

## An Interview with

# B.B. Bell

**JFQ:** When you took command of your present duties, what were your top goals and priorities? Were you given any specific orders?

**General Bell:** I wasn't given any specific marching orders, which I found refreshing. I clearly was told to maintain the readiness of the force, lead the U.S.–ROK [Republic of Korea] Combined Forces Command so that deterrence would be assured on the Korean Peninsula, and if deterrence failed, we'd be able to win decisively and quickly. I had been in Europe for 3 years, commanding U.S. Army Europe, but importantly for this job in Korea, I had been a NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] commander. To say the least, dealing with 26 great nations in NATO gave me a good foundation for trying to understand what the issues are with our allies and the complexities they face. But it was refreshing not to be given specific guidance to achieve some policy goal.

I studied a lot before I arrived in Korea. Before I landed at Osan Air Base, I had partially concluded that the alliance was under enormous stress, that the interests of the Republic of Korea and the United States were diverging, and that we were finding it very difficult to find common ground. Because of that, I had some work to do to understand what it was that was causing friction in the alliance.

I was pleasantly surprised to learn that my fears were largely unfounded. We don't have divergent interests at all with our ally. In fact, our interests are very similar; they're just as clear today as they were probably 54 years ago at the end of the Korean War. What I had not taken into account, and perhaps what our nation has not taken into account fully, is the incredible success story that is the Republic of Korea. For those of us who grew up on *MASH*, the TV program, we have an indelible memory of those pictures. And those pictures portend a country that is Third World, largely backward, war-torn, and agrarian.

But in fact today the Republic of Korea is a modern, first-world nation. It's the 11<sup>th</sup>-largest economy in the world. Think about that: here's a nation with 49 million people and they're producing goods and services for world consumption at a rate within the top 11 in the world—and that includes more populous nations like the United States, China, Japan, etc. When you land in the Republic of Korea, you see miles and miles of high-rise buildings, from 15 to 60 stories, and a modern, first-world country with a transportation network and corresponding infrastructure, advanced hospitals, great universities, cultural centers, and vibrant business enterprise. You become almost envious looking at it.

So what I have learned is that the ROK is a modern nation that wants to be self-reliant. And to the extent that the United States is perceived to be dominating the Republic of Korea by its citizens, it can cause friction. What our ally wants is an equal stance with the United States, to be on a fully equal basis. It wants an *understanding* ally. For example, the fact that I'm the commander of Combined Forces Command is in itself of concern to many Koreans. They think, "Why in the world would an American command our military during war in the year 2007?" As commander of Combined Forces Command, in war, I command all forces, joint and combined, in the Korean theater of operations during conflict. Why is that? Their military is first-world. I know most of the militaries that the United States deals with very well. I've trained with them. With nearly 15 years deployed overseas, I know the British military, the French, the Germans, and the Russians very well, among others. This Republic of Korea military is a competent peer of any of those militaries.

So, again, if you were an average Korean, you might ask, "Why is a U.S. commander still in charge of our security during war?" What you might want is a partnership where



JFQ (David H. Gurney)

**General B.B. Bell, USA, is Commander, United Nations Command/Combined Forces Command/United States Forces Korea.**

the United States remains in a mutual defense treaty arrangement allowing Korea to lead its military operations and assuring our direct commitment in case of war. So the pressure points I found had more to do with an outdated *structural approach* to our alliance than it did with our common interests. We have the same interests. We want democracy, individual freedom, a free market economy—we're negotiating a free trade agreement—we want North Korea to behave itself and to join the free world. I think that in pursuit of North Korean engagement, we've begun to also accommodate our ally. And quite frankly, similarly, we have said to our ally, "There are some things you need to understand about the United States also." This is not 1953 for us either. We've got a lot of things going on in the world, and we need a reliable and trusted ally too. So we've put a few requests on the table for our ally and have been very firm that, as we make changes in the way we approach the alliance, we would ask that they make similar changes—and they are.

So, as a really long answer to a very short question, what did I find in the Republic of Korea? I found a nation that wants to be in charge of its own security and wants a reliable and dependable ally, the United States, to remain in Korea in support of the

Col David H. Gurney, USMC (Ret.), and Dr. Jeffrey D. Smotherman of *Joint Force Quarterly* interviewed General Bell at his Pentagon liaison office.



DOD (Cherie A. Thurby)

Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates meets Korean Defense Minister Jang Soo Kim at Pentagon

they want to continue to help us worldwide as well, and they're doing it. That was all very refreshing.

**JFQ:** *General [Peter] Pace, like General [Richard] Myers before him, speaks frequently about more effective partnering with other Federal agencies, allies, and industry. How does your command promote the coherent integration of U.S. military capabilities with other elements of U.S. and allied power?*

**General Bell:** We are in an armistice environment in the Republic of Korea, so I realized that I needed to gain the assistance of all of the departments of our government to engage effectively with the Republic of Korea. For example, if I want to impact the burden-sharing money that the Republic of Korea provides us for nonpersonnel stationing costs, it's our State Department that negotiates with their Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. So I go talk to the State Department, including our Ambassador in the Republic of Korea, and set up some parameters, provide my logic, tell them how these monies will be spent, and try to draw some red lines. Dealing with an ally cuts across all of our departments of government.

Also, we must look at potential conflict with North Korea. Every day we have challenges with the North Koreans. Obviously, we are engaged in a very sensitive, and hopefully productive, Six-Party Talk process, where

an agreement was reached to denuclearize North Korea, and to compensate them for that with economic assistance and security guarantees. Well, that took the governments and Ministries of Foreign Affairs of five other nations, led by the United States and the U.S. State Department. My relationship with Ambassador Chris Hill—whom I've known for years—is very important in this. I can explain to him what we ought not to trade away and what we would be willing to discuss in this process. And it just goes on from there, whether it's the Department of State, National Security Council, or Department of the Treasury. I can't tell you how important it is that we have total integration of the interagency in both dealing with our ally and in dealing with North Korean aggression.

So General Pace is absolutely right. There's a lot of diplomatic work to be done across government, short of war and in war, that is clear to me in the Republic of Korea, and northeast Asia in general, as we deal with the daily complexities of this very important area of the world.

**JFQ:** *Please tell us about emerging issues on the Korean Peninsula, and perhaps provide an explanation of why we need to keep U.S. forces in the South in the face of other global demands for resources.*

**General Bell:** I want to address the second part of your question first. The

Republic of Korea in northeast Asia represents a vital national interest area for the United States. First, this has to do with economics. Twenty-five percent of the world's trade flows through northeast Asia. Whether it's Korea, Japan, or China, if you're trading in the world, one out of every four things you trade, commodity-wise and dollar-wise, is going through that area. Twenty-four percent of U.S. foreign trade flows through that area. Korea itself is the seventh-largest U.S. trading partner. Our economy is a global economy, and we depend on global markets for our national well-being. Twenty-five percent of those markets are in my neighborhood, and this number is growing. So there's a vital national interest here. It's extremely important that this area of the world remains peaceful, stable, and open to free trade, so that our business interests can flourish, and so can theirs. That's a major reason why Korea is important to the United States.

Two, there remains a real threat in that region to peace, stability, and security, and it's a rogue state called North Korea. So it's in our interest to have military missions in northeast Asia. We have those missions currently in the Republic of Korea and in Japan as a demonstration of our commitment to stability and peace. Even when the day comes and a peace treaty replaces the current armistice, every instinct that I have tells me that we will want to maintain military missions in Korea and Japan, as long as we are welcome and wanted. Every poll that we've ever seen conducted in Korea says the same thing. The citizens of Korea want the United States to remain garrisoned in their country, fully respecting their sovereignty and fully supportive of their processes, but *there* nonetheless as a reliable and trusted ally. Today we are indeed welcome and wanted.

It is in the national interests of the United States and the Republic of Korea, and other partners in the region as well, for the United States to remain militarily engaged here. Because of the natural resources, lines of communication, and products that we will have to deliver around the world, northeast Asia is going to remain a national vital interest area for us. So our force here—a mere 2 percent of the U.S. Active duty military is stationed in the Republic of Korea—is a terrific bargain for America. It achieves an enormous positive payback for the United States for such a small contribution in military power: a future force of 25,000 Servicemembers for this

huge payback in stable global trade—again, 25 percent of the world’s trade and 24 percent of U.S. trade. So this is a small price to pay and I think every American is more than willing to continue to pay this kind of price for that kind of return on investment. I am certain that when presented to the American people like that, the answer will be a resounding, “We need to stay in northeast Asia as long as we’re welcome and wanted.”

**JFQ:** *Are there any impending force structure changes that you wish to speak to?*

**General Bell:** Absolutely. As I said earlier, we need to adapt and change, commensurate with our alliance mechanisms and in consultation with our Korean ally. In the year 2007 and given the capacity and capability of the ROK military, a U.S. commander in charge of the Korean military during wartime is in need of revision. Both nations agree on this. Since 1994, we and our Korean ally have been consulting over the future of our current combined headquarters led by a U.S. general, and when would be the right time to inactivate the headquarters and *empower* the Republic of Korea to command their own forces in wartime, with the United States in

a doctrinally supporting combat role. There have been many ideas about when it would be right to do this, and of course there’s lots of debate on both sides of the issue.

But the Korean people have spoken about this. In fact, the president of the Republic of Korea came forth to our President several years ago and said, “We want to do this, we’re ready.” And so these negotiations became very serious about 3 years ago. Earlier this year, our nations concluded an agreement to inactivate the Combined Forces Command, and the Republic of Korea will stand up and run its own joint force command to defend its nation by April 17, 2012. We’ll activate a standing warfighting joint force headquarters in Korea to support their defense with critical U.S. combat capabilities. This gives both nations 5 years to make the necessary programmatic and structural changes and to conduct the necessary training and exercises. We will ensure that we do this with no increased risk to our alliance deterrence capability, or defense readiness. This is essential and will not be compromised.

This is the biggest change in command and control since the start of the Korean War in 1950, when the Republic of Korea gave the United States command over its forces. Obviously, this is an emotional issue for many. Some great Korean patriots would rather not see this happen, and others would favor it. Same thing for influence groups in the United States. But, on balance, a significant majority of leaders in the United States, a significant majority of leaders in Korea, and the citizens of Korea in general favor what we’ve agreed to do. It will work, it will work well, and it will allow us to respect the sovereignty of the Republic of Korea directly and put us in a lower profile position on the peninsula. It will also allow us to maintain our alliance for mutual defense and to deter and defend on the peninsula. Also, the Republic of Korea will have the opportunity to continue to help us with our military requirements, which they are doing today in no small way, including force commitments to Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as a new commitment for a contribution to the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Lebanon.

**JFQ:** *We recently interviewed General James Cartwright [Commander, U.S. Strategic Command]. We spoke to him about ownership of ballistic missiles—a very sensitive subject. When there is a launch north of the parallel,*

*our readership would like to know who owns it and how these command and control conduits work, or at least to get a feel for that. At what point in its trajectory does responsibility shift from USFK [United States Forces Korea] to PACOM [U.S. Pacific Command] to STRATCOM [U.S. Strategic Command] to NORTHCOM [U.S. Northern Command]? Where does the decision to destroy or intercept lie? What can be said about USFK coordination with allies in relation to such weapons?*

**General Bell:** That’s a great question, and quite frankly, the important issue is not who *owns* it, but how it—an enemy missile—is interdicted, and who’s there with the authority to pull the trigger. We’ve got to stop these things from landing on friendly territory, allied or U.S.

There is an easy piece to this and a hard piece. I’m mostly responsible for the easier piece because in the Republic of Korea, we’re dealing with theater ballistic missiles, going on a fairly short north-to-south trajectory. They’re relatively easy to detect and we know pretty well who has to interdict them. U.S. Patriots are the best capability I’ve got to do that right now. The Republic of Korea has a developing capability with their Aegis destroyers, and plans to purchase Patriots. As such, on the Korean Peninsula, we have coordination requirements and our systems must interface within a unified command and control system.

The keys are to have clear rules of engagement, have the exercising and training under our belts, and have the detection processes in place in a very reliable way. Then, when the intercept capability detects the conditions, knows the missile is coming, and recognizes that it’s in an engagement envelope, the inbound missile has to be engaged and destroyed. All the procedures to do this have to be in place. While we require a shared information network with several of the combatant commands that you mentioned, our theater ballistic missile command and control challenges in South Korea are relatively clear, and we have the right procedures in place to assure our readiness.

Command and control issues if a North Korean missile is not directed south but is headed off the peninsula are, of course, more challenging. A key issue is to make sure we know the intention of the missile—a peaceful space launch or hostile—*understanding this* is extremely difficult without the cooperation of



Chairman and his Korean counterpart at change of command ceremony from GEN Leon LaPorte to GEN Bell

U.S. Air Force (D. Myles Culler)

South Korean sailor provides security for arrival of USS  
Paul Hamilton, Exercise Foal Eagle 2007

Fleet Combat Camera, Pacific (Sandra M. Palumbo)



the North Koreans. So right now the various combatant commands are training on and practicing a range of engagement criteria and decisionmaking. The key is rapid response with engagement decisions made at the right level in the right timeframes to effectively interdict.

None of this is an academic exercise. Clearly if a ballistic missile originating from North Korea crosses out of the Korea theater of operations, perhaps heads over Japan and across the Pacific, a fully functional and synchronous system must respond. The key is testing the totality of all the decisionmaking processes involved, and then testing those processes in realistic exercise scenarios to make sure that they work properly. You've got to prove to yourself that what you've agreed on will work when time is measured in minutes and seconds. We've not finished with all that work yet, but all the impacted combatant commands are focused on solutions, and I have lots of confidence in the direction we're headed.

**JFQ:** *What should joint professionals know about U. S. Forces Korea that they don't seem to grasp? There's a lot going on now in CENTCOM [U.S. Central Command], and I think to a certain degree EUCOM [U.S. European Command] and PACOM have lost the exposure they used to have.*

**General Bell:** To the joint force officer, I would say beware of those who try to convince our nation that we've seen our last conventional war involving an enemy state actor. *Beware.* It is true that the major and significant threat to the United States

today lies in the insurgent/terrorist arena. We all respect that and we're all committed to fighting terrorism and ensuring our nation is protected against the onslaught of any kind of weaponry that could be brought to bear by a small group of terrorists. This is our charge and our commitment to the American people today.

Having said that, we should be very careful not to view terrorism as the future of all warfare, thus forgetting about conventional wars and weapons. When we came out of Vietnam, we discounted counterinsurgency—turned our back and walked away from it. You couldn't even find a manual on it. Perhaps we have paid a price for that inattention. Now, however, we could be headed in the other direction. I think we now run the risk of walking away from conventional warfare capabilities—*theater level war*. I am convinced that in addition to the worldwide terrorist threat, some day a hostile nation out there is going to challenge our interests and our allies, or challenge us directly, in a way that we will be required to defend our nation or help our allies in a conventional warfare scenario. When I say *conventional*, I mean against state-formed, trained, and organized conventional militaries with traditional armies, navies, air forces, and marine forces that we will have to engage at the theater level of war. After all, how did Operation *Iraqi Freedom* start, anyway? It was a conventional fight, with conventional forces, with ships and planes and tanks, and long sweeping maneuver attacks pointed toward a hardened enemy's national capital. It's something different now in Iraq,

but we certainly went to war with a nation called Iraq.

In this global world, we are not through with threats to the United States that emanate from nations and states who have become our competitors for either resources, or our way of life—free trade, democracy, or individual freedoms. We must defend our interests, and we need a military that is sufficiently *full-spectrum capable* so that we can defend ourselves however we are threatened—whether it's a terrorist threat with a nuclear weapon, whether it's a terrorist threat with an IED [improvised explosive device], or whether it's a nation with a big army, air force, and navy. We owe it to our Constitution and to our citizens to defend our nation against all enemies—every one of them—who pose a threat to our way of life. It would be nice if we could inform our enemies of how we'd like them to organize, and then we can figure out how to combat them with single focus forces, but we've had really poor luck in doing that for the last 200 plus years. So beware of a military that walks away from conventional force capability and structures itself to deal solely in counterinsurgency because that will create the vulnerability that some nation will try to take advantage of.

And today, the U.S.-led Combined Forces Command in Korea is the *only* command I know that routinely and vigorously conducts theater-level warfare exercises in a conventional scenario. We are today keeper of conventional warfare doctrine. And conventional war is not extinct—it will happen again and our nation must be ready.

**JFQ:** Thank you, sir.