



# Emergency Preparedness Regional Implications of the South Korea Ferry Disaster

By Eric Weiner

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On April 16, 2014, the South Korean passenger-car Ferry *Sewol* capsized with 476 people on board, leaving more than 300 people dead or missing.[1] Political realities resulting from this disaster may have secondary effects on South Korea’s longer-term foreign policy, impacting the broader Asia-Pacific region. With political bandwidth narrowed and temporarily diverted inward, foreign policy and engagement on regional security issues may receive less attention from President Park. In the short term, South Korean politicians and bureaucrats will be concerned with damage control and political survival, which may leave less time and energy for routine governance. The disaster has the potential to weaken President Park, and the greatest risk is the possibility of an extended lame-duck term. However, as it is still early in Park’s presidency she has enormous political incentive to focus on restructuring and getting it right.[2] It should be noted that these reforms represent an opportunity for South Korea to consider expanding its capacity to respond to future emergencies in the Asia-Pacific, but the consensus among Korea experts interviewed for this article holds that the ferry disaster will have limited implications for South Korea’s regional disaster response in the short term. Rather, it is likely that South Korea will remain inwardly focused on national healing and domestic restructuring.

In a public address to the nation on May 19, President Park proposed a laundry list of domestically focused structural reforms to the country’s emergency preparedness and disaster response system, suggesting only a few with implications for South Korea’s regional disaster response. South Korea has never faced a civilian maritime disaster on the scale of *Sewol*, and is still working to address internal shortcomings. Traditionally, the country has not developed robust humanitarian assistance and disaster response capabilities, because it has not encountered natural disasters often or severe enough to necessitate them, as other countries in the region have, particularly in Southeast Asia.[3] This ferry disaster could eventually serve as an impetus for the country to develop a more effective domestic disaster response infrastructure, but the government is still in the very initial stages of reform and the incident has had an enormous psychological impact from which it will take time recover.[4]

The mismanagement of the ferry disaster has been widely chronicled in Korean news sources, leading to a greater national understanding of the importance of domestic safety and response systems. Among the numerous domestic reforms proposed by President Park in her speech, one in particular stands out as having potential future implications for South Korean regional disaster response: to improve national response to maritime emergencies in South Korea, President Park proposed the creation of regional maritime safety offices for the Yellow Sea, the South Sea, the East Sea (Sea of Japan) and Jeju Island.[5] These offices would be intended to protect the immediate seas surrounding South Korea, but they could also improve South Korea’s response capability if called upon by neighboring countries to respond to future disasters.

As South Korea awaits a parliamentary investigation into the ferry sinking,[6] comparisons are being made between President Park’s proposed safety reforms and the U.S. Government’s restructuring following Hurricane Katrina and the September 11 terrorist attacks. Both of these U.S. tragedies led to reexamination

of local and national roles, as well as responsibilities and authorities. The Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006 addressed shortcomings identified in the preparation for and response to Hurricane Katrina, and the Department of Homeland Security was created to consolidate 22 agencies and organizations into a new department.[7] Similarly, the creation of a National Safety Agency in South Korea following the ferry disaster seems intended to organize and harmonize emergency response functions under one authority.[8]

It is unclear what shape current reform efforts will ultimately take in South Korea, but the *Sewol* ferry disaster certainly has the potential to transform South Korea into a more proactive participant in regional disaster response. One such area for potential application of existing capacity is in responding to future CBRNe (chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, or high-yield explosive) disasters in the region. The South Korean military has conducted extensive joint CBRNe training with U.S. military forces to demonstrate response capabilities in the event of an attack. These same capabilities could be adapted and incorporated into contingency plans for response to future regional CBRNe disasters. CBRNe response is a specialized capability possessed by few nations, and Japan's Fukushima nuclear disaster has proven the importance of having this resource when disaster strikes. It would be a long road from recovering from the *Sewol* tragedy to becoming a key participant in regional CBRNe response, but it is within South Korea's reach as a relatively advanced, technological and modern industrial society.

The *Sewol* tragedy offers a rare occasion for South Korea to seriously consider its capacity to respond to natural and man-made disasters in the Asia-Pacific. The enhancement of South Korea's capacity to respond to disasters could also be used diplomatically to foster goodwill in the region where maritime tensions are high and legacy disagreements dominate political headlines in Japan and South Korea. Joint training for emergency preparedness and disaster response could be a way to unite Japan and South Korea against a common threat while strengthening regional security in the process. There are a myriad of potential regional applications for South Korea's disaster response capabilities, but for the moment it is understandable that external considerations are not the priority. With victims still missing, now is the time for mourning, reflection, and internal reform. Hopefully, in time, these reforms will also consider the nation's potential to become a regional leader in preparedness.

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*Eric Weiner is an analyst at Banyan Analytics. The views expressed are solely the author's.*

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[1] "No Headway in Search for Missing in Ferry Disaster." Yonhap News Agency. May 27, 2014. <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/topic/2014/05/27/69/1302000000AEN20140527001352315F.html>.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Eric Weiner, interview with Victor Cha, Senior Adviser and Korea Chair, Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2, 2014.

[4] Eric Weiner, interview with Scott Snyder, Senior Fellow for Korea Studies, Director of the Program on U.S.-Korea Policy, Council on Foreign Relations, June 2, 2014.

[5] Ibid.

[6] "Assembly Ferry Probe Stalled," The Korea Herald. May 28, 2014. <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20140528001293>.

[7] "Actions Taken to Implement the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006," GAO-09-59R. Published Nov. 21, 2008. Publicly released Dec. 8, 2008, 1. <http://www.gao.gov/assets/100/95880.pdf>.

[8] Eric Weiner, interviews with Scott Snyder and Victor Cha, June 2, 2014.