

Reform Locally, Act Globally? Crisis Management Trends in Korea

By James L. Schoff and Choi Hyun-jin

The unique restriction of a one-time, five-year presidential term in the Republic of Korea (ROK) has often resulted in short-lived changes to the way the nation's chief executive has staffed and managed his national security and crisis management apparatus at the highest levels. Previous policy offices or special assistants are frequently swept aside to make room for new campaign friends and advisory committees, and if the bureaucracy resists certain policies then new layers can be added within the Blue House to centralize policymaking and work around seconded personnel from the Ministry of National Defense (MND) or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MOFAT) who might not be fully committed to the president's vision. The recent presidential transition in Seoul appears to be a prime example, as the new Lee Myung-bak administration quickly made significant changes to a variety of national security, crisis management, and foreign policy advisory bodies—including wholesale revision of the National Security Council (NSC) structure—that were created or shaped by his predecessor.¹

What is perhaps different this time, however, is that President Lee inherits a crisis management apparatus that was reformed fundamentally under the previous Roh Moo-hyun administration in ways that could transcend political or personal preferences. So, while some Blue House positions have been eliminated and an anything-but-Roh atmosphere

pervades the new administration, Lee should also be tempted to leave many of these more basic reforms in place and build on them. This is because the catalyst for Roh's reforms was not political but instead was a combination of factors, including certain failures of the government's past responses to crises, a less intense threat perception of North Korea, and a growing awareness and integration of the ROK's crisis management and national security communities with those of other advanced nations. Moreover, the Korean military services and Korean nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are becoming increasingly involved in multilateral activities overseas, such as peacekeeping operations or disaster relief and humanitarian assistance missions, a situation that is prompting the ROK government to adopt many international standards.

This is a trend that President Lee seems keen to promote as part of his emphasis on "global diplomacy," and it could also be a component of "strengthening [its] strategic alliance with the United States."² Yet, the roots of crisis management reform are largely domestic, and they were crafted at a time when ROK leaders were promoting greater political and military independence from the United States, including the reduction and realignment of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK), the reform and modernization of South Korea's own armed forces, and preparation for the transfer

James Schoff's paper is the thirteenth in KEI's groundbreaking *Academic Paper Series*, which began in December 2006. As part of its *Academic Paper Series*, KEI commissions and publishes 9 to 10 papers per year on original subjects of current interest to Korea watchers, which KEI distributes to over 2,000 government officials, think tank experts, and scholars around the United States and the world. A public discussion at KEI with the author generally follows publication. In February 2008, KEI published its first collection of KEI Academic Papers in *On Korea, Volume 1*. To order a copy, please visit KEI's website at www.keia.org. The next KEI Academic Paper will be published in **May 2008**. Authored by **Marcus Noland** of the Peterson Institute for International Economics, it will be entitled "**South Korean Institutional Reform in Comparative Perspective.**"

of wartime operational control (OPCON) of ROK troops to a Korean general. On all of these issues the ROK government is being pulled simultaneously in two directions; one is still intensely peninsula focused, while the other is more regional and global.

Until now, ROK officials have usually been careful to separate international security and crisis management contributions from their discussions about national reforms, and they have not made a similar specific connection between international missions and the country's own security (as was the case in Japan).³ This might be changing, as South Korea's involvement in multilateral operations will certainly influence the crisis management reform debate in Seoul, and it could lead to a more prominent role in the future for Korean diplomats, soldiers, and NGOs when it comes to international missions. This paper examines the recent history of Korea's crisis management reforms and explores how the new Lee administration might strike a productive balance between its global aspirations and local demands.

Crisis Management Reform under Roh

A central theme running through former president Roh's reform effort was a desire to improve the information flow among ministries and to centralize the decision-making process; *Figure 1* shows the compartmentalized nature of crisis management decision making before Roh's reforms. In March 2003, the Blue House established the NSC Crisis Management Center (NSC-CMC) as its first step in a process of reform that links what had been disparate systems dealing with conventional security crises on the one hand, and natural or man-made disasters on the other. "The NSC has to enhance its general national crisis management capabilities by establishing a comprehensive and systematic prevention and management system," said President Roh at the opening ceremony of NSC-CMC.⁴ The NSC-CMC comprised a situation room and a planning-coordination team. The situation room monitors and analyzes the state of affairs around the peninsula and is prepared to alert appropriate first responders in case of an emergency. The planning-coordination team developed the nation's crisis management capabilities by fostering cooperative networks among government agencies.

On 9 September 2004, the NSC-CMC presented its Crisis Management Basic Guideline, which detailed the new crisis management system's structure (*Figure 2*). "We adopted a comprehensive security concept in defining national crisis, rather than confining it to conventional security. Under the new concept, a national crisis refers to situations that have the potential to undermine national sovereignty and core elements and values in the nation's political, economic, social, and cultural systems. The crisis management guide . . . clearly defines responsibilities and roles of related government agencies to prevent any vacuum or overlap on crisis management," explained Col. Ryu Hee-in, then head of the NSC-CMC.⁵ The Crisis Management Basic Guideline also clarified the highest decision-making body for each category by identifying the NSC standing committee for traditional security, the Central Safety Management Committee (CSMC) for disasters and accidents, and the Government Policy Coordination Council (GPCC) for the nation's critical infrastructure.⁶ The NSC-CMC was located at the heart of the system for central planning and coordination.

In addition to the Basic Guideline, the NSC-CMC also published a set of crisis management manuals. The set of 30-plus manuals comprises about 12 that cover traditional security areas, including inter-Korean conflicts; 11 on disasters; and at least 9 on the nation's critical infrastructure.⁷ The manuals specify the responsibilities and roles of relevant agencies, step-by-step procedures, and primary countermeasures in various cases. When responding to the 2004 tsunami crisis in Southeast Asia, for example, the ROK government followed procedures detailed in two of the manuals, *Earthquake* and *Protection of Overseas Koreans*. All of these response guidelines have been followed by more than 2,800 practical manuals developed since 2005 that specify more detailed procedures for related ministries and local governments.⁸

Administrative Structure of the New Crisis Management System

According to the new Provisions on NSC Operation, passed by the National Assembly in March 2003, the NSC was expanded to cover all national crises, and under its sec-

Figure 1: Crisis Management in Korea before 2004

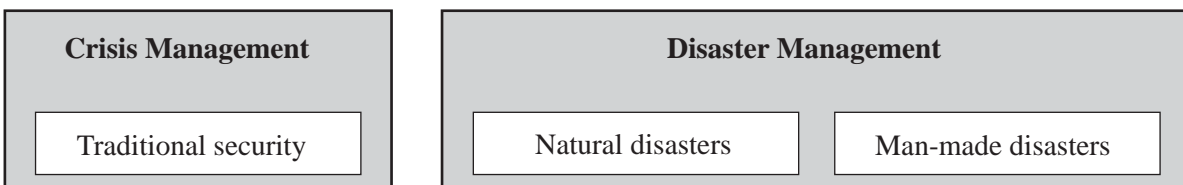
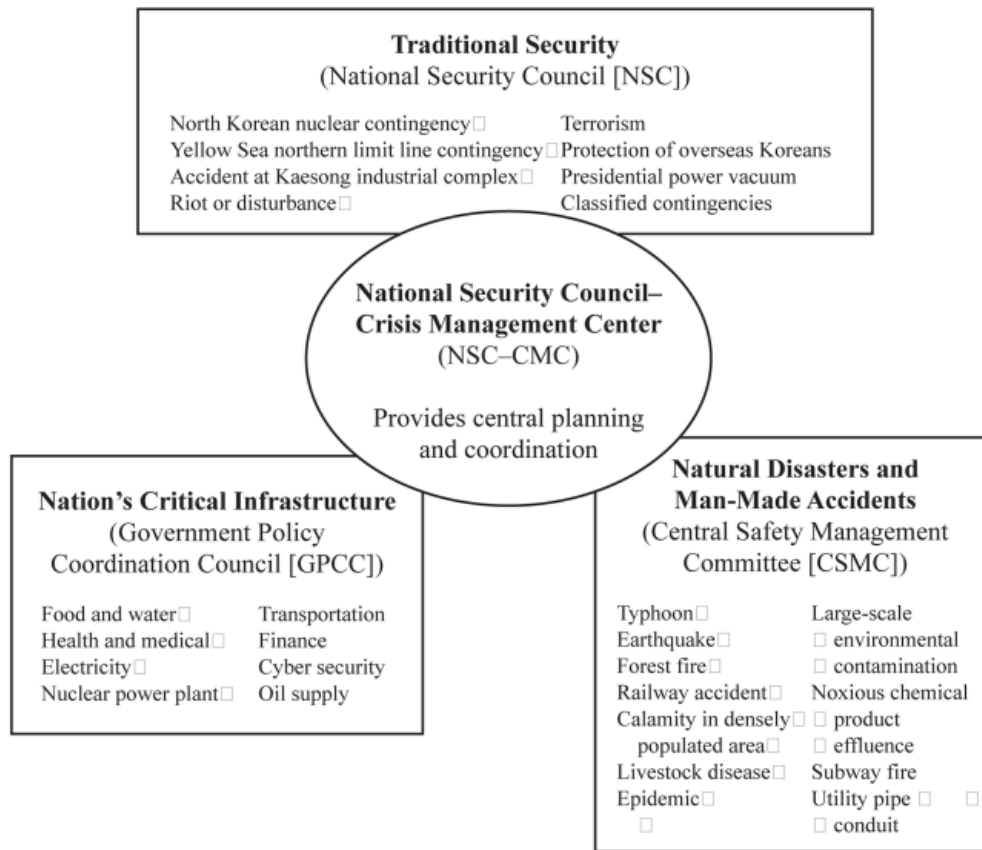


Figure 2: Crisis Management in Korea after 2004



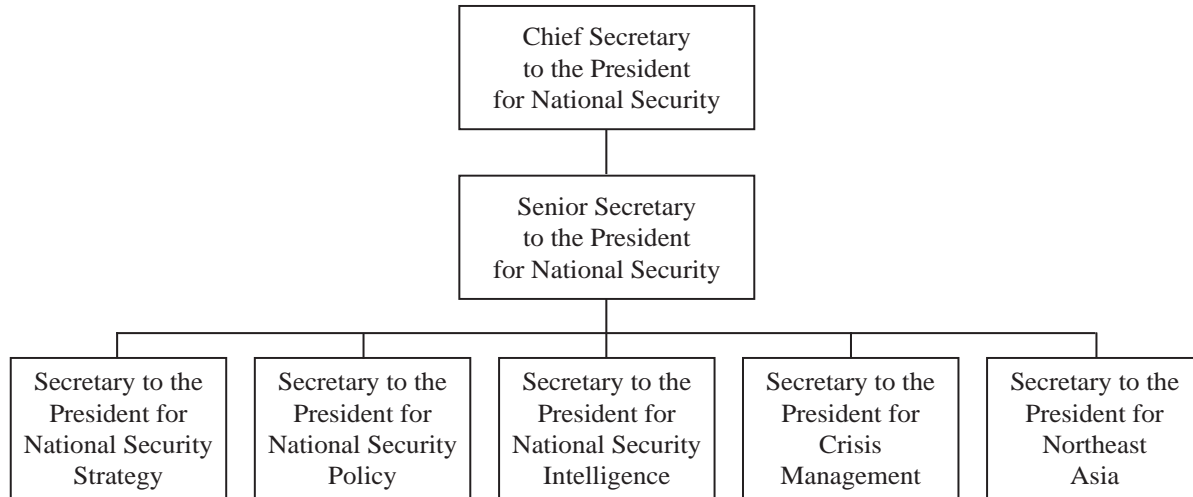
retariat four new offices were created: strategy planning, policy coordination, information management, and the CMC. Previously, the NSC secretariat had only one office with 10 permanent personnel handling crises, but the newly expanded NSC secretariat grew quickly to more than 70 staff members, featuring those dispatched from the MND and the Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs (now called the Ministry of Public Administration and Security [previously MOGAHA, now MOPAS]), which includes the Korean National Police Agency (KNPA) and the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA). The expanding role of the NSC secretariat is important to note because the NSC itself meets only rarely (perhaps four or five times during a president's entire term), and it is the secretariat that usually does most of the work of planning for crises.

The organizational positioning and political influence of the secretariat was a moving target under Roh, particularly as it became tightly linked with the career path of Roh's close adviser, Lee Jong-seok. This is an example of how Roh's reforms became personal, and it is in this area that the new president has made sweeping changes. At the start of his term in 2003, for example, Roh appointed Lee Jong-seok

to be vice chief of the NSC secretariat, where he was supposed to assist Roh's national security adviser, Ra Jong-yil. In practice, however, Lee had direct and personal access to Roh, often going over the head of Ra and creating a power struggle among Roh's advisers. Moreover, the NSC secretariat slowly became a de facto policymaking body under Lee Jong-seok, and it tended to view the ministries more as a means of policy implementation instead of a primary tool for policy formation.⁹

Later on, power traveled with Lee Jong-seok when Roh made him unification minister (and chairman of the NSC's standing committee) in January 2006. Roh created a new Security Policy Office under his chief presidential secretary, combining unification, foreign, and security policymaking within the presidential office (Figure 3). The newly launched office absorbed the strategy planning, policy coordination, and information management functions of the NSC, which had stayed just outside the Blue House, further consolidating Roh's and Lee's control over policy.¹⁰ After the reorganization, the retrenched NSC focused on crisis management planning, CMC operation, and administrative support for the standing committee meetings.¹¹

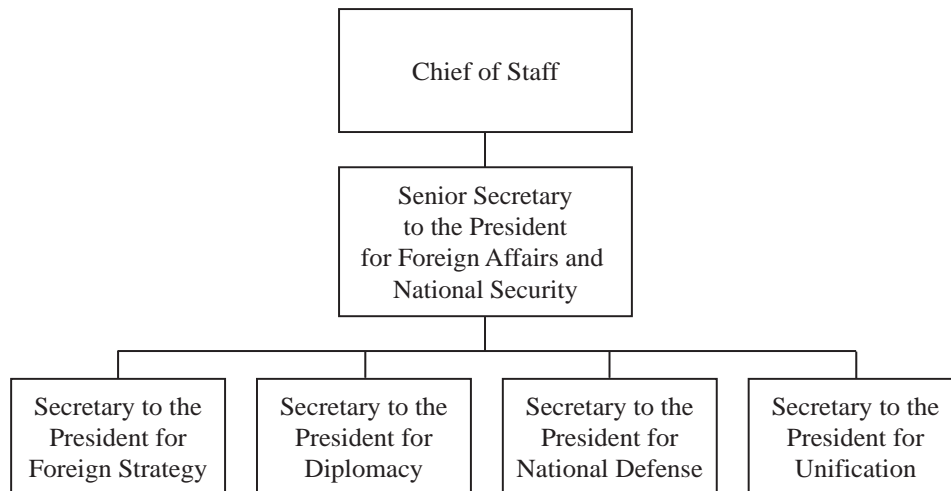
Figure 3: Security Policy Office Organization during Administration of President Roh Moo-hyun



The new Lee Myung-bak administration has significantly revamped these arrangements (*Figure 4*), with important implications that are mentioned below, but there is also a strong undercurrent of continuity regarding Roh’s reforms that will more likely lead to incremental evolution rather than dramatic change. Most noticeably, Lee decided to abolish both the standing committee of the NSC and its secretariat. The NSC will remain as a constitutional body, of course, but a new ministerial-level council, called the Foreign and Security Policy Coordination Council, replaced the standing committee, and the presidential office is absorbing the functions of its secretariat.¹² At the same time, the presidential office is planning to transfer responsibility for the crisis management situation room, previously located in the NSC secretariat (NSC-CMC), to the direct control of the Blue House chief of staff.¹³

Lee is also getting rid of the Security Policy Office, and, while certain high-level planning functions will probably be taken over by the Foreign and Security Policy Coordination Council, it appears that some of the policymaking power will devolve back to the ministries from where it was taken, which should strengthen the influence of MOFAT and the MND. This is a positive development. Overall these changes exemplify Lee’s emphasis on streamlining government structures to make them more efficient, although only time will tell whether this proves to be true. The removal of layers within the Blue House and the empowerment of the ministries are substantive changes, but overall Roh’s innovation of strengthening Blue House control over policy planning seems likely to remain.

Figure 4: Coordination for Foreign and Security Affairs during Administration of President Lee Myung-bak



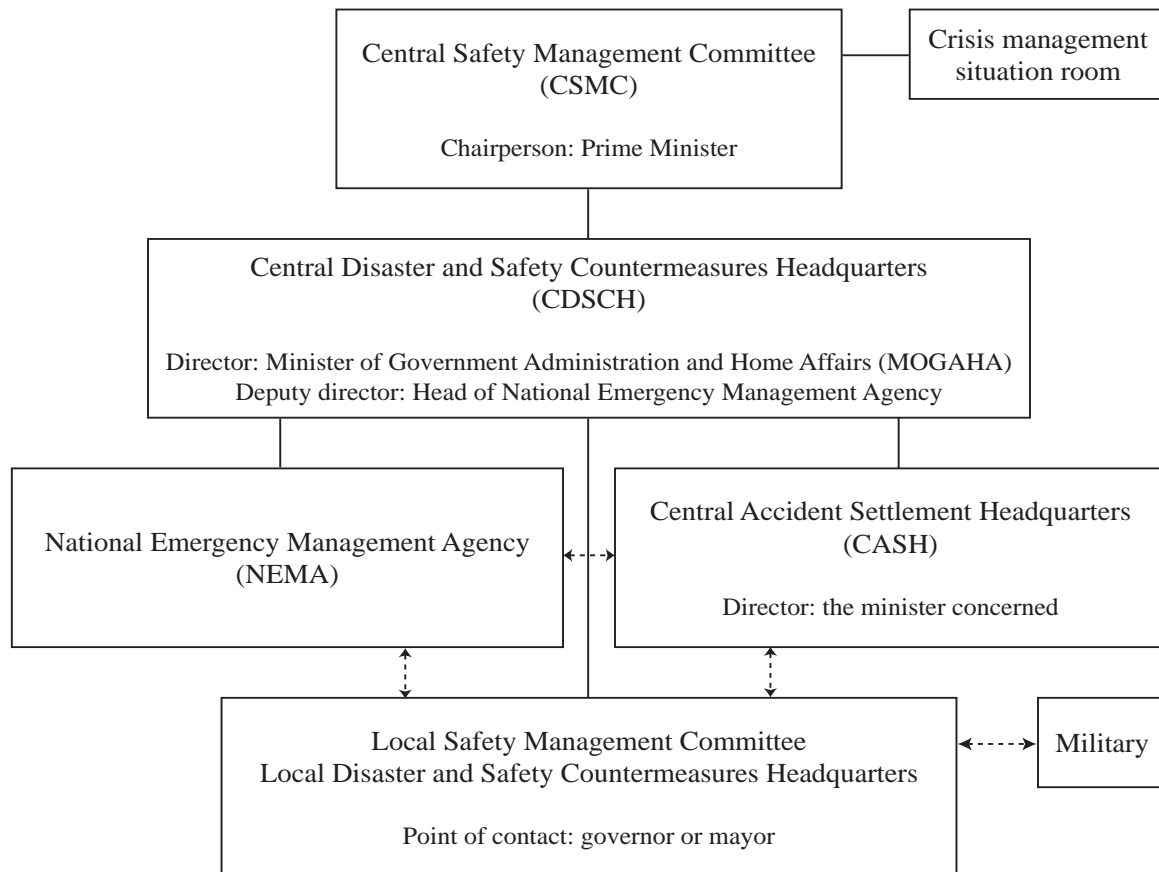
The MOFAT minister will chair the new Foreign and Security Policy Coordination Council, essentially replacing the unification minister in this role and underscoring the global diplomacy theme introduced by Lee. Other council members include the defense minister, the chief of the National Intelligence Service (NIS), the chief of the Office of the Prime Minister, the unification minister, and the senior presidential secretary for foreign affairs and national security (Kim Byung-kook). There is also a vice (or deputy) minister working group under the council that will meet weekly and will be chaired by Kim. The Blue House explained that the reorganization shows that the Lee Myung-bak administration views national security as an international issue by giving the lead role to the MOFAT.¹⁴

Although the rest of Korea's crisis management apparatus will continue to experience minor adjustment, most of the restructuring since 2003 and 2004 should survive and evolve relatively slowly. Briefly described, the Central Safety Management Committee is the government's lead organization for dealing with natural disasters or accidents (*Figure 5*). Chaired by the prime minister, the CSMC not only conducts long-term safety planning, but it also provides overall coordination and support for the Central Disaster and Safety Countermeasures Headquarters

(CDSCH). NEMA provides large-scale search-and-rescue services to CDSCH.¹⁵ The CDSCH serves as a chief executive organization for disaster management, taking charge of immediate consequence management and longer-term recovery planning. Meanwhile, the head of the competent ministry organizes a Central Accident Settlement Headquarters (CASH), which carries out CDSCH's directives with support from NEMA. For example, when a large oil spill occurred off Korea's western coast in December 2007, the Minister of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries organized the CASH within hours, established communication with the Coast Guard and Marine Pollution Response Corporation, and requested logistical support from other ministries and local agencies.¹⁶

Additional near-term changes under Lee will probably include a lower political profile for the prime minister and a reduction in the prime minister's staff, as well as possibly a reinvigorated role for the National Emergency Planning Commission, which handles civilian preparations for war on the peninsula or a similar national emergency and which languished under Roh. Over time it is also possible that the ROK will further consolidate crisis management functions across peacetime and wartime scenarios.

Figure 5: Disaster Management System in Korea since 2004



If a large-scale disaster occurs overseas, however, it is MOFAT that sets up a task force to help coordinate the government's response. The task force's initial focus is to determine the extent of the catastrophe and the fate of Korea's citizens, as well as to establish effective communication and cooperation between its headquarters and the affected nation's government. At the same time, the MOFAT minister, as the CASH director, manages the contributions from all of the relevant ministries through interagency coordination meetings. If requested by the affected nation, an overseas emergency response group—composed of government officials, NEMA rescuers, a medical team, and forensic doctors—can be dispatched to the disaster area.

In the case of the Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004, the ROK quickly set up a task force within its foreign ministry on 26 December to help coordinate the government's response. Instead of assigning the lead role within MOFAT to the regional bureau as many governments did, the International Economic Affairs Bureau took charge, working as part of a broader team effort that included the NSC, NEMA, and the prime minister's office. On 28 December, the MOFAT minister held an interagency coordination meeting and subsequently dispatched 69 members from an overseas emergency response group—16 MOFAT officials, 15 NEMA rescuers, 2 forensic doctors, and 36 medical doctors—to Thailand and Sri Lanka by 31 December.¹⁷

Many of these initial steps were outlined in the new NSC-CMC crisis management procedure manuals mentioned earlier. "In the past, MOFAT and MOGAHA often bickered over the relief responsibility to the overseas disasters. This time, the government immediately followed standard manuals preparing a cooperative network between MOFAT and other ministries," said one NSC official.¹⁸ In addition, on 30 December President Roh ordered the establishment of an interagency working group led by the prime minister. The prime minister chaired this impromptu committee, which decided on overall policy parameters for the response, with input from MOFAT, the NSC, and the MND.¹⁹ MOFAT worked with the NSC, with support from the MND and NEMA, to carry out the working group's directives. When a massive and deadly earthquake struck Pakistan almost a year later, the ROK government used a similar process to manage the country's contributions to the international relief effort.

Role of the Military

The ROK military and the MND are an important part of the government's crisis management reform program, and they have actively developed disaster management capabilities as part of their core duties. "We have decided to take up national disaster management support as the military's

basic, non-combat operation," explained an MND official in September 2004.²⁰ A month earlier, the ministry set up a Disaster Control Support Division to prepare for disaster and promote cooperation between Korean forces and USFK in the areas of crisis and consequence management, among other task areas. This new capacity in the military is intended to operate as part of the broader crisis management system although to date the focus has been primarily domestic, with an emphasis on close cooperation and coordination with local CDSCH.²¹

On the international front, what role the MND and Korean military assets should play in a relief or humanitarian operation has been a difficult question for ROK authorities. In the immediate aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami, for example, the United States quickly organized with other nations a multilateral military component, dubbed Operation Unified Assistance (OUA), to work in support of host governments and international civilian agencies. Within days, OUA grew to unprecedented size and complexity, involving the coordination of military assets from more than 20 countries in multiple areas of operation. South Korea was prepared to contribute, having participated in regional workshops and exercises focused on multilateral crisis response scenarios, but the speed and scale of OUA posed a unique challenge.

The ROK constitution has been interpreted as requiring National Assembly approval for the deployment of any ROK troops abroad for virtually any purpose. Thus, faced with an emergency situation that required a rapid response, the ROK government had to choose between quick but limited military involvement (not enough to raise objections in the National Assembly that the president was overstepping his authority) or slower, more substantial military involvement that was formally considered by the legislature. Not surprisingly, Seoul chose not to seek National Assembly approval and dispatched instead only air and sea transportation vehicles among MND assets, after consulting informally with the ruling Uri Party at the National Assembly.

For international missions with a longer lead time, the ROK military has been increasingly proactive since it joined the United Nations (UN) in 1991, especially in more recent years. The government has sent combinations of engineering, medical, and combat troops to assist in a variety of UN peacekeeping operations (PKO) in countries such as Somalia, East Timor, Georgia, Liberia, and Nepal. In 2002 and 2003, Seoul also sent 500 medical and engineering soldiers to Afghanistan as part of a mission that lasted until 2007. ROK troops in northern Iraq peaked at 3,400 in 2004, and close to 600 continue to serve there in 2008. Korea's largest UN PKO mission today is in Lebanon. The ROK government dispatched 350 troops to Lebanon on 19 July

2007 to help monitor and secure a cease-fire. President Roh's cabinet approved the dispatch plan on 28 November 2006, and the National Assembly passed authorizing legislation on 22 December. Thus, the time lag from cabinet approval to deployment was nearly eight months for what is ostensibly a one-year mission, demonstrating to many that the approval process is too cumbersome.

The MND can react quickly in certain situations, however, as it did in support of responding to a hostage crisis in Afghanistan in July 2007, when 23 Korean volunteers were kidnapped by the Taliban. The MND minister opened a 24-hour situation room immediately after the crisis occurred, and he dispatched a military liaison team to Ghazni city in coordination with MOFAT and the NIS.²² A few days later, the MND sent a small military support group to Kabul, which established an intelligence network with NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the U.S. Combined Joint Task Force 82 (CJTF-82) to obtain real-time information about the movements of hostages and the Taliban.²³ Meanwhile, USFK provided hostage-related intelligence to the MND and helped to establish a visual network system that connected ISAF, CJTF-82, and USFK with the MND. To support this growing international activity, the Korean military has developed a military satellite communications system during the past decade; it recently went into service, which will allow the MND to manage overseas operations without relying on other countries' systems.²⁴

More high-tech investment in Korea's military is expected, as the government at the start of 2007 embarked on an ambitious reform program known as Defense Reform 2020, which was named for the year in which this intense period of force and command restructuring is meant to be completed.²⁵ Reform 2020 will reduce the size of the ROK military overall (particularly within the army) but will strengthen its capabilities through acquisition of state-of-the-art weapons, communications, surveillance, and mobility systems. Jointness among the services and so-called civilianization of the defense ministry will also be promoted. The reform plan is meant to be financed at a total cost of more than 620 trillion *won* (roughly \$640 billion) during the next 14 years. Major increases in sealift or airlift capacities are not planned, but there will be some noticeable improvements along the lines of the ROK navy's first landing platform multipurpose amphibious ship (named *Dokdo*, at about 19,000 tons full-load displacement) commissioned in 2007, with two more on the way. At the commissioning ceremony for the *Dokdo*, the head of the ROK navy's Operations Command touted its usefulness for disaster relief, humanitarian aid, and peacekeeping operations.²⁶ In another sign of potential continuity, President Lee recently stated that he would "actively support the military's efforts to renew

itself" and advocated military participation in "global peace and development activities."²⁷

Future of Korea's International Contributions

The overall result of these reforms and investments to date is that South Korea is generally better prepared to respond to a wider range of both domestic and off-peninsula crises beyond those of a purely military or national security nature. Moreover, the new Lee administration appears inclined to build on these reforms rather than dismantle them, and Lee seems keen to orient these reforms in a more global direction. There are limits, however, to how quickly and effectively Korea can raise its international profile in the crisis management and international security arenas.

In terms of building on work that has already begun, there is much left to do to truly operationalize the Overseas Emergency Aid Act that was passed in March 2007. This act specifies procedures and regulations for overseas emergency relief efforts, including an organization of relief workers, the dispatch of military assets, and a standing system for civilian coordination with the government and the military. The act empowers the minister of MOFAT to organize an overseas emergency aid team and to convene a government-NGO joint council for overseas emergency aid, and the minister can also request the provision of military transport vehicles from the MND.²⁸ This latter option needs to be further defined, and this process might be linked to the establishment of a specially designated PKO force.

Since the tsunami, the ROK government and military have begun contemplating the creation of an emergency response unit for overseas consequence management missions. The results of this internal discussion were presented in a report to the presidential transition team on 6 January 2008 by the MND, which outlined a plan to establish a 1,000-strong standby force to be ready at all times for PKO and disaster relief missions, if requested by a host government or the UN.²⁹ The Lee government is interested in proceeding, but officials need to consider a number of important issues, such as whether National Assembly approval will be required for any and all dispatches of this unit; how the unit will interact with other nations' PKO teams; and how the ROK unit is commanded, trained, and integrated with the other ROK defense reforms under way.

In conjunction with this, three PKO bills are currently pending (and competing) at the National Assembly. One calls for advance legislative approval for PKO dispatch plans for the following year, while the others accept *ex post* approval. Two of the bills restrict missions to UN PKO, while the other one allows overseas disaster relief operations.³⁰ If the latter bill is approved, the channels for communication and coor-

dination in multilateral situations will need to be improved in the ROK crisis management system, as demonstrated by the fact that manuals for responding to overseas disasters describe only bilateral coordination procedures with the affected nation.³¹ In addition, the MND plans to establish a state-run training center for PKO by the end of 2009, although the bill to create the PKO center has been pending at the National Assembly since 2006. Together, these represent an opportunity for the Lee administration to quickly realize significant reforms on the international front that developed only slowly under Roh. This will be especially true if Lee's political party can win a larger share of seats in the National Assembly in the April 2008 elections.

Combined with improvements to Korea's domestic decision making and information sharing processes, any movement on the proposals noted above will surely enhance South Korea's ability to contribute to the management of overseas crises. Going forward, policymakers will need to pay more attention to the specific roles and responsibilities of government, military, and civilian workers as well as to the detailed procedures for mutual cooperation and information sharing in various cases. Some of this is being accomplished in collaboration with USFK and government agencies in both countries; issues addressed include sensor detection and medical surveillance to deal with severe chemical, biological, or pandemic disease incidents. Avian flu in particular has been a catalyst for wider regional cooperation in an interagency context because it involves health ministries, foreign ministries, international organizations, NGOs, and even local governments.

Beyond joint studies and workshops, an effective way to facilitate an even quicker, coordinated reaction is to plan ahead of time for different scenarios with partners and then to practice together as much as possible. The speed and efficiency of the international response to the tsunami, for example, were greatly enhanced by annual military exercises known as Cobra Gold, which take place in Thailand and involve forces from the host country, the United States, Indonesia, Singapore, and Japan. Although Korea sends observers to the Cobra Gold exercises and participates in other regional initiatives, Korea has an opportunity to take greater advantage of these ongoing programs in order to enhance multilateral crisis response planning and training.

Korea has begun to do this at an annual PKO exercise in Mongolia called Khaan Quest. Khaan Quest began in 2003 as a U.S.-Mongolia interoperability exercise focused on PKO and stabilization operations, and it was designed to help prepare Mongolian soldiers for their contributions to the international coalitions serving in Afghanistan and Iraq. The exercise went multilateral in 2006, and a year later the

field exercise portion involved more than 1,000 troops from nine different countries, including Korea.

But for all of these signs that Seoul is on the verge of becoming an international activist for global "peace and prosperity" (the term Roh applied to his North-South policy), there are a number of limiting factors that should cause us to anticipate a more modest transformation. First of all, North Korea has not gone away, and the ROK military is in the midst of a complicated and expensive process of modernizing itself in the form of Reform 2020 and taking over OPCON from U.S. forces. Reform 2020 is predicated on steady increases in defense spending at a rate of 9.9 percent per annum between 2006 and 2010, and smaller rates thereafter. But the actual increases for 2007 and 2008 were only 7.2 percent and 9.0 percent, respectively, which means that later increases will have to be even higher than planned (which is unlikely) in order to keep pace.³² This reality will dampen Seoul's enthusiasm for becoming overly active militarily overseas, and it will keep the ROK military focused on the peninsula.

In addition, President Lee owes his election largely to pledges to improve Korea's economy, and this priority looks tougher every day, given recent negative global economic developments. The direction of North-South relations is also notoriously unpredictable, which could distract the ROK government, and there is still a sizable constituency in Korea for investing aid monies in the North, rather than overseas as part of a more global diplomatic approach, as Lee advocates. These and similar financial, political, and security concerns will restrain Seoul's appetite for a growing international role in disaster relief, PKO, and crisis management operations.

Still, we should recognize the strides that Korea has made in reforming its national security and crisis management apparatus, and we should take time to understand how the Lee administration is building on earlier reforms. The Lee government's more global outlook and professional treatment of these issues is a welcome development for U.S.-ROK relations, the region, and the world. Measured expectations and patience are prudent, but there appears to be a unique opportunity to press forward with ROK leaders and officials to enhance Korea's standing and contributions to global peace and stability.

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cies (Potomac Books, 2005) and is the coauthor of Alliance Diversification and the Future of the U.S.-Korean Security Relationship (Brassey's, 2004) and The Pandemic Influenza Challenge: Multilateral Perspectives on Preparedness, Response Planning, and Areas for Cooperation (IFPA, January 2007). Mr. Schoff graduated from Duke University and earned an M.A. in international relations at The Johns Hopkins University School for Advanced International Studies (SAIS).

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27. Jin Dae-woong, "Lee Vows to Speed up Military Overhaul," *Korea Herald*, 12 March 2008.

28. For the full text of Overseas Emergency Aid Act, see National Assembly of the Republic of Korea, <http://www.assembly.go.kr>.

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30. The full texts of PKO bills can be downloaded from the Web site of the National Assembly of the Republic of Korea, www.assembly.go.kr.

31. Central Safety Management Committee, “National Safety Management Plan (2005–2009) [in Korean],” 397.

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