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US president accuses China of illegal oil transfer to North Korea

US President Donald Trump has lashed out at China for supposedly failing to implement United Nations sanctions on North Korea. South Korea announced yesterday it had seized a Hong Kong-flagged ship, the Lighthouse Winmore, which allegedly transferred oil to a North Korean vessel in contravention of UN bans.

Trump provocatively tweeted: "Caught RED HANDED—very disappointed that China is allowing oil to go into North Korea. There will never be a friendly solution to the North Korea problem if this continues to happen!"

The Trump administration has ratcheted up UN sanctions, and unilateral US bans, on the Pyongyang regime in a campaign of "maximum pressure" to compel North Korea to abandon its nuclear and missile programs. In contrast to this supposedly "friendly solution," the president has threatened again and again to take military action against Pyongyang if it does not fall into line.

Trump's denunciation of Beijing again demonstrates that the targeting of North Korea over its nuclear arsenal is aimed more broadly against China. The latest US National Security Strategy identifies China, along with Russia, as a major threat to American global dominance. The US military build-up in Asia against North Korea is also in preparation for war against China.

The latest Trump tweet smacks of a contrived provocation aimed at further ramping up tensions with China and North Korea. While South Korean officials announced the seizure

of the Lighthouse Winmore, the information is more than a month old, and its release was clearly orchestrated in collaboration with Washington.

Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying flatly denied that China had anything to do with the alleged transfer of goods from the Lighthouse Winmore to a North Korean ship, saying it "did not accord with the facts."

Hua pointed out: "In reality, the ship in question has, since August, not docked at a Chinese port and there is no record of it entering or leaving a Chinese port." She insisted that China had "always implemented UN Security Council resolutions pertaining to North Korea in their entirety and fulfills its international obligations."

Neither the US nor South Korea has provided any evidence of Chinese involvement. South Korean authorities stated yesterday that the Lighthouse Winmore was seized in South Korea's Yeosu Port on November 24, claiming the ship had transferred 600 tonnes of refined petroleum to a North Korean vessel.

The Hong Kong-flagged ship was chartered by the Taiwanese company Billions Bunker Group. It had previously visited Yeosu Port on October 11 to load Japanese-refined petroleum and left four days later, supposedly for Taiwan. However, according to South Korean officials, it transferred the oil to a North Korean ship, the Sam Jong 2, and three other non-North Korean vessels in international waters in the East China Sea.

The officials noted that South Korea had shared intelligence with the US for the detection of the illegal transaction. The US previously released satellite imagery showing a ship-to-ship transfer allegedly with a North Korean vessel.

UN sanctions limit, but do not ban, the export of oil to North Korea. However, a UN resolution in September prohibits the transfer of goods at sea to a North Korean ship. The US has called on the UN to blacklist 10 ships, including the Lighthouse Winmore, for allegedly carrying out illicit trade with North Korea.

Despite the lack of evidence of Chinese involvement, Trump threatened Beijing with trade war measures if it did not take stronger action against North Korea. In an interview yesterday with the *New York Times*, he said: "China's hurting us very badly on trade, but I have been soft on China because the only thing more important to me than trade is war."

In the interview, Trump repeated that he was disappointed with China for allowing oil to go to North Korea. He lashed out against China, saying "on trade [it] has ripped off this country more than any other element of the world in history has ripped off anything." He pointed out that during last year's presidential election he threatened to brand China as a currency manipulator, paving the way for trade war retaliation.

Trump then warned: "I can be different if they're helping us with North Korea. If they don't help us with North Korea, then I do what I've always said I want to do. China can help us much more, and they have to help us much more."

Trump's menacing threats against China and North Korea foreshadow a further escalation of tensions in the New Year. White House officials have repeatedly warned that time is running out for a "peaceful" end to the confrontation with Pyongyang.

Trump's comments are a further indication that he wants nothing less than a total economic embargo on North Korea in order to bring it to its knees. Both China and Russia have been reluctant to support measures that would create an economic and political crisis in Pyongyang that would allow the US and its allies to intervene and fashion a pro-American puppet regime.

Yet the imposition of a naval blockade on North Korea appears to be among the options under consideration by the Trump administration as it prepares for war against Pyongyang. Asked yesterday whether the US navy would become involved in seizing vessels suspected of transferring oil to North Korea, US Defence Secretary James Mattis declared he would not speculate on future military operations, but did not rule out such action.

Any forcible boarding by the US navy of a North Korean ship would violate international law and greatly inflame an already extremely tense situation. Such an incident could trigger North Korean retaliation and rapidly escalate into a full-scale conflict that would drag in other major powers, such as China and Russia.