

## Japan's foreign minister slams efforts on North Korea

Taro Kono says Pyongyang continues to get around sanctions with ship-to-ship transfers



South Korean ship P-Pioneer is being held in Busan over suspicions that it illegally provided oil to North Korea. © AP

Lionel Barber and Robin Harding in Tokyo APRIL 14, 2019

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Sanctions on North Korea are full of holes and the international community needs to crack down, Japan's foreign minister has said in an interview with the Financial Times.

Taro Kono said that the Pyongyang regime continues to get around sanctions by transferring cargoes between ships at sea, harvesting funds from North Korean workers abroad and hacking attacks on cryptocurrencies.

“There are a lot of [ship-to-ship transfers](#) going on, getting oil products to North Korea, and getting North Korean coal to some countries,” said Mr Kono. “North Korean ships are involved and several [other] countries are involved, [albeit] not directly or not knowingly.”

His comments reflect Tokyo's desire to ramp up economic pressure on Pyongyang after negotiations between North Korea and the US [stalled without progress](#) towards the destruction of its nuclear arsenal.

Japan has publicly identified at least 12 incidents of North Korean tankers lying alongside other vessels in international waters since the start of 2018. Based on the size of the ships, potential transfers would significantly exceed sanction limits.

Officials say Japan has spotted many other suspected ship-to-ship transfers with a lesser degree of certainty. It has not named all the sanctions-evading vessels, suspecting that many bear false markings. The US recently froze the assets of two Chinese shipping companies for [alleged sanctions-busting](#).

## How North Korea is attempting to evade sanctions



“There is an international operation going on in the East China Sea to prevent ship-to-ship transfers,” said Mr Kono. “We are also asking and sharing information with China so we hope China will tighten its grip on this issue.”

Mr Kono said the recent summit in Hanoi showed North Korea that US president Donald Trump would not give way on the decommissioning of Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons and so the only way out of sanctions was “to make the right decision to get rid of all the weapons of mass destruction and missiles of all ranges”.

North Korean leader [Kim Jong Un said](#) last week that his country would deal a “serious blow” to those imposing sanctions, according to state media agency KCNA.

Relations with the Korean peninsula have been a headache for Mr Kono — who stands out from past Japanese foreign secretaries for his fluent English and hyperactive travel schedule — since he took office in 2017.

Tokyo’s relationship with Seoul deteriorated sharply last year after South Korea’s Supreme Court ordered Japanese companies to [pay reparations](#) to wartime victims of forced labour, despite a 1965 treaty in which such claims were “settled completely and finally”.

“We were really shocked to see this. We didn’t expect this. We gave our economic co-operation back in the 1960s that was bigger than their annual government budget, and with that money they

were supposed to take care of all these claims, so we were very shocked to see this court ruling was allowed,” said Mr Kono.

The South Korean supreme court ruled that claims for psychological distress by private individuals were not covered by the 1965 treaty. Japan calls this group “former civilian workers”, saying that some of them travelled voluntarily to gain employment.

Mr Kono called on the South Korean government to enter talks on the issue. He said Japan does not rule out going to the international court in The Hague, but will take no action unless South Korea enforces the court rulings and there is “actual damage done to the Japanese companies”.