Cha, "China Is Complicit in North Korea's Human Rights Abuses," *Foreign Policy*, July 31, 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/07/31/china-is-complicit-in-north-koreas-human-rights-abuses/>.

² Human Rights Watch, "China: No Letup in Forced Returns to North Korea," *Human Rights Watch*, October 15, 2025, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/10/15/china-no-letup-in-forced-returns-to-north-korea>.

³ Victor Cha and Katrin Fraser Katz, "How China and Russia Facilitate North Korea's Human Rights Abuses," *Center for Strategic and International Studies and George W. Bush Presidential Center*, September 14, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-china-and-russia-facilitate-north-koreas-human-rights-abuses>.

⁴ Victor Cha, *The Impossible State: North Korea, Past and Future*. New York: HarperCollins, 2012.

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in the first half of 2026 were women.⁵ That imbalance is not incidental. Since 2003 the number of female refugees far outnumbers males due to Chinese practices (targeting males) and human trafficking along the border (targeting females).

About 20,000 North Koreans had exited through China and found permanent settlement in third countries by 2012; the cumulative figure for South Korea alone is now about 34,600. The overwhelming majority still end up there.⁶ The United States, under its resettlement program, had taken in 96 by 2010 and roughly 200 over two decades, but admissions dwindled to zero in 2019 and the North Korean Human Rights Act still awaits reauthorization.⁷ Only about 14 percent seek to settle in China, because of the fear of refoulement. Most North Korean defectors come from North Hamgyŏng Province, which is one of the poorest parts of the country. They cross the porous Sino–North Korean border into Jilin Province’s Yanbian autonomous prefecture, a region of 2 million people, the largest concentration of ethnic Koreans in China. Some escapees find work in Jilin, usually menial labor jobs under poor conditions, but still better than what was available in North Korea. Others, mostly women, marry Chinese farmers or laborers as a way to start a new life.

As a signatory to the 1951 U.N. Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol, China is obligated to recognize a political refugee who flees his country because of fear of political persecution. Parties to the convention, including China, have an obligation to the principle of non-refoulement, meaning that “No contracting State shall expel or return (“refouler”) a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.”

China has consistently refused to recognize North Koreans as refugees, and instead classifies them as illegal economic migrants that require deportation. Beijing is supposed to allow the UNHCR access to these migrants to determine whether they qualify for refugee status. The UNHCR established an office in China in 1995 in order to handle refugee flows from Vietnam, but the office has been denied access to evaluate North Korean cases. That denial is now total: North Koreans in China have not had access to UNHCR staff at the border since 1999 and have not had access to UNHCR’s office in Beijing since 2008.⁸

In a recent instance in 2023, the U.N. secretary general chose to refer the matter of an estimated 2,000 North Korean defectors being held in Chinese detention centers to the U.N.’s Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) instead of UNHCR, presumably because of

⁵ Victor D. Cha, *The Black Box: Demystifying the Study of Korean Unification and North Korea*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2024; Jooheon Kim and Kristen Talman, “63 North Korean defectors enter South in first half of 2026: Seoul,” *NK News*, August 6, 2026, <https://www.nknews.org/2026/08/63-north-korean-defectors-enter-south-in-first-half-of-2026-seoul/>.

⁶ Woo Jae-yeon, “63 N. Korean defectors arrive in S. Korea in 1st half, down 35 pct on-year,” *Yonhap News Agency*, August 6, 2026, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20260806007400315>.

⁷ Testimony by Amb. Robert R. King, “North Korean Refugees and the Imminent Danger of Forced Repatriation from China,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, June 13, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/north-korean-refugees-and-imminent-danger-forced-repatriation-china>.

⁸ Victor Cha and Katrin Fraser Katz, “How China and Russia Facilitate North Korea’s Human Rights Abuses,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies and George W. Bush Presidential Center*, September 14, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-china-and-russia-facilitate-north-koreas-human-rights-abuses>.

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China's sizeable pledges of funds for refugee programs worldwide, that has made UNHCR hesitant to pressure Beijing.⁹ Those detainees, as of 2023, had no access to UNHCR staff or foreign embassies in Beijing. China's repatriation policy is contrary to its obligations as a signatory to the International Refugee Convention. In addition, it refuses to allow the office of the U.N. High Commissioner on Refugees to interview or assist North Koreans who are hiding in China. Beijing likes to defend that policy by comparing it with the U.S. policy on Mexicans who are in this country illegally. This is absurd because Mexico doesn't imprison, torture, or execute citizens whom the United States sends back.¹⁰

From about 2001, China started to crack down on these cases more severely. The police increased the tempo of border patrols, repatriation, and security around foreign diplomatic compounds. Chinese living in Yanbian are offered rewards of \$500 for turning in any North Korean migrants and are fined large sums (\$3,600) if they are caught aiding any refugees, and periodic sweeps are conducted by police agencies to round up North Koreans for deportation. What follows is not unknown to anyone involved. Once refoiled, these individuals are thrown into labor/interrogation prisons along the Sino-North Korean border, where refoilees are asked four questions: why did you leave, did you contact any South Koreans, were you given a Bible, and did you go to a church.

Those found to have met South Koreans or missionaries are harshly tortured, as part of "reeducation." All women discovered to be pregnant are forced to have abortions; if Beijing repatriates a woman who is pregnant, North Korea either forces her to undergo an abortion, or, if the baby is allowed to be born, it is killed. And the practice is kept deliberately out of sight. When the Chinese forcibly repatriate, they send the North Koreans back on buses with curtained windows, to ensure anonymity, because nameless and faceless statistics are much less likely to raise international ire.

Supply Chains and Human Rights Abuses

Beyond China's forced repatriation of North Korean refugees, the collusion between China and North Korea on transnational repression is also embedded in their supply chains.

An ongoing CSIS project examining the hidden links between North Korean forced labor and international supply chains points to a systematic division of labor between North Korean state entities and Chinese entities operating in North Korea's special economic zones (SEZs).

What we are discovering, for example, is that a factory operating in these SEZs may be formally registered under a North Korean trading company, but its actual operations function as DPRK-PRC joint venture. The Chinese side often exercises control over all of the funding, raw materials, production equipment, quality standards, and final export destinations, while the North Korean state is responsible for mobilizing workers and enforcing control and surveillance.

⁹ Victor Cha and Katrin Fraser Katz, "How China and Russia Facilitate North Korea's Human Rights Abuses," *Center for Strategic and International Studies and George W. Bush Presidential Center*, September 14, 2023, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-china-and-russia-facilitate-north-koreas-human-rights-abuses>.

¹⁰ Melanie Kirkpatrick and Victor Cha, "China Is Complicit in North Korea's Human Rights Abuses," *Foreign Policy*, July 31, 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/07/31/china-is-licit-in-north-koreas-human-rights-abuses/>.

The cost of this partnership is overwhelmingly borne by the North Koreans whose forced labor sustains it. CSIS' ongoing study has found that inmates held in detention facilities and political prison camps throughout the country are actively mobilized by state security agencies for labor-intensive manufacturing work tied to production orders from Chinese commercial entities.

For inmates in these facilities, a typical workday can begin as early as 5:30 AM and continue until dark, with production operating seven days a week, 365 days a year. When production demands are high, some inmates reportedly continue processing goods through the night using battery-powered flashlights strapped to their heads. Within these facilities, rest is not recognized as a fundamental human right, and food is used as an instrument of coercion, with failure to meet production quotas resulting in meals being reduced to half-rations or withheld entirely. There are no cash wages for the workers.

These human rights abuses are not incidental; they help sustain a commercial partnership that also reinforces the North Korean regime's system of state control. The same Chinese businesses that provide capital, raw materials, and equipment for primary processing in North Korea also eventually enable these goods to move out of North Korea into Chinese supply chains after final processing and repackaging.

These products range from false eyelashes and wigs to garments and leather goods. They enter global supply chains under Chinese brands or with "Made in China" labels. The multi-layered concealment process involved makes it nearly impossible to trace the North Korean origins of these goods and the human rights abuses involved in their production.

While these dynamics have long been anchored in North Korea's economic ties with China, we are finding that they are increasingly involving Russia as well. We see this in the growing presence of Russian corporate entities and logistics brokers in the distribution networks of North Korea's special economic zones, and in the two countries' expanding cross-border infrastructure and logistics links.

North Korea's Forced Labor at Yelabuga

Allow me now to talk about the link between the Ukraine war and North Korea human rights abuses.

The most significant development for North Korea coming out of the pandemic lockdown in mid-2023 has been the growing military cooperation with Russia. Russia's dire need for munitions from North Korea reflects its growing international isolation and the state of its military industrial complex that cannot meet the needs of its own armed forces.

By March 2024 North Korea had supplied more than 10,000 containers of military equipment and munitions, which could amount to more than 3 million rounds of ammunition.¹¹ By October 2024,

¹¹ Victor Cha and Ellen Kim, "Russia's Veto: Dismembering the UN Sanctions Regime on North Korea," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, March 29, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-veto-dismembering-un-sanctions-regime-north-korea>.

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the figure had reached 8 million rounds of 122 mm and 152mm munitions and scores of ballistic missiles. Then came North Korean soldiers in October 2024. The dispatch of North Korean troops to Russia for the war in Ukraine effectively shows that Kim Jong-un is “all in” in helping Putin win his unjust war.¹² This also makes North Korea the most visible and committed supporter of Russia’s aggression in Europe.

By late 2025, Pyongyang was supplying as much as 50 percent of Russia’s needs for 122 mm and 152 mm ammunition. In early 2026, South Korea estimated that North Korea may have provided over 15 million rounds of artillery shells to Russia, deployed 16,000 troops to Ukraine, with reports that 30,000 to 50,000 more are expected to be deployed in the near future.¹³ In total, CSIS estimates North Korea may have profited as much as \$14 billion so far from its burgeoning relationship with Russia.¹⁴

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 created a demand for drones that Moscow could not initially meet. The Kremlin’s answer was an arrangement to manufacture the Iranian-designed Shahed on Russian soil, at Yelabuga in the Russian Republic of Tatarstan. Since late 2021 the UAV factory and associated facility area at the Yelabuga SEZ has expanded from two buildings under construction to a 17-facility complex comprising up to 116 buildings, now reportedly producing more than 5,500 units per month to support the war in Ukraine.¹⁵ Russia currently produces upgraded variants of the Shahed drone, redesignated as the Geran, and Ukraine’s Defence Intelligence estimates that Russia aims to produce 60,000 long-range drones and 50,000 decoys in 2026.

The workers trafficked to Yelabuga belong to three broad groups: 1) Russia’s domestic youth; 2) foreign workers; and 3) North Korean laborers.

Group	Who	How they are held	Reported scale
Russian youth	Students as young as 15, recruited by Alabuga Polytechnic college under a “work experience” label	Shifts of up to 12 hours; pay tied to strict quotas; threats of fines if they tell their families what they build	Thousands; about one-third in drone production
Foreign workers	Women aged 16 to 22, mainly from Africa and the Global South (Alabuga Start)	Promised hospitality work, then assigned to weapons production; flights, housing and language classes deducted from pay; passports confiscated on arrival	About 200 on site in 2024; about 90% in drone assembly
North Koreans	State-sent laborers and technicians	Minders restrict movement; the regime withholds 70 to 90% of wages	Up to 12,000

¹² Victor Cha, “Crossing the Rubicon: DPRK Sends Troops to Russia,” *CSIS Beyond Parallel*, October 28, 2024, <https://beyondparallel.csis.org/crossing-the-rubicon-dprk-sends-troops-to-russia/>.

¹³ Kim Hyun-soo, “No signs of additional deployment of N. Korean troops to Russia detected: S. Korean military,” *Yonhap News Agency*, August 23, 2026; Heejin Kim, “Ukraine’s Zelenskiy says up to 50,000 North Korean troops to be deployed in Russia,” *Reuters*, August 9, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/ukraines-zelenskiy-says-up-50000-north-korean-troops-be-deployed-russia-2026-08-09/>.

¹⁴ Victor Cha, “Explainer: What is Kim Jong-un getting from Russia?” *CSIS YouTube Channel*, July 15, 2025, https://youtu.be/JJu6_Gysw7s; Cat Barton, Soo-Hyang Choi, Heesu Lee and Adam Farrar, “Kim Jong Un Flouted Sanctions to Amass \$22 Billion Windfall,” *Bloomberg*, August 6, 2026, <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2026-north-korea-windfall/>.

¹⁵ Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., Victor Cha and Jennifer Jun, “A Closer Look at the Yelabuga UAV Factory,” March 9, 2026, <https://beyondparallel.csis.org/a-closer-look-at-the-yelabuga-uav-factory/>.

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The Alabuga Polytechnic college recruits Russian youth, some as young as 15 under a “work experience” label; they reportedly work shifts of up to 12 hours, their pay is tied to strict quotas, and they face threats of fines if they tell their families what they build. Workers come from North Korea, Africa, Latin America, South Asia, and former Soviet states, lured by fake job offers or coerced over by their governments.

The Alabuga Start program recruits foreign women ages 16 to 22 from the Global South with social-media advertising and paid influencers promising free airfare and a salary starting at over \$500 a month, targeted at countries with high youth unemployment. They then learn on arrival that their job is weapons production: about 90% of foreign recruits are assigned to drone production, where they assemble airframes, handle caustic chemicals, and paint different types of drones. The company deducts costs of airfare, housing, medical care, and language classes from their pay, their passports are confiscated, and their movement is restricted, and remitting money home can be difficult because of banking sanctions. The United Nations defines human trafficking as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of people through force, fraud, or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit, and the labor recruitment process for the Yelabuga drone factory meets this definition.¹⁶

North Korea has underpinned the rapid growth at Yelabuga with reported recruits of up to 12,000 workers and engineers. If the foreign labor recruitment program constitutes trafficking by a Russian corporation, the North Korean arrangement is trafficking by the state. The regime is selling the labor of its citizens under a state-to-state arrangement, controlling whether they may leave and collecting most of their wages, in violation of U.N. sanctions, and pocketing the earnings. Earning roughly \$2.50 an hour each, a workforce of about 12,000 North Korean laborers generates hundreds of millions a year, and the U.S. State Department has reported that the regime retains up to 90% of overseas workers’ earnings. The practice is not new to Pyongyang, which has ruthlessly and profitably exported labor for decades, to places like Chinese factories, Russian logging camps, and Gulf construction sites. What is new is the prohibition. In December 2017, UN Resolution 2397 required every U.N. member state to send North Korean workers home by December 2019. Continued trafficking to Russia by the Kim regime openly defies that obligation.

The money that North Korea receives from forced labor enables its nuclear and ballistic programs and bolsters the networks that keeps Kim Jong-un in power.¹⁷ The North Korean overseas labor program has more than 100,000 workers across some 40 countries, generating some \$500 million a year, so disrupting the trafficking would cut into Kim’s coffers.¹⁸ North Korean labor also

¹⁶“Human Trafficking,” *United Nations*, <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/human-trafficking.html>.

¹⁷ U.S. Department of State, “2025 Trafficking in Persons Report: Democratic People's Republic of Korea,” <https://www.state.gov/reports/2025-trafficking-in-persons-report/north-korea/>.

¹⁸ Maria Siow, “Rights group exposes North Korea’s forced labour scheme that reaps US\$500 million annually,” *South China Morning Post*, March 25, 2026, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/people/article/3347778/rights-group-exposes-north-koreas-forced-labour-scheme-reaps-us500-million-annually>.

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[transfers](#) technical know-how.¹⁹ Technicians sent to Yelabuga will return to Pyongyang with invaluable lessons from working at a mass-production drone assembly line.

If Iran supplied the original design, Russia built the plant, and North Korea contributes state-sponsored forced labor, then China, through a supply network it facilitates, provides the means for Russia to mass-produce the drones.²⁰

China's participation exacerbates human rights abuses by enabling Russia to rapidly industrialize and scale the drone factory. China is the main supplier of dual-use components, including batteries, electronics, engines and engine parts, and navigation systems. It serves as an indirect financier, moving money to Russia through sanction-resistant payment networks. And it serves as a transit route for drone components, including Western products, which are shipped through China and Hong Kong. China has become the main supplier of the drones' most critical subsystems: engines, navigation, and anti-jamming electronics. There has been a discernible increase in components from Chinese manufacturers, not merely Western parts routed through China, and Chinese-origin parts now account for roughly 80% of the critical electronics in Russia's drones.²¹

It is unclear whether China is directly financing the Yelabuga drone factories with traditional cash or monetary investments. The plant was financed by Russia, and the Deng Xiaoping logistics terminal that serves the special economic zone was funded by a Russian bank, VTB.²² The U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission documents China's role in facilitating financial transactions that enable Russia and Iran to evade sanctions.²³ Between 2023 and 2024, Chinese firms supplied at least \$63 million in drone parts to Russia and roughly \$96 million in contracts to Yelabuga; Beijing provided Russia with over \$4 billion worth of dual-use equipment; and in 2024 China recorded more than \$300 million a month in high-priority dual-use exports.²⁴ A Shandong

¹⁹ Spencer Faragasso and David Albright, "Youth Exploited for Military Drone Production at the Alabuga Special Economic Zone," *Institute for Science and International Security*, July 1, 2024, <https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/foreign-youth-exploited-for-military-drone-production-at-the-alabuga-specia/>.

²⁰ Austin Ramzy, "How the Iranian Shahed Drone Transformed War—With China's Help," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 25, 2026, <https://www.wsj.com/world/how-the-iranian-shahed-drone-transformed-war-with-chinas-help-2671bb43>.

²¹ "Shaheds, Dollars, and Beijing: How China Powers Russia's Drone Production in Alabuga," *Frontelligence Insight*, August 21, 2025, <https://frontelligence.substack.com/p/shaheds-dollars-and-beijing-how-china>; Dmytro Basmat, "China supplying Russian military factories with chemicals, gunpowder, components, Ukraine's Foreign Intelligence chief says," *The Kyiv Independent*, May 25, 2025, <https://kyivindependent.com/china-supplying-chemicals-gunpowder-machine-tools-to-russian-military-factories-ukraines-foreign-intelligence-chief-says/>.

²² "Alabuga Drone Plant: A Case Study of Key Relationships Enabling Iranian Support for Russian Military Production," *Iran Watch*, November 8, 2024, <https://www.iranwatch.org/our-publications/articles-reports/alabuga-drone-plant-case-study-key-relationships-enabling-iranian-support-russian-military>.

²³ U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, "China's Facilitation of Sanctions and Export Control Evasion," November 14, 2025, <https://www.uscc.gov/research/chinas-facilitation-sanctions-and-export-control-evasion>.

²⁴ Shaheds, Dollars, and Beijing: How China Powers Russia's Drone Production in Alabuga," *Frontelligence Insight*, August 21, 2025, <https://frontelligence.substack.com/p/shaheds-dollars-and-beijing-how-china>; Volodymyr Kuznetsov, "Why does China increase the supply of dual-use goods to Russia?" *The Gaze*, August 25, 2025, <https://thegaze.media/news/why-does-china-increase-the-supply-of-dual-use-goods-to-russia>.

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trading company linked to the same Russian procurement firms accounted for \$6.4 million in transactions and clearances between April 2024 and January 2025.²⁵

Conclusion

Please allow me to close with two points. First, Congress needs to reauthorize the North Korea Human Rights Act, which has been languishing since September 2022. Thank you Chairperson Kim and members of this committee for all that you are doing in this Congress and in the next Congress to get this passed.

Second, thank you for providing a platform for calling for the release of Min Zin, as my colleague on this panel will talk about. No American citizen should be randomly incarcerated in China while attending an academic conference. This issue should be on the agenda of the summit between Presidents Trump and Xi later this month.

²⁵ Shaheds, Dollars, and Beijing: How China Powers Russia's Drone Production in Alabuga,” *Frontelligence Insight*, August 21, 2025, <https://frontelligence.substack.com/p/shaheds-dollars-and-beijing-how-china>.