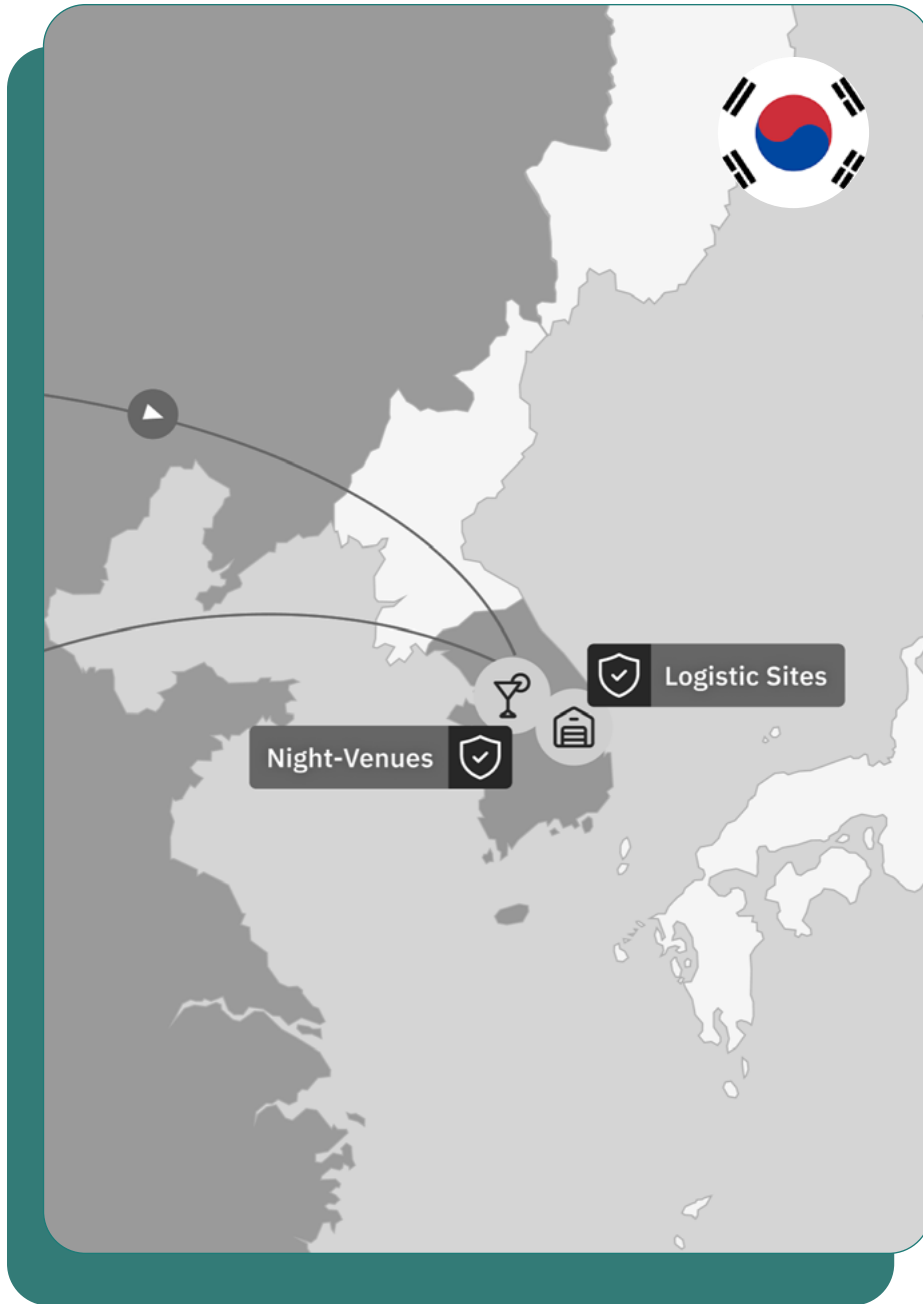


ApiraSol

E-CIGARETTES IN SOUTH KOREA 2024/2025 – Q2

SUPPLY CHAIN INTELLIGENCE
APRIL 2026



Overview

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2. E-CIGARETTE TRADE - ASIA

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1

INTRODUCTION & METHODOLOGY

Introduction

ApiraSol has been investigating the routes, brands, and entities involved in the trade of illicit e-cigarettes across various countries worldwide for several years.

In this particular research conducted in 2025, ApiraSol focused on the global illicit e-cigarette trade, drawing from trade data as well as open sources such as enforcement news, press releases from customs agencies, academic research papers, and online intelligence reports. The period covered for trade data spans January 2024 to December 2024, while enforcement-related news generally covers the years 2024 to 2025.

The Illicit E-Cigarette Trade: A Growing Global Challenge

The illicit e-cigarette trade is becoming a significant force reshaping the global nicotine market, fueled by rapid growth and mounting regulatory complexity. According to Euromonitor International, the illicit e-cigarette market was valued at **USD 47 billion in 2024**, representing over **70% of global spending** and roughly **three-quarters of total volume—equivalent to 605 billion cigarettes**. Furthermore, Euromonitor reported that illicit e-cigarette products exceed **80% penetration in North America, Latin America, the Middle East and Africa, and Asia Pacific**,

while Western Europe, though lower, continues to face persistent illicit trade despite increasing legislative pressures.

Regulatory Frameworks Driving Illicit Trade

Stringent bans and fragmented regulations often unintentionally fuel underground trade. Bans do not necessarily eliminate demand for e-cigarettes; where consumer interest persists despite such measures, gaps in legal supply may arise, creating opportunities for illicit suppliers to fill unmet demand. Even in countries with robust regulatory frameworks, unintended consequences may arise—strict compliance requirements and high taxation can make legal products more expensive and less accessible, while the convenience of illicit channels, including online and delivery-based sources, may further draw consumers toward cheaper, non-compliant alternatives. These conditions typically incentivize smuggling and the use of transshipment hubs in regions with weaker oversight, allowing illicit goods to infiltrate regulated markets.

Complex regulations also often create loopholes that illicit networks exploit, such as mislabeling products or routing shipments through multiple jurisdictions to obscure origins. While strong regulations aim to protect public health, without equally strong

enforcement, these often end up driving demand for illicit products rather than curbing it.

China's Regulatory Gaps and Insufficient Enforcements

China produces the vast majority of e-cigarettes globally, making its regulatory framework critical to controlling illicit trade. The **Administrative Measures for Electronic Cigarettes** (effective May 1, 2022) require that all e-cigarette products comply with mandatory national standards and that producers, exporters, and retailers obtain licenses from the State Tobacco Monopoly Administration (STMA). Similarly, the **Administrative Rules for E-Cigarettes Import-Export Trade** (issued October 2022) stipulate that only licensed exporters can ship products abroad, and exported goods must either meet the destination country's regulations or adhere to China's national standards.

In practice, however, exports are not sufficiently controlled. Loopholes in licensing, weak oversight of small-scale producers, and limited monitoring of export compliance allow unlicensed operators to bypass official channels.

Compounding these issues is weak enforcement in many destination countries. These challenges are amplified by the growing use of digital platforms such as social media, messaging apps, and

informal online channels, which make detection and enforcement even harder.

Without stronger controls and enforcement mechanisms in China, and investment in monitoring capabilities in destination countries, illicit trade will continue to thrive despite regulatory efforts.

On December 18, 2025, China's General Office of the State Council issued a policy document titled "Opinions on Combating Tobacco-Related Illegal Activities Across the Entire Chain", which sets out a comprehensive enforcement strategy against illicit tobacco and nicotine products. The Opinions explicitly bring electronic cigarettes and other nicotine-containing products under strengthened regulatory scrutiny, calling for full-chain enforcement against the illegal production, wholesale, transportation, sale, and "export re-flow" of e-cigarettes and related products. This includes tightening oversight of e-cigarette manufacturing and supply chains, cracking down on unauthorized operations, and treating unlawful export and smuggling back into China as enforcement priorities alongside traditional tobacco smuggling.

The text of the Opinions does not designate exports to overseas destination markets as independent enforcement targets; rather, references to other countries and cross-border cooperation are tied specifically to preventing illegal e-cigarette exports from re-entering China's domestic market. This confirms that the

primary focus is safeguarding China's domestic regulatory objectives, public health, and market order, with international cooperation positioned mainly as a means to curb the re-flow of illicit products back into China. The effectiveness of China in stepping up its enforcement efforts to control the illicit trade of tobacco and nicotine products remains to be seen.

Amid the alarming surge of illicit market activity and mounting regulatory complexity, ApiraSol's 2025 investigation into the global e-cigarette trade will map illicit trade flows, analyze seizure patterns across countries and regions, and uncover the mechanisms enabling this shadow economy.

Methodology

This report has been prepared using various data sources, including (but not limited to):

- Publicly available customs trade data for the period January 2024 - December 2024. For those countries covered in this report that don't make their customs data publicly available, data has been obtained from the mirrored data of other countries.
- Statistical data for the period January 2024 - June 2025.
- News articles relating to enforcement and seizures.

Terminology and Definitions

Statistical Data - Numerical information representing measurable aspects of economic, demographic, social, or environmental phenomena, as produced by national statistical offices, government agencies, or intergovernmental organizations.

Trade Data - Information on the movement of goods and services between countries, typically reported by customs authorities and presented in terms of import and export volumes, values, origin, and destination.

Enforcement News - Reports and updates issued by law enforcement, customs, or regulatory agencies on activities such as investigations, product seizures, arrests, policy actions, and other official measures.

In the trade data, Origin and Destination Countries refer to the following:

Origin Countries - Shipment Origin Countries declared in publicly available trade data between January 2024 - June 2025.

Destination Countries - Shipment Destination Countries declared in publicly available trade data between January 2024 - June 2025.

2

E-CIGARETTE
TRADE - ASIA

E-Cigarette Trade - Asia

This report examines the trade of e-cigarettes in **South Korea**.

The e-cigarette landscape across Asia is marked by a diverse and rapidly evolving regulatory environment. Countries like **India, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam**, and **Hong Kong** have implemented strict bans on the import, sale, and use of e-cigarettes, citing public health concerns and youth protection. Others, such as **Australia, Malaysia, Indonesia** and the **Philippines**, have opted for regulated frameworks, allowing e-cigarettes under specific conditions—often with licensing, age restrictions, and product standards. Meanwhile, **China** and **South Korea** treat e-cigarettes as tobacco products, subjecting them to taxation, licensing, and safety regulations.

In many countries, there is a significant discrepancy between the value of e-cigarettes declared as exported from China and the value reported as imported by the destination country—**often with China's export figures being much higher**. This statistical gap may indicate the **presence of illicit trade**, where products enter markets without being officially recorded or taxed.

However, in cases like **Singapore** and **Hong Kong**, the opposite trend is observed: declared imports from China exceed China's reported exports. This suggests these locations may serve as transshipment hubs, where e-cigarettes—both legal and illicit—

are imported, stored, and re-exported to other countries in the region.

Illicit e-cigarette trade continues to rise across Asia despite regulatory measures. Euromonitor estimates illicit incidence to be at least 60% in Indonesia and Malaysia, and around 80% in South Korea and the Philippines —underscoring the scale and persistence of the problem across the region. Enforcement reports consistently identify China as the main source, with large volumes of unregistered, untaxed, flavored, and high-nicotine devices produced in southern China and smuggled into most neighboring countries.

While most seizures trace directly back to **China**, some cases involve other routes—such as products intercepted in **Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia**, and **Thailand** coming through Southeast Asian countries, and shipments in **India** linked to Middle Eastern suppliers. These are few compared to the overwhelming volume of China-origin products dominating the market.

Authorities—including customs, health ministries, and anti-smuggling units—have intensified crackdowns, seizing millions of illegal devices and launching awareness campaigns. Yet enforcement gaps and strong consumer demand fuel a thriving underground market, increasingly tied to organized crime. Australia

illustrates how these dynamics can escalate: since 2023, authorities have reported multiple bombing incidents and violent attacks connected to criminal groups involved in illicit tobacco and vaping products. This trend suggests that the illicit e-cigarette trade is not only a regulatory concern but may also pose broader public safety risks as it intersects with organized crime and, in some cases, adulterated or drug laced products.



3

E-CIGARETTE TRADE -
SOUTH KOREA

Summary

South Korea's official trade statistics for e-cigarettes reveal substantial discrepancies when compared to reported exports from key partner countries, notably China and Indonesia. For instance, China's declared exports to South Korea in 2024 amounted to \$726.9 million, whereas South Korea's import records from China were only \$175.3 million—a gap of more than \$551 million. Similarly, Indonesia reported \$208,000 in e-cigarette exports to South Korea, while South Korea registered only \$16,000 in imports from Indonesia, highlighting further inconsistencies.

These statistical gaps arise from several contributing factors:

- **Regulatory Environment:** South Korea maintains a stringent and continuously evolving regulatory framework for vaping products under the amended Tobacco Business Act, effective 24 April 2026. These regulatory pressures increase the tax burden on importers and restrict the volume of products that can be legally admitted into the country. As a result, traders may choose to misdeclare shipments, underdeclare quantities, or route products through alternative channels to avoid compliance checks and tax obligations.
- **Re-routing:** Products intended for South Korea may first pass through intermediary countries or free trade zones before reaching their destination. These routing practices can obscure the true origin, complicate customs checks, and hinder

accurate tracking in trade statistics—contributing to the significant gaps observed between reported exports and South Korea's official import data.

- **Misdeclaration and evasion:** E-cigarette shipments may be declared under unrelated HS codes, mislabeled, undervalued, or split into smaller lots to avoid detection, registration requirements, or taxation. These tactics enable importers to bypass regulatory scrutiny and contribute to the large statistical gaps observed in official trade figures.
- **Incomplete or Delayed Reporting:** Some shipments lack complete data—such as shipment weight or transport mode—hampering transparency and granular reconciliation.
- **Customs Data Limitations:** Differences in classification standards, documentation practices, and valuation methods between South Korea and its trading partners exacerbate discrepancies, making reconciliation of bilateral trade figures challenging.
- **Prevalence of Smuggling and Illicit Trade:** A significant portion of e-cigarette imports enter the country through smuggling, misdeclaration, or the black market, purposely avoiding customs declaration to circumvent taxes and regulatory oversight.

Overall, these gaps indicate that South Korea's official import data only partially reflects the true magnitude of inflows, with substantial volumes of e-cigarette products bypassing formal

channels. This reality underscores ongoing risks in supply chain transparency and calls for enhanced international data harmonization, enforcement cooperation, and policy measures to better monitor and address the illicit movement of vaping products.

Regulatory Overview

South Korea regulates vaping products under a combination of tobacco related laws and chemical laws, shaped by public health objectives and evolving industry dynamics. E-cigarettes containing nicotine derived from tobacco or artificially synthesized are classified as tobacco products under the Tobacco Business Act and are subject to tobacco regulations and taxation.

Notably, synthetic nicotine was historically excluded from the tobacco definition, creating a regulatory and fiscal gap. To address this, the Tobacco Business Act was amended and passed in December 2025, with implementation in April 2026. As a result, synthetic nicotine products are now brought within the scope and subject to regulatory controls, including taxation, application of statutory health warnings, and advertising restrictions.

Currently, nicotine-like products remain unregulated as these fall outside the tobacco definition. Discussions are underway to address these regulatory gaps, with the aim to improve consistency across product types and prevent youth access.

Statistical Data (China as Origin)

China's declared exports of e-cigarettes to South Korea in 2024 totaled \$726,923,000, while South Korea's declared imports from China reached \$175,333,000—creating a **discrepancy of approximately \$551.6 million**. This substantial gap suggests that a significant portion of e-cigarettes exported from China to South Korea may not be entering the country through official channels, or are subsequently being rerouted to other destinations. Factors likely contributing to this discrepancy include the use of indirect trade routes to mask the ultimate destination of goods, as well as the circumvention of regulatory controls and duties through grey-market activity, under-declaration, or misdeclaration. The tightening of regulations and enforcement in target markets, as well as strategic efforts to obscure trade flows by both exporters and intermediaries, increase the risks of smuggling, diversion, and unrecorded movements. As a result, the gap may reflect both the scale of illicit trade and South Korea's potential role in channeling e-cigarette shipments across the Asia-Pacific, compounding the challenges of supply chain transparency and effective regulatory oversight.

Total Value 2024:

- Total Exports from China 2024: \$726,923,000
- Total Imports from China 2024: \$ 175,333,000
- **Statistical Gap: \$551,590,000**

Statistical Data (Indonesia as Origin)

Indonesia's reported exports of e-cigarettes to South Korea in 2024 amounted to \$208,000 while South Korea registered \$16,000 in imports from Indonesia, highlighting a considerable **statistical discrepancy of \$192,000**. This considerable statistical gap suggests that a substantial share of e-cigarettes exported from Indonesia are not entering South Korea through formal, documented channels, or may be diverted in transit to other destinations. Such discrepancies are indicative of broader supply chain challenges, including misdeclaration, under-reporting, and the use of third-country routing to obscure the true destination of products. These factors may reflect attempts by exporters or intermediaries to circumvent regulatory controls or avoid import duties within South Korea, or alternatively, may signal the presence of grey-market flows and illicit trade. The persistent mismatch underscores the difficulty of accurately tracking e-cigarette movements in the region and demonstrates the need for enhanced customs coordination, enforcement measures, and data harmonization to address supply chain vulnerabilities and regulatory risks.

Total Value 2024:

- Total Exports from Indonesia 2024: \$ 208,000
- Total Imports from Indonesia 2024: \$ 16,000
- **Statistical Gap: \$ 192,000**

EXPORTS OF E-CIGARETTES FROM CHINA TO SOUTH KOREA - STATISTICAL DATA (ITC DATABASE)

HS Code	HS Code Description	ORIGIN COUNTRY	DESTINATION COUNTRY	Value in 2024 (Unit : US Dollar thousand)	Value in 2025-Q1 -Q2 (Unit : US Dollar thousand)
24041200	Other products containing nicotine, intended for inhalation without combustion	CHINA	SOUTH KOREA	594,756	196,974
24041990	Other products containing nicotine substitutes, intended for inhalation without combustion	CHINA	SOUTH KOREA	10,846	5,282
24041910	Other products containing tobacco substitutes, intended for inhalation without combustion	CHINA	SOUTH KOREA	0	0
85434000	Electronic cigarettes and similar personal electric vaporizing devices	CHINA	SOUTH KOREA	121,321	53,301
Total:				726,923	255,557

IMPORTS OF E-CIGARETTES TO SOUTH KOREA FROM CHINA - STATISTICAL DATA (ITC DATABASE)

HS Code	HS Code Description	ORIGIN COUNTRY	DESTINATION COUNTRY	Value in 2024 (Unit : US Dollar thousand)	Value in 2025-Q1 -Q2 (Unit : US Dollar thousand)
2404121000	Products containing nicotine, intended for inhalation without combustion (excl. containing . . .	CHINA	SOUTH KOREA	80,309	16,789
2404129000	Products containing nicotine, intended for inhalation without combustion (excl. containing . . .	CHINA	SOUTH KOREA	503	1,230
2404199010	Products containing tobacco or nicotine substitutes, intended for inhalation without combustion . . .	CHINA	SOUTH KOREA	3,872	1,750
2404199090	Products containing tobacco or nicotine substitutes, intended for inhalation without combustion . . .	CHINA	SOUTH KOREA	46	3
2404191000	Products containing tobacco or nicotine substitutes, intended for inhalation without combustion . . .	CHINA	SOUTH KOREA	0	0
8543409000	Electronic cigarettes and similar personal electric vaporizing devices	CHINA	SOUTH KOREA	88,985	35,911
8543401000	Electronic cigarettes and similar personal electric vaporizing devices	CHINA	SOUTH KOREA	1,618	819
Total:				175,333	56,502

EXPORTS OF E-CIGARETTES FROM INDONESIA TO SOUTH KOREA - STATISTICAL DATA (ITC DATABASE)

HS Code	HS Code Description	ORIGIN COUNTRY	DESTINATION COUNTRY	Value in 2024 (Unit : US Dollar thousand)	Value in 2025-Q1 -Q2 (Unit : US Dollar thousand)
24041210	E-cigarette liquid or gel	INDONESIA	SOUTH KOREA	18	14
24041290	Products intended for inhalation without combustion, containing nicotine, other than e-cigarette . . .	INDONESIA	SOUTH KOREA	0	0
24041910	Products intended for inhalation without combustion, containing tobacco substitutes	INDONESIA	SOUTH KOREA	190	5
24041920	Products intended for inhalation without combustion, containing nicotine substitutes	INDONESIA	SOUTH KOREA	0	0
85434000	Electronic cigarettes and similar personal electric vaporising devices	INDONESIA	SOUTH KOREA	0	46
Total:				208	65

IMPORTS OF E-CIGARETTES TO SOUTH KOREA FROM INDONESIA - STATISTICAL DATA (ITC DATABASE)

HS Code	HS Code Description	ORIGIN COUNTRY	DESTINATION COUNTRY	Value in 2024 (Unit : US Dollar thousand)	Value in 2025-Q1 -Q2 (Unit : US Dollar thousand)
2404121000	Products containing nicotine, intended for inhalation without combustion (excl. containing . . .	INDONESIA	SOUTH KOREA	0	13
2404129000	Products containing nicotine, intended for inhalation without combustion (excl. containing . . .	INDONESIA	SOUTH KOREA	0	0
2404199010	Products containing tobacco or nicotine substitutes, intended for inhalation without combustion . . .	INDONESIA	SOUTH KOREA	16	3
2404199090	Products containing tobacco or nicotine substitutes, intended for inhalation without combustion . . .	INDONESIA	SOUTH KOREA	0	0
2404191000	Products containing tobacco or nicotine substitutes, intended for inhalation without combustion . . .	INDONESIA	SOUTH KOREA	0	0
8543409000	Electronic cigarettes and similar personal electric vaporizing devices	INDONESIA	SOUTH KOREA	0	17
8543401000	Electronic cigarettes and similar personal electric vaporizing devices	INDONESIA	SOUTH KOREA	0	0
Total:				16	33



SOUTH KOREA STATISTICAL DATA



Exports from China to South Korea

726,923,000

Total 2024 Value (USD)
1H 2025 Value (USD): 255,557,000

Imports to South Korea from China

175,333,000

Total 2024 Value (USD)
1H 2025 Value (USD): 56,502,000

Statistical Data Gap *

551,590,000

Exports from Indonesia to South Korea

208,000

Total 2024 Value (USD)
1H 2025 Value (USD): 65,000

Imports to South Korea from Indonesia

16,000

Total 2024 Value (USD)
1H 2025 Value (USD): 33,000

Statistical Data Gap *

192,000

* Difference between the Exports and the Declared Imports (USD)



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SOUTH KOREA

TRADE DATA (MIRRORED DATA FROM INDONESIA AND GLOBAL SHIPMENTS DATA)

The lack of officially recorded e-cigarette shipments from China and Indonesia to South Korea can be attributed to strict import controls, regulatory barriers, and heightened enforcement against unauthorized products. Many shipments may be diverted through indirect channels, misdeclared, or enter via the black market to circumvent restrictions, resulting in significant underreporting and discrepancies in official trade statistics.

Shipments:	39 Trade Shipments
Period:	January - December 2024
Origin Countries:	China: 77 %, Indonesia: 23 %,
Origin Ports:	Qingdao: 79 %, Batam Hang Nadim U: 18 %, Batu Ampar: 3 %
Destination Countries:	South Korea
Destination Ports:	Pusan: 77 %, Incheon Intl Apt Seoul: 21 %, Other ports: 2 %
Products:	Products containing nicotine, intended for inhalation without combustion; e-cigarette
E-Cigarette Brands:	
Mode of Transport:	Sea: 77 %, Air: 21 %, Unknown: 2 %
Value declared:	207,631.34 USD (23 % of shipments)
Weight declared:	860,162.40 KG (100 % of shipments)

SOUTH KOREA

Number of exporters:	3 (The exporter's name was not provided in 1 shipment)
Number of importers:	3
Top Exporters:	
Top Importers:	
HS Codes declared in shipments:	240412: Other products containing nicotine, intended for inhalation without combustion (30 shipments) 240419: Other products intended for inhalation without combustion (9 shipments)



SOUTH KOREA

TRADE DATA (Mirrored Data from Indonesia and Global Shipments Data)



Shipments (Period FY 2024)

39

Quantity

207,631.34

Value (USD)

All included shipments and brands are recognized by regulatory authorities and involve only companies operating in compliance with legal requirements.



Destination Ports

- Pusan (77 %)
- Incheon Intl Apt Seoul (21 %)
- Other ports (2 %)



Origin Ports from China and Indonesia

- Qingdao (79 %)
- Batam Hang Nadim U (18 %)
- Batu Ampar (3 %)



Mode of Transportation

Sea: 77 %, Air: 21 %, Unknown: 2 %

E-Cigarette Products

Products containing nicotine, intended for inhalation without combustion; e-cigarette

Legal Brands at Time of Shipment

Top Importers

Top Exporters

The online articles report on **seizures of illegal e-cigarette products in South Korea.**

South Korean authorities have reported a surge in seizures of illegal nicotine concentrate and synthetic cannabis disguised as e-cigarettes. Major cases involve imports from China and Germany, with raids on apartments, nightlife venues, and logistics sites. The trend includes youth misuse of e-cigarette-type drugs and the distribution of drug-laced cartridges.

Recent enforcement actions have revealed highly organized criminal operations importing raw drug materials (such as synthetic cannabis and powders for psychoactive pills) from overseas. These groups set up covert labs in residential areas to manufacture narcotic-infused e-cigarette liquids and pills, distributing them throughout the country using encrypted communication and cryptocurrency to avoid detection. Police have uncovered hidden inventories—sometimes buried in remote locations—along with detailed sales records and significant cash proceeds.

High-profile raids in Busan and Seoul have targeted both domestic supply and international trafficking networks, resulting in large-scale arrests, asset freezes, and the confiscation of drugs valued at billions of won. These cases also exposed efforts to market these products in popular nightlife districts and among youth, raising urgent public health and law enforcement concerns. South Korea's response involves not just aggressive policing, but

also closer inter-agency coordination and regulatory reforms, such as the temporary scheduling of new narcotics found in seized e-cigarettes and the removal of risky products from retail shelves. Collectively, these actions underscore the increasing complexity of the illicit e-cigarette market, its links to international drug trafficking, and the evolving methods used to penetrate legitimate consumer channels.

- **Locations of seizures:** Seizures and crackdowns occurred in Seoul (including Gangnam nightlife venues) and Busan, with cases involving both local distribution and international smuggling of raw materials.
- **Products & Substances seized:** Police confiscated e-cigarette liquids laced with narcotics, synthetic cannabinoids (“synthetic marijuana”), and potent synthetic nicotine—often marketed to youth and disguised as regular e-cigarettes.
- **Methods:** Raw materials for drug-laced e-cigarettes were imported, processed in domestic labs, and distributed through nightlife venues and criminal syndicates targeting young consumers.
- **Scale & Enforcement:** Major busts targeted organized rings; police identified and arrested multiple suspects, seized significant volumes of dangerous e-cigarette liquids, and escalated nationwide efforts against new forms of drug-related crimes.
- **Trend:** Authorities warn of a surge in synthetic drug e-cigarettes and highlight the evolving threat of organized crime targeting youth with clandestine distribution networks.



SOUTH KOREA ILLCIT TRADE OVERVIEW

South Korean authorities have reported a surge in seizures of illegal nicotine concentrate and synthetic cannabis disguised as e-cigarettes. Major cases involve imports from China and Germany, with raids on apartments, nightlife venues, and logistics sites. The trend includes youth misuse of e-cigarette-type drugs and the distribution of drug-laced cartridges.

Legend



Seizure



Warehouse



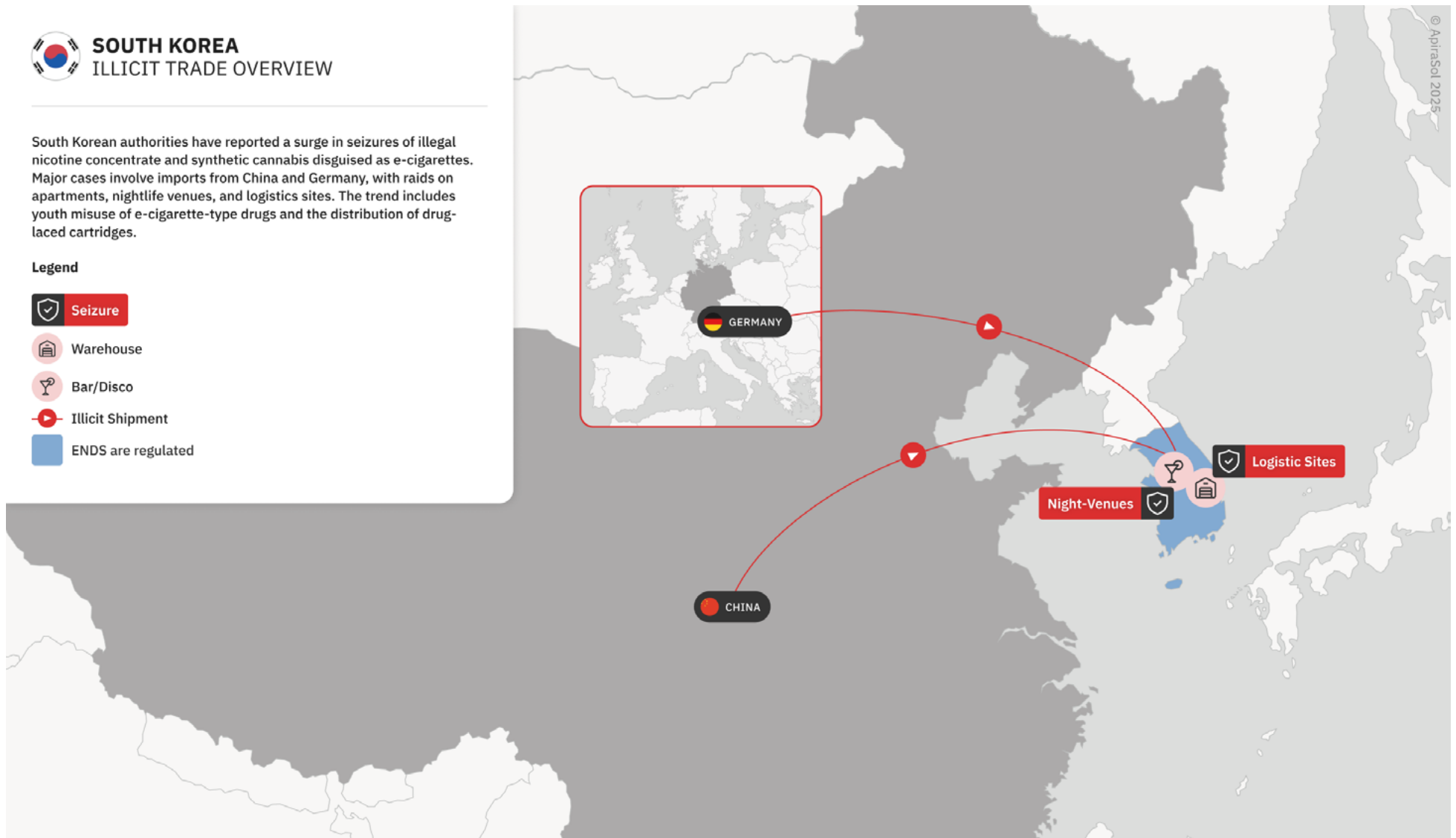
Bar/Disco



Illicit Shipment



ENDS are regulated



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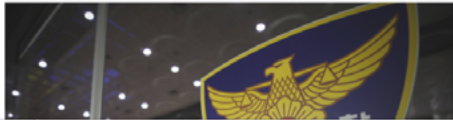


SOUTH KOREA ENFORCEMENT NEWS

Korean police busted a group smuggling drug-laced e-cigarette liquids from Hong Kong to Seoul clubs, seizing 513 cartridges and pursuing ringleaders who fled to Thailand.

Police identify nine for distributing vape liquid laced with new drugs to Gangnam nightlife venues

Published: 13 Aug 2025, 17:59



Legend



Seizure



ENDS are regulated



Illicit Shipment

Source

<https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/2025-08-13/national/socialAffairs/Police-identify-nine-for-distributing-vape-liquid-laced-with-new-drugs-to-Gangnam-nightlife-venues/2374880?>



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