

Leon Panetta
2015 World Knowledge Forum

At the World Knowledge Forum on October 20, 2015, former CIA Director (2009–2011) and United States Secretary of Defense (2011–2013), Leon Panetta, discussed the importance of maintaining a strong alliance between the United States and South Korea. He also fielded questions concerning his assessments of current situations involving China and North Korea.

Mr. Panetta outlined the importance of the strong security relationship between the United States and South Korea, identifying this alliance as a “cornerstone” of American foreign policy.

“It is one of the most successful alliances in history,” he said, highlighting the full commitment of the United States to continue helping South Korea resist the threat posed by North Korea.

Mr. Panetta noted that the potentially dangerous common enemy faced by South Korea and the United States is one of the principal reasons for maintaining the bond between the two nations.

“Having this common enemy requires that we have a strong common defense,” he said. As long as problems with North Korea persist and threaten stability on the peninsula, Mr. Panetta sees no alternative to keeping a strong alliance between South Korea and the United States.

The ultimate goal of the American policy regarding North Korea is “complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization.” To achieve this, Mr. Panetta said the United States must maintain and even enhance a strong military presence. He called this “force projection” in the region.

He realizes, though, the anxiety this creates in the minds of South Koreans, especially residents of Seoul.

“This beating heart of South Korea is only minutes away from the border of one of the most aggressive regimes on Earth,” he said, acknowledging that a war with North

Korea would be painful. “There is no question that North Korea would be doomed,” he said, “but that would cost lives and would take a terrible toll.”

Mr. Panetta desires unification on the Korean peninsula, but he stressed that such unification must be on South Korean terms, which is “non-negotiable,” but also possible.

“[South Korea has] all the leverage, and if South Korea makes clear that it will not surrender what makes it strong, it has a chance at successful reunification,” he said.

Yet, China is necessary to achieve unification, he noted.

“I think we have to work together to have China play a positive role here,” Mr. Panetta said. “It is critical that we work together to meet the challenges in this region.”

Considering the alliance between China and North Korea, Mr. Panetta is surprisingly optimistic. While China had a strong relationship with Kim Jeong-Il, Mr. Panetta openly wonders about their feelings for Kim Jeong-Un. Mr. Panetta sees North Korea as inherently unstable, and doubts that it is in China’s best interests to keep Kim Jeong-Un in place.

“This leader is as unpredictable to China as he is to us,” Mr. Panetta said, “and I’m not so certain that we are able to negotiate with him.”

Mr. Panetta also addressed anxieties about China’s new territorial claims in the South China Sea, which he sees as unacceptable.

“We cannot allow one country like China to suddenly say that it can make territorial claims . . . and violate international rules when making those claims,” he said.

Citing historical precedent, Mr. Panetta stressed that if countries are able to assert their authority over others, unchallenged and in violation of international law, we will pay a bigger price in the future.

“History is replete with that lesson,” he said. “For China to make these territorial claims is in violation of international rules. That cannot be allowed.”

“Every time I visit the Republic of Korea,” Mr. Panetta said, “I am always impressed by the close relationship between the Republic of Korea military and the United States military forces.”

He reiterated that there is no alternative to a strong alliance between South Korea and the United States, and that the partnership will continue for the foreseeable future. “Ka chi, kap shi da,” he said. “Let us go forward together.”