

[PL1-2] A World Free of Nuclear Weapons: A Bold Dream v. A Reality in the Making

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Full Summary

The panel titled A World Free of Nuclear Weapons: A Bold Dream v. A Reality in the Making took place in the Grand Ballroom on Monday, June 13th. The first Plenary Session of the Asan Plenum, it was moderated by David Sanger of the New York Times. The panelists consisted of Dr. Edwin Feulner (from the Heritage Foundation), Mr. Han Sung Joo (the former South Korean Minister of Foreign Affairs), and Mr. Lee Hong Koo (the former South Korean Prime Minister). With respect to the format of the panel, Mr. Sanger went down the line, allotting each of the panelists roughly 15 minutes to make a statement. He then directed a question to each panelist in response to their presentations, and then allowed them to answer him briefly. Following the contributions of all three panelists, Mr. Sanger then opened up the floor for a question-and-answer session from the audience. The panel reached its conclusion at the assigned time, running from 2:15 pm to 3:30 pm.

Former Prime Minister Lee Hong Koo began by citing a sense of urgency for any vision of a world free of nuclear weapons. He established an inextricable link between the mission for Global Zero and the elimination of the threat on the Korean peninsula. To him, the upcoming presence of the 2012 Nuclear Security Summit marked a watershed in both areas. Here, he mentioned the special character of the Northeast Asian region. While only one country – Japan – has ever suffered from the use of the nuclear weapons, Mr. Lee noted that 10% of the dead in Hiroshima were Koreans: workers who were assigned or had migrated during World War II.

The elimination of the threat on the Korean peninsula had to be the priority, Mr. Lee reiterated. He argued that even the possibility of reunification between the two Koreas had to be secondary to addressing the nuclear threat, labeling that choice as one of sensibility. The former Prime Minister took special care to express South Korea's high opinion of and receptiveness to the Kissinger-Schultz-Perry-Nunn initiative. He then reminded us that the DPRK had pledged to keep the Korean peninsula nuclear-free as well, in the form of the 1992 Joint Declaration. Unfortunately, he concluded, the actions of the DPRK since have stood in

stark contrast to that statement. Much work needed to be done.

Mr. Sanger followed up by directing a question on the topic of reunification. He wondered whether there existed a middle ground between reunification and war – the extreme choices that Mr. Lee had described. The former Prime Minister noted that South Korea had no interest in “absorbing the DPRK.” Even if a reunification were to take place, he suggested that it would take the form of a commonwealth, or a union – citing the European Union as a model. Regardless, the primary objective on the peninsula had to be peace, even if that meant the indefinite continuation of the status quo (with respect to sovereignty). Here, Mr. Lee took care to point to the unusual nature of the situation – a product of the whims of global powers in the post-World War II period.

Former Minister Han Sung Joo similarly began by referring to the 2012 Nuclear Security Summit. He framed the event both symbolically and substantively, making allusions to it as part of a developing process for the nuclear-free world. Mr. Han not only mentioned the Kissinger-Schultz-Nunn-Perry initiative here, but cited the progress that followed President Barack Obama’s 2009 speech in Prague. However, while he had high hopes for the 2012 summit, he stressed that the nuclear weapons program in North Korea not only threatened the peninsula, but undermined the very Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime. Such proliferants highlighted the danger of a potential new nuclear era.

The majority of Mr. Han’s presentation centered on a number of steps he set forth as essential to moving towards complete disarmament.

- 1) The international community must strengthen and reinforce the NPT, among each of its three pillars (non-proliferation, disarmament, and peaceful development of nuclear energy).
- 2) The United States and Russia must accelerate their arms reduction at a more substantial level. Moreover, the other Nuclear Weapons States must join in the process. Here, Mr. Han stressed the need for a “strong political will.”
- 3) The 1996 Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty must be brought into force as soon as possible, with US ratification a key component in the process.
- 4) The production of fissile materials must be halted. Mr. Han endorsed the role of the Conference on Disarmament here, as parties there seek to negotiate the Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty.
- 5) Universal adherence to the NPT is necessary. Moreover, signatories should accept IAEA comprehensive safeguards for all of their peaceful nuclear activity.
- 6) The international community must accept and enforce the communiqués provided by the 2010 Nuclear Security Summit and the 2010 NPT Review

Conference.

- 7) The right to use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes must be affirmed. Mr. Han also stressed that the Nuclear Weapons States provide support for those in need.
- 8) Finally, the international community must redouble its efforts to solve the regional conflicts that lead to cases of proliferation. Here, Mr. Han cited the value of the Six-Party Talks to bring the DPRK back into negotiations.

The former Minister of Foreign Affairs acknowledged that the goals he has listed are difficult, with seeming contradictions between them. For instance, he noted that the nuclear deterrence of the United States in Northeast Asia has to date dissuaded Japan and South Korea from pursuing their own programs; reductions in that capacity could promote a change among the latter's policies, and defeat the purpose of the endeavor. Similarly, Mr. Han related the line of thinking that the US nuclear umbrella has served as the rationale for DPRK proliferation and continued conventional provocation. Intervention in the cases of Iraq (by the US) and Libya (by NATO) seem to confirm the logic, with DPRK officials believing that their possession of weapons would prevent deter similar action against them. Regardless of this situation, however, Mr. Han underlined the fundamental threats posed by proliferation. He noted the increased danger of nuclear accidents, the likelihood of selling materials on the black market, and the increased activity in illegal networks (for instance, between DPRK and Pakistan). In short, a nuclear free-world remained the best and safest option, and immensely more preferable to the status quo.

Following Mr. Han's presentation, Mr. Sanger pushed back on the issue of intervention. He asked whether the United States, by taking action in Libya (as part of the NATO coalition) and in Iraq (largely unilaterally), was undercutting its own message, and confirming the decisions of rogue states such as the DPRK to proliferate. Mr. Han responded simply by saying that such beliefs and interpretations of other leaders and countries – from Kim Jong Il in the DPRK, Gadhafi in Libya, to Ahmadinejad in Iran – cannot be a consideration in taking action. After all, were the US to refrain from intervention or action in those cases, this could still encourage nuclear proliferant. They would believe (and rightly) that their programs had caused the US to alter its entire foreign policy. Thus, again, Mr. Han underlined the fundamental nuclear threat that must be addressed.

Finally, Dr. Edwin Feulner started by noting 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 2012 Nuclear Security Summit is the latest example. In speaking of the vision of the nuclear-free world, he noted that the message transcended political parties, even in the US. The desire to put the “genie back in the bottle” was even expressed by President

Ronald Reagan, the man in the White House during arguably the most contentious eras of the Cold War, and a man more associated with missile defense and deterrence than reduction.

Yet, perhaps the primary message Dr. Feulner expressed was not of a singular direction moving forward, but that of prudence. The movement towards Global Zero could not come at the expense of security – he spoke specifically of the need to maintain credibility in the US deterrence capability. The vast number of global challenges in the world (including Iran, Syria, and the DPRK) further underlines the need for prudence. He concluded with an example that illustrates the complexities of the issue: the DPRK. Dr. Feulner noted that there was a fine line between admonishing the DPRK and urging them back to the Six-Party Talks. The danger of destabilizing the current global order remained a consideration, even if complete disarmament was a worthy goal.

Mr. Sanger cited the ideology of the Bush administration in posing his question to Dr. Feulner. Why would the US give up its nuclear superpower status, and put itself on a level with other Nuclear Weapons States? He suggested that the issue was one of sequencing – yes, all involved might desire a nuclear weapons free world, but how would it actually happen? Dr. Feulner admitted that that was the ultimate problem, and professed he had no real solution to offer. Given the US role worldwide, given the fact that other parties have cheated, there seemed to be little incentive for the US to take concrete action. Moreover, the long-term goal of Global Zero was ultimately secondary to the concerns of today's world. After all, the “urgent inevitably overwhelms the important.”

Prior to opening the floor for question-and-answer, Mr. Sanger posed a final question for the two former Korean government officials. Was there a developing feeling among ROK officials that South Korea needed its own deterrence capability? After all, an execution of President Obama's vision would undercut the value – if not the very existence – of the US nuclear umbrella. Mr. Han responded by saying that the lack of progress in eliminating the DPRK nuclear program might indeed be contributing to a frustration, which in turn fueled the desire for South Korea to develop its own programs. He also expressed the views of others who perceive a South Korean deterrence capability as essential to bargaining with the North. Yet, he acknowledged that the consequences of such a program, not to mention its practicality, would be tremendously counterproductive. Former Prime Minister Lee came to the same conclusion. The nuclear program might seem a profitable strategy for smaller powers, but his country has always preferred the way of soft power, not hard power. He also noted that the ‘frustration’ Mr. Han spoke of was not just directed towards North Korea, but towards China. To the South Koreans, it seemed that China's policies towards the DPRK equaled an implicit acceptance of not only a) the DPRK's nuclear program, but b) the possibility for nuclear dominoes to fall in the region (with Japan and South Korea). Dr. Feulner jumped on this final

point, listing the vast number of potential nuclear neighbors that China could have in the near future, in addition to Russia, India, Pakistan, and the DPRK.

The questions that emerged during the Q&A covered a vast array of topics. The special ‘responsibility’ of China to act on the crisis on the Korean peninsula was pursued further. All 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 overstated, as that government specifically asked North Korea not to conduct nuclear test in 2006 and 2009 – with, famously, no success. Dr. Feulner, however, noted the special 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. Moreover, Mr. Lee noted the historical circumstances – referring to the Korean War – that would provide China incentive to take a more active role in the region. For now, it seemed to him that the country simply had too much on its plate, and thus was taking a holding pattern (the US being another example). The panelists seemed to agree that any real action taken against the DPRK required multilateral coordination.

There were in fact a number of questions that dealt with the specific nature of negotiations in the North Korean situation. One audience member wondered whether the DPRK dealt with Weapons of Mass Destruction generally as an issue of nuclear security, or an internal politics issue (domestic regime security). He suggested that the real purpose of Kim Jong Il’s actions were not to prevent an invasion, but to secure the succession process for his. Mr. Lee didn’t disagree with that assessment – yet, it would be hard to extrapolate from that any sort of strategic advantage. Next, another attendee queried as to what the US and South Korea have learned from their respective collaboration. Dr. Feulner said that there could be no distance between Seoul and Washington D.C. prior to approaching Pyongyang: they had to be on the same page. Speaking of, would the parties consider changing their approach, demanding not a ban of the North Korean program at this point, but for a cap? Mr. Han said that this was not a realistic step, at least explicitly at the bargaining table. While this may in fact be the reality, for South Korea to essentially accept the nuclear legitimacy of the North Koreans was unacceptable. The drastic actions taken by the DPRK – in terms of testing, enrichment, production, and so forth – only underscored the danger of acquiescing in this manner. A final question continued from the perspective of the ROK, asking if Mr. Lee or Mr. Han could specify the circumstances under which the South Koreans would pursue the nuclear option for security purposes. Neither believed it was practical nor advisable. As Mr. Han noted, furthermore, 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 crisis on the Korean peninsula. Given the primacy of that situation, it was not a surprise that

all of them treated it as the primary obstacle to any vision of a world free of nuclear weapons. To borrow from Dr. Feulner, the panelists chose to focus on the urgent, rather than the important. In this case, however, the two might be the one and the same. Ridding the world of the North Korean threat would be a seminal moment, preventing the fall of nuclear dominoes and making a nuclear free world a much more attainable goal.

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