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Lt. Gen. (Ret) In-Bum Chun – Report – Eurasia Review

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By Ash Khayami*

([FPRI](#)) — Since the Cold War, few crises have put so many Americans on edge as the escalating tensions between the U.S. and North Korea. While Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and President Donald Trump continue to send mixed signals of negotiation attempts alongside threats of annihilation, Kim Jong-un has shown no signs of abandoning his nuclear ambitions. Retired South Korean Lt. Gen. In-Bum Chun argues that the primary goal for the U.S. should be getting the North Koreans to the negotiating table without military intervention. While current U.S. rhetoric has been effective at confusing and perhaps even shocking North Korean officials, Lt. Gen. Chun's insights into North Korea's internal political, social, and economic landscape reveal the dangers of further escalating the crisis.

Brief North Korean History

Lt. Gen. Chun explains that after the Korean War ended in a stalemate, the North Korean regime held a meeting in 1962,

where it set out to achieve several key military and security reforms. These included modernizing the military and perfecting its officer training program, as well as moving the bulk of the country's manufacturing and storage facilities underground to protect them against U.S. air strikes. But one of the most significant reforms the regime took was to militarize a large section of the population. North Korea was so effective at carrying out these reforms that the regime currently has 1.5 million active duty soldiers and 5-6 million reserve soldiers who receive at least 200 hours of military training a year.

Starting in the 1980s, the North Koreans began making advances in both nuclear and missile technology. They got their first break in 1980, Lt. Gen. Chun explains, when Egypt exported a Scud-B missile for them to reverse-engineer. Within ten years, North Korea was exporting its own ballistic missiles back into the Middle East. At the same time, the U.S. had turned a blind eye to the nuclear enrichment program in Pakistan. North Korea, realizing at the time that Pakistan did not possess missile technology, initiated a trade where Pakistan swapped its centrifuges—the essential tool for enriching uranium—for North Korean missile technology. And while the collapse of the Soviet Union stripped North Korea of a key benefactor state, North Korea hired many of the old Soviet scientists and bought much of their technology on the black market.

The North Korea of the 21st Century

Progressing into the 21st century, the North Korean regime has continued its decades-old mission of establishing a robust

nuclear weapons program. Much like its arrangements with Pakistan and the Soviet Union, North Korea continues to enlist the help of amiable state actors. In 2012, the North Koreans and the Iranians signed an agreement to cooperate in science and technology, which Lt. Gen. Chun suggests facilitated cooperation between the two countries with respect to ballistic missile technology. He points out that Iranian ballistic missiles today bear a striking resemblance to North Korean ballistic missiles and that there are photos of Iranian officers at North Korean military parades.

In addition to its growing nuclear capabilities, Lt. Gen. Chun argues that the North Korean regime's political and social structures are non-conducive to a democratic uprising in the short term. Within the country, Kim Jong-un, the head of state, is revered as a god. Children who enter pre-school at the age of 5 are instructed to bow everyday at pictures of the Kim dynasty, which has ruled North Korea since its inception. This indoctrination continues throughout their schooling, as well as in their mandatory military service from the age of 18 to 31. This indoctrination not only breeds extreme nationalism, but also anti-U.S. sentiment. In fact, young officers who underestimate U.S. capabilities are replacing older generals who lived through the Korean War. Lt. Gen. Chun says that these new generals are increasingly buying into their own propaganda, which may increase the North Korean military establishment's willingness to engage in violent conflict.

How Do South Korea and China Fit In?

Apart from the U.S., South Korea and China also play crucial roles in influencing the North Korea crisis. Lt. Gen. Chun claims that China-North Korea relations are not as strong as they used to be. Even though Kim Jong-un came to power almost seven years ago, he has yet to make a trip to China, which is highly irregular. He also points out that North Koreans do not feel the same sense of loyalty to the Chinese for their help in the Korean War that South Koreans do for the U.S. The North Koreans believe China was ultimately looking after its own interests in supporting them. Despite these frictions, China still does not want to see a unified pro-U.S. Korea, a leftover policy stance from the Cold War era. Furthermore, a significant sector of the Chinese government maintains that North Korea is justified in its pursuit of nuclear weapons because of the belligerent rhetoric the U.S. has used against it. Ultimately, China has no decisive allies in this situation, and therefore has exerted only minimal pressure on North Korea via U.N. sanctions to bring the regime to the bargaining table.

Lt. Gen. Chun explains that while South Korea is taking steps to defuse the situation, they have several concerns. First, South Koreans, both military officials and civilians, are concerned that inflammatory rhetoric, while it may have a strategic purpose, can also be destabilizing with terrible repercussions, considering Seoul's vulnerability to North Korean conventional weapons. Second, South Koreans embrace democracy, tolerance, and freedom as core values, and thus are weary of reunifying with North Koreans, who have lived under a totalitarian and cult-like regime. If done too quickly, Lt. Gen. Chun says, North Koreans

may fail to integrate into a Western style democracy, which will result in socio-political clashes and a period of prolonged political instability for South Koreans.

To counter and deter threats of North Korean aggression, South Korea is developing several key defense programs. One of these programs is the Kill Chain, which is designed to first identify when and where North Koreans are building their missiles and then pre-emptively destroy them before they become operational. In the event that this strategy fails, the South Korean military is also building a missile defense system —Korea Air and Missile Defense—that could shoot down any missile launched by North Korea. Lt. Gen. Chun states that these defense measures serve two purposes: They are deterrents to North Korean aggression, and measures designed to instill a sense of security for the South Korean people.

What Should We Do?

Given the complex nature of the crisis and the gravity of a potential nuclear conflict, Lt. Gen Chun advocates for peaceful negotiations to de-escalate the nuclear standoff. At the same time, he recognizes certain realities about what goals are feasible and what are not. Currently, the U.S. and its Western allies are most likely underestimating Kim Jong-un's nuclear weapon capabilities, especially given the regime's level of confidence. Lt. Gen Chun also claims that North Korea will never give up its pursuit for nuclear weapons, as they view it as a right and essential to their national security. However, this doesn't mean that the only substantive approach for the U.S.

and its allies is containment.

Lt. Gen. Chun believes that the U.S. should start negotiations geared towards non-proliferation and de-escalation of tensions. In addition, we should treat de-nuclearization as a long-term goal rather than an initial demand to get the North Korean regime to the negotiating table. Lt. Gen Chun emphasizes that while time might be on the regime's side as far as preventing the development of advanced ballistic missiles in the short term, the regime's rejection of democracy, tolerance, and freedom are not aspects of sustainable governance. This is why it is important, he says, to use both UN sanctions and humanitarian aid—in the form of food and medicine—to further weaken the Kim regime and to fight anti-Western propaganda respectively. While the regime might steal some of the aid, ultimately, the North Korean people will know and understand that the international community is providing the medicine and/or food on which they rely.

Currently, we may never realize these long-term goals if we fail to start a dialogue with North Koreans regarding de-escalation in the short term. Lt. Gen Chun believes that it is essential that the U.S. and South Korea not only maintain a robust military alliance, but also coordinate and participate in a joint diplomatic strategy to defuse the situation. Kim does not seem like he's backing down, and the longer tensions remain heightened, the longer all involved parties continue to risk nuclear warfare as the result of miscalculations or excessive posturing.

*** On Tuesday, October 3, General In-Bum Chun delivered a briefing on North Korea at the Foreign Policy Research Institute.*

He retired from the ROK military in 2016, after 35 years of service. He is now a Visiting Scholar at the US-Korea Institute at SAIS/Johns Hopkins University and at the independent Institute for Corean-American Studies. This program was cosponsored by UPenn's Center for East Asian Studies.

About the author:

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