

## Asan Plenum 2025

# **“80 Years of Independence and 60 Years of Korea-Japan Normalization”**

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Let me start by offering my congratulations on this year’s Asan Plenum. I thank the Asan Institute for inviting me to speak this morning.

For well over a decade, the Plenum has been providing much-needed thought leadership on how best to navigate the enormous challenges facing this region and beyond.

As the theme of this gathering reminds us, Korea celebrates 80 years of independence this year. When Korea regained its sovereignty in 1945, the world was emerging from the turmoils of World War II.

History has taught us how devastating the endgame can be for the world when the powerful narrowly pursue their naked self-interest at the expense of the common good.

The determination not to repeat the tragedy of the first half of the 20th century paved the way to a new post-war order.

It was an order shaped under US leadership and anchored to the belief that peace and prosperity can best be secured when nations cooperate.

Korea has been a key beneficiary of that order.

It was enlightened self-interest that viewed the upholding of the then-freshly minted UN Charter outlawing aggression to be critical. That is what brought the US-led United Nations troops to defend South Korea from the communist invasion in 1950.

It was the belief that nations can collectively become more prosperous when cooperating, rather than engaging in unbridled zero-sum competition, that undergirded the multilateral trading system conducive to Korea’s export-driven growth model.

In short, Korea’s survival and prosperity depended on an international order based on enlightened self-interest and the rule of law.

It is increasingly clear, however, that the existing order is falling into disrepair. The world is entering a post-Cold War era, but we have yet to define the contours of this new era.

The vision of preventing ‘World War Three’ as well as ‘inadvertent war’ is unquestionably noble.

This is especially true at a time when the ongoing war in Ukraine could have unforeseen repercussions in the Indo-Pacific and when tensions in the Indo-Pacific have the potential to spiral out of control.

This laudable goal should not be eclipsed by the recent dynamics that are eerily reminiscent of the naked self-interest and zero-sum approach of the inter-war years.

The past should not be prologue.

At the same time, there does need to be greater acknowledgement that international order must be more consistent with the long-term interests of its key stakeholders. Only then, can the international order be more durable.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In broad terms, what Korea has been seeking to achieve through its diplomacy over the last three years, not least during my tenure as Foreign Minister, is contributing to shaping the positive contours of the post post-Cold War order, starting from our region and extending beyond.

First, making our alliance with the United States more resilient and further advancing our partnership with Japan.

The Korea-US alliance has become more attuned to addressing emerging challenges by broadening its horizons to critical technologies and economic security.

On the more traditional front, we have been strengthening extended deterrence to counter North Korea’s growing nuclear and missile threats. The Nuclear Consultative Group provides critical reassurance to Korea and Dr. Kurt Campbell, who is here with us today, deserves huge credit for his instrumental role in its birth.

The second Trump administration has reiterated its ironclad commitment to the defense of Korea and reaffirmed the importance of US extended deterrence commitments.

Korea and the US are also working closely together to unleash the full potential of our economic partnership, including win-win cooperation in shipbuilding, LNG and balancing trade.

The recent phone call between Acting President Han and President Trump marked a promising start in our journey towards a more resilient and sustainable alliance.

This positive momentum can also be seen in our trilateral cooperation with Japan.

Indeed, Secretary Rubio, Minister Iwaya and I have already held two trilateral meetings since the new Trump administration came to office, issuing joint statements after both meetings.

Robust trilateral Korea-US-Japan cooperation is dependent on the health of Korea-Japan bilateral relations. Indeed, the two relationships are analogous to interlocking cogwheels.

Fortunately, no relationship has seen more progress over the past three years than Korea's partnership with Japan. The numbers speak for themselves: Korea and Japan have held 14 bilateral summits and 14 foreign ministerial meetings over those three years.

In the face of common challenges and in light of our shared values and interests, strengthening cooperation between Korea and Japan is not a matter of choice, but a necessity.

I am heartened by nascent signs of a growing bipartisan recognition here in Korea about the importance of keeping our relationship with Japan steady.

But, it takes two to tango. In order to help prevent this hard-won momentum from backsliding, both Korea and Japan should sincerely reflect on what went wrong in the past.

It is my firm belief that the best way to shape a brighter future is to move first to change my own thinking and behavior locked in the past, rather than wait until the other side does so, which will certainly prompt the other side to follow suit.

This year, Korea and Japan commemorate the 60th anniversary of the normalization of relations with a series of joint events. Successfully building a future-oriented relationship between Korea and Japan will serve as a new engine of peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

Second, strategically managing ties with other neighbors.

Korea's bilateral relationship with China has been moving towards a healthier and more mature partnership in recent years. In areas where we see things differently, for example in the South China Sea and the Yellow Sea, we will certainly continue to speak with candor and disagree, as was the case during my meeting with Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Tokyo last month.

Resumed dialogues at all levels and reactivated collaborations in many areas during the last one year vindicate our principled approach to China. We will continue to work towards a healthy and balanced relationship with China on the basis of mutual respect, reciprocity, and shared interests.

The APEC summit meetings Korea and China are consecutively hosting this fall and next year will provide us with another good opportunity to advance this goal.

It is no secret that countries in the region don't want to be in a position of having to choose between Washington and Beijing. Nor do they want to see US-China strategic competition become a zero-sum game.

Korea is no exception, even as its foreign policy priority lies first and foremost in the robust alliance with the US, which even China does not contest.

So, in many ways, I believe our engagement with China aligns with US interests.

When Korea spearheaded the resumption of the Korea-Japan-China trilateral cooperation from its dormancy last year, it was partly guided by the view that Korea and Japan's active engagement can help encourage China's constructive role in upholding peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

Engaging China would also better align with the goal of preventing a war between great powers in the 21st century.

On Russia, there can be no business as usual when the war in Ukraine is still going on and Russia's military cooperation with North Korea is going beyond what was seen even during the Cold War period.

Nonetheless, this does not alter the geopolitical reality that Russia remains a key player for the present and future of the Korean Peninsula. This is the reason why we have not let go of communications with Russia even under the current circumstances.

I believe Russia is well aware of the dangers of providing North Korea with cutting-edge military technology. It will hone Pyongyang's ability to directly threaten the United States and embolden Pyongyang to believe that US security can be decoupled from those of its allies in East Asia.

Negotiations to end the war in Ukraine must ensure that North Korea is not rewarded for its unlawful military cooperation with Russia. Nor should North Korea be allowed to retain the ability to wreak nuclear destruction on South Korea, even if it professes that it will give up the ability to strike across the Pacific.

Third, strengthening international order by expanding and deepening multi-layered networks with like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific, NATO, EU and G7.

The image of North Korean soldiers fighting against Ukraine in a European battlefield underscores how the security of our two regions is becoming truly intertwined.

In an era of inter-connected security, it makes every sense for Korea to strengthen partnership with NATO. Together with Australia, Japan and New Zealand, Korea has been invited to participate in four consecutive NATO Foreign Ministers' meetings.

In fact, standing side by side with NATO has become such a natural part of our diplomacy that I felt very much at home at this month's NATO meeting in Brussels. The NATO Summit in The Hague will offer the chance to hold the fourth NATO-IP4 summit meeting.

Last November, Korea also launched a strategic dialogue with the EU and signed a security and defense partnership.

Slowly but surely, our partnership with the G7 is also evolving.

I came away from the G7 Foreign Ministers' meeting in Italy last fall more convinced than ever that the G7 and Korea need to think seriously about next steps.

The future of international order will very much hinge on how countries in the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific step up their cooperation. The G7 provides the anchor to lift nations' determination to step up and more effectively pull their weight.

I want to thank Dr. Hamre and many others present here for tirelessly championing the case for Korea's inclusion in the G7.

Fourth, cultivating our partnership with the Global South.

For the first time ever, Korea held summit meetings with the leaders of Pacific Island Countries in 2023 and with Africa last year.

We also upgraded our ties with ASEAN last year to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and have actively strengthened our collaboration with friends and partners in Central Asia and Latin America.

It has been a great privilege for me to personally oversee the long-awaited establishment of Korea's diplomatic relations with Cuba in my early weeks as Foreign Minister, and recently with Syria in the waning weeks.

It was also gratifying to see both countries keen to benchmark Korea's development journey from the South to the North.

Finally, playing a bridging role on the global stage as a facilitator, supporter and initiator.

For example, as an elected member of the UN Security Council, we have been taking the lead in placing cyber security at the heart of the Council's work and facilitating efforts to further strengthen the UN's peace-building architecture with the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) at its core.

Our efforts to facilitate the conclusion of a treaty on plastic pollution, even if unsuccessful, were not an exercise in futility.

Korea has also been a staunch supporter for the Global South in their efforts to achieve SDGs and take climate actions. Unlike other donor countries, our ODA grew by 30% in 2024 from 2023, and quadrupled since 2010 levels.

Together with other partners, we have also initiated efforts to help establish new international norms in areas like AI, by hosting the AI Seoul Summit and the 2nd Summit on Responsible AI in the Military Domain last year.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In six weeks time, a new administration will be taking office in Korea.

I trust that the incoming administration, too, will recognize that shaping the rules of the post post-Cold War order is not something that can or should be done by a concert of great powers.

Others with stakes in the system, too, must step up. That is why Korea has increasingly been shouldering roles and responsibilities commensurate with its weight over the past three years.

The core lines of efforts that I have outlined have been serving as Korea's compass for doing so.

We have been tackling immediate challenges while simultaneously navigating through the longer-term tectonic shifts in the geopolitical landscape.

And we have been doing so in a manner true to Korea's national interests and true to our deeply-held ideals.

I sincerely hope that with bipartisan support, this will continue to be the case in the new administration.

Thank you.