

Plenary Session 2: Crisis Management on the Korean Peninsula

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Summary

The 2nd plenary session at the 2011 Asan Plenum focused on Crisis Management on the Korean Peninsula. The panel was moderated by Mr. David Sanger, the chief Washington correspondent for the New York Times, and featured presentations by Dr. Gary Samore, Special Assistant to the President for Weapons of Mass Destruction, General Larry Welch, the former president and CEO of the Institute for Defense Analysis, General Burwell Bell, the former commander of U.S. forces Korea, and Dr. Hahm Chaibong, the president of the Asan Institute.

Dr. Samore began by outlining the three principles that the Obama administration has applied to deal with North Korea. First, the United States remains committed to the ultimate objective of complete denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. Second, the United States is committed to working with its allies and partners in East Asia, including continued consultations and enhanced military cooperation. And finally, the United States will continue to match action with action. If North Korea carries out provocations or violates United Nations Security Council resolutions, the United States will respond with political isolation and increased sanctions. At the same time, the United States remains open to engaging with North Korea if they show that they are committed to more responsible behavior.

General Welch followed with a fairly pessimistic assessment. He argued that while the United States is good at predicting eventual outcomes, it's bad at predicting timing. While

the United States might be right that the North Korean regime will eventually collapse, it can't say with high confidence when that will occur. Therefore, the United States and the Republic of Korea must find a way to deal with North Korean behavior for the foreseeable future while also planning for the difficulties of eventual Korean unification. General Welch argued that while the United States should continue to talk with North Korea, it should avoid negotiations – in which both sides actually try to resolve issues – until there are signs that the North is serious. In the past, North Korea has used negotiations as a cover for the continued development of its nuclear program.

General Bell spoke third, discussing the importance of crisis management and the U.S.-ROK alliance. He emphasized that the two allies have very formal and effective crisis management standing operations. However, he also argued that the political and diplomatic community in the United States needs to refocus its attention on East Asia, and the Korean peninsula in particular. According to General Bell, the United States can only enhance stability in the region by maintaining a credible nuclear deterrent and enhancing missile defense cooperation.

Dr. Hahm closed the session, arguing that the United States and the Republic of Korea must be prepared to manage a permanent crisis. According to Dr. Hahm, recent North Korean actions have taught us many important lessons. First, North Korea will not give up its nuclear program and/or weapons anytime soon. Second, North Korean nuclear developments are not the result of bad or inconsistent policies. Third, China will not side with the ROK, at least on security issues. Fourth, North Korea will not collapse any time soon. And finally, tension on the peninsula will persist. As a result, the alliance system is as important as ever; the United States remains an indispensable ally.

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