

Korea United: North & South Set Aside Differences to Demine

Following a historic summit between leaders from North and South Korea, efforts are underway to clear a path through the DMZ. In the South, efforts are also being made to clear the paths civilians use in areas outside the DMZ.

By Keith Feigenbaum, MAIC

In a land marred by over a half-century's worth of fierce political divisions and lingering suspicions, agreement and coexistence have come to be as rare as the landmines are plentiful. Such is the troubled state of Korea—from the isolationist Communist North, through the neutral (and heavily mined) demilitarized zone (DMZ), to the revitalized republic in the south. Despite the troubled history of this divided peninsula, steps have been taken recently to put aside

ideological differences and focus on the estimated 1.12 million mines in the 4 km-wide DMZ, as well as the tens of thousands of mines in "rear areas" situated outside the DMZ.

In June 2000, leaders from North and South Korea met in a historic summit in Pyongyang. The meeting between South Korean President Kim Dae-jung and North Korea's Kim Jong-il led to efforts to reconstruct the Kyongui (Seoul to Shinuija) railroad and to create a four-lane highway that would link the two countries. Based on the leaders' desire to create this link,

the two sides' militaries set out in September 2000 to address the unique mine situation.

Efforts Underway

Unlike many mine-affected countries, the vast majority of mines found in the Koreas have had minimal effects on civilian populations. The Korean Campaign to Ban Landmines (KCBL) estimates that at least 1,000 civilians have fallen prey to mines washed from the DMZ in flooding. Conversely, Koreans have the DMZ to thank for its role as a buffer against the 95 percent of mines suspected to be in Korea. Of South Korea's estimated 1.2 million mines, only about 68,000 have been located outside the DMZ in rear areas.

Rachel Stohl, a senior analyst for the Center for Defense Information, writes, "The landmine problems facing North and South Korea differ from those encountered in other countries afflicted with large numbers of mines. For the most part, mines in Korea are concentrated in well-designated 'fields' along the DMZ and surrounding areas and do not affect farming, industry or other segments of 'normal life...' The enduring danger from landmines in Korea, once the known fields are removed, ought to be much less than in countries such as Cambodia and Vietnam."

Of course, while the landmine situation may differ from that of other affected countries, threats such as unmapped mine fields, floods that

carry mines out of mapped areas (and often outside the DMZ) and the unknown nature of the mine problem in North Korea add an air of uncertainty to the overall situation.

Demining in Rear Areas

While the DMZ is widely known to be a dangerous, mine-affected area, the effects of mines on other regions of the Koreas are less publicized. Meanwhile, the effects on areas outside the DMZ in North Korea are shielded from the outside world. But, in South Korea, landmines have been identified in areas frequented by civilians. The mines found in these areas, more so than those located in the DMZ, pose a definite threat to civilians as many have been displaced through flooding or are unmapped.

A November 2000 edition of *The Korea Herald* reported that the environmental group Green Korea United (GKU) identified large numbers of landmines "planted in and around Seoul and other large cities, as well as national and provincial parks." GKU has noted 21 mine-affected areas in the following South Korean provinces and cities (number of mine-affected areas in parentheses): Kyonggi and South Kyongsang (4), South Chungchong (3), Pusan and South Cholla (2), and Seoul, Taegu, Ulsan, Kangwon, North Kyongsang, and North Cholla (1 each).

GKU Secretary General Lim Sam-jin told the *Herald*, "In most of the mined places, mine warning signs are easily found near villages, meaning the safety of civilians is threatened."

In response to these threats, the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) announced in February 2001 it would remove all mines in rear areas by 2006—the same year South Korea and the United States plan to sign the Mine Ban Treaty, contingent on the development of acceptable mine alternatives. The JCS expects to begin

this effort by clearing about 6,000 APLs (the only type of mine reported to be found in rear areas) from these locations: two former air defense bases on Mt. Chungni in Pusan and in Kumo-ri in Hadong County, South Kyongsang Province, Haeundae in Pusan, Mt. Kumdan in Songnam, Kyonggi and Kwangju.

The JCS expects the upcoming demining efforts to put a significant dent in the already reduced number of mines outside the DMZ.

In a *Herald* article from Dec. 23, 2000, a South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) official said, "The army completed the removal of some 1,100 AP mines planted on top of Mount Kumho [sic] this year, where Nike missile radar systems were located. We have cleared a total of 6,800 mines in seven spots [since 1996] to reduce the number of landmines planted in the rear areas to around 68,000."

To aid the military in demining Korea's rear areas, GKU, KCBL and the Japan Campaign to Ban Landmines (JCBL) have also reportedly agreed to begin efforts to map mine fields. According to KCBL Coordinator Cho Jai-kook, the efforts will include surveys of three mine-affected areas that pose a threat to the lives of civilians and soldiers: two of the 21 locations identified by GKU as mine-affected, U.S. Air Force bases surrounded by AP mines and "civilian passage restricted areas" located from 3 km to 30 km south of the DMZ.

Railroad-Highway Construction Route

On September 18, a force of about 2,800 South Korean soldiers set out to take on the difficult task of ridding the train and highway construction route of its estimated 100,000 mines. Of the 2,800 officers, 700 were dispatched from field engineer battalions to begin mine clearance work with a deadline of

December 2000 in place (since postponed to September 2001), an official from the South Korean Defense Ministry told the *Herald*. Meanwhile, the North Korean military was also reported to have begun clearance efforts on September 4, removing trees and other obstacles.

Adding complexity to the mine situation is the fact that of the estimated 100,000 mines in the construction route, only 3,000 are in confirmed areas. This, along with the short timeframe allotted for clearance efforts, caused demining to be suspended in mid-December. South Korean defense officials expect work to resume following the spring thaw in March 2001. Lt. Gen. Sun Young-jai of the South Korean Army told the *Herald* on Sept. 19, 2000: "Our schedule for the mine clearance is flexible as we are putting top priority on the safety of soldiers. We have prepared various safety equipment and methods for our soldiers."

Demining the DMZ

A variety of demining methods—noted by a variety of sources—have been identified as potential clearance methods to be used in creating a path through the DMZ. The South Korean Defense Ministry told the *Herald* in August 2000 of its plans to initiate a six-stage clearance program (see box on next page for elements of this program).

The equipment used by deminers was expected to consist of a mix of foreign and Korean tools and vehicles. "We have designed remote-controlled 'armored buckets' with thick steel plates and bulletproof windows attached to heavy equipment such as excavators, bulldozers, cranes and water sprinklers to be used for mine removal," Lt. Gen. Sun said. "With these safety measures, soldiers will be able to do most of their work without setting foot on the ground, thereby



Equipped with a mine detonation device, a South Korean K-1 tank drives across a mine field during training to remove landmines. c/o AP



■ South Korean soldiers move to the next position after removing a mine field fence as an armored mine clearing vehicle pulls forward during operations. *C/o AP*

Anticipated Mine Clearance Procedures:

- Use of water sprinklers to uncover mines.
- Insertion of 15-meter-long plastic pipes filled with dynamite and detonators into suspected areas (for mines up to 10 cm underground).
- Use of excavators and bulldozers to remove plants and dig up earth (for mines 20 to 30 cm underground).
- Final inspections by soldiers to ensure the removal of all mines.

greatly enhancing the safety of deminers.”

Another method reported to be under consideration by the South’s Defense Ministry was a “scorched earth policy.” This method would involve spraying fuel along the South Korean portion of the DMZ between the Imjin River and Changdan in Munsan and then burning the fuel.

More Help on the Way?

Although mine clearance and mine identification efforts in both rear areas and the DMZ have thus far been limited to the military and civic groups, in January the South’s Sungdo Construction Co. created the demining firm Specialist Demining Engineering (SDE) to aid the Koreans

and other mine-affected nations in clearance efforts. The firm’s vice president, Koo Ja-ho, recently said the SDE has formed a “technical assistance agreement” with the UK’s Specialist Gurkha Services (SGS)—one of the world’s top-10 mine and UXO clearance companies. Koo expressed to the *Herald* a desire to aid the Korean governments’ demining efforts, saying that private firms are at an advantage over militaries when it comes to insuring operations, gaining funding, and securing the most advanced equipment.

To date, no formal agreement between the private firm and the Korean governments has yet to be announced. However, JCS Battle Coordination Division official Lee Kang-soo, head of mine affairs in the division, recently told the *Herald* the

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South Koreans are considering cooperating with SDE in clearing the estimated 20,000 mines on Mt. Chungni.

The End in Sight?

When the Korean soil thaws in early spring and the demining effort is continued, the Koreas will be en route to clearing a path not just through the DMZ, but through years of silence and conflict. Though we may never know of advances in clearance operations and mine awareness on the northern side of the DMZ, the North's pledged cooperation with the South is a huge step towards reconnecting the once

united peninsula. Even the People's Republic of China has pledged technical and personnel support to both Koreas' efforts, according to the August 23, 2000 *Yonhap News*. It could be said that the mine situation in Korea pales in comparison to such places as Bosnia-Herzegovina or Afghanistan. Perhaps this is true from a numerical standpoint. But when one considers a country divided in two by a guarded, man-made boundary and by stark ideological differences, there are few, if any, situations to rival that of the Koreas. If, in fact, the drive to clear a path for railroad and highway construction is successful in September 2001, the joint efforts of enemies will be responsible for

partially reversing in about one year what took over 50 years of animosity to create. ■

References

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