Northeast Asia’s Pandora’s Box: North Korean Escapees

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Abstract

The issue of North Korean escapees is minor when juxtaposed against other serious problems such as nuclear or missile programs on the Korean Peninsula. However, what is at stake in the case of North Korean escapees is more than simply humanitarian considerations. The issue has a more complicated nature than what appears, since the escape cases involved many elements such as the role of the UN and NGOs, and regional politics regarding the ultimate survival of the Pyongyang regime, and the interests of countries concerned (China, South Korea, Japan, the United States, and Russia) in North Korea in particular and Northeast Asia policy in general.

A series of recent escape cases planned by some radical NGOs have pushed the already fragile relations between the regional countries into a tenser situation. If handled badly, it may set off a chain of political and strategic ramifications. Once the regional countries recognize the potential consequences, it is likely that they would not choose the temporary solution of simply sending escapees to South Korea via a third country. On the contrary, neighboring countries should rather help toward alleviating North Korea’s economic situation to reduce hunger and hence the incentive to flee. Thence, it is argued that this issue should be seen in the context of the entire North Korean problem, and not just as one of purely humanitarian aid. A political and diplomatic resolution at a multilateral and a bilateral level is now required among the countries concerned.
Introduction

The issue of North Korean escapees has finally come into the open, after initially being ignored, whether intentionally or unintentionally, by neighboring governments and by North Korea itself. However, when a group of seven escapees who had been in Russian custody in November 1999, was returned to North Korea by the Chinese government on January 12, 2000, despite pleas from South Korea and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the ensuing debate managed to draw attention to the human rights situation in North Korea. In particular, the desperate attempt by Chang Gilsoo and his family to enter the UNHCR office in Beijing on June 25, 2001 drew global attention. The world has witnessed an increasing number of North Korean escapees seeking refuge in various foreign missions in China.

From a moral perspective, humanitarian efforts to help the North Korean escapees deserve praise. Generally speaking, however, the governments concerned—mainly China, the United States, Japan, Russia and South Korea—were prodded into action only when the media and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) got involved. Having failed to recognize the North Koreans as refugees, governments deliberately behaved as though nothing had happened, despite increasing criticism of their passivity by the international community. Some questions remain: Why were governments so passive? What were the consequences of their action, or lack thereof? What are the ramifications of the issue for the region?

The question of North Korean escapees is minor when juxtaposed against other serious problems such as nuclear or missile programs on the Korean Peninsula. But this is more than a humanitarian issue, and has a more complicated nature than what first appears. As seen from the Chang Gilsoo incident, escape cases have involved many elements such as the role of the UN and NGOs, the survival of the Pyongyang regime, and the interests of countries concerned with North Korea in particular, and Northeast Asia policy in general. The series of inci-

1 “Needing refuge—China has a duty to protect fleeing North Koreans,” The Economist, June 22, 2002, p. 16.


ists insist that morality can apply only to individuals, not states. Although it has become an important theme in international relations, the norms are not “persuasive” everywhere and individual states still engage in terms of their own values.\(^8\) Weaker states are concerned with preserving their sovereignty and prefer the principle of non-intervention to universal values.\(^9\)

If the debate is to be extended to East Asia, politics appears more dominant than human rights in the region. Borrowing Roy’s explanation of East Asian states’ approaches toward human rights, the regional countries see that the norm of human rights is closer to the Western ideas. With their bitter historical experience of colonialism and imperialism, most Asian states have still a tendency to perceive any intervention on human rights as domestic meddling by the West. Pressing the issue can add destabilizing stress to their already fragile domestic political stability and national security.\(^{10}\)

The Situation of North Korean Escapees

Who are the North Koreans who flee to China or elsewhere? Why have they chosen to go to these places? How many are there, and what is their situation now? The situation of North Korean escapees can be the result of severe food shortages, caused by various factors. Since the collapse of the socialist bloc in the late 1980s, North Korea no longer had economic support from the Soviet Union/Russia and China. After consecutive years of negative growth in the 1990s, its economy was on the verge of collapse.\(^{11}\) It may further pose a diplomatic or security problem, which is the major theme of this paper. Things become more complicated if refugee movements happen among states, which do not share the same interpretation of “refugee.”

Generally speaking, the concept of human rights has become an important theme in international relations.\(^5\) The liberal approach takes the view that individuals can be subject to international law. This was termed by McRae as a “Copernican Revolution,” which “makes human security, rather than state security, a new measure of success for international security, and for the international system.”\(^6\) Liberals contend that like-minded countries and international NGOs should cooperate to realize the universalization of human rights.\(^7\) In contrast, real-


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11. North Korea’s gross domestic product (GDP) fell by 3% in 1991, 7.6% in 1992, 5.4% in 1993, 1.7% in 1994, 2% in 1995, 2.1% in 1996 and 6.8% in 1997. See
agricultural policies, the country’s economy has been ruined by droughts and floods since 1995. According to data from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), North Korea’s average grain output sufficient to feed the population is about 5 to 6 million tons. However, when food output went down to 4 million tons after the early 1990s and to 3 million tons after 1995, starvation became an imminent prospect for North Koreans. The situation in North Korea has been described as a “famine in slow motion” by the World Food Program (WFP). Mortality rates had risen to 9.3 per 1,000 in 1999 from 6.8 per 1,000 in 1995. Any number of people from several hundreds of thousands to two million people are believed to have died from starvation.

Hunger drove North Koreans to flee the country in the mid-1990s and the exodus has increased dramatically since the late 1990s. Nearly half of the total escapees (1,342) to the South have intensively occurred from 1995 to 1999. There were almost 1,100 North Korean escapees in 2000, based on an average of 90 arrivals per month. From January 2002 to November 2002, almost 1,000 North Koreans came to South Korea. The food crisis had paralyzed distribution systems and loosened control over domestic travel as well as cross-border movements. North Korean escapees also include escaped loggers in Siberia, but these are normally classified among those who get into China’s northeast provinces. Unable to go directly to South Korea because of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) separating North and South Korea, they usually flee via the routes of China, and hide in the Chinese towns of Tumen, Jian, Yanji, Dandong and others in Jilin and Liaoning provinces, where 2 million ethnic Koreans live. Their numbers are uncertain, but humanitarian organizations put the numbers of North Korean escapees as high as 300,000, while the Chinese government estimates the number to be 10,000 and the South Korean government a number between 10,000 and 30,000. According to humanitarian sources, North Korean escapees live in an atmosphere of fear and intimidation as Chinese police and North Korean agents pursue them. A report by Human Rights Watch describes their status thus: “Escapees “who are caught crossing repeatedly, who stay for a prolonged period, or have any contact with South Koreans or other non-Chinese foreigners, including missionaries and humanitarian workers who enter this area, are liable to severe punishments, even including death, if discovered and returned to North Korea.” Only a small number of North Koreans have successfully reached South Korea, with help from relatives in the South coordinating their quiet transit, by brokers out of China, or by dashing into diplomatic compounds. There are two main routes from China: either over the Mongolian border, or over the border to the Mekong River, eventually reaching Thailand.

Most legal and human rights experts argue that North Korean escapees should be granted refugee status and be protected by the Principle of Non-Refoulement of the 1951 Convention. In addition, Article 3 of the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhumane or Degrading Treatment or Punishment of the Geneva Assembly resolution 39/46 of December 10, 1984, stipulating that “no state shall expel, return (“refouler”) or extradite a person to another state where there are substantial grounds for believing that he would be in danger of being subjected to torture,” can be applied. However, North Korean escapees in China are not recognized as refugees by North Korea and China. North Korean refugees are treated as “illegal economic migrants” as the governments claim that economic motives play a part in their decision to escape. Hence, North Korean escapees who crossed the Yalu and Tumen Rivers into China fall under the category of “economic

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13 Amnesty International (AI), Persecuting the Starving: The Plight of North Koreans Fleeing to China (ASA 24/03/00, 2000), p. 2.


migrants. There is doubt as to whether the North Korean escapees are really in danger if they are forcibly extradited to the North.

Differing Positions of the Parties Involved

The issue of the North Korean escapees has eventually become a regular news item in the global media. Despite the growing importance of the issue, while NGOs have taken more action regarding the issue, the major countries concerned have different approaches according to their own understanding of the issue. What are the underlying calculations or considerations, and how has this reflected the participating parties’ responses?

North Korea

The major responsibility falls on North Korea itself, which has failed to feed its people. However, the country takes a different view of the issue in the context of regime security. Although North Korea joined the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Covenant B) in 1981, the regime has usually regarded escapees as anti-socialist traitors and criminals for leaving the country without permission. To address the problem of the increasing number of North Korean escapees, Pyongyang has either sent the secret police to arrest the escapees, or sought to blame South Korean agents, who capitalize on the situation by taking North Koreans illegally into China so as to use them for political ends. Nevertheless, the regime itself has tacitly neglected the issue. Since the food crisis in the 1990s, the North has not tightly controlled the central rationing system, with the result that many people can flee North Korea into China, along with urban residents relocating to rural villages. Punishments have also been relaxed, since punishments invariably differ according to the refugees’ background, regional origin, age, and the duration of stay out of the country. At present, North Korea seems more concerned about handling foreign relations to minimize the diplomatic damage. The regime seems to appreciate China’s handling of the issue for saving its face and to approve of Beijing’s non-recognition of the escapees’ status as “refugees,” despite international condemnation of Beijing. For Pyongyang, the escape issue is dwarfed by the bigger problem of regime survival.

China

China is the North Koreans’ sanctuary of first resort. Article 32, paragraph 2 of the Chinese Constitution stipulates that “the PRC shall accord the right to protection to those foreigners who demand refuge for political reasons.” However, the Chinese government has shown two-faced responses to recent incidents. It still sends back the escapees to the North in accordance with the North Korea-China Extradition Treaty, signed between Kim Il-Sung and Zhou En-lai in 1960, and the 1986 Agreement on Cooperation in North Korea-China Boundary Areas. China’s extradition efforts have apparently been reinforced by the Jilin Province Management Act of November 1993. Amnesty International claims that about 5,000 North Koreans were forcibly returned in March 2000 alone. In April 2001, the central authorities launched the “strike hard” campaign against the North Korean escapees. Those suspected of helping North Koreans are now believed to be fined up to 30,000 yuan. Meanwhile, China permitted those who

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17 Ibid.
18 For example, an escapee, Won, who was arrested by Chinese authorities while attempting to enter the Korean Consulate in June 2002 said that he crossed the North Korean border six or seven times, including forceful return to the North once or twice.
19 North Korea applies Article 47 of the 1987 North Korean Criminal Code to people who leave the country: “A citizen of the Republic who defects to a foreign country or to the enemy in betrayal of the country and the people... shall be committed to a reform institution for not less than seven years. In cases where the person commits an extremely grave concern, he or she shall be given the death penalty...,” quoted in AI, Persecuting the Starving, p. 5.
21 AI, China: Hundreds of North Koreans Forced Across the Border (ASA, 17/028/2001); Most recently, it is reported that from December 2002 to mid January 2003, 3,200 escapees have been sent back to North Korea and 1,300 are confined
individual importance has diminished as the number of escapees has increased rapidly since the mid-1990s. However, South Korea has still welcomed them or has solved the issue diplomatically by requesting that China send them to Korea via a third country. The South is cognizant of the need to tread carefully with regard to its relationship with China, which regards the North Koreans as illegal economic migrants. Seoul is reluctant to provoke Beijing, which is an important trading partner as well as an influential power vis-à-vis North Korea in regard to Seoul’s “sunshine policy.”

Also, Seoul does not want the issue to disturb fragile inter-Korean relations within the context of its unification policy. In addition, Seoul doubts its ability to cope if the current trickle of refugees turns into a flow. It worries about economic restructuring and the huge potential cost of reunification.

### Japan

Regarding North Korean escapees, Japan is more concerned with avoiding diplomatic conflict with China and North Korea than in humanitarian issues. The weakness of Japan’s protest against the Chinese police’s intrusion into the Japanese Consulate in Shenyang on May 8, 2002 reflects its reluctance to anger North Korea, and its desire to avoid offending China, with whom it shares the most important trading and economic interests. At present, the Japanese policy seems to have adopted a more selective approach. According to a recent report, the Japanese Foreign Ministry will allow its foreign missions to receive applications for refugee status from the North Korean people, but it only grants refugee status to those who were once Japanese residents, the members of pro-Pyongyang General Association of Korean Residents in Japan (Chongryon) or their relatives.

### South Korea

Articles 3 and 2(1) of South Korea’s Constitution, as well as the country’s Law of Nationality, stipulate that North Korea is a part of the Republic of Korea and that its people are citizens of the Republic. Therefore, it is argued that North Korean escapees should be automatically allowed to enter the South if they so desire. When the escapes first began, the North Koreans had been welcomed and received privileged social security benefits. South Korea treated the escapees as “victory spoils” in terms of competition with the North, but their

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26 Pokempner et al., *The Invisible Exodus*.
27 In an interview with the BBC on Oct. 24, 2000, President Kim Dae-jung, in talking about the human rights issue in North Korea, said that South Korea is currently in a phase of resolving easier issues first, and thus it is not beneficial to raise issues that can have negative effects. The freeing of North Korea from its famine and threat of war are the more urgent agendas. See *Peace and Cooperation—White Paper on Korean Unification* (Seoul: ROK Ministry of Unification, 2001), p. 65.
scheduled talks with North Korea, along with a wide range of agenda items, from weapons of mass destruction and conventional armed forces to human rights. The U.S. Congress has also weighed in on the issue. Following the submission of a bill in the U.S. Senate aimed at promoting human rights and democracy in North Korea, the House of Representatives introduced a more comprehensive “North Korean Freedom Act,” which allows the escapees to apply for refugee status in the United States without first having interviews with the UNHCR. Such an omni-dimensional human rights offensive by the United States can be regarded as an effort to pressurize North Korea on the nuclear issue.

**Russia**

Russia joined the “Refugee Convention” in February 1993, but does not recognize the concept of “refugees.” Russia is generally uninvolved in human rights issues, and their actions largely seek to avoid taking blame. When the seven escapees were arrested by the Russian Border Patrol in 1999, the Russian authorities forcibly returned them to China on December 31 of the same year, claiming that their decision was based on the fact that China, not Russia, was the country of first resort. Russia has enough headaches from the refugee flow from the former Soviet Union member states, as well as Afghanistan and Chechnya. The North Korean escapee issue, along with Siberia’s North Korean loggers who can become another source of escapees, is another unwelcome, but relatively unimportant one.

**Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)**

Human rights NGOs have increasingly become the agenda-setter on the refugee issue. Initially, they adopted a relatively moderate stance. Amnesty International sent an open letter to the then President of China, Jiang Zemin, expressing “deep concern over hundreds of forcibly returned escapees to North Korea by China.” South Korean activists

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28 In accordance with a Red Cross repatriation program from 1959-1984, 93,340 Koreans including 1,800 Japanese spouses were sent to North Korea. See “Japan to write refugee-friendly policy,” JoongAng Ilbo, online English edition, Aug. 6, 2002.


Political Consequences

Thanks to the assistance of NGOs, the refugee issue has been brought onto the international stage, and some North Korean escapees in China have been rescued. The issue is undoubtedly a humanitarian one, but the recent series of escape cases were significant for four political consequences:

Firstly, the issue has to do with the role humanitarian NGOs are playing in the issue. If we focus on the purity of NGOs’ intentions and their means and methodology in dealing with the issue, we cannot point out the political dimension of their activity. While previously the goal was to aid escapees in seeking sanctuary in foreign embassies, the recent series of high-profile escape events showed an increasing ambition on the part of NGOs. They wanted to accomplish their goal through official channels and challenge the political authority through their organizational power and their radical tactics. Nevertheless, the efficacy of their methods is not beyond question. Scott Snyder, Korea Representative of the Asia Foundation, and Brad Glosserman, the director of research at the Pacific Forum CSIS, both commented “Although the intent of the human rights NGO leaders to solve the plight of North Korean refugees is admirable, the international spotlight has thus far been counterproductive.” In addition, the human rights organizations members I interviewed admitted that what limited success was achieved had led to harsher responses from China and North Korea, with the result that the vulnerability of escapees had increased greatly. The Chinese authorities have cracked down on North Korean escapees, as well as on the NGOs helping them. North Korea itself also sent 150 officials to northeast China to arrest the

34 AI, China: Hundreds of North Koreans, p. 7.
35 Many NGOs have been working together and trying to build a transnational network. Most of the name list can be seen at http://nkhumanrights.or.kr/about.html. Recently, the Fourth International Conference on North Korean Human Rights and Refugees was held on March 3, 2003 in Prague, the Czech Republic. See “Conference on North Korean Human Rights and Refugees (1),” Chosun Ilbo, online English edition, March 4, 2003.
37 In August 2002, seven North Korean escapees demonstrated at the gates of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, demanding that the Chinese government grant them refugee status. In January 2003, another 78 North Koreans attempted to escape through Chinese ports to reach South Korea by sea in deliberate imitation of the Vietnamese boatpeople, the largest group-attempt orchestrated by NGOs so far.
39 Interviews with several NGO activists in Seoul in November 2002.
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escapes, with the approval of the Chinese authorities.40

Secondly, the issue has had a significant impact on the North Korean regime. North Korea, so far, seems to muddle through many difficulties. The North has been using food as an instrument of political and economic control, favoring those who are politically loyal,41 as the country has been unable to feed its citizens since the late 1980s. Rather, regime and feeding its people.

The regime and the freedom of the citizens for the regime's roll over food supplies and the freedom of the citizens for the regime. North Korea, so far, seems to muddle through many difficulties. The country sees that the most serious threat to its regime is abandoning people who are not loyal to the regime during food crises, enabling the hungry people to cross the border. The regime policy might have been helping the regime to save the cost of maintaining the regime and feeding its people.42 However, North Korea finds itself in a dilemma. The country sees that the most serious threat to its regime is the weakening of its control over the nation due to economic difficulties. In order to overcome such difficulties, the North needs to receive the help of the international community. Nevertheless, other countries may not give the help to North Korea if the regime does not improve its human rights conditions.43 Ironically, Pyongyang, which has controlled food supplies and the freedom of the citizens for the regime's survival, has to improve food conditions and human rights of its people in order to maintain the regime.44 Moreover, what the regime is more concerned about is the fact that most escapes wish to go to South Korea rather than other countries, which may be interpreted as a reflection on North Koreans' changed perspectives on South Korea. In the longer term, the royalty of people to the regime will be shaken.

Thirdly, the issue has become a political "hot potato" in pluralistic societies, such as Japan, South Korea and the United States. The issue cuts across existing social divides and can be easily adapted to further political agendas. For example, the Shenyang incident clearly divided Japanese domestic opinion. While the Japanese ambassador to Beijing described the escapees as "potential subversives," the former UN High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Okata openly criticized the inhumanity of the Japanese government.45 The government was lambasted for behaving passively with regard to the issue. In South Korea, the issue was also potentially damaging to the political authority of the government. When Russia and China returned the seven escapees to North Korea in 1999, despite pleas by the Seoul government, the then Foreign Affairs and Trade Minister of South Korea, Hong Soon-young, was sacked for his diplomatic failure, although not just for this reason. In addition, the opposition party capitalized upon the issue to damage the government's "sunshine policy" in the run-up to the 2002 presidential election. By emphasizing the humanitarian angle of the issue, the opposition party wanted to woo the conservative votes.46 Although the United States has not been directly involved, the country is also not exempt from domestic opinion and critics. Despite official claims that they remain concerned about the North Korean escapees, the U.S. government has been criticized for its reluctance to grant asylum to North Korean escapees.47

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43 As a BBC program showed, political prisoners are used to test new chemical weapons, quoting a former chief of a North Korean gulag. Although it is unable to confirm such testing, it is clear that the human rights situation in North Korea can become an immediate issue for the international community. See “North Korea said to test gas chamber on families,” International Herald Tribune, Feb. 2, 2004.
46 Lee Hoi-chang, the then Grand National Party’s presidential candidate, urged during his meeting with Jiang Zemin in September 2002, that the escapees should be taken as political asylum seekers and China should grant them refugee status. See “Lee advocates defectors’ rights in China,” JoongAng Ilbo, online English edition, Sept. 4, 2002.
47 The U.S. State Department, intentionally or mistakenly, ignored the letter faxed by the U.S.-based NGO, Defense Forum Foundation, to help an escaped
A fourth political consequence is immediate diplomatic disputes between the countries concerned. Considerations such as domestic public opinion or saving face in the international community have led the countries involved into a position where compromise remains difficult, and their diplomatic relationships awkward. In March 2002 when Chinese security officials trespassed into the compound of the South Korean Consulate, used physical force against South Korean diplomats, and dragged a North Korean escapee from the mission, Seoul and Beijing criticized each other, while Beijing accused South Korean diplomats of preventing the guards from carrying out their duties. Seoul requested that the Chinese government issue a clear apology and ensure those responsible. Both sides later settled their dispute, expressing “regret” for the incident, but they were left wounded diplomatically. Another diplomatic scuffle broke out between Tokyo and Beijing after Chinese police entered the Japanese Consulate-General in Shenyang. Video footage showing Japanese diplomats watching impassively as Chinese police dragged away five North Korean escapees out of the Japanese mission, has undermined Japan’s international image. Although the two countries later agreed to send them to South Korea via a third country, the Shenyang incident has “dragged Sino-Japanese relations down to their lowest point in recent years.” Furthermore, diplomatic conflict is not limited to Sino-South Korean or Sino-Japanese relationships, but can occur anywhere and anytime the escapees seek refuge and safety in the goodwill of other nations. Considering the continuing wave of escapees, the issue could potentially pose a diplomatic headache to almost every country.


49 In September 2002 alone, three North Korean escapees entered a South Korean embassy in Southeast Asia; Germany and China agreed to send 16 North Korean escapees to South Korea via a third country; 12 escapees tried to enter Ecuador’s Embassy. Three months later some escapees applied for refugee status in Australia and Canada.

Policy Recommendations

Who should take responsibility for the starvation of North Koreans and their fleeing of the country? Responsibility should rest on the shoulders of North Korea, which has failed to feed its people. It is widely recognized that Pyongyang is an incapable and hostile regime, and one of the most dangerous terrorist-supporting countries, with scant regard for the welfare of its citizens. The most important thing is that the state has almost lost its ability to feed its starving people. Working on the assumption that the overall economic situation and resulting food shortages cannot recover in the short term, we can safely assume that the exodus to avoid starvation and poverty will continue. How should the regional countries approach this issue, and what are the policy options available to solve or reduce the outflow of North Korean escapees?

There are four options: The first is simply to seal off the Sino-North Korean border, so as not to allow more North Koreans to cross the border. However, this cannot be carried out because the action is open to a great deal of criticism on humanitarian grounds. Furthermore, it is not clear whether it would have any substantial impact on the North Korean regime. Critics such as Andrew S. Natsios, formerly an NGO leader, and now an administrator for the U.S. Agency for International Development, has observed, “Punishing the common people in a totalitarian regime as a means of forcing their government to change its behavior has seldom been successful, given that the people have no control over their government’s behavior . . . [After all,] the government officials eat and the people die.”

If the United States and its allies—Japan and South Korea; and China and Russia (although China and Russia are not likely to join in the action)—really take up this option, they will immediately meet criticism from the international community for leaving innocent people to suffer starvation and death. Second, some means to pressurize China, where most North Koreans hide, such as recognizing them as refugees, can be considered. In her study on improving China’s human rights policy, Kent points out the
available methods of achieving this, including: “active monitoring, involving the threat of sanctions through the use of [bilateral trade] mechanisms, the sponsoring of UN human right resolutions, and visits by political leaders and members of the administration to China to inquire into or investigate human rights conditions; and passive monitoring, through the annual U.S. Human Rights Report and human rights dialogue.” However, the major drawback is that China may not cooperate, as “the Chinese feel that they can survive the costs of external pressure.” Moreover, China may not bow easily to outside pressure if it cannot save face. Beijing still considers talk about human rights a manifestation of international power politics and is repulsed by any kind of Western pressure in this regard. Meanwhile, the United States itself may be hesitant to push China too much, having had the prior experience of jeopardizing its own political and economic interests by pressing the human rights issue with China in the early 1990s. Currently even the international environment favors China. September 11 has provided a respite for China’s defensive position on its poor human rights record. The issue of terrorism has replaced China in the Americans’ diplomatic order of priorities. Given that other countries do not have sufficient clout, or the will, to arm-twist Beijing, cooperation will only come when Beijing stands to gain external benefits. If it were willing to cooperate, China could possibly make a tactical compromise by expelling the North Koreans to a third country, through which they could eventually move to South Korea.

54 The author’s impression from a conversation with a Chinese Korean Peninsula expert in Beijing in January 2003 is that China was primarily concerned about the possible use of the issue as propaganda by Western governments, particularly the United States. He questioned the timing of the rise of the issue to coincide with China’s application to host the 2008 Summer Olympics.
58 Interview with South Korean activists in Seoul in November 2002.

Third, local or third-country settlement, as mentioned by Son, could be considered. It would be humanitarian to settle escapees in the country to which they have fled, or in third-party countries if they wish. However, the country of first resort may not wish to receive escapees, due to its concern for domestic and diplomatic conflicts. Recently, South Korean activists of the “Headquarters for Helping Settlement of North Korean Refugees” launched a drive to establish a refugee camp in a third country for North Korean escapees, possibly in Mongolia. This formula, based on activism by foreign civic groups in third-party countries, is not likely to be realized. Mongolia’s foreign affairs minister, Luvsangiin Erdenechuluun, has already dismissed the idea, hinting that Ulaanbataar is not happy with the constant flow of escapees sneaking over the border from China. Both China and Russia have already opposed the construction of refugee camps, because such facilities encourage more departures. Even leading North Korean human rights activists in Seoul doubt that such settlement would be good for the escapees, questioning whether the escapees would really prefer to settle in Mongolia and give up hope of eventually reaching Seoul.

The most ideal option, therefore, also mentioned by Son, is for the escapees to return to North Korea voluntarily, without fear of domestic persecution. However, this option is only possible if North Korea agrees not to punish the escapees in exchange for their return. To make the option possible, the countries concerned should consider means to induce North Korean cooperation. China and Russia, who still maintain close relations with Pyongyang, can exert various kinds of influence over the Pyongyang regime to ensure the safety of the escapees. However, the most significant step to bring about a change in North Korea’s attitude might be reappraisal by the United States of its North Korea policy. Among the major powers surrounding the Korean Peninsula, the United States is in the most powerful position to offer incentives to the Pyongyang regime not to punish the returned escapees.
Deriving from the prospect that the overall economic conditions and resulting food shortage cannot recover in the short term, the exodus to avoid starvation and poverty will continue. The fundamental solution to the issue is to put an end to the need for the North Koreans to escape because of hunger.

It is thus necessary for countries to understand the issue from the perspective of the entire North Korea problem.60 There is a Korean proverb: Give one more rice-cake to a difficult child than to an obedient child. The United States and other countries should consider the weaknesses of the North Korean regime and give it breathing space for economic survival. This might be more easily said than done, but no alternative option is available to reduce the escape flow. More concrete actions are now needed rather than discussions and debates, and countries should also seek to resolve this issue at policy level. Otherwise, domestic and diplomatic conflicts between concerned countries will continue and it will be a serious challenge to the stability and peace of the Korean Peninsula, and even the rest of Northeast Asia.

**Conclusion**

The issue of North Korean escapees has become a serious political and economic challenge to regional stability and development. It has not just local but also international implications.61 The network of NGOs facilitating their escape will continue their aggressive stance to challenge traditional state authority. “No matter what the walls built by the Chinese government at its border with the North, large-scale defections will continue to increase,” said Moon Kook-hwan, secretary-general of the human rights group named “The People to Save Gilsoo’s Family in the North.”62 “It will become a flood. . . . They can try to stop 25 maybe, but not 250,000,” says the German activist Vollesten.63 That is exactly what neighboring countries fear. The flow of North Korean escapees will continue unless the food situation and economic conditions in the North improve.64 According to the UN, the situation will only get worse.65 To send them to South Korea via a third country or back to North Korea may be a temporary solution, and diplomatic disputes will continue if similar cases occur again. Countries should do more to prevent the exodus immediately, for the costs will possibly be even greater if the situation is allowed to continue. No matter how much barbed wire and barriers the Chinese government throws up around foreign missions, the North Koreans}

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61 As early as 1999, South Korea and the United States established a task force to prepare for a contingency regarding the exodus of North Korean refugees into South Korea via the sea. The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) said that 150 military officials from 24 nations, including the United States, Japan, China and Russia, would hold a large-scale military exercise (The 3rd Multinational Planning Augmentation Team (MPAT)) on January 11–18 to cope with the possible mass landing of refugees on the Korean Peninsula. “The scenario is based on the assumption that 100,000 refugees would be accepted at refugee camps on the southwestern coast. The exercise plan may be an extension of the North Korean refugee relief plan,” an anonymous military analyst said. See “24 Nations to Take Part in Military Drill on Refugees,” *Korea Times*, Jan. 8, 2002, online edition. According to a recent report, the South Korean army is operating six refugee camps, each with a capacity of 200 people, from the western battle line to the eastern to temporarily accommodate a large number of North Koreans crossing the DMZ. See “Facts on Camps for Refugees Emerge,” *Chosun Ilbo*, online English edition, Oct. 28, 2003.


64 The South Korean Embassy in Beijing suspended its civil affairs services because of a surge in the number of North Korean escapees staying at its consular section. Since May 2002 about 400 of them have found their way into South Korea from there via third countries. About 180 escapes are still staying at the embassy during the negotiations with the Chinese government. See “Embassy Wilts Under Refugee Crush,” online English edition, *Chosun Ilbo*, Oct. 6, 2003.

65 The World Food Program (WFP) urged the international community to support a new US$ 171 million emergency operation that aims to feed 6.5 million of the most vulnerable people in North Korea during 2004. In December 2003, 2.2 million North Koreans would be deprived of WFP cereal rations, and the number is expected to rise to 3.8 million early in 2004 unless new pledges are made. Soon. See “WFP urges support for 6.5 million hungry in North Korea,” News Release, Dec. 11, 2003, available at http://www.wfp.org/index.asp?sections2.
will get into them with the help of resourceful NGOs and other sympathizers. If the other surrounding countries think that they are immune to the exodus because North Korean escapees use only Chinese soil, they are wrong, because hundreds of thousands can cross the border to Russia and Southeast Asia, while others may sail to Japan as boat people. The escapees will seek out the United States, European or other national embassies and consulates everywhere.

Out of this potential for chaos, the major players ranging from NGOs to states can cooperate for the common good, and find a basis to maintain peace and development on the Korean Peninsula. If the countries concerned miss this opportunity to create a solution, it may be too late once the exodus spreads. This issue does not rank highly on most political agendas, because it is not seen as a pressing problem. However, there may be serious and destabilizing consequences, if it is left unmanaged. In the end, countries may all reach the same conclusion, which is that it will go beyond any one country’s management ability if nothing is done at this stage.

This issue should be seen in the context of the entire North Korean problem, and not just as one of purely humanitarian aid. An effective political and diplomatic cooperation mechanism needs to be established through enhanced cooperation between countries in the region, and a more active North Korea policy is required. Only through more active and positive policy efforts on the issue at a multilateral and a bilateral level will every country’s interest be promoted, but it would also save the lives of innocent North Koreans, including North Korean escapees.