

The Fourth Think Tank 2022 Keynote Address: East Asia is the Hot Spot

Mark Esper
February 26, 2022
US Secretary Of Defense (2017–2019)



Good morning, everyone. It is great to be back in Korea!

Let me begin by stating clearly upfront that East Asia will likely be the epicenter for geopolitical instability and great-power competition for years to come. Despite this, we in the United States too often fixate on other parts of the world.

For example, the Middle East is home to the world's greatest state sponsor of terrorism, a country bent on dominating the region through proxy forces and its own conventional military might, and it -- the Islamic Republic of Iran -- aspires to become a nuclear power.



Europe

On the European continent, the United States and its NATO allies face challenges from a revanchist Russia, led by Vladimir Putin, who aims to restore Moscow's unmitigated influence -- if not controlled -- over parts of the former USSR, beginning these days with its neighbor, Ukraine. Rather than working to improve the welfare of the Russian people in his country, Putin would rather dismantle what's left of their democracy, their freedoms and their economy to pursue foreign adventurism, saber rattling, hybrid warfare, cyber-attacks and state sponsored misinformation. As we sit here today, over 100,000 Russian troops stand poised to strike Ukraine at any moment.

Asia

And then there's Asia, where the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has made excessive and illegal claims about its borders, trouncing the sovereignty of many states and strong-arming capitals throughout the region. Beijing's actions not only harm the economic interests of others, but their militarization of islands in the South China Sea and actions throughout the Indo-Pacific risk conflict with the United States and its allies. Further, the People's Republic of China's diplomatic bullying, economic intimidation and rapid military buildup represent the true nature of the CCP and its authoritarian leader, Xi Jinping.

All of these dynamics threaten the peace, sovereignty and security of others in the Indo-Pacific. But when I look at global flash points, at areas of the world where conflict could occur, at regions where the United States and its allies could end up at war -- nowhere else but in East Asia, are the stakes higher, the players bigger, the situation murkier, and the "game" more intense.

East Asia

It's East Asia, which might have war with North Korea or conflict in the Taiwan Strait, that can cite the following disturbing facts to make its case for being the epicenter of geopolitical instability: Four of the world's nuclear-capable states are here. The world's three largest economies and five total that rank in the top twelve are here. Six of the world's largest or most capable militaries are here. A half dozen of the world's most technologically advanced countries are here.

Importantly, all these key players are within missile range of one another. Unlike war with Iran in the Persian Gulf or a conflict with Russia and Europe, should hostilities break out in East Asia, it would have a devastating international impact, even if the war itself is geographically bounded by the East China Sea and its contiguous waters. Thousands could die, tens of thousands could be wounded. Millions would be displaced, economies would falter, financial systems would be disrupted, supply chains would collapse, governments could fail, and nuclear war, I fear, could ensue. While I'm confident that the United States and its allies would prevail in such a conflict, it is not one we ever want to undertake in the first place.



The US role

The United States must do its special part by demonstrating resolve and leading from the front. In this context, we should look to the past to help guide us in the future. A little bit of history that most of us are familiar with can help illuminate the way ahead. One of America's greatest presidents and my favorite was Ronald Reagan. Our fortieth president saw the United States as an exceptional nation, a shining city on a hill that offered hope and inspiration and promise to many. He was an unabashed, God-fearing patriot who saw our country's greatness in its constitution—the foundation of our republic—and in the American people.

President Reagan is remembered for many things. The one that stands out the most is how he overcame the greatest challenge of an era and defeated a major foe without ever getting into a fight. It was how he won the Cold War. With strength, clarity and resolve, Reagan stood down a succession of Soviet leaders bent on flexing their muscles in Africa, Latin America and Asia, and extending their communist philosophy and influence globally.

Reagan called the USSR an evil empire, a godless regime, one that didn't recognize the values and freedoms that we, you and I, hold dear. Reagan not only rebuilt the US military, he also strengthened our alliances, took principled stands, compromised where it made sense and built a strong American economy. Less than a year after he left office, the Berlin Wall fell. Two years after that, the Soviet Union collapsed. A new era of hope emerged from the rubble of communist Russia's defeat, and one country, one people divided by that cold war, Germany, soon reunited.

Unfortunately, bad ideologies die hard, especially when given new life by leaders who soft sell their governing beliefs to people unfamiliar with Communism's deep flaws. Some in our own countries now even buy into this model. As a result, we face renewed challenges today from this philosophy, a little more than three decades since the Warsaw Pact ended.

Emerging threats

Regrettably, the decline of the Soviet Union in the twentieth century has been replaced by the rise of China in the twenty-first. Like the USSR, the People's Republic of China wants to dominate its near abroad, and eventually the world, beginning with gaining total control over those closest to them --

Western China, Tibet, Hong Kong and next, Taiwan. Its heavy hand will eventually reach out farther and farther, to grab more and more.

Unlike the Berlin Wall, now a defunct symbol of a bygone era, the demilitarized zone still cuts across the Korean Peninsula, unnecessarily dividing a great people.

The despotic regime in Pyongyang ruled by Jong-un Kim is propped up by and supported by his benefactors in Beijing and Moscow, who turned blind eyes to the North's bad behaviors.

If China and Russia would approach the DPRK in alignment with the United States, South Korea and Japan and use the leverage they have with the hermit kingdom, we could quickly get on a peaceful path toward a constructive reunification. But they have not. So now, more than thirty years later, a new generation of leaders must follow Ronald Reagan's example, and America must lead again; it must do so with its values, and it must bring along its allies and partners. We must once again demonstrate strength, clarity and resolve. Diplomacy should be our primary emphasis. But it must be buttressed by a strong military, strengthened alliances and coalitions of democracies.



NATO for Asia

Together, and I emphasize "together," we must take a principled stand, compromise where it makes sense and be willing to make short-term sacrifices for the long term good. With this in mind, there are a few basic steps that we must take in order to be successful in East Asia. This list is not exhaustive, but it outlines some core essentials.

First, we must harness the great advantage we have over China, Russia and North Korea -- the combined power of our alliances and partnerships. This is our unique asymmetric edge, one that Beijing, Moscow and Pyongyang cannot match. And while the threats and challenges from these countries bring us together, it is our shared values, common histories, and the close ties between our peoples that bind us most tightly.

The United States has great bilateral alliances throughout the Indo-Pacific from Australia and the Philippines to Japan and South Korea and elsewhere. But what we need is better cooperation and collaboration between these allies, especially Seoul and Tokyo.

Moreover, we must work more closely with India, the Pacific Island countries and the member states of ASEAN and support the latter's centrality to the countries of Southeast Asia. We must help them all push back against common threats to their sovereignty and interests. We need to give them a better choice and then deliver on it.

It is said that the United States does not seek to build a "NATO for Asia." I say why not? We should have lofty goals and high expectations and not let history and distance confound us. America's European allies overcame a brutal history to form a collective security arrangement to deal with Soviet Russia. There's no reason why the same can't happen in the Indo-Pacific as we increasingly face off against a recalcitrant North Korea and aggressive Communist China.

The Quad

That is why I'm such a big believer in the quadrilateral security dialogue. The Quad, as it's better known, is a strategic dialogue between the United States, India, Japan and Australia; it is rightly viewed as a unified response to China's rising military and economic power.

During my tenure as the secretary of defense, I worked hard to move the Quad forward. On multiple occasions, I met with my Quad counterparts in Washington and abroad and participated in two of America's three major dialogues with our Indian counterparts. Together, we advanced many important agreements, understandings and initiatives. We were also able to participate with New Delhi in a Quad military exercise, which was a major step forward.

Second, while we need to continue to deepen and strengthen the Quad, we also need to broaden it. As such, I believe South Korea should be the next partner to join the Quad, transitioning it into the "Quint." It is something the Blue House should pursue this year.

Deepening our cooperation, collaboration and inter-operability is necessary if we are going to deter future conflict in East Asia.

But it is not sufficient. Every country must do more to improve its military capabilities. That gets to my third point that America's allies and partners need to invest at least two percent of their GDP for defense and invest in the right capabilities -- from offensive ones like long range precision strike capabilities to defensive ones like air and missile defenses, from Naval systems such as advanced submarines to fifth-generation fighter aircraft, and from command control and communications networks to their soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines.

I know that the Republic of Korea and Australia have already met this two percent mark. Japan has begun to climb above its historical one percent threshold but needs to do so more quickly. Some countries such as Taiwan are above two percent. But given our situation, much higher defense spending is warranted in the right areas.

Together though we all have to develop our collective capacity and capabilities to ensure we overmatch a China that has built the world's largest Navy, is developing hypersonic weapons at an astounding pace, continues to modernize and expand its air force and has credible outer space and cyber capabilities. Much of the same could be said for Russia, Beijing's junior partner. And as we all know, both countries are modernizing their nuclear arsenals. The capabilities we build to defend against these threats will also further our ability to deter aggression by North Korea, a poor country that possesses the world's fourth largest army.

Unity of Korea, Japan and the US is essential

Accompanying this task should be the elimination of ballistic missiles that can reach South Korea, Japan and beyond. Doing this is vital if we are to remove the specter of total war and intimidation that casts a shadow over meaningful negotiations. It will be up to Washington, Seoul, Tokyo and others to determine what confidence- building measures can assure Pyongyang that this is not an attempt to disarm the DPRK as a prelude to an allied attack, but an important step forward to resolving our differences and promoting long term peace. It should be accompanied with appropriate economic and other incentives, such as sanctions relief that over time will offer a clear and meaningful benefit for doing so as denuclearization is achieved.

Once this process begins, both sides can also explore resolving a panoply of other long-standing issues. I don't know what the odds of success are. I don't know how much progress can be made in the near term. But I do know that the likelihood of success is zero if we don't try.

It is my hope that our countries continue this important work together. It is central not just to the security and stability of the Korean Peninsula and East Asia, but also for the peoples on both sides of the DMZ, who are the tragic victims of this historical anomaly.

Achieving that future begins with strong partnerships between the United States, the Republic of Korea and Japan. These are relationships built not merely on formal treaties, but more importantly, on our shared values, our mutual interests, our common histories, our integrated economies, and deep, deep family connections. But we also need exceptional leadership--like Ronald Reagan and others of that era provided--to show us the way and guide us there based on our core goals and principles. And we need strong militaries and even stronger global coalitions to bolster their diplomacy and make conflict unpalatable to our competitors and adversaries.

With these key ingredients, the United States and our allies in the Indo-Pacific will win this epic 21st century contest, just like we won the cold war -- peacefully, by honoring our principles, defending our beliefs and acting with resolve to advance freedom and liberty for all.

Thank you. Kamsahamnida.

4th Think Tank 2022 Forum In Pursuit Of Reconciliation - Before Mark Esper's Keynote Address

Following the tolling of a bell, the curtain in the Global Arts Center rose revealing thirteen seated men whom the MC, Young-il Shin, a former KBS TV announcer, described as "experts on national defense and security (the topic of the forum) as well as peace leaders who had all attended the event to take part in the panel discussions."

Additionally, Mr. Shin announced that others from across the world would participate in the event through a two-way internet connection. "This fourth forum," he said, "would have a real-time connection to Korea, the United States and Japan." Mr. Shin described Think Tank 2022 as a "global networked body of experts promoting stability and peace in Northeast Asia and the world based on the desire for the peaceful reunification on the Korean Peninsula."

Dr. Young-ho Yoon, chairman of the Think Tank 2022 Forum Organizing Committee, gave a welcoming address. He informed the audience that a number of high-profile leaders, including eighty-five heads of state or former heads of state from seventy nations were attending in person or online, "providing an opportunity to search for a new path to peace and unity on the Korean Peninsula despite tensions caused by recent North Korean missile launches.... Above all," he added, "heads of state and former ones from 157 nations in the Americas, Asia, Europe and Africa sent remarkable speeches demonstrating their sincere support for peace on the Korean Peninsula; they also adopted the Seoul Declaration, which is based on the platform, 'one territory, one people, one culture.'"

MC Shin spoke briefly before introducing Mr. Esper. "It is now time for our keynote address. Mark Esper, today's keynote speaker, was the 27th US Secretary of Defense. Defense Secretary Esper served as an officer with the 101st Airborne Division and during the Trump Administration, he was appointed first as US Secretary of the Army and then US Secretary of Defense. Since then, he has devoted himself to national security. Former Secretary of Defense, Mark Esper has asserted that peace and unity on the Korean Peninsula come from the cooperative relationship between the US and South Korea and has shown that there is hopeful progress toward the denuclearization of North Korea. He is actively supporting and working with the vision of a heavenly unified Korea for the security and safety of the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia."