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Former Senior South Korean Officer Warns Off Military Action

20-26 minutes

“I... want to thank all of you for the 1,078 British soldiers that sacrificed their lives during the Korean War.”

That was the message delivered by retired Lieutenant General In-Bum Chun of South Korea recently when he spoke to British reporters at [an event](#) hosted by Policy Exchange.

The former general also took the opportunity to outline the military situation on the peninsula, delving into a number of related subtopics.

North Korea’s four military policies:

The first subject he discussed was the way in which current events are being influenced by policy decisions made in the middle of the Cold War:

“In 1962 – that’s about nine years after the [Korean War](#) – the North Koreans had a big meeting.

"And in this meeting, they decided upon 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.

“Secondly, they said, ‘The Americans... 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... a lot of their facilities are underground – satellites cannot see where they are. And for security, most of the North Koreans don’t know what’s (nearby).

An American F9F Panther bombs enemy trucks during the Korean War (image from 'F9F Panther Units of the Korean War' by Warren Thompson © Osprey Publishing, part of Bloomsbury Publishing)

“Third is they said, ‘We need to make sure that we arm everybody. A 14-year-old teenager in North Korea probably gets more than a hundred hours of military training a year. So by the age of 14, a North Korean teenager knows how to shoot an (AK-47), fire an RPG, throw a grenade and pitch a tent and march 20 kilometres...

“Finally... (they have endeavoured to create a modern military). So until the mid-70s, the North Koreans had a far (more capable military than both) the South Koreans and the United States combined on the Korean Peninsula. They had more tanks, they

had more aircraft and so forth.

On military equipment and obsolescence:

“But I think the North Koreans realised that this was not going to be able to continue. They knew that... the life span of their equipment would not (go beyond the 1980s). 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 also received their first Scud missile from the Egyptians, and they started re-engineering the technology. And now, we are where we are today”.

That means making the most of what they do have:

“Right now, all their tanks and all their aircraft are obsolete. Their most modern aircraft is the (Russian-made Sukhoi) 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 weapon systems?’

An SU-35 (image: Alan Wilson; see [licence](#))

“Probably as kamikaze type aircraft – load them with a lot of fuel, some bombs, have a pilot, tell him and her that ‘that’s your target, and you need to destroy it’.

“And so they have... more than a thousand aircraft and probably if something happens on the Korean peninsula there’ll be a lot of modern day [\(air\) aces](#) being born, but the North Koreans (also have this kamikaze) capability.”

The result, he said, is that the North is very militarised, far more so than most westerners, and even South Koreans, realise.

In talking about how he tries to explain this to American allies, Chun said he tells them:

“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 (Saddam) Hussein. (It’s going to be more akin to) getting rid of Allah’.”

That, he pointed out, is the extent to which the country is a personality cult revolving around the Kim family.

Cyber, biological, chemical and conventional threats:

The general also said that the North has chemical and biological weapons, between 2,500 and 5,000 tons’ worth that could be fired from 500 missiles aimed at Seoul. A further 500 artillery guns are also aimed at the capital.

Cyber attacks are another card they could play – in fact, Lt Gen Chun said that this threat is so severe that it is surpassed only by the nuclear threat.

“In North Korea, they... categorise their people into four classes – it’s like a caste system, but (one more based around) loyalties. The only area (where they don’t) apply this class system is picking out these computer whiz-kids.”

These talented youth are funnelled into either programming or hacking.

US dollars are also counterfeited there and this is done so

well, he said, that machines designed to detect counterfeit money can't pick them up.

The North Korean military:

Referring to the active personnel, who come from a population base of 25,000,000, Chun said:

“They also have a million plus men and women... 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 percent being women. Most of them are in anti-aircraft units, communication units, and so forth, but that's the layout.”

In terms of physique, Chun pointed out that North Koreans are remarkably short, but also implied that they should not be underestimated because they have 200,000 special forces personnel. (Britain probably has less than 2,000 in the full-time SAS and SBS combined).

Explaining them further, Chun said:

“They're actually... translated as 'snipers'. So to the western mind you think they are (sharp shooters), but (this roughly translates as) 'monkey units'. So imagine a doped-up chimpanzee... running around... hitting everybody. So that's the role of these special forces – to disrupt the lines (of the enemy).”

Giving an example from the Korean War, Chun said that it was a

common occurrence for these monkey units to surround and cut off the artillery support of given units, which would then allow them to be destroyed by conventional forces. He said this tactic would almost certainly be used in any future war.

US marines being given air support during the Korean War to avoid being overwhelmed by soldiers of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army

With regards to the possibility of North Korean special forces potentially infiltrating the Winter Games in South Korea, a threat Chun didn't think was credible, he said:

“(This) reminds me of a story that I heard. So after the [Cuban missile crisis](#)... the Soviets and the Americans had this great idea (to do a student exchange program). And... some Americans said, ‘Are you crazy? They’re going to send KGB agents’... 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... I truly believe that my system of democracy, freedom, respect of human rights is (much more powerful) than any North Korean nuclear weapon.”

This, he said, gave him confidence that there is a lot of room for dealing with North Korea in a manner that does not include a military confrontation.

However, he still wasn't convinced the problem can be fixed in the near future:

“I hope tensions will lessen and that the Olympics will (prove to

be a good opportunity) to (find) a peaceful resolution to all of this. That is what my heart wants, but my head... and the lessons that we have learned (about)... dictatorships like North Korea tell me that we have a long way to go... We need to be ready as much as we can because if you want peace the only proven real lesson is prepare for war.”

The North’s economy and propaganda:

Too much preparation for war might be a bad thing though, even for the North. That’s because North Korea’s ongoing military commitments are the reason its economy is so poor, he said. The country seems to him to be like a huge barracks.

The totalitarianism also extends to the mind. Defectors he has encountered have shown him, he said, just how indoctrinated their society is, in the sense that they display an irrational confidence in the superiority of their communist way of life. In fact, he made a point of saying the most dangerous thing about the regime in the North was their misunderstanding of reality:

“(M)y greatest fear is that the North Koreans are believing their own propaganda.”

Later on, he touched on this theme again:

“North Korea really needs to realise that in his pursuit of nuclear capability, (Kim Jong-un) has awoken the average American and given all justification to get his... ass kicked. So, I’m not sure he realises what he has done. So, if I were him, I would give up ICBM (Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles), I would give up IRBM (Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missiles), which is

threatening Japan and South Korea, I would give up SLBM (Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missiles), I would give up proliferation... and he would still have some nuclear capability for the interim, and try to broker a deal with the United States and the rest of the world.”

And Kim and the regime’s possible misreading of reality is also something he mentioned when giving an assessment of the North’s nuclear capability, which is perhaps not as potent a threat as some Americans might think (yet):

“Right now, the latest test of (North Korea’s) Hwasong 15 missile seems to be able to strike the US capital but that’s assuming that it only had a 150-kilogram warhead; so if it had a 500-kilogram 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 (of opportunity) 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.”

Continuing the theme of propaganda, despite the extensive brainwashing, he said that his experience of captured North Koreans is that they are very tightly controlled but that they change very quickly once they become aware of just how dishonest their regime is.

The reason for that tight control is this:

“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.”

On the South:

He also contrasted this with observations of South Koreans:

“You go to Korea (and the people) are very calm. They’re more worried about the (possibility of a price increase of hamburgers) than the North Koreans at this point.”

Ideally, he said, people there should probably be a little bit more concerned than they currently are.

Lt Gen In-Bum Chun (ret'd) (image: US Defence Department)

Even he, though, is no more worried about the emerging nuclear threat than he already has been of other threats, at least from his own narrow 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 a biological weapon – to me, I’m dead anyway, so it’s not that big of a deal.”

The other ‘good cop’:

China was also discussed when someone asked why the Chinese don’t simply pressure the North Koreans to stop.

Chun said that it has become clear only comparatively recently

that the Chinese do not have as much influence over the DPRK (Democratic People's Republic of Korea) as was believed. The relationship between North Korea and China is not, Chun pointed out, comparable to the alliance between South Korea and the US.

Also, he said, it seems the Chinese would rather have a nuclear-armed North Korea on their Manchurian border than Americans.

Politics by other means:

With regards to the possibility of the North using its nuclear weapons to force the reunification of the entire peninsula that it has always wanted, Chun said that as long as South Korea has an alliance with the US, there will be deterrence. But, he also said the nature of retaliatory strikes do need to be carefully considered by his own government:

“...if the North Koreans drop a bomb, a nuclear weapon, and... contaminate 20 percent of South Korea, is it in my best interest to drop a bomb on Pyongyang, and (to make that radioactive for) the next 100 years, when we have precision munitions that can kill Kim and his family, or the perpetrators of this inhumane act?”

He said this is something his countrymen should be pondering, saying “(the simple idea that) if they nuke us we need to nuke them, we really need to think about (whether or not that) Is the smart thing to do”.

As for a precision ‘bloody nose’ strike by the Americans, despite

reiterating his own president's statement that President Trump deserves 'huge credit' for bringing the two Koreas together by apparently putting the regime off balance, Chun said:

“I hope the Americans are talking very closely with the South Koreans about options... nobody likes surprises, right?... Hopefully the United States is talking very very closely with the South Koreans and vice versa.”

When one reporter remarked that Chun seemed quite sceptical about this, he replied, “I don't know why you would say that!”

There was laughter in the room.

The general finished by saying that there is a military option for dealing with North Korea, but likened it to dealing with a toothache by having to rip out all of your teeth and then trying to put them all back in again:

“So (yes), 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.”

Cover image: The 'Statue of Brothers' Korean War memorial in Seoul (image: Danleo)

Songnisan National Park in South Korea

With the 2018 Winter Olympics only a few days away, [Forces Network](#) has taken a look at the British forces athletes who'll be on show.

Almost 3,000 athletes will be striving for medal glory at Pyeongchang in South Korea, with the opening ceremony taking place on Friday and competition running until February 25.

But who from the military will be among them? Just take a look below...

Amanda Lightfoot – GB Biathlon

30-year-old British Army Sergeant [Amanda Lightfoot](#) has been selected as Great Britain's sole biathlete for the Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang.

The Adjutant General's Corps soldier started skiing through the military in 2006 and began competing internationally two years later.

She underwent a knee operation in April 2013 before making her Olympic Winter Games debut at Sochi 2014.

Finishing 75th and 71st in the 7.5km sprint and 15km individual, Lightfoot has seen improvements since that display, with her personal best coming at the 2017 World Championships in Hochfilzen, when she finished 32nd in the 15km individual event.

South Shields' Lightfoot is only the second female British biathlete to compete at a Winter Games and has done so while maintaining her Army career.

Competition Dates: Feb 10 - 7.5k Sprint, Feb 12 - 10k Pursuit, Feb 14 - 15k Individual, Feb 17 - 12.5k Mass Start.

Lamin Deen - GB Bobsleigh (4-Man)

Grenadier Guards Sergeant Lamin Deen's bobsleigh career began when he was spotted competing in the 200m sprint finals

at an Army inter-unit competition in Aldershot in 2007, although he initially only started the sport as a hobby.

The 36-year-old Army man has represented the Army in boxing and basketball, as well as athletics and bobsleigh.

Having switched from brakeman to driver after missing out on selection for the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, Lamin made his Olympic bow at Sochi four years later, finishing 19th in his favoured four-man event and 23rd in the two-man competition in Russia.

He won two of his first three races on the North America's Cup circuit in 2013/14, triumphing in Park City and Calgary, and went on to guide GB1 to fifth place at the 2015 World Championships in Winterberg alongside Ben Simons, Bruce Tasker and Andy Matthews.

He narrowly missed out on World Cup bronze with a fourth-place finish in Lake Placid in January 2016 and he and his crew of Tasker, Simons and Joel Fearon were on course for a World Championship medal before a late crash in Igls the following month.

Lamin finished 21st in the 4-man event at his fifth World Championships in Königssee in 2017 and was on the World Cup podium in December 2016 after a sixth-place finish in Lake Placid.

His team-mates are Joel Fearon, Andrew Matthews and Ben Simons.

Competition Dates: Feb 24 - Heats 1 & 2, Feb 25 - Heats 3 & 4

Nick Gleeson – GB Bobsleigh (4-Man)

[Joining Lamin Deen at the Games will be Army Private Nick Gleeson](#), who's taking part in Olympic competition for the first time.

His sled will be driven by Brad Hall, with fellow brakemen Greg Cackett and Toby Olubi taking up the other two spots.

Relatively new to bobsleigh, the 3rd Battalion, Parachute Regiment (3 PARA) man was brought into the sport through the military.

Making his World Cup debut in the 2017/18 season, he's known as the 'baby' of the team at just 21.

The Epsom-born athlete wants to be challenging for medals in PyeongChang, after such an impressive year for the team, and has his sights set on becoming a pilot by 2022. As Nick reflects:

"In bobsleigh, if you get given an opportunity, you've got to take it, or that's it, it's gone."

He added: "Last season, I wasn't focussed on these Games at all. I never thought I'd get there. But times change.

"The Army has given me a work ethic of, 'If you're going to do it, do it properly', so that has stuck with me in bobsleigh. But I never thought I'd be able to call myself an Olympian. I didn't think I'd be competing at the biggest competition in the world."

Competition Dates: Feb 24 - Heats 1 & 2, Feb 25 - Heats 3 & 4

Rhys Thornbury – NZ Skeleton

RAF skeleton racer Rhys Thornbury was selected for New Zealand off the back of steady results on the International Bobsleigh and Skeleton Federation World Cup circuit.

The 28-year-old, who has dual UK-New Zealand citizenship, recorded five top-10 finishes in 2017 and 11th place at last year's World Championships.

He first tried skeleton in Austria in 2011, making it onto the World Cup circuit in 2015.

The RAF has an elite athlete scheme which allows serving personnel to focus on sport at an elite level, and that has allowed Thornbury to train full time for the last three years.

He's got a fan in New Zealand Bobsleigh and Skeleton Association president Ross Dominikovich, who says Thornbury's character has helped him to the top level of the sport.

Competition Dates: Feb 15 - Heats 1 & 2, Feb 16 – Heats 3 & 4

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