

# US Department of State Duty to Plan and Execute Evacuations

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“Nobody wants to sit where I am and think now about what ‘coulda, shoulda, woulda’ happened in order to avoid this.” – Secretary of State Hilary Clinton on Benghazi

The Department of State has an abysmal record of conducting Noncombatant Evacuation Operations, especially when it comes to emergency response to social unrest and instability in conflict zones. There are internal mechanisms in place for leaders to learn from these events and to take steps to strengthen their processes. However, whether an issue of not wanting to have written documentation of failures and shortcomings or general disregard for the requirements, Department of State (DoS) officials have not conducted proper after-action documentation. This calls into question DoS level of readiness as we face continued friction and instability over Taiwan.

A memorandum of agreement between the Departments of State and Defense indicates the DoS will exercise overall responsibility for protecting U.S. citizens and nationals and designated other persons, to include, when necessary and feasible, their evacuation to and welfare in relatively safe areas. DoS further assumes responsibility for minimizing their risk of death or seizure as hostages and reducing their presence in probable or actual combat areas, so that combat effectiveness of U.S. and allied forces is not impaired (U.S. Department of Defense & U.S. Department of State, n.d.).

This same memorandum tasks the Department of Defense (DoD) with monitoring the political, military, economic, and other conditions. DoD will assess levels of hostility; local national willingness to provide protections for US citizens, nationals and other designees; number and locations of the same persons abroad and evacuation and protection capabilities, including transportation/lift requirements and their availability as well as the availability of relatively safe holding or survival areas for staging evacuees during emergencies (U.S. Department of Defense & U.S. Department of State, n.d.). These are considered Noncombatant Evacuation Operations (NEO)s.

While each agency has its own lines of effort, the DoS has ultimate responsibility to prepare plans for protection and evacuation of US citizens and DoD non-combatants. This includes coordination to maximize timely use of available military transportation assets and existing host nation support infrastructure. Given the significant failures of Benghazi and Afghanistan along with questionable decisions about non-government US citizens in Sudan, it is no wonder there is concern and apprehension in the DoS planning approach to Taiwan.

National level concerns over DoS planning and readiness is not a new focus. In 2007 the Government Accountability Office (GAO) was tasked with assessing Evacuation Planning and Preparations for Overseas Posts. As part of the evaluation, the team assessed DoS guidance and plans to conduct training and exercises in preparation for evacuations. The GAO team also reviewed post staff efforts to collect, analyze, and incorporate evacuation lessons learned into future guidance and training (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2007).

A significant finding asserts, “Posts do not find State’s primary guidance particularly useful in preparing for evacuation. In addition, while State requires posts to update Emergency Action Plans (EAP)s annually, almost 40 percent of posts surveyed have not updated their plans in 18 months or longer.” (Post in Benghazi, 2016) It is evident from the failures in the Afghanistan evacuation, recommendations from both reports also gained little or no traction in the 10 years leading up to the failures at Bagram Airport and throughout the country.

In 2017 the GAO initiated a follow-on assessment of DoS emergency preparedness. GAO findings during this evaluation period indicate only 2 of the 20 evaluated posts, which were approved by DoS Bureau of Diplomatic Security, had updated all key EAPs. “GAO also found that EAPs are viewed as lengthy and cumbersome documents that are not readily usable in emergency situations”, suggesting that EAPs serve as a check the box requirement rather than a functional plan for implementation (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2017). Another significant finding indicates only 36% of the posts reported completing their evacuation drills.

GAO report 17-174 reiterated what should be obvious from previous agency assessments and actual events. DoS needs to ensure posts complete EAP updates and training exercises. Because of the inconsistency in following requirements, DoS should more closely track the policy requirements and verify posts are following through during EAP cycles. Most importantly, “State could develop a more streamlined version of the EAP—consisting of key sections, checklists, and contact lists—that could be used [by staff in and emergency], in addition to the full EAP... and take steps to ensure overseas post complete required lessons learned reports” (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2017). These are all items addressed in some form during the 2007 assessment of DoS readiness.

Four years after GAO report 17-174 there was a systemic failure during the evacuation of Afghanistan. House Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC) Interim Report “A Strategic Failure: Assessing the Administration’s Afghanistan Withdrawal” asserts there was a failure to plan. Findings from the report indicate the “[DoS] took very few substantive steps to prepare for the consequences that were expected” (U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee, Republicans, 2022). The report further indicates “Military commanders have clearly stated there was an utter lack of urgency on the part of the White House, the National Security Council (NSC), and the State Department as it pertained to an evacuation, despite repeated dire warnings” (U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee, Republicans, 2022). These comments seem to be echoed by reports that Chairman of the Joint Chiefs GEN Milley believed DoS waited too long to initiate evacuation efforts (Blankenship, 2021).

The HFAC report also addresses key planning failures regarding NEOs. “[DoS] was unable to provide adequate assistance to U.S. citizens (AMCITs), lawful permanent residents (LPRs), Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders and applicants, and other at-risk Afghans who were attempting to evacuate the country during the NEO. Would be evacuees were sent conflicting messages, told they could not be helped, or left standing outside the gates of the airport” (U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee, Republicans, 2022). Given our adversaries use of Information Warfare, disinformation operations and deep fakes, DoS needs to be both mindful and prepared with a strong communications plan.

Additionally, “U.S. military personnel on the ground involved in the evacuation said they had been prohibited from coordinating evacuation planning with all allies except for the UK until early August 2021” (U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee, Republicans, 2022). This is an operational failure which was identified and addressed as a key planning consideration in the Benghazi Report. General Sullivan noted US forces weren’t even allowed to coordinate with the Turkish forces commanding a primary military contingency at the airport and Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman did not begin NEO coordination through her channels until August 22, 2021, which was nine days after the fall of Herat and Taliban seizing control of all national border crossings (Faiez & Popalzai, 2021). These types of coordination would be critical to success given the more than 20 countries and organizations that were trying to conduct similar evacuations. Failing to heed this type of coordination in future NEOs, such as Taiwan, will also be disastrous. This is especially true given the number of countries who have a significant population of citizens working in Taiwan.

On April 22, 2023 DoS initiated an evacuation of embassy personnel and their dependents from Khartoum Sudan. This evacuation did not include civilians and other designees. Under Secretary for Management, Ambassador John Bass indicated the DoD took the lead on evacuation operations for

the Embassy after it was determined that use of commercial air and access to the airport was no longer an option. He further applied to the loss of access to commercial air as a reason not to attempt a US government evacuation of other American citizens in the near term ((U.S. Department of State, n.d.). DoS makes a point of asserting it has the authority to assist in the evacuation of US citizens but is not required to do so.

Ambassador Bass did indicate the DoS was attempting to maintain contact with US citizens and provide them with a best assessment of the security environment, while encouraging them to take appropriate precautions. He further asserted the DoS was working with other countries and the United Nations, as well as international organizations to enable US citizens to make their way to safety (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). There was no indication that this was part of an EAP or that early coordination had been ongoing, with an expectation for the DoS to need the support of partner countries and non-government organizations. Given previous examples of planning failures and the number of posts that have not completed EAP requirements, it is likely these efforts were cobbled together as events unfolded.

Recent reporting from multiple news agencies suggest the United States is conducting advance planning for a potential NEO evacuation of the Taiwan DoS post. While the one China policy has dictated that the US not establish an embassy in Taiwan, DoS works out of the American Institute in Taiwan. A June 13, 2023 piece by dayFREURO suggest multiple sources provided perspective on US evacuation planning that began more than 6 months prior. Unnamed sources indicated the planning process was not a public topic due to its sensitive nature and the potential fear and apprehension it might evoke within the Taiwanese population (Euro DayFR, 2023). The fact that DoS is taking an active planning approach, suggests recommendations and lessons learned are finally being applied in EAP development for this post.

A Messenger report from December 2021 indicates roughly two thirds of the Taiwanese population identifies as Taiwanese rather than Chinese. This growing shift along with recent Taiwan and US efforts to shore up defenses may be contributing to China's need to act sooner rather than later, on its claims to the island nation. This is not the first time Taiwan and the US have drawn attention over evacuation training. A 2003 Taipei Times report on joint training exercise Han Kuang #19 indicated Deputy Defense Minister Chen Chao-ming specifically addressed the inaccurate perception the US military was participating in evacuation training (Taipei Times, 2003).

"China has unsuccessfully attempted military force against Taiwan before, in the 1950s and 1990s. For much of that period, Taiwan itself had a superior military to the People's Republic, and U.S. naval dominance in the region was unquestioned" (The Messenger, n.d.) An example can be found in June 1950, when President Truman placed the 7th Fleet between mainland China and Taiwan. In this case deterrence through the neutralization of the Taiwan Strait discouraged Chinese forces from conducting an amphibious assault. However, the same policy of deterrence today may be speeding China's decision-making timeline.

As DoS continues to develop NEO evacuation planning, the Philippines are likely to play a key role. The country's May 2022 presidential election significantly shifted Philippine relations with the US and China and allowed the US to reestablish democratic relationships that had deteriorated under Rodrigo Duterte (Wilson Center, 2022). And, as recently as May 2023 the US has reaffirmed its 72 year defense alliance with the Philippines, through a defense treaty in the South China Sea (Nicholson, 2023a). Just days after confirming this treaty, President Marcos indicated Philippine bases could play a key role if China were to attack Taiwan (Nicholson, 2023b).

An example of how DoS planning might leverage Philippine bases includes the Ports of Kaohsiung and Subic Bay. Kaohsiung is located on Taiwan's southwestern coastline and Kaohsiung port is one of the biggest container handling facilities in the world. The port handles roughly 5000 vessels and 18,900,000 tonnes of cargo annually (Marine Insight, n.d.). Along with the port, Kaohsiung boast one of the country's largest international airports co-located just outside the port area. Subic Bay, Philippines is approximately 500 miles south and served as a US naval base until 1992. The Subic facilities also include an international airport. Given DoS intentions to rely on commercial transportation as a first alternative, these two facilities provide multiple avenues for departure and arrival, not only for US citizens but other countries as well.

A possible indicator to the approach above can be found in a DoS Joint Statement from April 11, 2023. "Mindful of the growing complexity of the Indo-Pacific security environment, including the multidimensional nature of modern challenges and threats to the peace and security of the Philippines and the United States, the Secretaries reaffirmed their shared determination to defend against external armed attack in the Pacific... Accelerate the implementation of [Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement] EDCA projects and increase investments in EDCA agreed Locations to further support combined training, exercises, and interoperability between the U.S. and Philippine Armed Forces, as well as the Philippines' civilian-led disaster preparedness and response capacities. Most recently, a July 30, 2024, press release indicates the United States has allocated USD \$500 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF) from the FY 2024 Indo-Pacific Security Supplemental Appropriations Act (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023).

Whether through learning from previous events or developing new approaches, DoS will face significant obstacles during a NEO event in Taiwan. Reliance on a variety of networks and resources will be paramount to conducting a successful NEO. This will include advance coordination and relationship building before the crisis and NGOs may play a substantial role.

In early 2000 Taiwan established the Department of NGO International Relations, which falls under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It is responsible for maintaining positive relationships with NGOs, through open dialogue on difficult topics such as political freedom and civil rights. Associations such as this provide early indicators of instability which may extend operational and execution timelines. During a potential crisis such as this, time is a valuable commodity.

*Editor's Note:*

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