THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

CENTER FOR NORTHEAST ASIAN POLICY STUDIES

2003 SPRING FORUM

TENSIONS ON THE PENINSULA: KOREA, NORTHEAST ASIA, AND THE UNITED STATES

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
WASHINGTON, D.C.
APRIL 24, 2003

LUNCHEON SPEAKER:

GENERAL JOHN TILELLI

Transcript by:
Federal News Service
Washington, D.C.

MR. JAMES STEINBERG: Ladies and gentlemen, I know you're all still in various stages of continuing to eat, but I want to take advantage of our guests today to both add to your physical nourishment some intellectual nourishment as well.

As I was getting up to introduce General Tilelli, he said to me that I was only allowed one sentence of introduction. And so it's going to have to be one with a lot of clauses in it, but I won't say a great deal. You have his bio in the program, which allows me to both honor his wish and also not skirt the really remarkable career that he's had.

But I just want to say that it's a personal privilege to have him here because in his four years as CINC in Korea -- and I can still call them CINCs even if the Pentagon doesn't – he really was a remarkable friend and advisor and somebody that we looked to with tremendous trust and confidence to deal with what was then and continues to be one of the most serious and difficult challenges we as a nation face, so it's really an honor and privilege for us to have General John Tilelli here for this.

(Applause.)

GENERAL JOHN TILELLI: Well, thanks for the opportunity and invitation here today. I truly appreciate it, and I appreciate being with you today. First, all of the disclaimers: I'm just an old soldier with some opinions and a great love for the Republic of Korea and its people, and when I speak, I speak from that context. This is a very important time; it has been a very important time for our great allies and for us. But after I reviewed the agenda of discussions in the panels this morning, I said much of what I say may be redundant, so I'm going to use the old analog of Julius Caesar to show you I learned something in Catholic school. (Laughter.) You know, I heard he was a great general. I read about that, and he was a great orator, and he gave long speeches, and his friends assassinated him. (Laughter.)

So what I am going to do today is give you a very short presentation, and after that, allow for some questions and answers. I'm going to give you my best shot because the topic I was going to discuss and was asked to discuss are what are the Korean peninsula challenges in the future?

So let me start by paraphrasing a comment made by our U.S. commander in the Republic of Korea, and this may give you a little bit of insight on what I'm going to talk about. General Leon LaPorte -- a great American of character and courage who sacrifices every day for our nation and for the people of the Republic of Korea -- and I paraphrase what he said. He said North Korea represents a growing threat to the world through its proliferation of missiles and potential nuclear materials and technologies. North Korea's large conventional force and special operational force directly threaten the Republic of Korea.

So let me put that as a baseline. A rhetorical question that I ask that you answer in your own mind's eye, as I move forward, may lead you to the answer of what are the challenges we face, and that rhetorical question is, has North Korea shown a sincere attempt to address threats to peace within the international community? So in my humble view, the challenge remains the same, and I'll give you the bottom line up front: the maintenance of peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in northeast Asia, a free and democratic Republic of Korea, our great alliance.

Now, let me talk a little bit about that. I will tell you as we go forward -- and we have been moving forward and backward -- it's been very fitful with North Korea. All of us hope – and I know that hope is not a method when dealing with the North Koreans – that multilateral discussions will lead to the positive results that we desire. No one in their right mindset would ever think that conflict on the Korean Peninsula is a desirable outcome.

So as we think about the peninsula, it remains one of the world's few potential theaters for a conventional interstate conflict. Risks persist in northeast Asia, even while forces and energies are devoted elsewhere around the world. And even though the international community has done much to bring North Korea into the global community, generally status quo remains. And as I think about it, and I look at the many opportunities, from the Republic of Korea, Japan, China, Russia, the United States, other countries, North Korea can be categorized as the masters of missed opportunity. And in my view, that missed opportunity also lays out a blueprint for us as we think about North Korea and how they might act in the future.

You all know that the U.S. maintains about 100,000 troops in the region, with 37,000 in the Republic of Korea as part of the mutual defense treaty. That 37,000-commitment is a commitment of the United States of America, and a commitment to the people of the Republic of Korea, in coordination and coalition with them to defend the republic against aggression. The force is a deterrent for us and has been very successful in deterring conflict on the peninsula, and this deterrent – and there's some question, especially after some of the – if I could, use the term "pre-election theater" oanti-Americanism – there's some question in America whether or not this force should still stay in Korea, and if the people of the Republic of Korea still want the United States to be present on their land. But this force as a deterrent often lessens the need for more substantial cost later. And the fact, as you think about this deterrent, and you think about its success over the years, even as we've drawn down in size and scope, it's been a very, very vital part to this alliance and to our Republic of Korea.

The security offered by this presence and the alliance – and I can't emphasize enough the alliance – is directly or indirectly responsible for the economic vitality and stability of the region. A magnificent – for lack of a better descriptive – a magnificent miracle from a war-ravaged society and country dealing with the dual legacies of colonization and a fratricidal war into a free market democracy that I am proud to have served in.

Let me just shift for a moment and talk about this great alliance of ours. First, this U.S./ROK alliance is a unique and a model alliance for any other alliance to emulate. It's unique in its model because it's truly a partnership, and it's an alliance based on this partnership and friendship. And it is one – if anyone were to track historically the alliance since the Mutual Defense Treaty, and since the establishment of the Combined Forces Command, it's one that's ever-changing and maturing. And that is, if you will, the life's breadth of what's been done there. It's an alliance between people, it's an alliance between country, and it's an alliance where the burden of costs -- not only in the military but also in the real dollar -- is shared by the countries. And it's an alliance over time, as we all know, because I think we are here today for that reason that's based on more than any documents, but based on a true friendship between many people of the Republic of Korea and many people in the United States of America.

The Republic of Korea, Japan, the United States, and other countries have made many initiatives to normalize relations with North Korea, and as I've said, it's moved fitfully, backward and forward. The masters of missed opportunity have gone to a certain point, and then backed off. That's been their blueprint and their pattern. We look at the June 2000 summit as a touchstone for discussion about the peninsula and where it might go, but I think the question we have to ask ourselves – and again, it's rhetorical – where has it gone since that summit? What has been the give and take, not only the take, by North Korea?

Certainly, the Sunshine Policy established by former president Kim Dae Jung was not the first initiative, nor will it be the last. A notable initiative preceding that was the 1992 agreement on reconciliation and non-aggression and exchange and cooperation, which did not go very far. So you have to look at the half-life of these agreements as we think about the north, and I'm not a pessimist. I try to be a realist as I look at things. That agreement was short-lived, because in 1993, when the U.S. and the Republic of Korea became aware of North Korea removing spent fuel rods from the Yongbyon nuclear reactor. And then after that, the standoff occurred, and the standoff ended when North Korea and the United States signed the agreed framework.

And that proceeded along, and then in the late '90s, we had the Perry Review, which again laid out a very realistic blueprint, you know, the path of good and the path of status quo. And the path of good would have essentially done those things that I think all of our countries that are interested would have liked to see happen. Last October, it was again discovered that North Korea had initiated over time a nuclear program, once again a violation of an agreement, and the follow-on withdrawal from the nuclear non-proliferation agreement, and we read about the rest today – the crisis that has been caused by that.

I guess the thing that is frustrating to me -- and certainly, being an impatient American as I am -- this was being done in spite of all the initiatives of the Republic of Korea and other interested countries to try to help, to try to make change, to try to reconcile, to try to draw Korean to Korean, because truly, that's what we are all about.

So let me in shorthand give you a little bit of discussion about what I see as I look at North Korea, and you've all talked about this this morning. You know, Ford has a slogan that says "Quality is job one." In North Korea, regime power is job one, and retention of regime power in my view is job one. I think it's a paranoid regime that looks externally for threats not only to keep itself in power but to act the way it does. It's an economic basketcase that over 10 years – and I know I will be criticized on this – that had nothing but economic downturn. Now, that's not exactly true. They had about eight years, and then they had a blip that moved it up a little bit, but it moved it up from so low in the basket, I don't know how you can call it an upturn. It's not self-sufficient, so Juchay (ph) is not reality in any event. It's somewhat isolated from the international community, although there have been moves by relatively progressive countries to try to establish relationships with North Korea.

It's a state that requires welfare for its people to survive, and it's a state where there's been recurring famine, disease, lack of all of the social activities that we would think would be humanitarian for the people by the Republic of North Korea, and in that context, the Republic of Korea has done much, along with the United States and Japan, to try to alleviate some of that horror. So in spite of horrifying economic conditions, the regime has demonstrated its priorities, which are not only the survival of the regime but also its military-first policy.

And in the context of we think about North Korea, and we think -- if we don't like to think about the military aspects of North Korea, which I will talk about in a moment, think about it from this context of those of us who believe in humanitarianism and how those people suffer and how those children suffer. Kim Jong Il's policy of military-firsts compounds the distribution of limited resources to the people of North Korea.

Let me just talk about the military because that's probably the area that I know a little bit about. It's technologically not sophisticated, but the regime does do selected modernization of its forces. So anyone who thinks that they're back in the 1950s hasn't paid attention to what it's done. It does have weapons of mass destruction. It does have missile programs. It does proliferate missiles as a cash crop. It's the fifth largest army in the world, about 1.2 million people under arms. I used to use the term "the tyranny of proximity" as I thought about the forces in North Korea, because they're so close to the de-militarized zone. And if you wanted to put it in the context of how we sit here today, if you put as much North Korean artillery missiles and forces in Baltimore, they could reach the mall today.

So in a great context, they're not in a defensive posture because they're well forward. They have large artillery and special operational forces, and the military is the largest purchaser and user of consumer goods, no matter how you describe those goods -- food and fuel. And it's a tragedy when you think that it continues to invest 30-plus percent of its GDP for the military. Now, 30 percent – it's hard to figure out exactly what that equates to in any real terms, but when you compare it to our 3.1 percent, you can understand the deprivation that must occur in a country that economically has collapsed long ago.

Without fundamental change, North Korea will continue to rely on charity and on its military as its last element of national power. So going back to my bottom line, the major challenge for us and our alliance is the maintenance of peace and stability and security on the peninsula and throughout northeast Asia. And at the same time, using those elements of power to try to cause positive change as we move to the future, I can say that all of us who served in the Republic of Korea, and who have any heartfelt feelings about the Republic of Korea, truly hope for reconciliation. But I think as we try to lay the blueprint of what will happen next, as we think through crisis to crisis, we must use the past as a blueprint. It's a history of brinksmanship, provocation, incidence, going so far, and then backing off. And I think as a nation and as an alliance and as the Republic of Korea, we must think our way through that.

You know, as we think about North Korea, many of you have forgotten already that there was a sea battle in the West Sea in this past June -- well, North Korea sunk and killed Republic of Korea sailors -- that there have been missiles fired – again, anti-ship missiles off North Korea; that there was an acknowledgement of a nuclear weapons program. So the consequence is maintaining this great alliance, deterring aggression, continued programs that in fact might, over time, because I don't think you're going to see a paradigm shift tomorrow morning when we wake up. There will not be free elections. Hopefully, a paradigm shift in North Korea. And with this alliance, with peace and stability on the peninsula, with deterrence, I think we can hope that the remainder will flow from there. But I also will say without peace and stability in the Republic of Korea and in northeast Asia, the positive effects that we desire will not occur.

So with that, I thank you for your time and interest. I would be glad to entertain some of the questions, and if I can't answer them, I'll defer them to the smart people at this table on my right here and pick them out. So, any questions -- I'll be glad to answer them. Thank you.

(Applause.)

MR. : Thank you very much, General. If I could ask any questioner to wait for the mike, and then please identify yourself so the General will know who he's talking to.

GEN. TILELLI: Well, this is good. There are no questions. Yes?

Q: (Inaudible). General, I was wondering if you could comment. There's been a lot of discussion this morning and the last couple of days about the issue of U.S. force deployments in South Korea. How do you think about them? Are these the right leaders to be making the – (off mike)?

GEN. TILELLI: You know, I think – the question had to do with U.S. force deployments and footprint of those forces in the Republic of Korea. In my view, and this again is a personal view, I don't believe it makes a hell of a lot of difference of where

those forces are in the Republic of Korea. I think that's an agreement that through collaboration and coordination with our great alliance that those decisions are made. And the fact is – do I believe we need to keep the deterrent force in the Republic of Korea? The answer is yes. Do I think we need to keep the second ID where they exactly are, up close to the DMZ? I'd say the answer is no, because we have great capability.

This alliance – remember, the Republic of Korea forces and the United States forces are there to complement each other. And in a real sense, those Republic of Korea forces were developed based on the complementary capability that the Untied States would provide. So as the Republic of Korea forces attain greater capability – and I will tell you this is a rock solid Army, Air Force, Navy, Marines, well-led, well-trained, well-equipped, well-disciplined – that there's no reason why there cannot be a change of the footprint.

The question, I think, in our mind's eye as we think about that, is there a lessening of the commitment of the United States of America towards this alliance, and I would say absolutely, there should not ever be a lessening of commitment. And I don't think that that would show a lessening of commitment, because I think we are as a people, as a nation, and as an alliance, committed to our friends in the Republic of Korea. So a lot of folks will churn over, you know, do we have 1,000 folks north of the Han River or south of the Han River or 2,000, and in my mind's eye, it doesn't make any difference. I think that's up to the two governments to decide.

And remember, when we – and you know this, but I think, to be quite frank with you – and one of the things good and bad about me is I'm generally candid about things, even in an audience where I probably shouldn't be – many of our Koreans don't understand that when we serve in a host nation, we serve there at the pleasure of the host nation. So consequently, if through discussions and dialogue that the host nation desires that we change our footprint, we sure as heck should do that, after the facts are known on what impact it might have our ability to deter and defend.

Q: General, Richard – (inaudible) – with CNAPS. You mentioned the – (inaudible) – that recently was a republic of freedom. I wonder if you think if this is a passing phenomenon related to an election campaign? Is it more enduring, and whatever the – (inaudible)?

GEN. TILELLI: I think there'd be others here who could talk better about whether it's enduring or not. Certainly, I do think that some of it had to do with the campaign. I also think that some of it will be enduring. I think the way that you try to achieve this understanding – because it truly is an understanding – falls into two pockets of responsibility. The first pocket of responsibility has to be within the Republic of Korea and the people and the administration of the Republic of Korea. Those in government who understand what this alliance is all about and what is it guaranteeing and what it has done and what it could possibly do for the Republic of Korea must articulate that well. You cannot have a faint heart when it has to do with moral courage.

Secondarily, in my view, part of the responsibility is on we as Americans, who must always be good neighbors, must understand the culture, must work within that culture, and must accommodate our host nation where possible, where it will not affect readiness and will not affect the very alliance itself.

And I think the third part is wouldn't it be horrible if people in this free democracy called the Republic of Korea couldn't protest? That's what democracy is all about, and the fact that if it's non-violent protests, that is a way of voicing your concerns. And at times, that's the way that both governments hear concerns.

At the same time, I will say -- and this is my personal view, once again -- that I think the vast majority of the people of the Republic of Korea understand why the Americans are there. And those same people have an abiding respect for our soldiers, sailors, and airmen and Marines, who are there to give their all, if necessary. I can tell you from my perspective, when I served there, I – and I was fortunate. I mean, luck is as good as talent at times. I was very fortunate in that the protests we had were tens and twenties, you know, we'd talk about one thing or another. I never had to cope with that in four years. But I will tell you, in my view, the people of the Republic of Korea understand, and you've seen it come out in the press now that there's a little more progressive view of the worth of having American forces where they are. But you can't be complacent about it; you've got to work. You've got to work, you've got to love what you're doing, and you've got to try to accommodate where you can.

Yes, sir?

Q: (Inaudible) – General, you said two things in your remarks that I'd like to ask you about. You said North Korea has weapons of mass destruction. You also emphasized several times in your remarks the importance of the U.S. of a deterrent – (inaudible). Do you think that the acquisition by North Korea of nuclear weapons is an unacceptable thing, or do you think this is something that is deterable, even if North Korea were to possess nuclear weapons?

GEN. TILELLI: When I said North Korea had weapons of mass destruction, I was generally talking about missiles and chemical weapons of mass destruction. I think, in my view -- and I've said this in open forum in a panel that I sat on called – (unintelligible) – in the Republic of Korea in November – that I think it is intolerable for North Korea to have nuclear weapons. I think it's absolutely intolerable. And I think if you were to ask our friends in the Republic of Korea what they think, they'd say the same thing. I think it's intolerable.

At the same time, I think we have to be very cautious when we think about what these nuclear technologies and where they might evolve to. If missiles have been become a cash crop, which we have seen missiles moving to different places, what makes us so confident or complacent that nuclear technologies for reprocessed material might not become the second cash crop?

Thank you all for your time. Thanks for the invitation. It's been great. Thank you very much, sir.

(Applause.)

MR. : General Tilelli, thank you very much for – I broke the microphone. Thank you very much, General Tilelli, for being with us. For lunch, we have a small token of our deep appreciation to you.

(Applause.)

MR. : And if I could just take a couple more seconds of your time. I'd like to thank a few other people. First of all, Mr. Lee Folger, over here at table one, for his generous support of CNAPS. Second, my staff. They're the ones who did all the work to put this fine event together – Sharon Yanagi (sp), Kevin Scott, Daphne Fan (sp), Nori Katagiri (sp), Sonia Naga (sp), and Carolyn Kwok (sp). Thank you all very much. Thank you for the audience for coming and joining us today. We really appreciate your support of our program. Thanks again.

(END)