

Transcript of an event at Policy Exchange “North Korea: Is there a Military Option?”

with Lieutenant General IB Chun

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First I want to thank Policy Exchange for availing me of this opportunity to speak here tonight.

I also want to thank all of you for the 1,078 British soldiers who sacrificed their lives during the Korean War. I mean this very sincerely, and we Koreans have at least halfway paid our debt by making our country the economic power that it is today, and now we are pretty much a very free democracy, and we owe it to the sacrifices of your people, and that will never be fully repaid but I just wanted to take this opportunity to thank all of you, the descendants of these great men.

So today's theme is “Is there a military option to counter the threat?” Well, I'll give that answer at the end of the one hour, but first I would like to share some of the relevant facts to this question, very shortly, and have some opportunity to entertain some of your questions on a broader scale, and I would be flattered to share my opinions towards your questions.

So, in 1962 – that's about nine years after the Korean war – the North Koreans had a big meeting, and in this meeting they decided on four basic military policies that they would pursue in their final goal to unify the Korean peninsula under their terms.

First they said: during the Korean war we lost a lot of our platoon, company and battalion commanders. So we need to make sure that our soldiers are educated and trained so that they will be able to accomplish their mission one echelon above their assigned mission. So a platoon leader would be expected to be able to conduct his missions as a company commander, a company commander as a battalion commander, and so forth.

Second, they said: the Americans, they bombed us to the Stone Age – this must never happen again. So everything must go underground. All their military factories are underground. All their storage facilities are underground. Even a lot of their airfields are underground. So they've been at it since 1962: a lot of their facilities are underground, satellites can't see where they are, and for security a lot of the North Koreans don't even know what's next door.

Third, they said: we need to make sure we arm everybody. A 14-year-old teenager in North Korea probably gets more than 100 hours of military training a year. So by the age of 14, a North Korean teenager knows how to shoot an AK, fire an RPG, throw a grenade, pitch a tent, and march 20 kilometres. So they've been at this since 1962.

Finally, the fourth is that they must have a modern military. So until the mid-70s, the North Koreans had a far more capable military than the South Koreans and the

United States combined – on the Korean peninsula. They had more tanks, they had more aircraft, and so forth.

But I think the North Koreans realised that this was not going to be able to continue. They knew that the cycle of, the lifespan of, their equipment, would not exceed after the 80s. So by the early 60s they already wanted nuclear weapons, and by the early 80s they first got their 5 megawatt research reactor from the Soviet Union, and in the 80s they first received their first Scud missile from the Egyptians. And they **started** re-engineering the technology, and now we are where we are today.

So right now, the conclusion of all of this is that North Korea is very militarised – far beyond any kind of imagination that I think that South Koreans and Westerners think they are. So oftentimes I try to explain to my Americans: look guys, if we have to go into North Korea it's not going to be like Iraq or Afghanistan. You know, it's not going to be getting rid of Hussein – it's more going to be like trying to get rid of Allah. So can you imagine what that would look like, trying to kill Allah in Afghanistan or Iraq? Kim Jong-un and the Kim family is a cult in North Korea.

Right now, all their tanks and all their aircraft are obsolete. Their most modern aircraft is the SU-35, and they only have a handful of them. They have a lot of MiG-21s and MiG-19s, and you wonder, why would you have such obsolete weapons systems? Probably as kamikaze-type aircraft: load them with a lot of fuel, some bombs, have a pilot, tell him or her: "that's your target, and you need to destroy it". So they have more than 1,000 aircraft, and probably if something happens on the Korean peninsula there'll be a lot of modern-day aces being born. But the North Koreans have this capability.

And chem/bio capability. Estimates put it at maybe 2,500 to 5,000 tonnes of chemical and biological weapons. They also have artillery and rockets that directly threaten the capital city of Seoul. We estimate somewhere about 1,000 tubes – half of that is single artillery tubes, the other half is multiple rocket launchers, so we can imagine what a single salvo could deliver.

They also have cyber capability. The entire state looks for talented people. Now in North Korea they have a system called Songbun – they categorise their own people into four classes, it's like a caste system but more oriented on loyalties. The only area that they do not apply this caste system is picking out these computer whizzkids. So by the age of 12 or 13 if he or she shows an aptitude for computers, they would choose them, train them, and eventually differentiate them into programmers or hackers. So if you read somewhere that, you know, some country, like South Africa, has one of its banks missing \$100m, you can probably bet £5 that it was the North Koreans, and they are able to do this.

And I'm sure that most of you are aware that the North Koreans have a state-run business of counterfeit cigarettes, narcotics, and the US dollar. They call it the "supernote", and the reason they call it the supernote is because it's so well made that counterfeit-detecting machines have difficulty finding it. And as the United

Kingdom you had the same problem I believe until the 60s, because the Nazis had been counterfeiting the pound as well, so you can relate to the kind of threat that that is.

They also have a million-plus men and women. Now, because the North Koreans – there are about 25 million of them, and they have conscription. The men serve for 11 years. The women serve for six to seven years. Some estimates put the North Korean military – the standing, active-duty military – at 30% being women. Most of them are in anti-aircraft units, communication units, and so forth. But that's the layout.

The average height of a North Korean soldier is about this high. So they fit in very nicely into a T72 or a T62. But they have 200,000 special forces – they're actually translated as "snipers", so to the Western mind you think they are snipers, but what the sniper is actually in Chinese is, roughly translated, "monkey units". So imagine a doped-up chimpanzee in this room, running around, you know, hitting everybody. So that's the role of these special forces – to disrupt the lines of your enemy. So if you look at the Korean War, what the popular tactic of the North Koreans was, they would probe, they would find a weakness, they would send in their troops – these so-called sniper units – they would cut the communications to the artillery support of the main units, isolate them, and then pick them off one by one. It's a classic tactic that the North Koreans used, and will use in the future.

So these are the capabilities that the North Koreans have. And right now we have a problem with nuclear weapons, and the long-range capability of delivering these nuclear weapons. And they've done something that no other country has really done, which is threatened the United States with the use of nuclear weapons. So that's where we are.

So before I go back to the question "Is there a military option to counter the threat?", let me just open to some of the questions that you might have. Thank you.

Christopher Morton, King's College London

You have described an impressive, but idiosyncratic, military machine. How sustainable is it? How long can they afford to have a million people under arms, and whatever equipment they can afford.

Lt Gen Chun

They've been able to do it for the past 60 years. So that's the main reason their economy is in the shape that it's in right now. So, during the Kim Jong-il era – which is the father of the present President there – even when one million plus of their people were starving to death, they invested in their military, and especially in their nuclear programme. So they've been at it, and the entire country, you could say, is like a huge barracks.

I forgot that – another thing I wanted to mention to you is the Kim family itself. So Kim Il-sung was the "Great Leader". And his son was Kim Jong-il, and now we have his (Kim Il-sung's) grandson, Kim Jong-un. Kim Jong-il, the father of Kim Jong-un, had

one wife, but he had three other women. So the first wife had Kim Jong-nam – the person that was murdered with the chemical handkerchief in Malaysia. The second spouse had two daughters, and we know very little of her. The third spouse had two sons and one daughter. So the eldest son is Kim Jong-un's older brother, and the second son is Kim Jong-un, and his younger sister is Kim Yo-jong, who is now playing what seems like a significant role in the politics of North Korea.

Kim Jong-un is not crazy. He seems to be a sportsman. Unlike his father, who enjoyed wine and women, it seems he's not that kind of a person. I'm stretching a little bit but it seems to me that Kim Jong-il is similar to a Mussolini type of a figure, whilst Kim Jon-un is more of a Hitler kind of person. Not that he is a mass murderer or anything – yet – but in the temperament and the characteristics of their leadership styles So I'll just throw that to you; I forgot to mention that.

Frank Gardner, BBC Security Correspondent

Are you expecting North Korea to send special forces across to the Olympics disguised as civilians?

Lt Gen Chun

No, I don't think so. Why would they need to do that? All they need to do is to watch YTN, which is similar to your BBC, or CNN. So I do not think so.

Which reminds me of a story that I heard. So after the Cuban missile crisis, when all of us were near a nuclear catastrophe, the Soviets and the Americans had this great idea about exchanging younger students. And the Americans said – some Americans said: "Are you crazy? They're going to send KGB agents!" But in the end, they had a student-exchange programme. And sure enough, the Soviets sent a lot of KGB agents disguised as students. But 30 years later, when Gorbachev was trying to change the Soviet Union, a lot of those KGB agents, who had grown into their organisation, actually supported Gorbachev.

So I truly believe that my system, of democracy, freedom, respect of human rights, is far more powerful than any North Korean nuclear weapon. So I think this kind of confidence gives me the courage to give a little bit more slack to what we can do with the North Koreans before we actually bomb them.

Dean Godson, Policy Exchange Director

Just following up on that, why would it not be in their interest to cause the kind of disruption that Frank was talking about?

Lt Gen Chun

I think right now they're a little bit off-balance, because of Mr Trump. So, because of Mr Trump they're trying to figure out, you know, "Is he really crazy or is he really going to do this or not?" So Mr Trump has put them off-balance, so they're not going to risk it – yet.

My greatest fear is that the North Koreans are believing their own propaganda, and I have had opportunities to talk to North Korean soldiers who have defected to South

Korea. You cannot imagine how indoctrinated they are – these are men who have defected to South Korea and yet there’s an inner belief in their system which is quite close to ridiculous.

Latika Bourke, Sydney Morning Herald

I’m just wondering if you think, after the talks between the Koreans, if you think it’s crucial that the US join those, how likely do you think that might be, and the US has made a veiled threat about military action – do you think that is now off the table given the talks, and what role will South Korea have in US military action?

Lt Gen Chun

I hope that tensions will lessen, and that the Olympics will be a good door to a peaceful resolution over this – that is what my heart wants. But my head, and the lessons that we’ve learned of human nature, and dictatorships like North Korea, tell me we have a long way to go.

The only thing that I, as a 39-year military man, know for sure is that we need to be ready as much as we can. Because if you want peace, you know, the only proven, real lesson is: prepare for war. So I really think we need to do that, and we must seek peace but at the same time we must prepare ourselves for the worst.

Audience Member

Are the Korean people united behind their leadership, or could there be a rebellion, for obvious reasons?

Lt Gen Chun

Sir, we are a democracy, how could we be united? We have 51 million people, and probably 51 million opinions. That’s what you taught us to be, right? And so what the Western nations have wanted Korea to become, we’re getting there – we’re not there yet, but we are a very diverse country now. So I would say 30% are conservatives...

Audience Member

Sorry, my question was about whether the North Korean people are united behind their leadership.

Lt Gen Chun

They, for the short, immediate term would be united, because no other kind of... other opinions are not allowed.

They have a system where five to 10 families are made into a group. If a single person in that group of five to 10 families misbehaves, the entire five families or 10 families go to the gulag, or are executed. So everybody spies on everybody else. It’s a great mechanism to keeping people under control, so they would be very highly controlled.

What is interesting though is we had this incident where the North Koreans, in 97, infiltrated, and their submarine broke down. In the submarine were 18 crewmen, and they lined up and allowed themselves to be shot in the back of their head – it was a

semi kind of suicide. So this is how determined they are. And yet, when one of them were captured, it only took us a day for him to change and betray information. So they're very tightly controlled, but once they realise they've been lied to, they change very quickly. So there's a divergence there.

Dean Godson

Can you say just a little more following on from that question about what we were talking about earlier – the number of defectors under Kim Jong-un going down and now rising again gently. Could you explain the reasons behind that and the nature of the kind of defectors who have been coming?

Lt Gen Chun

So there have been about 30,000+ North Koreans who have risked their lives and great, great hardship to come to South Korea. Then when Kim Jong-un came to power, about one year later we saw a steep decline. And the reason was that he was putting his version of the wall along the Chinese-North Korean border. And to a degree it seemed in North Korea their economy got a little bit better.

Now we are seeing a little bit of an increase in North Korean defection, so something is going on in North Korea. But it's not as bad as it used to be. But under this new leader, it's an unavoidable fact that it seems that life is getting a little bit better.

John Newham, teacher of politics and history

Can you tell me why is it that the People's Republic of China appears to tolerate this awkward neighbour – for want of a better expression – because of all the other countries they surely have more influence over the DPRK than anybody else.

Lt Gen Chun

It only took us until very recently to realise that they don't have as much influence as we thought. And it seems that the Chinese feel that it is better to have a nuclear-armed North Korea than to have Americans at their borders. Which I think that the Chinese are wrong, but that seems to be what they're thinking.

So to the Chinese, they don't want their northern borders to be adjacent to an American-influenced country like South Korea. And the North Koreans do not feel the same as a South Korean, to the Americans. And it seems their relationship is not like the alliance that the South Koreans have with the United States.

Gareth Davis, previous visitor to North Korea on a research trip with Harvard University

The Belfer Centre at Harvard University just came out highlighting the vulnerability of the South Korean military to a biological or chemical attack given the North has been stockpiling anthrax and smallpox in particular. The United States military are all vaccinated, based on Korean territory. Could you comment on the vulnerability of your military to an attack with biological or chemical weapons and how you rank that in terms of likelihood versus a nuclear attack?

Lt Gen Chun

I would decline from sharing with you the capabilities of the South Korean military, but I would also agree with the statement that there is a vulnerability. Another fact to that statement is that, from us Koreans, a lot of Westerners sense this calmness among South Koreans against this North Korean nuclear threat, so from my perspective... I only live 35 miles away from North Korea – which is artillery range. So whether being zapped by a nuclear weapon, or a chemical weapon or biological weapon, to me I'm dead anyway, so... it's not that big of a deal.

I try to tell my Koreans, we should not be afraid of North Korean nuclear weapons, because even if they had 100 nuclear warheads, my friends the Americans have 5,000, so what's the big deal? But because of maybe this kind of thinking, we don't consider the chemical threat or other kinds of threat as seriously as an outsider.

So you go to Korea, people are very calm. They're more worried about the price increase of hamburgers than the North Koreans at this point.

Helen Thomas, Blondemoney

Following on from that, if we go through history, how worried are South Koreans at this moment? You said they're not too worried but how does it compare to the history of the last 30 to 40 years, and secondary to that is there a sense of what the endgame might be for Kim Jong-un?

Lt Gen Chun

So I think there's no doubt in any South Korean's minds that if there is war that the alliance will win. It's just the fact that the sheer air power that the Korean and United State – with British aircraft that will, hopefully, come to our aid – can inflict on the North Koreans.

But because of the proximity of Seoul to the North Koreans, and the fact that since they will have the initiative, that we will inevitably lose some ground. And it does us no good if part of our country is in ruins. So that's the part that concerns us. We're not concerned about being communised, as long as we have the United States and other allies. So it's North Korea against the world right now, so we're not that worried about that issue.

But for a person like myself I personally would wish a little bit more awareness of the general public, because, you know... we're caught in the middle where we don't want to frighten our people, and yet a lot of our people don't take this situation as seriously as they should. So I personally try to explain to my people: Look, let's not think about war, let's think about an earthquake, what we should be preparing for an earthquake.

Jim Ormiston

I just wanted to ask: If the North Koreans get fully fledged nuclear capabilities, how likely is it that they would use that to threaten the world and say: You can't intervene, we want to reunite the Korean peninsula and we have nuclear weapons now so no one can stop us?

Lt Gen Chun

That's a good question. They've been saying over and over again that their nuclear capability is against the United States, and the United States only. Some people believe it. I don't believe it.

Will they blackmail us? Will they intimidate us? Yes. But like I said, why should we be concerned? As long as we have an alliance with the Americans, they guarantee extended deterrence, and like I said, my friends have 5,000 warheads, so...

Now, having said that, we Koreans really need to think about: if the North Koreans drop a bomb, a nuclear weapon, and contaminate 20% of South Korea, is it in my best interest to drop a bomb on Pyongyang and then make that a radioactive area for the next 100 years, when we have precision munitions that can kill Kim and his family, or the perpetrators of this inhumane act?

So that's a thing that we South Koreans need to think about. So, you know, a lot of the initial thinking is: "Oh, if they nuke us, we need to nuke them." But what we really need to think about is is that the smart thing to do? Is that what we want to give to our future generations? So we're at that stage right now.

David Bond, Financial Times

You're obviously saying that the South Koreans are reassured by the Americans, but Trump's rhetoric seems to be inflaming the situation rather than making it safer. What's your take on that, and, you know, is there sort of method in his madness? Because he's brought the two Koreas together, and we've had these talks in the last few days.

Lt Gen Chun

So just yesterday my President has stated that President Trump deserves "huge credit" for the two Koreas coming to the table. So I don't think - or I don't hope - that he is mad. But he has made the conditions where he has put the North Koreans at an imbalance. So for now he's actually put us in a direction where negotiations have started.

What will happen after the Olympics? That's a concern. But my President has been talking to Mr Trump, and as long as we have that kind of close coordination, and more close coordination, I think we'll be able to put the foundations of the Korean and US alliance, and help from countries like the United Kingdom, that we'll be able to find a better solution.

Duncan Bartlett, editor of Asian Affairs magazine

You've mentioned that the North Koreans have repeatedly said that their nuclear threat is against the United States and the United States only, and you said that you were sceptical about that view. Could you say something about the connection between the nuclear tests and the intercontinental ballistic missile tests? What countries are in range of North Korean missiles, and which countries are potential targets?

Lt Gen Chun

The United States, Japan, China – the Chinese don't seem to be worried; I don't know what they have, but they seem not to be worried.

Right now, the latest test of their Hwasong-15 missile seems to be able to strike the US capital but that's assuming that it only has a 150kg warhead. So if it had a 500kg warhead, which is what we think you would need to have a nuclear capability, it probably would not reach the US capital.

So in my view the North Koreans have not really had that capability. And this is where the window still exists for them to cease where they are. So if they want to broker a deal with the Americans, they need to do it now. Indications are right now that they're not inclined to do that, and I think it's important for the North Koreans to realise that this window is closing really, really soon. And I'm a little concerned about their perception of this.

Jack Blanchard, Politico

The talk in America this week seems to be about the idea of what they call a "bloody nose" attack, where they try to take out one facility with a single strike just as a warning to North Korea that they mean business but with the hope that it won't escalate into a wider conflict. Knowing what you know about Pyongyang, is that a realistic strategy, a possible strategy?

Lt Gen Chun

I don't know, but I hope the Americans are talking very closely with the South Koreans about options. Nobody likes surprises, right? Unless it's a happy birthday or a diamond ring. So hopefully the United States is talking very, very closely with the South Koreans and vice versa.

Blanchard

You sound quite sceptical about it to me...

Lt Gen Chun

I don't know why you would say that...

John Hemmings, Henry Jackson Society

Hwang Jang-yop, the senior defector, once said that North Korea's military had a founding principle to unify the Korean peninsula, and that this was a balance-of-power struggle with the Kim family. Can you speak to that? Can you describe the current relationship between the military and the Kim family, and whether unification is a priority?

Lt Gen Chun

It is not now the priority, because they're starving. But I think it is prudent to assume that the end of the whole game is to unify the Korean peninsula under North Korean, or Kim's, terms. It sounds absurd, but for many reasons which I do not want to go into for time's sake tonight, that would be the ultimate goal of the North Korean regime.

Lev Mikheev, Bernina Systematic

You've highlighted a multiple number of times the vulnerability of Seoul due to its proximity to the border. Are there any efforts underway to diversify political, military and economic capabilities away from Seoul?

Lt Gen Chun

So right now there are 51 million South Koreans, and in the Greater Seoul metropolitan area, about 25 million people live in that area. The Korean Government, from about a decade ago, has been moving their administrative governments down south, to a place called Sejong. It's about the middle of South Korea. So there is that effort currently.

But people gravitating to Seoul has been going on for the past 500 years, and it's hard to break an old habit. I don't know if you have that in your country, but that's how it is in Korea. So there is that effort but it's going to take a long time – and maybe some artillery shells.

James Savory

I'm interested in your view – you said that China don't want to have a border with a United States-friendly country. Do you think that China would in the future take a position to pre-emptively act, so that they can maintain a buffer.

Lt Gen Chun

That is a popular concept shared by many Koreans, which I am not one of. If the Chinese are ever foolish enough to go into North Korea in that fashion, I would applaud them, because they are going to be going into a very nasty place. And if they're willing to fight the North Koreans, so be it. But they better be really ready, because all of the problems that we have right now are going to be their problems, and it's probably a good idea for them to not go into North Korea, for whatever reason.

David Nussbaum, The Elders

One theory is that Kim Jong-un is mad. But if we look at alternative hypotheses, one is that he's following a strategy, which that Iraq gave up its nuclear ambitions, the US invaded and the leader was killed; Libya did the same, the Americans invaded, the leader was killed, Ukraine gave up its nuclear thing and Russia took over part of the country.

So that presents a possible rational strategy, which suggests there are almost no circumstances in which they would give up their nuclear capability, because if you're the leader and you think the Americans will try and kill you and your family, nuclear weapons are the one thing that might put them off doing that, particularly because there are so many Americans in South Korea.

What credence do you give to that hypothesis?

Lt Gen Chun

So I think it's very obvious that the Kim family, has taken lessons from these events. But I think there's another aspect where the Kim family, Kim Jong-il, the father of Kim Jong-un remarked that... he compared the Kim family to the royalty of Sweden, in that they now were a category like your Queen and King. And that they would enjoy that. Which is different, because I don't think the King of Sweden allowed 1.5 million of their subjects to starve to death.

But anyway, they seem to have their own sense of confidence in their system, but they need assurances – real assurances – which is nuclear weapons. So that's most probably their motivation. I think what happened though is that in their process of pursuing a nuclear capability they went a little bit too far.

Now, I don't know if you agree but it's very hard to get the American people to go to war – as you might remember how my favourite Brit, Winston Churchill, tried to get the Americans to help with World War Two.

I was in Arizona just two weeks ago, and the waitress serving me hamburgers, when I was introduced as a retired Korean general, she said; "Oh, North or South?" And I said "South." And she said: "North Korea... very bad... nuclear weapons." You know, this young woman, she probably six months ago thought that Samsung was a Japanese company.

So North Korea really needs to realise that in his pursuit of nuclear weapons he has awoken the average American and given all justification to get his ass kicked. So I'm not sure if he realises what he has done. So if I were him, I would give up ICBMs, I would give up IRBMs, which are threatening Japan and South Korea, I would give up SLBMs, I would give up proliferation – which is a big problem, even for you. And he would still have some nuclear capability in the interim, and broker a deal with the United States and the rest of the world.

Audience Member

I just wondered if you had any further comment on the North Koreans' cyber capability, and whether we should worry that they will escalate beyond ransomware and viruses.

Lt Gen Chun

We should be very worried. About 10 years ago, they attacked one of our banks. It took us about six months to figure out it was, to gather proof it was, North Korea. And then we got to thinking "Why would they do that? Why would they attack one of our banks" And we later concluded that they wanted to see what our procedures were – they wanted to know who we called, what we did, who did it, who didn't do it.

So that's how good they are. I would not be surprised if they are hacking into this camera right now. I have a cellphone, and I assume it's being monitored by somebody. So North Korea's cyber capability is something that I think is right below their nuclear capability as to a threat.

Lt Gen Chun

Before I close, I want to go back to the question: "Is there a military option to counter the threat?"

Yes, there is a military option. But it's like having a toothache. But this toothache is like having to pull out all of your teeth and then having to put it back in again.

So the military option exists, but I just want to say that it should be the last option – and heaven forbid that we would have to use it.