

Considerations for Rescuing North Korean Political Prison Camp Inmates

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Abstract

Rescuing inmates from North Korea's vast political prison system presents significant challenges for American and South Korean political and military leaders. The lives of prisoners would be immediately threatened in the event of war or the collapse of the Kim Family Regime, as former camp guards who defected to the Republic of Korea have testified to this effect. The events that would threaten the prisoners' lives would occur at a time when the military assets needed for their rescue are in most demand. Defending Seoul and treating civilian casualties will remain priorities for military commanders, who will find it difficult to divert the specially trained troops, air support and logistical resources required to neutralize camp guards, secure the prisons, and provide immediate aid to the inmates. Yet, rescuing the inmates would provide benefits, including gaining the support from a wary North Korean population and legitimizing post-crisis reunification efforts. Because of the strategic implications of this decision, only the American and South Korean presidents could authorize such a mission.

Keywords: North Korea, South Korea, U.S.-ROK Alliance, political prisoners, political prison camps, regime instability, regime collapse, Ministry of State Security, Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, Kim Jong-un, Kim Family Regime, rescue operations

Introduction

The history of dictatorships is replete with political prisoners and prisons. As dictators fall, the release of the political prisoners has historically been chaotic and complicated, evoking feelings of both joy and despair for the individuals and families involved. The political prisoners who are released under a new regime and reunited with their families are the lucky ones.

Should the Kim Family Regime (KFR) collapse, the approximately 120,000 political prisoners in North Korea are likely to experience a much

different fate. Two former guards who defected to South Korea stated the regime will order guards to kill all the prisoners instantly, should a crisis arise in North Korea.¹ While comparisons with the Nazi death and concentration camps where millions of Jews were murdered invariably fall short, the killing of 120,000 North Koreans would constitute genocide and a crime against humanity. Additionally, most inmates are innocent of any crime even by North Korea's warped interpretation of political crime. Based on the KFR practice of "guilt by association," three generations related to a political violator are also arrested and sent to the same political prison camp, euphemistically called 'management centers' [*kwalliso*]. The majority of the prison population is absolutely innocent.

The international community has limited options to address this potential tragedy during the Armistice (there was no peace treaty signed after the Korean War). International organizations have sought to raise awareness of the North Korean political prison camps. The United Nations' "Report of the Detailed Findings of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea" is a compelling account detailing the crimes against humanity occurring within these camps.² North Korea responded to this scrutiny by moving some camps away from the country's border with China. However, there have been no changes to the process, which includes arrest of perceived violators and their families, internment at hard labor with insufficient sustenance to maintain health, brutal and tortuous treatment, eventual death, and burial in an unmarked grave. This savage system continues under Kim Jong-un's rule, and will continue until there is a crisis that threatens to break the KFR's grip on power.

Should a regime-threatening event occur, there is no guarantee that the ruthless dictator infamous for purges and executions of anyone who crosses his mood won't slaughter the aforementioned prisoners. The priority missions for the United States (U.S.)- Republic of Korea (ROK) alliance is to deter and defeat North Korean military aggression. However, because hostilities and regime collapse are scenarios that alliance leaders must address, American and South Korean leaders should also consider operations to rescue those confined to camps. That said, the events that would threaten the prisoners' lives would occur at a time when the military assets needed for their rescue are in most demand. Alliance leaders contemplating rescuing the KFR's political prisoners must consider the requirements to defend the ROK, as well as North Korea's ability to strike allies in Northeast Asia and the continental U.S. With the aforementioned

as background, this paper examines the political justification and military challenges associated with potential rescue operations of one or more political prison camp populations during a crisis on the Korean Peninsula.

Crisis Timing and Leadership Decisions

The type of crisis – provocation, regime instability, or war – will have a major impact on any decision by Kim Jong-un or his subordinates in initiating the order to kill the political prison camp inmates. Korean observers note there have been thousands of provocations on the Korean Peninsula over the decades that haven't led to killing all of the inmates. At the same time, these provocations haven't led alliance leaders to consider rescuing political prisoners due to concerns of crisis escalation. One can only speculate whether Kim Il-sung considered issuing such an order in the days following the 1976 Panmunjom axe murders or during Kim the 1993-4 nuclear crisis. According to defector reports, the largest political prison inmate slaughter occurred in 1987 at the now-dismantled Camp 12 in Onsong, North Hamgyeong Province; camp guards killed over 5000 persons following a prison revolt.³

Regime instability is marked by the loss of political and governing control. Determining and assessing the regime's stability is challenging due to the secrecy of the KFR and multiple scenarios that could lead to the loss of power. Certainly, the assassination of Kim Jong-un would initiate such instability. Ongoing developments within the North Korean populace, including increased access to external information and low-level marketization, are arguably affecting the regime's stability very slowly. This is due to the security services' monitoring of the entire population and the Korean Workers' Party controlling all levels of every agency, including the security services and military. However, at some point, regime leaders might perceive they are losing control, causing them concern over their ability to remain in power. Rebellion and civil war could then be inevitable. If so, the KFR may believe it has a narrow window in which to eliminate its political prisoners.

Should war break out on the Korean Peninsula, the KFR's decision to kill its political prisoners would likely occur when it realizes that its armed forces have lost the initiative in combat. Accordingly, halting North Korean advances might be a condition that must be satisfied before alliance leaders are asked to decide whether to begin operations to rescue political prisoners. This approach could be incorporated into operational plans, ensuring contingency plans are developed within a rigorous staff

planning process and allocated sufficient resources.

The competing demands for limited military resources during a collapse scenario or hostilities are so great that the alliance's uniformed leadership or even the most senior civilian defense officials would not be the ones making the decisions. Rather, the decision to rescue North Korean political prisoners will require agreement between the American and South Korean presidents. The debate over bombing Nazi concentration camps in World War II underscores the need for civilian leaders to decide this critical issue. American and British leaders failed to establish a policy to rescue Jewish victims of Nazi oppression. Although President Roosevelt established a War Refugee Board in January 1944, the War Department rejected the board's request to bomb the Auschwitz Concentration Camp in July. Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy summed up the department's position, writing, "such an operation could be executed only by the diversion of considerable air support... now engaged in decisive operations elsewhere and would in any case be of such doubtful efficacy that it would not warrant the use of our resources."⁴ The controversy over this decision continued after the war. Many of those liberated from the camps suggested that bombing the camps would have saved a significant number of lives despite losses sustained in an attack.⁵ Because similar operations in Korea present the same challenges and complexities, this is an issue that must be decided by the elected leaders of both countries. The elected civilian leaders of both countries have the authority to divert scarce resources on an extremely difficult and highly risky mission.

Strategic Rationale for Rescue Operations in North Korea

The strategic rationale for military operations designed to rescue North Korean political prisoners includes securing political capital for post-crisis efforts to unify the peninsula under the ROK government, gaining the support of a wary North Korean population, and delegitimizing Chinese or other third-party attempts to intervene in hostilities. Although of little military value when compared to the regime's leaders, weapons of mass destruction, or key military facilities, North Korean political prisoners are nonetheless strategic considerations that must be addressed in the alliance's military policies and operational plans.

The most compelling reason for attempting to rescue political prisoners is that it would provide alliance leaders with political capital that will help legitimize post-crisis reunification efforts. As noted, any decision

to conduct rescue operations will require the concurrence of the American and South Korean presidents. Ensuring the survival of political prisoners—and preserving evidence of the KFR’s crimes against humanity—highlights both countries’ commitment to human rights. The decision to secure North Korea’s political prisoners would engender significant support from alliance partners and the international community, enhancing the legitimacy to the alliance’s military operations. Accordingly, the inmates’ survival is a critical asset that must be secured as soon as possible, albeit within military combat priorities, to prevent incidents of genocide during a Kim regime-ending crisis.

Second, securing North Korean political prison camps would counter the regime’s ideological indoctrination and propaganda. Rescued political prisoners would provide the alliance with an immediately identifiable cadre of North Korean political elites who have a degree of legitimacy in the eyes of their fellow citizens. Assuming the rescued prisoners would work in support of the alliance, they would be extremely helpful in persuading their countrymen to support the alliance, both during military operations and the post-KFR transition period. The rescued political prisoners would significantly contribute to a successful, peaceful, and lasting resolution of the hostilities or crisis that led to their release.

Lastly, conducting rescue operations eliminates the rationale for China and other parties to intervene under the guise of protecting human rights. Indeed, China’s long-time support for the regime has enabled the KFR to continue its barbaric behavior. However, both China and Russia have reinforced military units stationed along the North Korean border. There is some reporting that Beijing has sent as many as 150,000 troops to the facilities along the Yalu River, but logistical realities indicate that this is an exaggerated number. Securing North Korea’s political prisoners provides the alliance a living, emotional counter-narrative to both the North Korean people and the world that undercuts Chinese claims to having a significant voice in Korean reunification.

Operational Issues for Rescue Operations in North Korea

Among the many operational issues that must be addressed by senior alliance leaders is determining which command would be responsible for operations involving North Korean political prisoners. There are four theater-level commands in Korea: the ROK Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS); U.S. Forces Korea (USFK); the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command (CFC); and the United Nations Command (UNC). Each command has

unique authorities, responsibilities, and apportioned forces, making some more suitable than others for this mission.

There are two unilateral commands: the ROK JCS and USFK. Unlike its American counterpart, the ROK JCS provides operational command and control for the South Korean Armed Forces. The Chairman of the ROK JCS, a four-star flag or general officer, reports to the South Korean president through the Minister of National Defense. USFK is a sub-unified command responsible for the operational control of U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula, as well as the reception, staging, onward movement, integration, and sustainment of reinforcing American units to the CFC. The Commander, USFK, an American four-star flag or general officer, does not command or control South Korean units or personnel.

CFC is a bilateral (U.S.-ROK) command that reports directly to a bilateral Military Committee, which in turn, reports to the American and South Korean national command authorities. During times of crisis, both national command authorities will assign forces to CFC for the purpose of defending the ROK. The American commander of USFK also commands CFC and the UNC. The U.S. Government established the UNC in 1950 following the United Nations Security Council's enactment of Resolution 84, which requested that member states provide military forces for the defense of South Korea under a unified command led by an American commander. Since 1953, the UNC's primary function has been maintaining the Armistice Agreement.⁶ Former Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali reiterated that the UNC is not part of the UN in a 1994 letter to the North Korean foreign minister: "the UN Security Council did not establish the unified command as a subsidiary organ under its control, but merely recommended the creation of such a command."⁷

Because securing North Korean political prisoners requires bilateral consultation and agreement at the highest levels of government, the mission would appear to fall to the multinational UNC or the bilateral CFC. Assigning the mission to UNC forces would appear to support the UN's mandates on human rights. However, the UN's reluctance to support the UNC and its cumbersome decision-making process makes it unlikely that the U.S. Government would support assigning a time-sensitive mission to this command. In contrast, the CFC provides both an integrated operational command and bilateral consultative structures needed to plan and execute rescue operations.

This brief analysis of the four theater-level commands in Korea is designed to highlight the considerations and complexities of the most basic

operational issue that must be addressed. Other considerations include which camps are viable targets for military rescue operations, when rescue operations would be conducted within the overall campaign, what are the intelligence indicators that would be used to make a decision on committing forces, and how does the commitment of military assets to rescue operations affect ongoing air, ground, and naval operations.

Reconciling the strategic imperative to defend Seoul and its citizens with the potential strategic benefits from rescuing North Korean political prisoners underscores the challenges facing strategists, operational commanders, and military planners. Most of Seoul is within the range of long-range artillery systems deployed north of the Demilitarized Zone, and Pyongyang's shorter-range weapons can reach the rapidly growing suburbs north of the capital. The defense of Seoul is paramount for alliance leaders, who would be unlikely to divert assets from the counter-fire fight. At some point, the CFC will have reduced the North Korean artillery threat to the point where allocating resources to rescue operations might be feasible. The commander will be faced with a choice of which group of people are more important to the future of Korea.

Despite the challenges, the CFC's combined planning process provides the framework and resources to address these issues. Indeed, American and South Korean military planners have worked together since 1968, when a combined operational planning staff was established as an adjunct to the UNC and USFK; this was the origin of the CFC, which was established a decade later. In the nearly 50 years of combined planning, military planners have continually refined plans to counter North Korea's evolving conventional threat, address Pyongyang's weapons of mass destruction, and mitigate the effects of the KFR's collapse. The rescue of North Korean political prisoners will require a similar effort.

Tactical Considerations for Rescue Operations

Securing any North Korean political prison camp is a complicated and risky mission. It requires detailed planning, specially trained personnel, and dedicated military assets. Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets would need to be focused on the camps and their command and control systems to support any rescue operations. At a minimum, the mission would include: using precision air strikes to incapacitate camp security forces, severing camp command and control

capabilities; suppressing air defense capabilities along the routes in ingress and egress; transporting the rescue force to the camp; and resupplying the rescue force and liberated prisoners.

Those assigned to the assault element would need to be highly proficient in the skills required to defeat the guard force and defend liberated prisoners. The security element would need to include psychological operations (PSYOPS) specialists, medics, and military police. PSYOPS soldiers would communicate with the prison camp inmates, outlining the objective of the operation, gaining their trust, and explaining how to identify alliance personnel; e.g., uniform patches or cloth strips affixed to helmets. PSYOPS soldiers would also attempt to persuade guards and administrators to cooperate with the raid force. Medics would treat those wounded in the rescue, as well as addressing the immediate needs of the camp population. Military police trained to identify, collect, and preserve evidence of crimes against humanity would be vital to holding the KFR to account for its heinous actions.

Sustaining the rescue force and liberated population must be considered in planning and task organization. The rescue force commander will be responsible for the health and well being of those liberated. Providing logistical support to an isolated force and basic necessities to thousands of civilians during high-intensity combat operations will be the most challenging issue facing planners, operators, and logisticians.

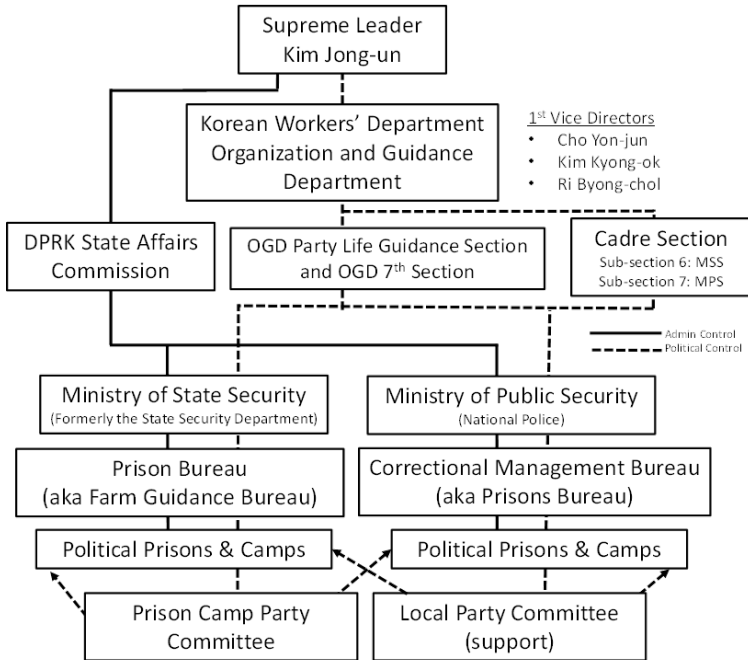
The personnel, training, and equipment challenges extend beyond task organizing rescue forces. The special operations and enabling personnel required for this mission serve in “high-demand, low density” military occupation specialties. Even considering the mobilized resources of the ROK and the deployed assets of the U.S., demands on personnel and equipment will tax the alliance. Capabilities requirements developed through rigorous planning will need to be presented to those responsible for manning, training, and equipping the services.

Political and Administrative Systems

To appreciate the challenges associated with rescuing political prisoners, it is important to understand the political and administrative structures of North Korea’s political prison system. Foremost, political prisoners aren’t incarcerated for violating criminal laws; those individuals are sent to traditional prisons. Instead, political prisons house those guilty of political crimes against the KFR. Their crimes are typically violations

of the *Ten Principles for the Establishment of Monolithic Ideological System*. Written in 1967 and made politically mandatory in 1974, the North Korean government requires all citizens to memorize *The Ten Principles* as a means to exercise complete control over its people. The political controls for the regime’s prison camps mirror other political structures in North Korea: Kim Jong-un is at the top. Figure 1 depicts the organization of the political prison camps:

Figure 1: Political Control of the Kim Family Regime’s Political Prison Camps

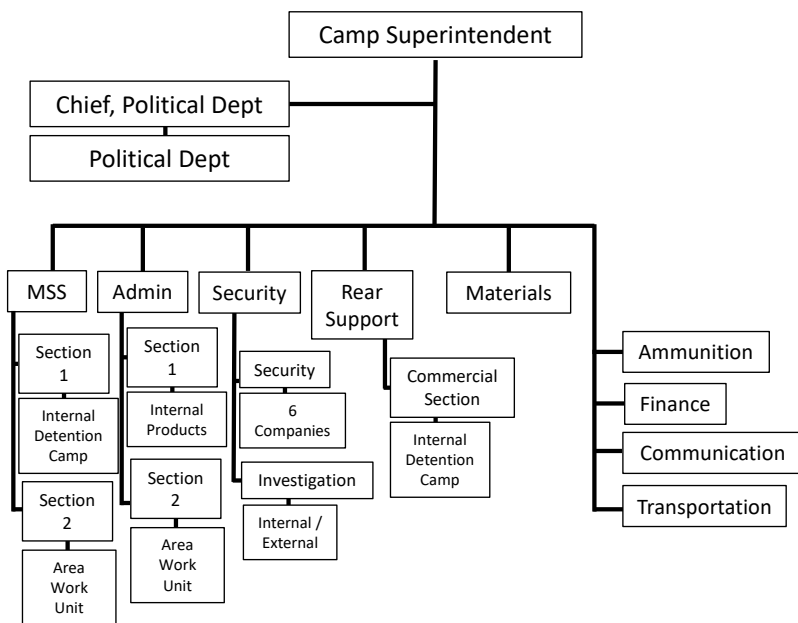


Source: Created by the Author from Multiple Sources⁸

The Ministry of State Security (MSS) operates political prisons and camps. With the exception of Camp 18, the camps and their security and administrative personnel are part of MSS's 7th Bureau, also known as the Farm Guidance Bureau. The Ministry of Public Security's Correctional Management Institute, also known as the Prisons Bureau, administers Camp 18. The guard force and security systems vary according to the size of the inmate population, but all camps have a security force of 200 to 1,000 MSS officers and guards.⁹ A former camp guard testified that Camp 22, which has since been dismantled, had a guard force of 400 MSS officers and 560 prison guards, thus giving a rough ratio between the two types of security personnel.¹⁰

MSS personnel are the lead authority within North Korea's political prison camps (except for Camp 18). MSS officers and their families live in a separate village within each camp; there is a village school for their children and a hospital for persons affiliated with the security services. They live the most privileged lives within the camp. MSS officers are trained to treat the inmate population as revolutionaries and enemies of the state. Figure 2 outlines the organization of the camps.

Figure 2: Camp Administrative and Security Structure



Source: Created by the Author from Multiple Sources¹¹

Each camp has an economic production theme for which the inmates provide slave labor, according to the instructions of Kim Il-sung. However, the MSS 7th Bureau personnel exist not for camp production. Instead they are responsible for “dealing violently with class struggle” against “class enemies and factional elements.”¹² While most MSS personnel are assigned to the MSS’s 7th Bureau, the 3rd Bureau also maintains a sub-unit in each camp. The 3rd Bureau, also known as the Preliminary Adjudication Bureau, is responsible for pre-trial investigations and confinement in accordance with procedures outlined in the Criminal Procedure Act. The same document ostensibly outlines a suspect’s rights. However, based on the testimony of numerous defectors, 3rd Bureau personnel no more observes the rights of suspects than any other agency in North Korea, particularly in cases that have a political aspect to it. The 3rd Bureau is notorious for the worst kinds of torture and rights deprivation.¹³

The guards are separate from the professional MSS officers, belonging to a unit referred to as the Camp Guard Force. This conscript force is made up of young men who would otherwise serve in the Korean People’s Army.

Guards are responsible for preventing inmate escape, arresting those who attempt to escape, and protecting the camp. They wear military uniforms and are assigned enlisted and non-commissioned officer ranks. Guards complete training at a separate facility—it was previously located at Camp 11 in Gyongsong, North Hamgyeong Province before the camp was disbanded—prior to being assigned to an operating camp for the remainder of their seven-year service obligation. Similar to the MSS officers, guards are trained to treat camp inmates as non-humans, not to ever talk to them, and refer to them as “emigrants.” They are armed with handguns, AK-58 and AK-68 rifles, and 14.5 mm anti-aircraft machineguns. Guards conduct significant training against enemy airborne insertions.¹⁴

Most camps are located deep in mountainous terrain, which makes access difficult. These camps are inaccessible for outsiders and the individual camp’s security guards are responsible for internal security. The camps are designed, of course, to prevent the prisoners from escaping. Security measures include barbed wire fences, electrified fences, armed guard towers located to maximize fields of vision and fires, landmines, and dog patrols. Some camps use booby-trapped ditches to prevent escape.¹⁵

Prisoners are employed in a variety of activities to include farming, logging, fish farming, animal husbandry, camp construction, mining, hydroelectric power projects, and manufacturing. Frequently the villages within the compound are organized around a specific economic activity. Because of the work demands placed on inmates—coupled with insufficient food and no health care—most inmates are in extremely poor physical condition. All, or nearly all, male prisoners have military experience. As such, they are accustomed to organizing themselves militarily.

Rescuing North Korea’s political prisoners presents a number of tactical challenges. Foremost, this is a time-critical operation. Assuming that alliance leaders are able to detect that the KFR believes it has lost control of the government or the initiative in combat, then there is a brief window of opportunity to act. Commanders and planners must account for the additional time required to coordinate with, and gain approval from, the national command authorities in both countries. Second, tactical commanders shouldn’t underestimate the capabilities of the guard force. Detailed knowledge of the terrain and likely avenues of approach will offset equipment deficiencies. Lastly, even though they are prisoners and undoubtedly resent the KFR, some inmates may react to allied forces in a

manner they consider patriotic. While psychological and information operations need to be incorporated into all operations, American and South Korean personnel who enter the camps should understand that prisoners have been subjected to a lifetime of indoctrination and may strike out against their liberators.

Political Prison Camps

This paper will now focus on the known political prisons. The characteristics of Camps 14, 15, 16, 18, 25, and the Choma-bong camp are outlined, along with satellite images of each facility.¹⁶ Camps 14, 22, and 25, as well as the Yongpyong area of Camp 15 reportedly are the highest security facilities, but there is no exact explanation for that independent assessment.¹⁷

Camp 14

This camp is located in Kaechon, South Pyongan Province. It is 61 km north of Pyongyang and 19 km south of Kaechon. There are 25 named villages and several unnamed villages within the camp's 153 square km confines. Fences, patrol paths, and roads surround the camp's 58.8 km perimeter; the camp's southern perimeter lies along the northern bank of the Taedong River. There are 38 guard positions within the camp and along the perimeter. Camp 14 houses approximately 15,000 prisoners and their families. Those incarcerated are primarily former mid-to-high level ranking party, government, and military officials. The large number of prisoners requires a security force of MSS officers and camp guards of over 1,000 people.¹⁸

Camp 14 presents major operational challenges to alliance planners. Because the camp is located north of Pyongyang, rescue and support aircraft would need to cross one of the most dense air defense networks in the world. Additionally, the camp is located close to a corps-sized Korean People's Army unit, as well as an active air force base that supports North Korean special forces. The rail station at Naenjongcham provides access to the camp, allowing the KFR to reinforce the facility with additional personnel and equipment. Camp 14 is adjacent to Camp 18, enabling immediate reinforcement of the guard force. In the very southwest corner of the camp, there is a major communications tower that must be included in CFC's list of high-priority targets. Lastly, one defector reported prisoners at Camp 14 were subjected to chemical weapons tests. A guard force with access to chemical weapons poses significantly more risks to

alliance rescue forces.

Camp 15

Camp 15 is situated in an isolated region of Yodok County in South Hamgyeong Province. The camp is located 119 km northeast of Pyongyang and 65 km southwest of Hamhung. Based on analysis of satellite imagery, the camp measures 365 square kilometers within an 85 km perimeter. Camp 15 is comprised of 42 named villages. There is a command and control facility at the camp's far southern entrance. There is a large secondary guard facility on the northern side of the camp, likely due to distance between the southern and northern entrances. The number of guard posts and barracks is not easily determinable, making it difficult to estimate the number of security personnel.¹⁹ According to former inmate Kim Yong-sun, there are at least 1,000 guards.²⁰ The prisoner population is estimated to be 32,000 inmates and family members. However, this is based on information obtained 25 years ago.²¹ Lastly, electrical power is generated from internal sources due to the isolated location.

The size of the camp presents significant challenges to American and South Korean planners. Command and control will be difficult within the camp. The camp can only be accessed by air. Outside the northwest perimeter of the camp there is a communications or air defense site that would need to be a priority target for destruction or neutralization.

However, Camp 15 does offer some advantages compared to other camps. The camp is located approximately 70 km from North Korea's east coast, raising the possibility of an assault from American or South Korean sea-based forces. Regardless of the origin of the assault, North Korean forces would have difficulty in responding due to Camp 15's isolated location amidst very mountainous terrain. Any reinforcements are likely to be local militia whose capabilities are considerably weaker than regular KPA units. Planners should assume those regular forces would deploy forward during war, but not necessarily during periods of crisis or instability.

Camp 16

Camp 16 is located in Myonggan County (formerly Hwasong County), North Hamgyeong Province. The camp is 25 km east of North Korea's

nuclear test facility at Punggye-ri. Camp 16 is among the largest camps: its 119 km perimeter surrounds 53 named villages and 539 square kilometers. The camp is not completely enclosed and the northern perimeter lacks fencing or other security measures. However, the west-central perimeter nearest the nuclear facility is reinforced. There are 35 guard posts along the perimeter and six guard barracks within the camp; the headquarters is located seven km from the secondary entrance on the eastern part of the camp.²² Camp 16 maintains its own power supply with six power stations. There is a major communications tower located at the very southwest corner of the camp.

One report estimates Camp 16's population at 20,000 inmates, making it one of the largest political prisons in the country.²³ Camp 16 is reserved for formerly high-ranking prisoners sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole. The guard force is estimated at well over 1,000 personnel.

Camp 16's proximity to the Punggye-ri Nuclear Test Site potentially allows senior leaders to achieve two critical alliance objectives: securing North Korea's nuclear materials and liberating its political prisoners. While this would require a larger force, most planning and execution considerations would remain the same for both facilities. Additionally, securing former high-ranking officials would provide the alliance with greater insight into the KFR's activities. These individuals might also be capable of serving as transitional leaders.

Camp 18

Located 66 km north of Pyongyang, Camp 18 is adjacent to Camp 14. The Taedong River is a common boundary for both facilities, which are located in Kaechon County, South Pyongan Province. Camp 18 differs from the other political prison camps examined here as the Ministry of Public Security (national police) manages the facility; the MSS (secret police) manages all other political prison camps. There are conflicting reports whether North Korean authorities are dismantling the camp. A 39.5 km security perimeter surrounds the 71.5 square kilometer camp. As of 2006, there were 19 barracks and guard positions interspersed along the perimeter. However, all but ten of these have been razed since then.²⁴

Conducting rescue operations at Camp 18 are similar to those outlined for Camp 14. American and South Korean forces would need to cross Pyongyang's air defense system, one of the densest air defense networks in the world. Camp 14's security forces can rapidly reinforce Camp 18, as

well as soldiers assigned to a nearby corps-sized unit of the Korean People's Army. There are no discernable operational advantages to selecting this camp as a rescue operation target.

Camp 25

Camp 25 is a relatively small camp. Approximately 5,000 prisoners are incarcerated in a one square km area that is located 7.5 km north of the port city of Chongjin in Susong-dong, North Hamgyeong Province. The camp perimeter is only 5,100m long. There are 41 guard posts and checkpoints interspersed along the 5.1 km perimeter. There is one barracks housing an estimated 200 to 300 security personnel, making this the most heavily guarded political prison based on a prisoner-to-guard ratio. These numbers may not include headquarters and logistical staff, which could increase the number by 50 personnel. There is an air defense site outside of the very southwest corner of the camp.

Camp 25 presents significant challenges to operational and tactical planners. Foremost, the camp is close to the border and there is a highly developed road network between China and Chongjin. Should Beijing decided to intervene, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) can do so using multiple avenues of approach. If the PLA doesn't cross the border, North Korean authorities could mobilize a large, albeit weak, reserve force from Chongjin to counter American and South Korean rescue operations. Third, unlike other isolated camps, Camp 25 is connected to the external power grid, leaving the rescue force vulnerable to external manipulation. Lastly, a North Korean Air Force base is located 18 km south of the camp.

These challenges notwithstanding, there are several factors that planners should consider when assessing the feasibility of conducting rescue operations at Camp 25. Like other camps along North Korea's east coast, American and South Korean military forces could potentially access Camp 25 from the sea. The camp's small size reduces the span of control for rescue forces.

Choma-bong Restricted Area

The Choma-bong Restricted Area (Camp Choma-bong) is located 72 km north of Pyongyang. The facility houses an undisclosed number of prisoners. Approximately 200 guards and an estimated 50 staff personnel work inside a 14.5 square km facility that includes an internal security area for high-ranking prisoners. There are 24 guard posts and checkpoints along

a 20.4 km perimeter. Camp Choma-bong shares a three km border with Camp 14.²⁵

The challenges associated with Camp Choma-bong are similar to the other camps located north of Pyongyang. Similarly, the opportunity to secure former, high-ranking officials associated with the KFR would assist American and South Korean military planners during and following hostilities.

Legal Considerations

Legal considerations are critical to any decision to conduct a rescue operation targeting a North Korean political prison camp. Should the operation occur during hostilities, the applicable laws include the 1949 Geneva Convention and the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC), which is triggered by the presence of an “armed conflict;” it no longer requires a declaration of war.²⁶ Historically referred to as the Law of War, today the body of law regulating armed conflict is more commonly termed the LOAC or International Humanitarian Law. Traditionally, LOAC distinguishes between an international armed conflict and a non-international armed conflict. Although the U.S. Government believes the LOAC governs conduct on the battlefield, the prevailing international legal opinion is that human rights law applies *in addition to* the LOAC during armed conflict.²⁷

In the event of regime instability in North Korea, international law would differ significantly from the laws addressing general warfare. Under modern international law, states do not have a right to violate another state’s sovereignty, barring two exceptions: 1) the UN Security Council has issued a binding Chapter VII resolution for the use of force to maintain or return international peace and security; or 2) the state is acting in self-defense. Consent, although not an exception to the use of force against a state, is another legal requirement for a state to cross another state’s territorial lines.²⁸ Furthermore, two emerging areas of law provide arguments for infringing on a state’s sovereignty: 1) humanitarian intervention under customary international law, commonly referred to as the “responsibility to protect” (R2P);” and, 2) a state “unable or unwilling” to defend its people (prevent repetition of an armed attack). Regime instability or a civil war in North Korea could threaten the political prisoner, thus triggering the R2P.

As discussed throughout this paper, securing North Korean political prisoners would allow the Americans and South Koreans to consolidate

war objectives more rapidly and efficiently. By showcasing the atrocities occurring in the political prison camps, the alliance would be able to rally support from the international community against the KFR. Former officials who've been liberated may be able to persuade their countrymen to support allied efforts. If there is not a military objective for liberating a political prison camp, then it may not be a lawful target under international law.²⁹

Additionally, rescue operations would facilitate the collection and preservation of evidence of crimes against humanity, including genocide, torture, rape, and other heinous crimes. Military personnel were critical to the gathering of evidence that was subsequently presented at the Nuremburg Trials in 1945, the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal of 1946, and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia that operated from 1993 to 2016. Transitional justice will become a major issue after the cessation of hostilities or the fall of the regime.

Conclusion

This paper outlined a few of the major considerations associated with planning for the rescue of North Korean political prisoners. As noted, this is a strategic issue requiring the approval of both the American and South Korean presidents. Strategic decisions involving the rescue of political prisoners would likely influence theater operations given the need to allocate limited resources and competing military priorities. At the tactical level, units assigned to rescue North Korean political prisoners will require special training to address the unique challenges of this mission, as well as the specific needs of those being rescued.

Despite the operational challenges and inherent risks, there are strategic benefits to attempting to rescue North Korean political prisoners. First, rescuing political prisoners will generate international goodwill resulting in political capital for the Alliance's post-crisis efforts. Second, treating political prisoners humanely engender support from a wary North Korean population. Third, rescue operations targeting North Korea's political prisons delegitimizes Chinese or other third party rationale for intervening on the Korean Peninsula.

There is historic precedence for considering prisoner rescue operations in North Korea. Like World War II, documenting atrocities and holding those responsible legally accountable will be critical in a post-

collapse or post-conflict Korea. The ROK-U.S. Alliance and the ROK-US Combined Forces Command have dealt with similarly complex political-military issues over the years. Planning for the collapse of the KFR is perhaps the most recent example of the Alliance's political and military leaders agreeing to address unconventional threats and challenges. Developing these plans took over a decade. Rescuing North Korea's political prisoners is an equally difficult issue, and will require extensive consultation, planning, and war gaming at all levels of the Alliance. Legal considerations must be addressed throughout the planning process. However, like collapse planning, it is important to address the most challenging issues associated with rescuing North Korea's political prisoners. Unlike collapse planning, we may not have the time. As history has shown, it is best not to undertake this mission on an ad hoc basis.

Notes:

¹ See *Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, Political Prison Camps in North Korea Today* (Seoul: NKBD North Korean Human Rights Archives, 2011), p.245; see also Ahn Myong-chol, former political prison guard, in Roberta Cohen, "Preventing a Massacre in North Korea's Gulags," *Washington Post*, July 25, 2014, Available online at https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/preventing-a-massacre-in-north-koreas-gulags/2014/07/25/b9d6a3fe-1284-11e4-9285-4243a40ddc97_story.html?utm_term=.f0054f5a44fd.

² *Report of the detailed findings of the commission of inquiry on human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea*, UN Human Rights Council, 25th sess., Agenda Item 4, UN Doc. A/HRC/25/CRP.1, 7 February 2014, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/CoIDPRK/Pages/ReportoftheCommissionofInquiryDPRK.aspx>.

³ Kang Chol-hwan, "5000 Prisoners Massacred at Onsong Concentration Camp in 1987," *Chosun Daily*, December 11, 2002, Available online at <https://web.archive.org/web/20071017123327/http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200212/200212110038.html>, Last accessed on August 20, 2017.

⁴ Holocaust Encyclopedia, "The United States and the Holocaust: Why Auschwitz Was Not Bombed," Available online at <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId>.

⁵ Holocaust Encyclopedia, "The United States and the Holocaust: Why Auschwitz Was Not Bombed" and "The United States and the Holocaust: Wartime Rescue Attempts,"

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed June 1, 2017. URL:

<https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10008041> and

<https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10008040>.

⁶ Shawn P. Creamer, Colonel, U.S. Army, "Theater-level Command and Alliance Decision-Making Architecture in Korea," *International Journal of Korean Studies*, Volume XX, Number 2 (Fall/Winter 2016), pp. 42-65.

⁷ Associated Press, "North Korean Envoy to United Nations Command: Get Out of South Korea," June 21, 2013, Available online at

http://www.syracuse.com/news/index.ssf/2013/06/north_korea_envoy_to_united_na.html

⁸ Authors rendition based on the following sources: See Choi Da-mi, “현성일박사가밝힌당조직지도부의절대적위상 (Professor Hyun Seong-il Reveals That the Organization and Guidance Department Has Now Ascended to the Top),” December 22, 2013. URL:

<http://www.newfocus.co.kr/client/news/viw.asp?cate=C01&mcate=M1001&nNewsNumb=20131211631>; see also Hyun Seong-il, “A Study on the Structure of the North Korean Workers’ Party and its Control System over the Society – Focused on “The 10-Point Principle for the Establishment of the Monolithic Ideological System of the Party,” Master’s Thesis, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, 1999, pp.41-51; see also Choi Jin-uk, *현대북한행정론 (Modern North Korean Administration Theory)* (Seoul: MyonginMunhwa Publishing, 2008); pp.187-188; see also Chun Hyun-jun, “김정일리더십연구 (Studies in Kim Jong-il’s Leadership), Korea Institute of National Unification, p.39; and see Jae-Cheon Lim, *Kim Jong Il’s Leadership of North Korea* (New York: Routledge Publishing, 2011), p.36.

⁹ Park Heung-soon, et al, “Survey Report on the Political Prisoners’ Camps in North Korea, “*Database Center for North Korean Human Rights*, December 2009, p.79. URL: <http://www.rwi.lu.se/NHRIDB/Asia/Korea/Prison%20Camp%20Survey.pdf>.

¹⁰ Kim Yong-sam, “(Shocking Report) Political Prisoners Camps in North Korea,” *Monthly Chosun*, March 1995, p.29. URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20051102073803/http://nkfreedom.org/resources/AnMyongChol_Testimony_full.pdf.

¹¹ Based on deactivated Camp 13. See Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, *Political Prison Camps in North Korea Today* (Seoul: NKBD North Korean Human Rights Archives, 2011), p.204.

¹² Kim Yong-sam, “(Shocking Report) Political Prisoners Camps in North Korea,” *Monthly Chosun*, March 1995, pp.11-41. URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20051102073803/http://nkfreedom.org/resources/AnMyongChol_Testimony_full.pdf.

¹³ Based on author interviews with multiple defectors.

¹⁴ Kim Yong-sam, “(Shocking Report) Political Prisoners Camps in North Korea,” *Monthly Chosun*, March 1995, p.29. URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20051102073803/http://nkfreedom.org/resources/AnMyongChol_Testimony_full.pdf.

¹⁵ National Commission of Human Rights of Korea, “Survey Report on Political Prisoners’ Camps in North Korea,” August 30, 2010. URL: <http://www.rwi.lu.se/NHRIDB/Asia/Korea/Prison%20Camp%20Survey.pdf>.

¹⁶ Individual satellite photos do not reveal camouflage and concealment, which is likely well done given the Korean People’s Army significant experience at such techniques.

¹⁷ See Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, *Political Prison Camps in North Korea Today* (Seoul: NKBD North Korean Human Rights Archives, 2011), pp.239-42.

¹⁸ Camp 14. Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., Andy Dinville, and Mike Eley, “North Korea Imagery Analysis of Camp 14,” *Committee for Human Rights in North Korea*, March 17, 2016. URL: https://www.hrmk.org/uploads/pdfs/ASA_HRNK_Camp14_v7_highrezFINAL_11_30_15.pdf.

¹⁹ Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., Andy Dinville, and Mike Eley, “North Korea Imagery

Analysis of Camp 15,” Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, February 13, 2015. URL:

https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/ASA_AnalysisReport_HRNK_Camp15_Final.pdf;
see also Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., Andy Dinville, and Mike Eley, “North Korea Imagery Analysis of Camp 15 “Yodök” Closure of the “Revolutionizing Zone,” Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, September 18, 2015. URL:

https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/ASA_HRNK_Camp15_RevZone_HQ.pdf.

²⁰ See Database Center for North Korean Human Rights, *Political Prison Camps in North Korea Today* (Seoul: NKBD North Korean Human Rights Archives, 2011), p.221.

²¹ David Hawk, “The Hidden Gulag, Second Edition: The Lives and Voices of ‘Those Who are Sent to the Mountains,’” Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, 2012. URL: https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/HRNK_HiddenGulag2_Web_5-18.pdf.

²² Camp 16, Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., Andy Dinville, and Mike Eley, “North Korea Imagery Analysis of Camp 16,” *Committee for Human Rights in North Korea*, December 15, 2015. URL:

http://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/ASA_HRNK_Camp16_v8_fullres_FINAL_12_15_15.pdf.

²³ Amnesty International, “Media Briefing: North Korea Political Prison Camps,” May 3, 2011. URL:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20131001154636/http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ASA24/001/2011/en/2671e54f-1cd1-46c1-96f1-6a463efa6f65/asa240012011en.pdf>.

²⁴ Camp 18. Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., Andy Dinville, and Mike Eley, “(Report forthcoming),” *Committee for Human Rights in North Korea*, March 17, 2016.

²⁵ Choma-bong camp: Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., Andy Dinville, and Mike Eley, “North Korea Ch’oma-bong Restricted Area,” Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, March 17, 2016. URL:

https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/ASA_HRNK_Chmbg_201603_FINAL.pdf.

²⁶ The Judge Advocate’s Legal Center and School (TJAGLCS) International and Operational Law Dept., *Law of War Deskbook*, 7 (Charlottesville, VA 2011), https://www.loc.gov/tr/frd/Military_Law/pdf/LOW-Deskbook-2011.pdf.

²⁷ Note: USG view is that LOAC prevails on the battlefield, excluding HRL.

²⁸ See UN Security Council Chapter VII Articles 39-51: www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/chapter-vii/.

²⁹ Military objective: objects which by their nature, location, purpose or use make an effective contribution to military action and whose total or partial destruction, capture, or neutralization, in the circumstances ruling at the time, offers a definite military advantage.