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Flood Across the Border:



China's Disaster Relief Operations and Potential Response to a North Korean Refugee Crisis

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Response to a North Korean Refugee Crisis**

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Cover photo: View across the Tumen River from Fangchuan, China, looking into North Korea. Photo by Drew Thompson, December 2008.

Executive Summary

This report considers the planning, capacities and mechanisms for addressing natural disasters and domestic crises in the People's Republic of China and the implications for Chinese management of a potential crisis involving a rapid and unexpected increase in the volume of North Korean refugees fleeing to Chinese territory. Its focus is on structures and organizations in Jilin Province and its subordinate Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture.

Chinese officials are concerned that rapid and unexpected changes within the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) could trigger a flood of refugees crossing the border into China creating a potential humanitarian crisis and threatening social stability in a Chinese region still struggling with significant development challenges. Yanbian, on the DPRK border, is a favored destination due to a substantial Korean-speaking ethnic Korean population, while cultural and family connections create a somewhat permissive environment for North Koreans. Any rapid influx of refugees would upset delicate balances, undermining social and economic stability and threatening the current state of law and order in the region.

Little is publicly known about how Chinese authorities are preparing for such a contingency and how they might respond to a humanitarian crisis on Chinese territory emanating from across China's border in North Korea. China-North Korea relations are politically sensitive, particularly the status of regime stability in Pyongyang and the status and treatment of North Koreans who enter China illegally. Chinese contingency planning for crises involving North Korea is considered a state secret, precluding public discussion of plans or contingency preparations. However, China has made extensive investments in planning, preventing and responding to natural disasters and emergency situations. The government has established mechanisms for inter-agency coordination, intelligence gathering, assessments, effective communications and response to disasters resulting in humanitarian crises. A raft of official plans, laws and regulations, promulgated at all levels of the government provide a legal framework, along with frequent exercises (many of which were stood up in the context of the 2008 Beijing Olympics). Those exercises, in addition to actual disaster responses, offer indications of how China might respond to a disaster caused by a sudden and unexpected flood of refugees arriving in China.

Due to the well developed culture of secrecy amongst the Chinese military, People's Liberation Army contingency planning for disasters and any planning for coordinated action with civilian authorities takes place in a black box, precluding informed discussion of the military's role in a North Korean humanitarian crisis. This study therefore focuses on civilian agencies and their capacities.

This study also does not consider scenarios either involving DPRK regime collapse or leadership transition scenarios, assuming only that instability and rapidly deteriorating

conditions are a distinct possibility. Under this assumption, there are three possible scenarios in which large numbers of North Koreans might seek refuge across the border in China. The three circumstances are a steadily increasing flow, a sanctioned outpouring and a mass exodus caused by regime collapse or similar breakdown. Each of these scenarios presents different challenges to the Chinese authorities at central, provincial and local levels in terms of addressing the potential humanitarian crisis caused by large numbers of North Koreans relocating to China. In particular, North Korean actions will likely determine how quickly or accurately Chinese authorities identify and assess the scope of the crisis. In addition the scenarios shape Chinese responses, such as the ability to hand over escapees to a functioning authority in North Korea, or whether or not Chinese forces can deploy forces across the border to deter refugees and provide humanitarian assistance on North Korean territory. However, in all scenarios, Chinese concerns remain the same: primarily ensuring law and order, social stability and continued economic growth. Chinese responses to the crisis will invariably seek to achieve those goals and how it manages refugees should be interpreted in that light. It is unlikely that ideological or altruistic motives will shape policy or actions on the part of Chinese officials in this case.

While a natural disaster is not an exact approximation of a refugee crisis involving North Koreans on Chinese soil, Chinese planning and experience for natural disasters does provide insights into the capacity of civilian authorities to respond to such a crisis. There are well documented structures, coordinating mechanisms and planning devices that are typically deployed by China's political leadership, with specific reference to their role in China's disaster and emergency planning and response. Likewise, each ministry, provincial bureau and lower level organ has clearly defined roles and responsibilities in responding to disasters or sudden incidents. With a government structure that is hierarchical, but with competing lateral relationships, the interlocking roles of the Party, military, central and local governments all play a critical role in disaster relief and mass incidents that are analogous to a humanitarian crisis involving North Koreans on Chinese soil. At each level of government, vital mechanisms, such as coordinating groups and established regulations clearly define roles and responsibilities and foster coordination creating a framework for a presumed Chinese civilian government response to a crisis.

However China's capacity to respond to disasters remains complicated by several factors, including:

- A complex bureaucratic structure with inherent challenges to inter-agency coordination and communication involving both horizontal, civil-military, and vertical dimensions and a reliance on *ad hoc* structures to encourage a coordinated response;
- Inadequate pre-positioned supplies and a heavy reliance on donations and volunteers;
- Uneven training for a humanitarian crisis on both civil and military sides;
- An absence of established protocols for international participation in response to a disaster, particularly from multilateral and Western aid groups, reflecting continued wariness of foreign assistance in national crises;
- Inadequate attention given to meeting the needs of victims over the long term.

Importantly, it is also clear that there are significant tangible resources available at the central, Jilin and Yanbian prefecture levels that will serve authorities responding to a humanitarian crisis on their territory. Primarily, the Chinese government has demonstrated time and again the ability to mobilize large numbers of people to tackle challenges, as demonstrated by a “People’s War” approach that proved effective against the SARS outbreak, the Sichuan earthquake and even government preparation for the Beijing Olympics. Such experience extends even to government bureaus in Yanbian, including the police, customs and other departments which were mobilized for Olympics-related training exercises, provided new equipment and training experiences to ensure a rapid response to any unexpected event. This ability to appropriate resources, both those readily available and in regular use by local authorities, in addition to “importing” resources from other parts of the province or country represents a massive surge capacity to address crises that few other countries can match.

However, Chinese responses will still depend largely on how quickly officials identify an emerging crisis, assess the situation and report to higher authorities. The three refugee scenarios posed in this paper, the “trickle to a flood,” “Mariel outpouring” and “total collapse” each present different challenges to identification and developing a response. The “trickle to a flood” scenario is most likely to go unrecognized the longest, causing costly delays in government responses. Cover-ups are most likely to occur in this scenario, either to hide incompetence or present a sanitized image to the Chinese public and internationally. Local authorities may also fail to recognize the situation as a crisis, or report it as such to authorities above them in the hierarchy, perhaps because of concerns about how heightened security will affect the local economy through the disruption of local construction projects, for example, or through the imposition of restrictions on cross-border trade and tourism.

The political sensitivities that the Chinese place on their relationship with the DPRK and Chinese interests on the Korean Peninsula virtually assure that Chinese officials will seek to exclude the international community from any but the most superficial role in a crisis that unfolds in the border region. In addition to the issue of the status of North Korean refugees, other considerations may constrain China’s cooperation with international organizations on a refugee crisis. Chinese authorities will have a strong desire to manage information about the crisis, creating the impetus to exclude foreign organizations that they can not control. For these reasons, it is likely that in the event of a refugee crisis along the China-North Korean border, Chinese authorities will be reluctant to involve members of the international community in direct relief efforts. The unwillingness of Chinese authorities to privately discuss the issue with South Korea, as well as the US, and Japan as well, adds a significant level of potential complexity to China’s ability to mobilize an appropriate response to a DPRK refugee crisis.