

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH GENERAL WALTER "SKIP" SHARP, COMMANDER, UNITED STATES FORCES KOREA VIA TELECONFERENCE SUBJECT: PRIORITIES FOR U.S. FORCES KOREA TIME: 11:00 A.M. EST DATE: TUESDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2009

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LIEUTENANT JENNIFER CRAGG, (Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): Welcome to the Defense's Bloggers Roundtable for Tuesday, December 15th, 2009. My name is Lieutenant Jennifer Cragg with the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs and I'll be moderating the call today.

A note to the bloggers and online journalists on the call: Please clearly state your name and organization you're with prior to asking your questions.

Today our guest is U.S. Army General Walter "Skip" Sharp. He is the commander of United States Forces Korea. General Sharp will discuss his priorities for U.S. Forces Korea to include readiness to meet the current and future military challenges. With that, I would like to turn it over to General Sharp for an opening statement and we'll go into questions. Sir, the floor is yours.

GEN. SHARP: Good morning. Again, this is Skip Sharp, the commander of United Nations Command, Combined Forces Command and U.S. Forces Korea. I've been in command since June of 2008. And when I took command I established three priorities that have been the focus of all of our forces in Korea.

The first is to be prepared to fight and win, and that really gets at our ability to be able to deter and defend in the Republic of Korea and to be able to rapidly execute our war plans. Over this past year we have actually strengthened our capability to do that as we've worked through the provocations from North Korea and we've exercised our war plans as we've moved forward.

So that's my first priority is to be prepared to fight and win. And the second priority is to be able to strengthen the alliance -- what I believe is the strongest alliance -- (audio break) -- the Republic of Korea-U.S. alliance.

In that area we focus primarily on preparing for OPCON transition on the 17th of April, 2012. As you all know, that if we went to war today I would be in command of all of the forces, both U.S. and the Republic of Korea.

On the 17th of April, 2012, we will transition so that the ROK chairman, the ROK JCS, will be in command of the warfight and the U.S. will be in a supporting to supported relationship.

That does not mean our commitment is reduced at all. Our forces on the peninsula, which we have about 28,500, of all services will remain the same for the foreseeable future. That's been codified by both Secretary Gates and President Obama. And if we had to go to war, our commitment and the capabilities that we would bring to the warfight are very similar to the ones that we have today.

We will work with the Republic of Korea to define exactly what the enduring capabilities are that the U.S. will bring for the foreseeable future, and what are the bridging capabilities that we will bring well after OPCON transition until the Republic of Korea is able to acquire those capabilities. So, again, the second priority of being able to strengthen the alliance.

And the third priority is to be able to improve the quality of life for all of our servicemembers, Department of Defense civilians, and families. We are working very hard to make sure that the facilities, the services, the schools, the medical capability that we have in the Republic of Korea is top-notch, which it is today, but also we are working towards being able to have all of our servicemembers come to Korea for two- and three-year tours and bring their families instead of one year at a time unaccompanied. Secretary Gates approved this over a year ago. We have made great progress. We have gone from about 1,700 official command-sponsored families in Korea during the summer of 2008 to 3,700 command-sponsored families in Korea. And we will continue to grow the number of families and the length of tours in Korea as facilities are available.

I anticipate by this time next year to be close to 4,900 command-sponsored families, and that will grow over time, again as we build apartments and medical facilities and schools, to 14,000 command-sponsored families.

(Inaudible.) It greatly reduces stress on our military to have accompanied tours in Korea, so it reduces the amount of time that servicemembers have to be separated from their families.

It greatly increases and shows our commitment to not only the Republic of Korea and the peninsula, but to all Northeast Asia to maintain stability and security in a critical part of the world.

So it's an exciting time to be in Korea. I think we have many opportunities over the next several years to really increase our alliance

and to make it a global strategic alliance, and I'm honored to be the commander at this time. And with that, I will open it up to questions.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, sir. Let's go to the first blogger. Clyde, please go ahead.

Q Thank you. General, my name is Clyde Middleton from patriotroom.com and Patriot Room Radio. My question is the leadership in North Korea. Kim Jong Il is decidedly an individual that does not play well with others. There has been rumors and speculation and now perhaps even a naming of his successor. Do you have a feel for the timing on how something like that could play out and how it might change relations?

GEN. SHARP: Well, again, we call on Kim Jong Il to abide by the U.N. Security Council resolution and to de-nuclearize and to complete all of the actions that were agreed to in the 2006 statement that was agreed to by all parties.

He needs to return to the Six Party talks and to denuclearize and take this opportunity in order to be a leader that will be seen as a responsible leader throughout the world.

Q All right, thank you, sir.

LT. CRAGG: Thanks, Clyde. Jeff, please go ahead. Q Hi, this is Jeff Shogol with Stars and Stripes, but don't hold that against me.

Q Yeah, I thought you'd get a chuckle out of that. When Admiral Mullen went to Korea in October, he talked about the possibility that troops from ROK could rotate to the Middle East. Is there any update on that? GEN. SHARP: No, he didn't say that. What Admiral Mullen said, it was not that they were going to rotate anytime in the near future to the Middle East, and we were talking about -- what he was talking about is that as we work with the Koreans to determine what are the capabilities and what do the forces in Korea need to be able to do, we are working towards being able to have our forces there, not only what we've been doing for years of deterring and rapidly executing our war plans, but also to be able to regionally engage and globally deploy, never forgetting that our number-one priority in Korea is to deter and be prepared to defend.

And we are not at the point yet where we are ready to globally deploy. That will come after only much consultation with the Republic of Korea. It will only come after we are much further along on toward normalization so that the servicemembers, if we do come to an agreement would be able to deploy as units from Korea, leave their families there and then return back to Korea -- very similar to what we do with the troops that we have in Germany right now. (Audio break) -- referring to.

There is no immediate plans for our troops in Korea -- my troops -- to deploy to Afghanistan or Iraq or anywhere else for that matter at this time, and that includes what -- and even after the discussions -- the surge that we're doing in Afghanistan. Q Is it possible to

estimate when you might be -- or when USFK might be in a position to deploy to the Middle East?

GEN. SHARP: Again, that will depend upon consultations between our countries and how quickly we are able to get toward normalization so that you're not deploying a soldier from an unaccompanied tour to another unaccompanied tour.

Q Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, Jeff. Karaka, please go ahead.

Q Hi. Good morning. My name is Karaka from Karaka Pend. I was curious about the relationship of -- H1N1 had been identified in North Korea as a very high risk factor, and recently South Korea has stepped in to offer vaccinations to assist North Korea with the spread of vaccination in that country. I was just curious if you had any thoughts about the humanitarian impact of that relationship.

GEN. SHARP: Well, again, I think the Republic of Korea is doing the right thing to be able to help with the situation in North Korea, the people that potentially have H1N1. And they offered that to North Korea, the Republic of Korea did, and they are working towards being able to -- my understanding is they're working towards being able to get the vaccine moved up to North Korea.

Q Okay, thank you very much.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, Karaka. Chuck, please go ahead.

Q General, Chuck Simmins from America's North Shore Journal. Thank you for taking the time to talk with us today.

GEN. SHARP: Good morning.

Q I want to go back to the deployment issue. Given the unique situation of the units under your command versus -- you know, they have essentially a fixed mission versus the units in the United States and Europe. How do career military people in your command -- how do they get the experience in combat that, frankly, is almost a job requirement for advancement in the combat branches of the military if there is no deployment going on?

GEN. SHARP: Well, again, as you know -- a couple of things. First off, of course, our troops, our individual soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines, go from assignment to assignment. And over the last many years the deployments have mostly been one year at a time in Korea. And so they have gone from assignment in Korea to assignments back in the States, to Germany, and then deployed from there since 2001, and even before that in Bosnia and Haiti. So they have those opportunities and that will remain for the future.

But the other thing that we're doing in Korea is we really have the ability because of ranges in the training capabilities that we have

in Korea to do what's called full-spectrum training. So we train all the way from counterinsurgency to against a high-end threat that is doing a deliberate attack, much like we used to do back at the National Training Center before 2001.

And we're able to do that in a joint environment so all of our services train together, and we do it in a combined environment with the Republic of Korea military, which is very good. So it really gives our servicemembers the opportunity to do that full-spectrum training so that if they had to be prepared to go to a conflict of that type rather than counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, we're prepared to do that.

Q Thank you, sir.

LT. CRAGG: Thanks, Chuck. Please go ahead, Josh.

Q Thank you. This is Josh Rogin from Foreign Policy magazine. I'm just wondering, in the last few weeks, if you've seen any new movements on the North Korean side in terms of preparing or setting the stage for maneuvers or tests or missile launches of any kind. Can you give us an update on what sort of activity you're seeing?

GEN. SHARP: Nope. Obviously I can't confirm -- talk about any intelligence that we're having, but we watch very closely within North Korea. I think North Korea is -- how they're going to react to the Ambassador Bosworth trip. And, again, we're prepared for anything that North Korea would be doing.

Q Well, let me just ask you more broadly if you've seen any reaction since Ambassador Bosworth left -- political, diplomatic or otherwise.

GEN. SHARP: Clearly we're prepared for anything that's going on, and I wouldn't comment on that. You need to, on political or diplomatic, talk to the State Department about that.

Q Thank you. LT. CRAGG: Thanks, Josh. Let's go to David.

Q Hi, General. It's David Axe with warisboring.com. Thanks for taking the time to talk to us.

So, my question is, in working with South Korean forces, is the -- you know, in planning and training, is the emphasis still solely on North Korea as a sort of conventional threat, or over time have we seen -- recently seen, I don't know, maybe a focus on an eventual kind of broader role for South Korean forces perhaps joining in U.S.-led coalitions or getting involved in sort of the broader range of security-type operations all over the world that the United States leads and is involved in?

In other words, is that relationship still -- like it has been for decades, still focused just on North Korea or is it blossoming into something bigger?

GEN. SHARP: Great question, and the short answer is it's definitely blossoming -- your words -- into something larger. Let me talk about a couple of things.

First off, we watch very closely what is going on in Iraq and Afghanistan and make sure that the lessons learned that our forces are gaining there, we apply them both in tactical-level training and all the way up through our theater-level war plans on both exercises in and the plans process itself. And so we've taken a lot of lessons learned and made adjustments out of that because of what we've learned in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Secondly, as we look at our exercises, we really try to also learn from the day-to-day operations that are going on in Korea, for example over the last year with the provocations that North Korea has done. We adjust our training and our exercises to be able to account for those real-world type of provocations to make sure that we have prepared for them and that we are prepared to and can actually coordinate through all elements of power both of the Republic of Korea and the United States.

So, what that has evolved into is some relationship between Combined Forces Command, the ROK chairman's office -- the ROK JCS -- and Ambassador Stephens in the U.S. embassy there, to make sure that we are able to quickly and effectively share intelligence, quickly and effectively prepare for any operations we need to do, both in actions and in words.

And Ambassador Stephens has worked very hard with the minister of defense -- I mean, with MOFAT, Minister Yu, to make sure again that the U.S. government and the ROK government are lockstep as we look at North Korea. Also, I think it's important to note that, you know, that Korea has been deployed to many places and not just focused on the North Korean threat. When the Zaytun Division was in Korea they did a great job -- I mean in Iraq, they did a great job there, and in fact, if you count the number of troops that deployed in and out of Iraq while the Zaytun Division was there, they're still the third-largest contributor of forces. They have a ship off of Somalia right now, fighting pirates and doing a great job. They are in numerous U.N. peacekeeping missions around the world, and again doing a great job.

And, finally, they are considering getting ready to send a provisional reconstruction team, PRT, back to Afghanistan sometime next year. And so we're working with them to make sure that how we operate in Afghanistan is understood by the units and the commands that will deploy there.

So I really do think that we are looking at what type of capabilities and training do we need, both on the ROK and the U.S. side, not only against the North Korean threat but against future threats to the alliance and on a global scale.

Q Great. Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, David. Dale, you're next. Please go ahead.

Q Good morning, General. This is Dale Kissinger from Military Avenue. I have a quick question about the base infrastructure or post infrastructure in Korea. Do you have the budget that you need to upgrade the facilities for the families that are coming?

GEN. SHARP: Great question.

Thank you. As you know, we are in the process of establishing a new base or really expanding a base -- Camp Humphreys -- down by Pyeontaek and about 15 miles from Osan Air Force Base. Several years ago the Republic of Korea asked us to move out of Yongsan, where my current headquarters is in the middle of Seoul, and we said that we would agree to do that as long as they would build and pay for the infrastructure to replace all the facilities we have in Yongsan, and they are doing that. At the same time we said we wanted to consolidate the Second Infantry Division, which is all north of Seoul, and consolidate them and also move them to Camp Humphreys.

We are going from about 107 camps and stations where we were located just several years ago, kind of where we ended up at the end of the Korean War, to when all of these moves are complete we'll be down to 42 locations. The infrastructure bill that's going into Camp Humphreys, we have the appropriate funding both on the ROK and the U.S. side to be able to do that. It will take another five or six years to complete that but great progress has already been made. When it is complete it will be the best post, the best installation in the world.

And you know, it should be a -- we can start basically from the ground up and say, how would you design motor pools and barracks and mess halls to be close to each other and apartments for families to live in and schools close together with plenty of green zone? So we're working our way through that and actually making great progress.

To get to the final point of 14,000 families there will require additional infrastructure even beyond what we're building at Camp Humphreys right now because it will really be -- it will be all services, obviously, with the primary ones being the Army and the Air Force. I'm very comfortable that we will be able to make great progress to the needs of those families as far as schools -- I mean, sorry, as far as apartments, as far as places to live, and medical. Schools is a different issue. I'm comfortable that we will be -- we have the funding and what we need to get to the 6,000 or so families by 2016. To get from there to 14,000 families, the long pole in the tent in schools.

And we're working with the Department of Defense here, of course, and then also with the Koreans in order to be able to come up with different mechanisms to build those schools. DoDEA, the Department of Defense Education Activity, has been to visit us many times and they're comfortable they can get the teachers there and have high quality. We've got to get the construction complete, though, and agreed to.

We are very proud of our schools right now in Korea. The DOD schools we have in Korea consistently get the highest SAT scores of any schools in the DOD systems and well above the national average, more academy nominations and scholarships than other DOD schools, and we want to maintain that quality in Korea. So that's the long pole in the tent but we're working hard to be able to work our way through that.

Q As a quick follow on, and as the spouse of a teacher who was in Iceland waiting for a job and DOD brought in teachers from the States instead of hiring military spouses that were qualified, is Korea a place where military spouse employment is being important and taken care of as families arrive?

GEN. SHARP: Absolutely. I've actually formed an initiative group that's been working this for about a year because it is critical. Not only do we have to do all of this that we talked about with schools and medical, but because there are a number of spouses that are employed and enjoy being employed and really contribute, that is critical in Korea.

We're working our way through -- spouses in Korea have the luxury of staying under SOFA visa so they still have SOFA protections, but also getting a visa to be able to work downtown in Seoul or other places throughout Korea. So we're working with the Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry and others to be able to get jobs for spouses. On post we also are working that, and as we build Camp Humphreys there will be more and more opportunities for spouses to be able to do that. And as you mentioned, on the teacher side, again, Dr. Miles, the head of DoDEA, is working towards that. As family members are qualified to be able to teach, there will be many more that are needed, and I'm absolutely confident that they will be able to be employed along those lines.

Q Absolutely. Thank you, sir.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, Dale. Bryant, and then, Maggie, you will be next. Bryant, please go ahead.

Q Hi. Bryant Jordan, Military.com. Good morning.

GEN. SHARP: Good morning.

Q On the matter of bringing more families to Korea, I mean, right on the face of it you can see where it makes sense -- troops will be happy to have their families with them, reduced costs of more frequent deployments of people going over for a year at a time -- but Korea was still technically at war with them, and that's made more complicated by North Korea's nuclear ambitions, aspirations. So I guess my question is, does it really make sense, in that respect, to put more families with spouses and children over there where there could possibly just be a tripwire?

GEN. SHARP: Great question. Thank you for that. And obviously I think the answer to that is yes, it does make sense. Let me talk about a couple of things. First off, we work very, very hard to make sure that we

watch what North Korea is doing on an every-minute basis. And we have some great indicators and warnings that we track very, very closely, and as we see things adjust in North Korea, we react to that and we're prepared for those.

As part of that of course is the determination of whether we should NEO folks out of there, and we have worked over the last year and half of so very closely with the Republic of Korea to make sure that the NEO plan that we have in Korea is real and we could execute it, and we've made great progress.

I mean, I could tell you today that at the collection centers that we would stand up, if we had to NEO, who would be the Korean forces that would be helping to protect those, and which trains and different buses we would use to get folks to airports and to ports to be able to ferry out. So we really have worked hard to make sure we have an executable plan and a very detailed plan to NEO out.

It's also made it easier -- will make it easier as we consolidate our forces down at Camp Humphreys and other places to be able to more rapidly go out. So, from the perspective of looking at North Korea, being confident that we would react quickly and have a good plan in place in case we had to execute it, I'm very comfortable that we're there. On the other side, I do think that sending servicemembers longer with their families sends a huge signal to North Korea that we are committed and that we are committed for the foreseeable future, for the life of the alliance, and that that signal to North Korea I think would be very clear to them that they would make a huge mistake if they were to attack and that we are prepared for that. And so the deterrent value of that I think is also important.

And then, finally, I think that as we establish soldiers there, all servicemembers there for longer periods of time, with their families, not only do you professionally grow and become a stronger, more capable force, but you also personally grow, to be able to establish the relationships, the personal relationships with the great people in the Republic of Korea. And, again, I think that makes us stronger, not only against North Korea but to be able to -- you could do all the other things we talked about earlier on here on the call to deal with security challenges and opportunities in Northeast Asia.

Q Thank you.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, Bryant. We have time for one more blogger. It's Maggie. Maggie, please go ahead. Q Good morning, General.

GEN. SHARP: Good morning.

Q My question is going to be 360 degrees away from everybody else. What did your dad do in the war?

GEN. SHARP: (Laughs.) Three-hundred-and -- he was a platoon leader in the 40th National Guard Division out of California, a platoon leader and as assistant S3. I'm very proud of the fact that I'm an Army

"brat." I was born actually when my father was fighting in the Korean War. When he came back, he was active duty military and he stayed in the service for 28 years. We moved around to many, many different locations. I loved growing up as a military kid and moving around to different posts and all. I'm very, very proud of his service and humble to be now in command of the command that -- in the country that he served in when I was born. And thank you for that question.

Q You're welcome. Thanks for the time.

LT. CRAGG: Thank you, Maggie. Right now I want to turn it back over to the general. If you have any closing thoughts, sir, the floor is yours again.

GEN. SHARP: Again, I really appreciate you all's time to be able to allow me to have the opportunity to tell you about the great opportunities that we have in Korea. Yes, there's challenges but I think that opportunities far outweigh the challenges. And it's an exciting time to be in command over there. I'm honored to be in command.

And I encourage folks who have not been to Korea for many years or maybe never been to Korea to come to Korea and visit. It is a modern, wonderful country. For those old enough, like I am, to remember the "M*A*S*H" TV series, it's not at all like that. It is a great country that welcomes our troops and really takes care of our troops and families. And, again, thank you all for your time this morning.

A note to everybody on the call: The audiofile as well as the transcript and the story from today's call will be available on www.dodlive.mil. Again, thank you, sir, for your time and thank you for the bloggers. This ends today's teleconference.

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