

THE BRIEF

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Patterns and Scope of Attack under the Kim Jong-un Regime

1 What is Transnational Repression?

UN Human Rights Council, Fifty-sixth session, "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Irene Khan," A/HRC/56/53, April 26, 2024.

Dictators do not hesitate to commit crimes and human rights violations in foreign jurisdictions to suppress exposure or criticism of their corruption, incompetence, and tyranny. Such cross-border attacks take various forms, including physical violence, digital threats, legal threats, and coercion by proxy.¹⁾

2 G7 Leaders' Statement on Transnational Repression (June 17, 2025).

The international community refers to this growing threat against national security, sovereignty, human rights, and the principles of international law as "transnational repression" (TNR).²⁾

3 Nate Schenkkan and Isabel Linzer, *Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach: The Global Scale and Scope of Transnational Repression* (Freedom House, 2021).

In 2021, Freedom House, a U.S.-based human rights organization, published a landmark report that investigated 608 direct, physical cases of transnational repression (assassination, assault, detention, deportation, etc.) perpetrated by 31 governments in 79 countries from 2014 to 2020.³⁾ The report provides detailed case studies on six significant offenders: China, Rwanda, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey.

Freedom House warned that transnational repression is becoming a “normal” phenomenon, as global migration and digital technologies both heighten authoritarian regimes’ perception of threat from expanding activism while simultaneously enhancing their capacity for transnational repression at lower cost. Freedom House has therefore recommended measures to hold perpetrators accountable and increase resilience within democracies.

Concerning North Korea’s transnational repression, the Freedom House report refers to two notable incidents from 2017: the assassination of Kim Jong-un’s half-brother, Kim Jong-nam, using VX toxin at Kuala Lumpur Airport in Malaysia and the abduction of Ham Jin-woo, a DailyNK reporter who had defected from North Korea to South Korea, in the border region between North Korea and China.

Beyond these two cases, North Korea has a long history of engaging in transnational repression, yet the responsible organs and decision-makers remain largely unidentified. While the South Korean government informs targeted individuals about the risk, provides temporary personal protection, and arrests North Korean agents operating in South Korea, it lacks the legal, institutional, and policy framework to systematically counter North Korea's transnational repression perpetrated abroad.

Methods of Transnational Repression


⁴ Ibid, pp. 9-14. Methods of transnational repression can be divided into the following four categories:⁴⁾

Methods of Transnational Repression

States targeting individuals, primarily their own nationals or exiles residing abroad, with violence, intimidation, or harassment to silence criticism and suppress dissent beyond its territory


Direct attacks

Assassination, assault, physical intimidation, enforced disappearance, etc.




Co-opting other countries

Collaboration for detention, deportation, or rendition




Mobility controls

Passport cancellation, holding family members as hostages, etc.



Threats from a distance

Coercion by proxy, online intimidation, spyware, etc.



- ① **Direct attacks:** Physical attacks against targeted individuals, such as assassination, assault, physical intimidation, enforced disappearance, detention, and deportation
- ② **Co-opting other countries:** Detention, deportation, or rendition of targeted individuals through manipulation of laws and institutions of another state or the misuse of Interpol notifications
- ③ **Mobility controls:** Prevention of targeted individuals from traveling or detention through passport cancellation, etc.
- ④ **Threats from a distance:** Repression of targeted individuals without physical action beyond the origin state's jurisdiction through online intimidation, spyware, or threats against their families within the origin state

Key Incidents under Kim Jong-un's Rule

① Direct attacks: Assassinations, abductions, etc.

Assassinations or abductions carried out in a foreign country are likely to create a significant diplomatic uproar. Especially in cases involving high-level figures, such operations are rarely undertaken without the order or approval of the supreme leader. The assassination of Kim Jong-nam in February 2017 is a prominent example of such incidents.

North Korea's capacity and scope for overseas activities have evolved considerably over time. In February 1997, Lee Han-young, Kim Jong-il's nephew, was assassinated in Seoul. Although they were based in South Korea, the shooting was carried out by North Korean agents. Two decades later, Kim Jong-nam was assassinated at Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Malaysia by two women from Vietnam and Indonesia, demonstrating the growing reach and complexity of North Korea's transnational operations.

In 2011 and 2016, South Korean authorities uncovered North Korean agents' assassination attempts against prominent North Korean escapees in South Korea.⁵⁾ North Korea has also repeatedly assassinated and abducted not only North Korean escapees but also those who assist them abroad.

In May 2016, Ko Hyun-chul [고현철], a North Korean escapee, was abducted in China. Reflecting a continuity in tactics, three South Korean missionaries, Kim Jung-wook [김정욱], Kim Kook-kie [김국기], and Choi Chun-gil [최춘길], were lured and kidnapped by North Korean agents in October 2013, October 2014, and December 2014, respectively. In certain cases, North Korea's transnational repression has escalated beyond abduction. In August 2011, Kim Chang-hwan [김창환], a South Korean missionary, was murdered by North Korean agents in Dandong, China. Similarly, Han Chung-ryeol [한충렬], an ethnic Korean Chinese missionary, was killed by North Korean agents in Changbai County, China, in April 2016.

5
 Kim Jung-woo, "박상학뿐 아니라, 김성민·이민복도 노렸다" [Not only Park Sang-hak but also Kim Seong-min and Lee Min-bok targeted], *Monthly Chosun*, November 2011;
 Choi Woo-suk, "제2의 이한영 사건을 막아라!" [Stop the second Lee Han-young case], *Monthly Chosun*, August 2016.

② Co-opting other countries: Collaboration for detention, deportation, or rendition

Authoritarian regimes often cooperate with host governments to expand their influence, pressuring the host states to restrict the movement of targeted individuals or to reject the asylum claims outright. North Korea, in particular, has engaged in such practices by filing false criminal charges, such as corruption, embezzlement, or drug-related offenses, against North Korean escapees and asylum seekers. These fabricated allegations are submitted to law enforcement authorities in the host states to arrest and repatriate the escapees, often without proper due process or formal judicial review. In countries where North Korean escapees are most commonly found, such as China and Russia, local police and law enforcement officials have routinely cooperated in monitoring, detaining, and repatriating these individuals to North Korea.

North Korea's bilateral treaties with China and Russia, including border security agreements and treaties on mutual legal assistance, enable the detention, deportation, and rendition of North Korean escapees and overseas workers who attempt to seek asylum. Despite the international community's concerns, Russia signed four treaties covering key areas: mutual legal assistance in criminal matters, extradition, transfer and receipt of illegal entrants and residents, and transfer of sentenced persons. Moreover, the new treaty on comprehensive strategic partnership, signed by Kim Jong-un and Putin in June 2024, stipulates the implementation of agreements in the field of mutual legal assistance and transfer of sentenced persons (article 14).

③ Mobility controls: Passport confiscation and hostages left behind in North Korea

The passports of North Koreans sent abroad, including workers, students, trade delegates, and diplomats, are confiscated for safekeeping by the North Korean authorities. Therefore, if they leave their dormitories or workplace without authorization to move to a different area, they can be arrested as illegal residents by the local authorities. Most North Korean escapees who have been sent abroad state that they were never allowed to see their passports again after arriving at their overseas destinations.

North Koreans sent abroad also have family members left behind as hostages and guarantors who have vouched for their loyalty in North Korea, facing punishment should the individuals attempt to escape.

④ Threats from a distance: Coercion by proxy and online intimidation

Even when North Korean escapees manage to cross the border, North Korea continues to extend its reach by exploiting their families left behind and turning them into instruments of fear and control. In the mid-2010s, Kim Jong-un, with some success, tried to use the remaining families of North Korean escapees who had settled in South Korea as hostages to lure them back to North Korea. The North Korean authorities use such coercion by proxy to make North Korean escapees provide information about other potential targets, including North Korean escapees in South Korea, brokers assisting North Korean escapees, and their collaborators in North Korea. In some cases, North Korean escapees are coerced to lure other North Korean escapees to a place where

they could be more easily abducted.

In early 2018, a decade after resettling in South Korea, North Korean escapee A received word from his brother in North Korea that someone wished to meet him. A headed to the North Korea-China border region, where Agent B from the Korean People's Army (KPA)'s Defense Security Bureau showed up with A's brother. B requested A's cooperation in his work, to which A accepted on the condition that his brother and family would be protected. After returning to South Korea, A provided B information on other North Korean escapees, their families in North Korea, and brokers assisting North Korean escapees through international phone calls and WeChat messages. A was later arrested and indicted for violating South Korea's National Security Act. A was sentenced to 3 years and 6 months in prison, the minimum term, in recognition of the extenuating circumstance that he had cooperated out of concern for his brother's well-being. According to the court judgment, B asked A for information on (1) the Association to Destroy the statues of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-un, (2) those who get people out of North Korea to China (brokers), (3) North Korean border guards collaborating with the brokers, and (4) people who pass on North Korean military materials to the U.S. or South Korea.

Cyberattacks have also become a common tactic of transnational repression. North Korean escapees who publicly criticize the North Korean regime or its human rights situation on South Korean or international media platforms, or who testify at global forums such as the United Nations, become targets of hacking attacks against their email or social media accounts. When victims remain unaware that their computers or mobile devices have been infected with spyware, the personal information of other North Korean escapees and human rights activists in contact with them may also be compromised. In cases where the acquaintances receive phishing messages from victims' compromised accounts, victims are forced to change their phone numbers and online identities, leading to disrupted communication and further social isolation.

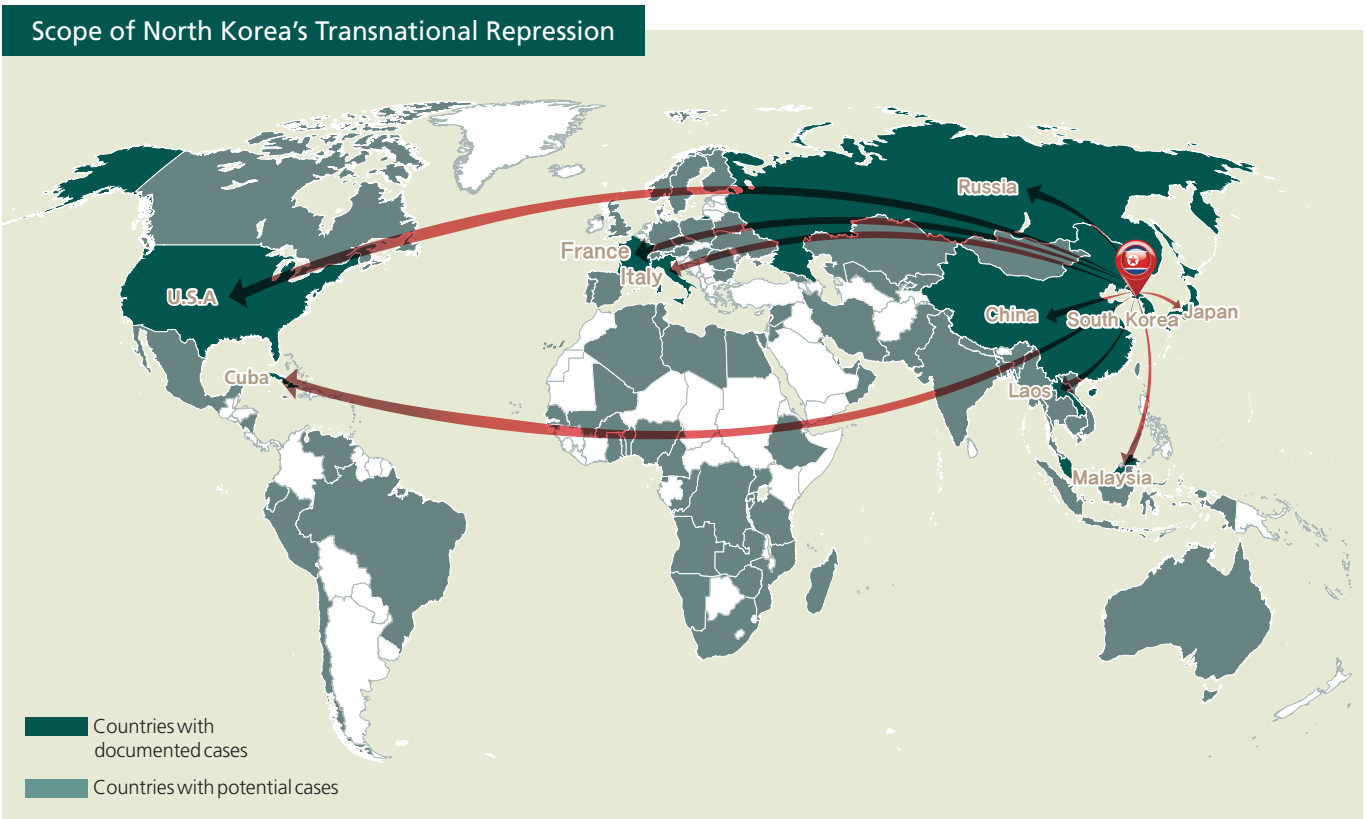
Through its external propaganda media such as 'Uriminzokkiri' [우리민족끼리], North Korea has publicly threatened North Korean escapees who provided testimony to the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the DPRK (COI DPRK) and assisted in its work between 2013 and 2014. Defamatory statements from their families and acquaintances in North Korea were disseminated via social media platforms. These smear campaigns exacerbated the North Korean escapees' anxiety and isolation, discouraging them from their public advocacy activities.

North Korea's Long Arm

North Korea's transnational repression reaches beyond the Korean peninsula and Asia. Targets are not limited to North Korean escapees who have resettled in South Korea or other countries, nor to North Korean workers in China and Russia. Any North Korean national abroad who seeks asylum risks becoming an object of state retaliation, as they may jeopardize North Korea's international reputation or reveal violations of sanctions against North Korea.

Over several decades, North Korea’s three leaders have developed an extensive and intricate network of overseas surveillance and control mechanisms designed to monitor and suppress dissent among its nationals abroad. North Korea’s long arm operates most effectively in countries that share similar authoritarian political traits or close mutual interests with the North Korean regime. Moreover, in states where the rule of law is weak or institutional safeguards are insufficient, North Korea can more easily bypass local oversight and reach its targets. North Korea also exercises influence through its embassies and consulates abroad, which serve not merely as diplomatic outposts but as operational hubs within its broader transnational repression scheme. Consequently, North Korea’s coercive reach extends across the globe, and even democratic states cannot be considered safe from its efforts to silence dissent beyond its borders.

Since its founding in 1948, North Korea has cumulatively sent its people to approximately 90 countries for its diplomatic missions, trade representative offices, overseas labor, and study abroad programs. While TJWG has documented North Korea's transnational repression cases in 10 countries (South Korea, Japan, China, Russia, Malaysia, Laos, Italy, France, Cuba, and the U.S.) as of October 2025, additional incidents are likely to have occurred in other countries.



Countermeasures Taken by the International Community

The U.S. countermeasures against transnational repression are spearheaded by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Department of Justice (DOJ), and the Federal Bureau of Investigation

(FBI). In 2022, the DOJ, in cooperation with the FBI, indicted Sun Hoi Ying (孫海鷹), a Chinese national involved in the Chinese government's Operation Fox Hunt (猎狐专项行动),⁶⁾ an operation which sought to forcibly repatriate dissidents overseas on charges of corruption. In 2021, the U.S. Congress passed the Transnational Repression Accountability and Prevention (TRAP) Act.

In June 2023, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (CoE), which has 46 member states, recognized transnational repression as a threat to the rule of law and human rights.⁷⁾ The European Parliament, a legislative body of the European Union (EU), called for enhanced training and resources for law enforcement authorities in the EU Member States to facilitate reporting, investigations, and attribution of transnational attacks against human rights defenders.⁸⁾

Nevertheless, universal norms and deterrence mechanisms to counter transnational repression remain inadequate. Despite the systematic, widespread, and grave nature of North Korea's transnational repression, the investigations, international mutual assistance, and countermeasures against these violations have been meager.

On the “North Korea’s Transnational Repression” Project

This project was launched in 2024 by the Transitional Justice Working Group (TJWG), a Seoul-based human rights documentation and advocacy NGO, and Global Rights Compliance (GRC), an international law foundation dedicated to promoting accountability through the innovative application of international law.

The project aims to investigate the continuity, geographic scope, victim groups, and the changing means and attack patterns of North Korea's transnational repression. With the broader objective of seeking countermeasures against it, we will continue to collect information on suspected cases of transnational repression and identify incidents with more detailed information. The project will also determine elements of transnational repression and analyze North Korea's operational methods. Researchers and external subject-matter consultants outside the portfolio of the project's main partners have also been brought onto the project to investigate the role of involved countries other than North Korea and analyze information in various languages.

Of the three planned issue briefs, this first edition outlines the rationale and direction of the project. The subsequent two briefs will examine North Korea's transnational repression in China and Russia, where international mutual assistance is particularly important. TJWG and GRC intend to share the project's open-source and closed-source findings on specific incidents, victims, and perpetrators, as well as policy and advocacy recommendations with EU policymakers and their domestic counterparts. In 2026, TJWG and GRC will organize an international conference in Seoul to discuss and develop countermeasures, as well as publish and distribute a comprehensive report in English and Korean.

⁶ US Department of Justice, “Man Charged with Transnational Repression Campaign While Acting as an Illegal Agent of the Chinese Government in the United States,” March 30, 2022.

⁷ Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, *Resolution 2509: Transnational repression as a growing threat to the rule of law and human rights*, adopted on June 23, 2023.

⁸ European Parliament, “Resolution on the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders,” P9_TA(2023)0086, March 16, 2023.



TJWG | Transitional Justice Working Group (TJWG) is a human rights documentation and advocacy NGO established in Seoul in 2014 that aims to develop the best practice to address mass human rights violations and to realize reparation and judicial accountability through a victim-centered approach in societies that are making a transition from or have yet to make a transition from armed conflict or dictatorship. TJWG also cooperates and shares experience with organizations and individuals who take the lead in human rights documentation and accountability for mass atrocities.



GRC | Global Rights Compliance (GRC) is an international law foundation established in 2013, dedicated to promoting accountability and strengthening justice systems through the innovative application of international law. Since 2019, GRC have been engaged in seeking accountability for victims and survivors of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) regime and providing mentorship to Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) working to achieve such justice.

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