

In Korea, Planning for the Worst: Mass Evacuation

By [Global Research](#)

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As the Korean peninsula enters what U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates calls “a difficult and potentially dangerous time,” the long-dormant Korean conflict is rumbling back into the public consciousness. Government officials from the U.S., South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, and other states throughout the region are planning for the worst-case scenario: renewed war, perhaps nuclear, and a massive exodus from South Korea. If tensions continue to escalate, hundreds of thousands of foreign civilians living in South Korea will flee, sparking one the biggest mass-evacuations since the British and French pulled 338,000 troops out of Dunkirk in 1940.

Even under the best conditions, a mass evacuation is no easy task. In July 2006, as a battle brewed between Israel and Lebanon-based Hezbollah militants, the U.S. took nearly a month to evacuate 15,000 Americans. According to the Government Accountability Office, “nearly every aspect of State’s preparations for evacuation was overwhelmed”, by the challenge of running an evacuation under low-threat conditions in a balmy Mediterranean summer.

Evacuating a Korean war-zone would be far harder. And the U.S. would likely have no choice but to ask China for help.

If North Korea launches another artillery strike against South Korea—or simply hurls itself at the 38th parallel—the resulting confrontation could trigger one of the largest population movements in human history. [According to one account](#), 140,000 U.S. government noncombatants and American citizens would look to the U.S. government for a way out. And that’s just the Americans. Hundreds of thousands of South Korean citizens and other foreign nationals would be clamoring for any way off of the wintry, dangerous peninsula.

In the absolute worst case, tens of millions of South Koreans and hundreds of thousands of foreigners, some wounded, some suffering from chemical, biological or even radiological hazards, will flee in the only direction available to them: south. The country’s transportation system would be in nationwide gridlock as panicked civilians avail themselves of any accessible means of travel. In this desperation and chaos, the U.S. military has the unenviable mission of supporting and evacuating U.S. citizens, all while waging a fierce battle along the DMZ.

The U.S. does have a plan. In the event of an evacuation, the State Department and U.S. military say that the U.S. will instigate a prepared noncombatant evacuation operation. The first stop for an evacuee would be a prearranged assembly area for registration, a search, and an identity check. Then, assuming transportation is available, evacuees would be sent by whatever means the military can arrange to relocation centers farther down the

peninsula to wait for transportation out of South Korea. Finally, U.S. civilians would gather at evacuation points where they will leave by sea or air to foreign “safe havens,” such as Japan, or to the United States. The plan openly admits that things won’t go smoothly, even instructing civilians to surrender their personal vehicle to the U.S. military upon arrival to an assembly area because the U.S. military may, in desperation, turn to civilian transport.

On paper, everything looks good, but as Korean tensions increase, the U.S. will have to get serious about evacuation planning. A successful wartime evacuation of the Korean peninsula can be done, and has been before. Sixty years ago this month, as Chinese troops pushed United Nations forces back from the Chinese border, an international fleet of 193 ships rescued around 196,000 soldiers and Korean refugees from Hungnam over just two weeks. However, modern-day evacuees would be far slower and more cumbersome than the well-trained amphibious force that made the Hungnam operation possible. Instead, the evacuation will be more like Dunkirk, where, largely unbidden, a disorganized fleet raced into threatened, shattered harbors to pull whomever they could to safety.

Countries around the globe with civilians or officials in South Korea would look to the U.S. first for evacuation support. But with a war to fight; wounded, contaminated, or infectious casualties to deal with; and amphibious lift resources at a premium, there would not be enough space for all who wish to leave.

Ironically, China, for all it has done to enable the present Korean crisis, may pose the best, last hope for many evacuees. With Korean, Japanese and American transport ships likely to be fully committed to the military conflict, the only other untapped Asian source of heavy amphibious sealift is China. Though often dismissed by military analysts as little more than a garnish for a “million-man swim” to Taiwan, China’s amphibious assault fleet could rescue many stranded non-combatants. China’s massive civilian fleet offers another possible resource. Plenty of Chinese ships will be available, able to respond if allowed to enter South Korean waters.

Over the course of the past month, the Philippines, one of many countries that lack the resources to carry out a timely evacuation of their Korean-based ex-patriots, has been debating how it could meet the challenge of transporting some 60,000 Filipino temporary workers out of a Korean crisis. For cases like this, where evacuation support will fall far short of demand, China’s armada of over fifty relatively modern medium-range amphibious vessels, capable of moving over 20,000 people in a single, albeit uncomfortable and slow voyage, would be an enormous boon.

A Chinese rescue fleet poses a political, operational and symbolic headache for South Korea, the U.S., and Japan. Chinese assistance with a Korean evacuation would be an enormous political coup for Beijing. Even modest Chinese support during a high-profile humanitarian emergency could do a lot to blunt wider Asian concerns over China’s naval expansion and territorial ambitions. And in the case of the Philippines, a timely humanitarian gesture by the People’s Liberation Army’s Navy would strengthen Chinese influence there and maybe even reconcile a festering territorial dispute over their contested South China Sea islets – to China’s favor. But the defenders of South Korea would not have any other choice than to ask for China’s assistance. No other help is available.

Chinese participation in a Korean contingency is the kind of scenario that makes U.S. policy makers in the region wince. But such are the ugly compromises that must be made if the U.S. and other countries fail to plan now, while there is still time to prepare, for how to get

potentially-threatened nationals out before the Korean peninsula lurches over the precipice.

Image: Local residents from Yeonpyeong island arrive at the port in Incheon, west of Seoul, on a police vessel on November 24, 2010 after being evacuated the day after a military strike on the island by North Korea. By Yoshikazu Tsuno/AFP/Getty.

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