

Chinese Fishing Near North Korea Is a Symptom of a Bigger Problem

Town, Jenny; Yozell, Sally . The Diplomat ; Tokyo (Jul 30, 2020).

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

[...]research has shown similar levels of Chinese fleet activity in 2019. Since 2017, the UN Security Council has banned all transactions involving North Korean seafood, including an explicit ban on the sale of fishing rights. [...]IUU fishing in North Korean waters has had a detrimental impact on the food, economic, and human security of small-scale North Korean fishers, while also devastating squid stock management in South Korean and Japanese waters. Because of these risks, protests by small-scale fishermen and governments have been increasing in many West African states, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Ecuador in response to new Chinese fishing facilities or the arrival of industrial Chinese vessels. [...]China can join other major seafood markets, such as the EU, United States, and soon Japan, and create a traceability system to track fish through the supply chain from catch to table.

FULL TEXT

A recent study published in Science Advances highlighted the robust scale of illegal fishing in the waters off the coast of North Korea by Chinese fishermen. By analyzing various types of commercial satellite imagery, the study found more than 900 Chinese vessels fishing in these waters in 2017, and 700 in 2018, amounting to what one researcher from Global Fishing Watch noted was roughly “one-third the size of China’s entire distant water fishing fleet.” Further research has shown similar levels of Chinese fleet activity in 2019.

Since 2017, the UN Security Council has banned all transactions involving North Korean seafood, including an explicit ban on the sale of fishing rights. But trade and transactions continue with a scale and persistence that is alarming, especially coming from predominately one country of origin –China. Despite Chinese government claims to “have prohibited ocean fishing operations in the DPRK sea areas” and to have implemented provisions that “prohibits procuring fishing rights from the DPRK,” several cases have been documented of Chinese fishing vessels caught fishing illegally in North Korean waters and holding DPRK fishing licenses.

Certainly, numerous evasion techniques can make detection and prosecution of these types of activities difficult, but there also seem to be few perceived consequences for getting caught, especially from the Chinese government. For instance, there is evidence of at least two Chinese companies in Hunchun and Ningbo with government ties openly advertising their brokerage of fishing permits from the North Korean government and the Korea Peoples’ Army (KPA). In 2019, the Haishangxian corporation in Ningbo was recruiting 100 boats to fish in North Korea’s exclusive economic zone (EEZ) from May through November that year, with a permit for unlimited fishing rights issued by the KPA.

These actions highlight gaps in implementation of the numerous international sanctions against North Korea for its WMD pursuits, but are also indicative of a larger problem of illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing and other illicit activities, especially by distant water fishing (DWF) fleets, which threaten the long-term sustainability of fisheries resources and the economic, food, and environmental security of coastal countries.

While IUU is a transnational issue, China is currently the top DWF nation, comprising about 40 percent of global DWF operations, which makes it a pivotal actor in addressing this problem. In the case of Chinese fishing in North Korean waters, two troubling trend combine: The Chinese government has been both lenient toward sanctions on North Korea for political purposes and reluctant to fully police its DWF operations or take measures to reduce IUU

operations perpetrated by its own fleets.

A 2019 Stimson Center report “Shining A Light,” for instance, identified a lack of transparency across China’s seafood supply chain and described their distant water fishing as an opaque system with little information about where fleets go, what they catch, and how fish is shipped to market. In addition, labor practices, vessel ownership, and fish access agreements between flag states and coastal states remain shrouded in secrecy.

Further, China continues expanding its DWF fleets across West Africa, South America, and the South China Sea. While not all of China’s DWF operations are engaged in IUU, these fleets have often been seen fishing illegally in another countries’ EEZs or right up to the line, or in the zone close to the shore set aside for artisanal fishermen. Even when fishing legally, vessels have been caught exceeding fish catch quotas agreed to with the host coastal state. These violations can have first and second order effects. For instance, IUU fishing in North Korean waters has had a detrimental impact on the food, economic, and human security of small-scale North Korean fishers, while also devastating squid stock management in South Korean and Japanese waters. Because of these risks, protests by small-scale fishermen and governments have been increasing in many West African states, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Ecuador in response to new Chinese fishing facilities or the arrival of industrial Chinese vessels. Over the last year, China’s words suggest that it seeks to improve its image as a global maritime power. In April 2020, China’s Bureau of Fisheries for the first time used the word “sustainable” in its distant water fleet regulations, marking a new approach to DWF management. This accompanied the bureau’s work to begin to blacklist vessels and captains found to engage in IUU fishing abroad, denying vessels access to Chinese ports and withholding licenses and lucrative fuel subsidies. It now also requires automated information system (AIS) tracking technology on all Chinese-flagged fishing vessels.

Other important steps taken include China’s announcement of its intention to accede to the global Port State Measures Agreement in 2020. In May, China overhauled its DWF transshipment regulations, strengthening DWF transshipment management across government and industry, requiring that starting in 2021 all DWF transshipment be reported and all ships that provide transportation services accept high seas observers. In June, the Chinese Bureau of Fisheries announced a closed season for squid in two important sections of the high seas off South America, to rebuild squid populations with the long-term goal to promote the sustainable harvest of squid in China’s DWF fleet. China’s BRI Green Development Coalition now has an Oceans Working Group, and China’s 14th Five Year Plan, which is currently in development, will include further oceans commitments. Given China’s outsized role in DWF operations, its cooperation is crucial to the success of establishing and enforcing laws and best practices aimed to reduce IUU fishing and its harmful impacts. Despite recent positive steps and the shift in rhetoric, current evidence suggests that China will need to take additional steps to curtail sanctions violations, IUU, and harmful DWF activities by Chinese fishing fleets.

China’s DWF fleet operations remain opaque, rendering enforcement difficult. Making vessel ownership and access agreements public is one step that could improve the accountability of its DWF fleet. China could also support World Trade Organization efforts to end harmful economic subsidies that artificially increase the value of fishing, incentivize overfishing, and undermine long term sustainability of oceans.

Finally, China can join other major seafood markets, such as the EU, United States, and soon Japan, and create a traceability system to track fish through the supply chain from catch to table. With these efforts, China can demonstrate its intent to translate words to actions, and safeguard fish stocks and the communities which rely on them.

As with other transnational, nontraditional security threats like infectious disease management, climate change, and nuclear security, high level leadership is crucial to spark change. UN member states have an obligation under the UN Charter to respect the sovereign equality of fellow members, as well as to accept and carry out the decisions of the UN Security Council, and to hold each other accountable for their actions. Despite the threat of an almost certain veto by China, other Security Council members should elevate recent events to the level of a full debate, to catalyze further actions to improve enforcement and traceability practices.

Jenny Town is a Fellow and Deputy Director of the 38 North Program at the Stimson Center. Sally Yozell is Senior

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