



## AS LIBYA IS SET ABLAZE, ASIAN NAVIES SET SAIL

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*Late last week, China and South Korea decided to dispatch warships to support the evacuation of their citizens from Libya. This is the first time for either country to send combat units in support of a non-combatant evacuation. A unit of four Chinese Air Force Il-76, a large military transport aircraft, have also been deployed to Sabha in Libya.*

### Korea and China's Swift Action

When violence in Libya erupted on February 15, 36,000 Chinese and approximately 1,400 South Korean nationals lived and worked in the North African country. Before the events in February, about three million people, from more than 20 countries, worked in Libya. As of March 2, around 32,000 Chinese and 1,000 Koreans had been evacuated by sea, air or land transport. However, the difficulties in extracting people are increasing, as the violence seemed to intensify on March 2. A Swedish diplomat, Mr. Håkan Hjort, stationed in Valetta, made a quick visit to Tripoli on March 2 and reported: "It's impossible to receive a landing permit in advance. One has to depart for Tripoli and request landing clearance while on the way. If permission is granted, then you land, if not, you're forced to turn back." (Radio Sweden, News broadcast, March 3, 7 am).

The actions taken by China and South Korea stand out. Seoul's foreign ministry has, so far, chartered two Egypt Air and one Korean Air flights to bring South Koreans home. Hundreds of Koreans, mostly working for Korean construction firms, stationed further away from Tripoli, have been evacuated over land to Egypt and Tunisia. A few others were transported out of Libya on a Turkish flagged passenger liner that departed from Benghazi. The plan for the South Korean destroyer Choe Yeong is to escort civilian vessels evacuating civilians or, if necessary, to be used as transport. The vessel carries land attack cruise missiles, two helicopters and a naval special operations unit, the latter used last in the rescue of a Mongolian vessel and its crew, who had been captured by Somali pirates.

Just a few days after the violence in Libya erupted, the Chinese government dispatched aircrafts from Air China,

the Chinese flag carrier. Chinese merchant ships, as well as chartered non-Chinese aircrafts and ships were also sent to Libya. Before being redirected to Libya, the Chinese frigate Xuzhou and the South Korean destroyer Choe Yeong were both taking part in anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia. A convoy system, using busses has also been set up by the Chinese embassy.

Why then have the governments of China and South Korea decided to act as decisively, and why now?

### A New-Old Concern

As the world is becoming more globalized, millions not only migrate permanently to find a new home; an even larger number work abroad for shorter periods of time. This raises a sensitive question of what responsibility their governments have for their citizens overseas.

More than 5.5 million Chinese citizens live and work overseas. Chinese companies, expanding into regions rich in both natural resources and political conflict, have brought with them scores of Chinese workers to Central Asia, Africa and the Middle East. In 2007, several Chinese oil workers were killed, when a SINOPEC facility in Ethiopia was attacked. A similar incident occurred in Sudan a year later. Several high-ranking Chinese officials have aired the view that the government in Beijing has the right and obligation to ensure the life and security of its nationals, not only in China, but also overseas. Although Beijing has on previous occasions helped in the evacuation of its citizen's from distant crises, the People's Liberation Army had not been directly involved.

As South Korean firms expand into politically unstable regions in order to secure natural resources and new mar-



kets, Koreans face increasing risks of being caught in the crossfire, or becoming the targets of violence themselves.

Chinese media, scholars and the public, criticized their Chinese government for doing too little when Chinese citizens lost their lives in Ethiopia and Sudan. This exemplifies how this issue makes headlines in emerging powers like China. In fact, this has increasingly become an important issue for the world at large. Israel is a small country that has repeatedly used both civilian and military resources to protect or/and evacuate its nationals overseas. In Sweden, the failure in handling the evacuation of Swedish tourists from Thailand after the 2005 tsunami, contributed to the fall of the Social Democratic government in 2006.

## Why Now?

For several decades, many Chinese and South Koreans have lived and worked overseas. It is not the first time that Chinese and Korean nationals looking for safety have left their host country in large numbers. So why have the Chinese and South Korean governments taken the highly symbolic decision to dispatch military forces to evacuate their citizens now?

The Beijing government would prefer the focus to be on their swift and decisive rescue of their citizens overseas, rather than on possible economic troubles at home. In South Korea, President Lee Myung-bak faces domestic opposition and is in need of something that can help him rally his people behind him. Last month's raid by a South Korean special operation unit against a hijacked ship of Somalia, rescuing all hostages and killing at least seven pirates, was applauded by the general public and the media. Government officials in both Beijing and Seoul are most likely hoping for a similar reception to their actions taken in regard to the present situation in Libya.

After the sinking of one of its warships and the shelling of one of its coastal islands by North Korea, the South Korean military has been harshly criticized for its incapability to protect the nation from harm. Its huge investments in a blue water navy, of little use in a conflict with Pyongyang, is also questioned. The rescue of the ship hijacked by Somali pirates, and the deployment of a destroyer to Libya, are decisions that give the navy a possibility to prove its worth. In China, the navy and air force, the greatest beneficiaries of the last two decade's increase in defence spending, are also

looking for a chance to test and display their new capabilities.

But these actions are not only for domestic consumption. Neither will the quick and resolute actions taken by China and South Korea only help to improve their humanitarian credentials; it will also serve as a wider message to the outside world. China and South Korea are both willing and capable of protecting their citizens aboard, and the option of using military force is not excluded.

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*The opinions expressed in this Policy Brief are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute for Security and Development Policy or its sponsors.*

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