

Maritime Cooperation for the Koreas  
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Although the North Korean nuclear crisis remains a focal point of security interest, maritime cooperation may present incremental options to decrease tension, despite an uncertain political and security-related environment.

Following the Korean War, significant incidents of ROK-DPRK armed engagement have occurred in the West Sea, along a disputed maritime boundary referred to as the Northern Limit Line (NLL). These confrontations often take place during the peak months of blue crab fishing, demonstrated by the "West Sea Battles" in June of both 1999 and 2002. As fishermen come dangerously close to or cross the NLL, accompanying ROK/DPRK patrol vessels display a pattern of armed engagement without a system for crisis management. The lack of progress on West Sea issues could potentially ignite confrontations at a time when tensions are already high on the peninsula.

Clearly, the Koreas would benefit from an incidents-at-sea agreement (INCSEA), similar to those used between navies throughout the world, to establish mechanisms for communication and to manage encounters between patrol vessels. However, in the absence of an INCSEA agreement, both sides can still gain much-needed experience communicating, maneuvering, and operating in one another's presence through cooperative initiatives.

Several factors may influence the success of Korean maritime cooperation. First, maritime border disputes are often used for political signaling in a way that is too provocative along the DMZ. Therefore, in order to be successful, cooperation should provide greater political benefit than the West Sea status quo. Second, long-term security and/or economic benefits must outweigh the political risks of deferring the NLL dispute. Third, the nature of maritime activities may unintentionally escalate tensions. Therefore, the goals and mechanisms of cooperation must be thoroughly understood and practiced by maritime communities of both sides. Finally, cooperation should remain transparent in order to sustain support from the general public.

In the following, we identify potential opportunities for maritime cooperation.

### **Search and Rescue for the Koreas**

Joint search and rescue (SAR) operations can be used to develop preliminary trust for improved military or patrol vessel interaction and communication. For example, pursuing SAR cooperation has proven valuable for various Middle East participants in the Maritime Safety Colloquium (MarSaf) process. Other forums emphasizing the benefits of SAR include the Asian Pacific Heads of Maritime Safety and North Pacific Coast Guards. The DPRK and the United Nations Command (UNC) most recently recognized the importance of SAR by agreeing to discuss SAR procedures, following an August 2002 meeting in Panmunjom.

A first step towards cooperation could be to invite DPRK maritime experts to visit a ROK Rescue Coordination Center (RCC), operated by the Korea National Maritime Police Agency (KNMPA). With 5 separate RCCs, 9 helicopters and 5 rescue vessels, the KNMPA has ample capabilities to demonstrate SAR procedures.

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A second step could be to organize a SAR exercise. Initially, this exercise could be conducted on paper or utilize simulation techniques to identify potential problems in methodology or equipment compatibility. The exercise could include SAR experts from both sides and simulate each step of a coordinated SAR activity with reference to documents, photographs, or detailed descriptions.

Eventually, North and South Korea could exchange SAR information via defined communication links to coordinate operational responses. These telecommunication links may establish an infrastructure that could be utilized for a wide range of future maritime security-based interactions.

### **Oil Spill Response**

Although North Korea imports most of its crude oil through overland pipeline from China, it remains vulnerable to the effects a major oil spill could have upon the fishing grounds within the West Sea. Both Inchon and China's Dalian port host hundreds of medium-sized tankers annually. If an accident were to occur in these areas and drift into Northern waters, the DPRK probably does not possess the necessary equipment to mitigate the accident. Additionally, as North Korean West Sea oil reserves continue to generate commercial interest, the DPRK may require expanded pollution control capabilities.

The UN Environmental Programme's regional seas initiative for the Northwest Pacific (NOWPAP) is comprised of member states China, Russia, Japan and South Korea. NOWPAP focuses on marine environmental issues and has a pollution emergency response center (MER/RAC) in Daejeon, ROK, which maintains data regarding oil spill response equipment and oil traffic reports submitted by member parties. The NOWPAP draft Oil Spill Contingency Plan also calls for joint exercises. North Korea recently participated as an observer at the March 2002 Seventh Intergovernmental Meeting of NOWPAP in Vladivostok, Russia.

ROK-DPRK cooperation might focus on coordinated responses to oil or hazardous chemical spills. A first step might be for South Korea to invite North Korean observers to a future NOWPAP oil spill exercise. This could provide the basis for a multilateral engagement effort supplying modest amounts of clean-up equipment for North Korea to use near the mouths of the Yalu or Tumen Rivers, as well as areas surrounding the Onjin Peninsula. The project could naturally include China or Russia, or potentially build upon the Tumen Project of the UN Development Programme.

This type of cooperation could draw DPRK maritime authorities into wider regional efforts to protect the environment, while simultaneously providing additional collaborative experience.

### **Inter-Korean Trade**

Currently, 500 South Korean companies utilize North Korean factories to manufacture textiles, television sets and automotive parts. Over 90% of inter-Korean cargo trade occurs via the maritime shipping route between Inchon and Nampo, and is primarily conducted through a Southern shipping company. Several additional shipping licenses await approval from the ROK Ministry of Unification. Transportation costs to North Korean ports remain high partly because vessels are required to detour from direct lanes to avoid restricted zones. Transshipment via China is also common.

In November 2001, Kookyang Shipping completed the approval process to begin a cooperative project with North Korea's Gaeseong Trade General Co. to improve the cargo loading facilities at Nampo. As facilities improve, direct shipping to Nampo increases, and special economic zones further develop, there will be an increased need to formulate vessel traffic management, as well as expedited customs systems.

The South and North could cooperate to expedite customs procedures, ensure record compatibility, and decrease the possible risks of fraudulent documentation. A prototype

electronic form and verification system for use in US-Mexican trade might provide a starting point for an inter-Korean initiative.

Tracking commercial vessel movements along the West Sea corridor would allow designated South Korean vessels to take more direct routes, thereby reducing shipping costs while maintaining DPRK coastal security. This would complement recent proposals to open ROK territorial waters in the East Sea to Northern commercial vessel traffic. Vessel tracking would provide experience for maritime authorities that might, in the future, be responsible for monitoring vessel movement within restricted or disputed areas.

### **Joint Fishing Ventures**

The West Sea provides an increasing percentage of protein for the entire NE Asian region. Several bilateral fishing arrangements have been established to monitor and manage fishing resources between China-ROK, China-Japan, and ROK-Japan. The October 2002 Inter-Korean ministerial talks included discussions regarding the establishment of a joint committee designed to handle inter-Korean fishing cooperation and possible ventures. Although most discussion to date has focused on the East Sea, a high-value blue crab fishery straddles the disputed NLL and may provide an economic incentive for cooperation.

A future joint fishing venture in the West Sea would need to effectively separate border disputes from fisheries exploitation and management. Currently, the ROK has designated a "red line" approximately 5.6 km south of the NLL as a boundary to prohibit ROK fishing vessels from straying too near to the NLL. Northern fishing vessels risk confrontations by fishing south of the NLL. Establishing joint access to a zone between the ROK red line and an area north of the NLL could be economically beneficial to both sides.

A designated fishing zone could form the basis for a ROK-DPRK joint fishing venture, similar in principle to the joint manufacturing projects in the DPRK's free trade zones. Since DPRK fishermen normally sell their catch to China and do not have the distribution capabilities for a wider international market, they could benefit directly from ROK's extensive and efficient marketing capabilities. South Korea could benefit from a joint venture by gaining access to areas previously considered a security risk. A joint venture would also enable efficient management of the crab and fish populations to ensure sustainable resources and profits.

A demarcated zone for the joint venture would require some type of monitoring and enforcement mechanisms. Designated vessels could police the fishing zone with inspectors from both sides onboard. Although these ships may come from official ROK/DPRK forces, they should be clearly marked as joint venture zone enforcement vessels and maintain the authority to repel, detain, or fine fishermen of either flag state, providing that fishing inspectors concur. Coordinated enforcement operations would require frequent communications between ROK/DPRK vessels. This would provide additional experience maneuvering in each other's presence, thereby decreasing the possibility of clashes or misunderstandings.

### **Conclusions**

Despite heightened tensions along the Korean peninsula, opportunities exist to move interactions forward, as demonstrated by recent efforts to open rail and road lines. Maritime cooperation may also provide avenues for progress. Search and rescue, commercial trade, fisheries management, and environmental security could benefit from a decrease in maritime confrontations, while encouraging maritime agency interaction and the establishment of tools and procedures for naval codes of conduct.