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Ex-general says he knows how powerful Kim Jong Un's military is

Kim Hjelmgaard, USA TODAY

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Vice President Mike Pence on Monday defended President Trump on his recent comments disparaging immigration from Africa and Haiti, insisting the president's "heart" is aimed at a merit-based system that is blind to immigrants' "race or creed." (Jan. 22)AP, AP



In this March 30, 2015, file photo, a South Korean Marine, right, and U.S. Marines aim their weapons during joint military exercises.(Photo: AP)

LONDON — A distinguished retired South Korean general warned that a U.S. attack on North Korea would be met by well-armed soldiers fighting with religious fervor to defend their homeland.

"I try to explain to the Americans — if we have to go into North Korea, it is not going to be like going into Iraq or Afghanistan. It's not going to be like toppling (ex-Iraqi President Saddam) Hussein. This would be more like trying to get rid of Allah," said I.-B. Chun, referring to the Arabic word for God.

Chun, speaking at a London think tank late Wednesday, said. "I said to my team: Can you imagine what that would look like? (North Korean leader) King Jong Un and his family is a cult in

North Korea."

The Kim dynasty has ruled North Korea since its founding in 1948. Its three leaders — first Kim Il Sung, then Kim Jong Il and now Kim Jong Un — have inspired an intense, devotional following that has kept them in power.

In her new book, *North Korea: The Country We Love to Hate*, political analyst Loretta Napoleoni described the isolated nation's ruling "juche" philosophy that values self-reliance and extreme nationalism "as a modern religion, similar to Scientology, a non-transcendental doctrine with a twist of absurdity and plenty of dogmas."

"I have had the opportunity to speak to North Korean soldiers who have defected to South Korea — and you cannot imagine how indoctrinated they are," Chun said. "These are people who have defected, and yet there is still an innate belief in their system which is close to ridiculous."

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Chun, who retired 18 months ago after serving in South Korea's military for almost 40 years, rose as high as deputy commander of the First South Korean Army, a position that also involved leading the country's special forces.

According to Chun, who lives just 35 miles from the North's border, here are some of the challenges that allied forces would face in the event of war:

- The majority of the North's military infrastructure is deep underground, a reaction to the massive bombing by U.S. forces during the Korean War, which ended in 1953 with an armistice instead of a peace treaty.
- Every North Korean, starting at age 14, gets 100 hours of training each year on how to shoot a weapon, fire a rocket-propelled grenade, throw a grenade, pitch a tent and other survival skills. "North Korea is militarized far beyond the (West's) imagination," Chun said.
- While the North Korean air force is significantly outdated with about 1,000 old fighter jets, these planes would be used for kamikaze-style attacks instead of air combat. "They will load them with a lot of fuel, some bombs, and tell the pilot, 'That is your target and you need to destroy it,'" he said.
- The regime has chemical and biological weapons, which Chun estimates at between 2,500 and 5,000 tons.
- North Korea has artillery and rockets that directly threaten the South Korean capital Seoul, one of the largest metropolitan areas in the world with a population of 25 million people.
- The North's military has 1.3 million active members and 7.7 million reserves. It has 200,000 special forces, whose official name translates as "monkey units," a reference, Chun said, to the "doped-up disrupting role they would play" in any conflict.

- In case of a foreign attack or invasion, North Koreans would stay loyal to Kim in the immediate term. "They have a system where five to 10 families are organized into a group, and if a single person from that group misbehaves, the entire five or 10 families go to the gulag or are executed. So everybody spies on everybody else. It is a great mechanism for keeping people under control," he said.

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Chun was also a national security adviser to South Korean President Moon Jae-in while he was running for office. Chun first gained prominence in South Korea in 1983 as a young lieutenant when he was credited with saving the life of a senior South Korean general during a terrorist bombing in Burma. Later, he became one of the most senior contact points for U.S. military commanders in South Korea.

He gave his assessment of the threats facing Seoul and Washington amid reports, including in *The Wall Street Journal*, that despite an apparent easing in tensions after this week's talks between North and South Korea for the first time in two years, the Trump administration is still teetering between

launching a pre-emptive strike on Pyongyang over its pursuit of nuclear weapons or holding out for diplomacy.

"A lot of good talks are going on — a lot of good energy. I like what I'm seeing," President Trump said Wednesday. North Korea agreed to send a delegation to next month's Winter Olympics in South Korea and to hold military talks aimed at easing front-line animosities.

Still, Chun said Pyongyang was ready for war and was "one huge barracks."

He said North Korea's latest missile test in November indicated it has an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of striking the U.S. mainland, including Washington, D.C.

"But that's assuming it only has a 150kg warhead," Chun said. "If it had a 500kg warhead — which is what we think it would need to have nuclear capability — it probably would not reach the capital. The North Koreans do not really have that capability, and this is where the window still exists for them to cease. If they want to broker a deal with the Americans, they need to do it now."

Chun said that over the course of his military career he became convinced "if you want peace, the only proven lesson is you must prepare for war. Yes, there is a military option for North Korea. But it's like having a toothache and having to pull out all of your teeth. It should be the last option — and heaven forbid we have to use it."

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North Korea agreed Tuesday to send a delegation to next month's Winter Olympics in South Korea, Seoul officials said, as the bitter rivals sat for rare talks at the border to discuss how to cooperate in Olympics and improve their long-strained ties.

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