

Plenary Session 1: A World Free of Nuclear Weapons: A Bold Dream vs. a Reality in the Making

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Summary

All of the panelists began by referring to the sense of urgency that currently exists with respect to the nuclear issue, especially on the Korean peninsula. The upcoming presence of the 2012 Nuclear Security Summit in Seoul was cited as pivotal, symbolically and substantively. Former Minister Han Sung Joo made allusions to the event as part of a developing process for the vision of a nuclear-free world, one that may have begun with the Kissinger-Schultz-Nunn-Perry initiative (heralded by the panelists) and progressed with President Obama's 2009 speech in Prague. Meanwhile, Dr. Edwin Feulner noted the rising role of Korea in world affairs, with the ascension of Ban Ki-Moon to the head of the United Nations, and Seoul recently hosting the G-20 as well. The Summit is the latest example.

Substantively, all of the panelists emphasized the danger of the North Korean situation. The actions of the DPRK stood in stark contrast to its pledge in the 1992 Joint Declaration to keep the Korean peninsula nuclear-free, former Prime Minister Lee Hong Koo noted. Mr. Han suggested that the program undermined the regime centered on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Further complicating the issue was the recent interventions in Iraq (by the US) and Libya (by NATO). The panelists suggested that North Korea interpreted those actions as justifications for their own nuclear weapons program – in essence, they believed that their possession of weapons would prevent deter similar action against them. Still, Mr. Han advised that this should not be a consideration for world powers in approaching cases such as North Korea, for changes in policy would only confirm that line of thinking, and encourage proliferation.

In speaking of the Korean case, all the panelists were in general agreement that China had arguably the most significant role to play. However, moderator David Sanger raised the possibility that the Chinese influence may be overestimated, as that government specifically asked North Korea not to test in 2006 and 2009 – with no success. The special ‘responsibility’ of China to act was a major topic in the question and answer question. Mr. Lee noted the historical circumstances – referring to the Korean War – that would provide China incentive to take a more active role. Similarly, Dr. Feulner noted the influence that China should have over the North Korean case, as it provides (by his rough estimate) 70% of North Korea’s energy and food supplies. Yet, all the panelists suggested that China had essentially allowed the situation to go unfettered. Mr. Lee suggested that China’s tolerance of North Korea’s nuclear development was an implicit acceptance of the possibility of nuclear dominoes falling in Northeast Asia – specifically, Japan and South Korea. He argued that frustration on part of South Korea had created an internal debate as to whether Seoul should emerge from the U.S.’s nuclear umbrella. As Mr. Han noted, however, any action taken in that direction would still require the consent of the U.S.

Overall, the panelists provided a nuanced, complicated, and concerning assessment of the Korean situation.

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