

[Asan Plenum 2024] Welcoming Remarks

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Good morning, dear friends, ladies, and gentlemen.

Welcome to the Asan Plenum 2024.

The theme of this year's Plenum is the "Future of Asia: Prosperity and Security."

Before talking about Asia's future, I want to reflect on important lessons from Asia's past.

For most of human history, Asia has been the driving force of cultural development and technological innovation. In the beginning of human history, civilizations flourished along the banks of the Yangtze, Ganges, and Euphrates rivers.

For more than fifteen hundred years up to the 16th century, merchants, pilgrims, and warriors traveled the Silk Road. They brought with them four Chinese inventions: papermaking, the compass, gunpowder, and printing.

As history unfolded, in the modern era, Asians experienced severe hardships. In the 19th century, Asia became a battleground for Western powers. Western powers colonized much of Asia. The British colonized India. The French took Indochina. The Dutch controlled Indonesia.

The British sold Indian opium in China. The Chinese burned the opium and the Opium Wars started. China lost the wars and China was forced to sign the unequal treaties.

In the 20th century, the situation did not improve. Asia was the major battlefield between the Allied Powers and the Axis Powers during the Second World War. Around 30 million Asian people died.

Post-war liberation did not produce prosperity and security for Asians.

After Japan's surrender in 1945, Mao Zedong's Communists and Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists resumed fighting in China. The Communists won in 1949 and the Kuomintang retreated to Taiwan. 10 million people were killed in the Chinese Civil War.

Korea was a part of Asia's hardships. In 1945, Korea was liberated and divided between North and South. In January 1950, U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson made a mistake of excluding South Korea from the U.S. defense perimeter in the Far East. Six months later in June 1950, with the Soviet Union's support, North Korea invaded South Korea.

Within one month of the invasion, North Korea occupied most of South Korea, except the southern port city of Busan. Under the banner of the United Nations Command, sixteen countries sent combat forces and six countries contributed medical units.

I was born in Busan during the Korean War in 1951. I was fortunate to survive the war. After three years of war, the Armistice Agreement was signed in 1953. During the Korean War, one million South Korean civilians, 140,000 South Korean soldiers, and 40,000 UN soldiers lost their lives.

This was the price that we paid for freedom. Korea remained the last bastion of the defense of liberal democracy.

Dear Friends, Ladies, and Gentlemen,

This may sound like a depressing way to open a conference titled the "Future of Asia." But we better not forget the past if we are to build a better future.

At the end of the Korean War, General Douglas MacArthur, the commander of the UN Forces, said, “It will take them 100 years to recover from the devastation.” In 1951, during the Korean War, the British newspaper, The Times, ran a condescending editorial, saying that, “It would be more reasonable to expect to find roses growing on a garbage heap than a healthy democracy rising out of the ruins of Korea.”

But both predictions were proven wrong.

In 1988, only 30 years after the end of the Korean War, we hosted the Seoul Summer Olympics and in 2002 we co-hosted the FIFA World Cup Football Tournament with Japan.

If we look at the sheer magnitude of the geopolitics of the vast Eurasian continent, a fact that a small country like South Korea, located at the tip of the continent, remains a free democracy, is a miracle, a miracle in progress.

Asia is becoming the world’s center of gravity. Today it accounts for over 40% of the world’s GDP and is expected to grow to 60% by 2050.

Major countries in Asia are leading the next industrial revolution. They are developing the technologies of the future such as semiconductors, quantum computing, and biotechnology.

Today Asia is prospering. But the question is whether Asia is at peace.

Our concern is that we still do not have a stable regional order. Prosperity without peace is fragile.

We understand that the United States and China are in a New Cold War.

In political rhetoric, President Biden said that “competition should not veer into conflict” and President Xi said that “Planet Earth is big enough for the two countries to succeed.” However, in reality, both countries are resorting to protectionism and unilateralism. “Buy American” or “Made in China” are the slogans of the two superpowers.

The competition between democratic and autocratic coalitions is also intensifying. American Senator Marsha Blackburn called the alignment between China, Russia and North Korea a new “Axis of Evil.” Meanwhile, others accuse U.S. alliances and new minilateral partnerships like the Quad and AUKUS of seeking containment of China.

The dangers of a military clash in Asia have rather increased. My dear friend, the late Dr. Henry Kissinger, dedicated his life to averting a Third World War. He achieved détente with the Soviet Union and diplomatic rapprochement with China. Today, we need that kind of leadership to prevent tensions from leading to a war.

Dear Friends, Ladies, and Gentlemen,

Predicting the future of Asia is not easy.

In 1969, President Nixon announced that he wanted Asian allies to bear more responsibility for their own defense. In 1971, the U.S. pulled out one infantry division from South Korea. In 1975, the U.S. withdrew from Vietnam. Many predicted that the United States would withdraw from Asia.

In 1989, some predicted that China and Russia would soon embrace liberal democracy as their economies opened up and developed into market economies.

But these predictions were wrong.

I want to remind you another issue that many people have predicted wrong: North Korea and its nuclear weapons.

15 years ago, Rupert Murdoch, the founder of News Corporation, asked me, “Do you know what the biggest news in the world is today?” The answer, he said, was “Iran’s nuclear program.” The international community underestimated North Korea’s nuclear ambitions.

While Iran has not developed a nuclear bomb, North Korea has built nuclear weapons. The international community failed to stop North Korea’s nuclear weapons program.

I have been calling for measures to deter North Korea's nuclear threat for many years.

In 2011, I delivered a speech in the South Korean National Assembly calling for the re-introduction of tactical nuclear weapons which were withdrawn from South Korea in 1991.

North Korea's nuclear developments have been the clear violation of its commitments to the 1992 Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

We had spent decades attempting engagement. The "Sunshine Policy" had tried to persuade North Korea to give up its nuclear ambitions in exchange for economic assistance.

Today, as we face a regime of hereditary dictatorship of three generations, we came to a different conclusion about the nature of the North Korean regime.

The analogy of the scorpion and the frog of the Aesop's fable makes us think of the hidden nature of North Korea.

As George F. Kennan once wrote of the Soviet Union, it is "Impervious to logic of reason, and it is highly sensitive to logic of force."

North Korea used to describe itself "A Paradise on Earth." But North Korea's GDP per capita is \$600, the lowest in the world.

South Korea's GDP per capita is \$32,000, 50 times larger than that of North Korea. For North Korea, the very existence of free and prosperous South Korea is the political threat. For the survival of its regime, North Korea thinks it needs the reunification of the Korean Peninsula under the communist flag.

Dear Friends, Ladies, and Gentlemen,

We, South Koreans, support the ROK-U.S. alliance. We welcomed the 2023 Washington Declaration to enhance extended deterrence.

We better begin laying the groundwork for the redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons.

This is the same logic that the United States continues to station tactical nuclear weapons in Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, and Turkey today.

We also need to continue dialogue with Asia's major powers like China and Russia who have responsibilities and roles to play as permanent members of the UN Security Council.

Dear Friends, Ladies, and Gentlemen,

Abraham Lincoln once said that "The Best Way to Predict the Future is to Create it."

I believe that the Republic of Korea will do its part to ensure that the Future of Asia is peaceful and prosperous for all.

I hope that North Korea abandons its futile quest for nuclear weapons and seek engagement with the outside world.

I hope that Asia can build a stable regional order where all countries can enjoy prosperity and security.

Thank you very much for sharing your insight and wisdom.

* The view expressed herein does not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies