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“Alliance of 70 Years and Beyond”

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Thank you very much, Honorary Chairman Chung and the Asan Institute, for inviting me here today. It's a great pleasure to be with you on this important occasion, celebrating the 70th anniversary of the Alliance. The subjects before you in this conference are extremely rich and diverse. I won't try to cover them all but I will try to cover a few, and I hope I do them in a short period of time.

I think it's important to put the position of Korea in the larger context of what's happening in the world as a whole. In many periods of history, geopolitical tectonic plates don't move at all, sometimes they move slowly, sometimes they move very rapidly. Right now, they're moving very rapidly. And things that are happening that we don't fully understand, but nonetheless we have to deal with.

So, I would first propose the way to look at this overall environment is to acknowledge that the post-Cold War period is over. It began with the collapse of the Soviet Union. And I think a visit of Xi Jinping to Moscow ended the post-Cold War era. During this era, too many people concluded that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact meant we reach the End of History—we all going to enjoy peace dividend; military threats were disappearing from the world; political risk was disappearing from international business and commerce; we could reduce military expenditures dramatically in the West and around the world. And we suffered no adverse consequences.

We were so focused on what was happening in Russia and Europe that we didn't pay enough attention to what was happening in China. And we did pay attention to it, we got it wrong. Very many prominent Americans said that after Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms, China was engaged in a peaceful rise; they would be a responsible stakeholder in world affairs; it would parallel the successful democratic, market-oriented economies of the developed world. Let's face it—in the West, in the United States, we almost all believed it, I believed it.

But we were wrong about China. We were fundamentally wrong about China. The exact opposite of our prediction is what happened. China became an aggressive, mercantilist power, using all forms of influence—military, political, economic, and social—to achieve hegemony, first along its periphery, and ultimately the world as a whole. It spent decades stealing intellectual property from the developed world and turning it to its economic and military advantage. It created forms of aggression that we never dreamed of before. It took companies like Huawei and ZTE which appeared all external purposes telecommunication companies, and has used them and as arms the Chinese state. This is the kind of the aggression that over a long period of time under the Deng Xiaoping policy of 'hide and bide.' 'Hide your capabilities and buy your time' has now become 'wolf worrier' diplomacy—no longer hiding, no longer buying; it's right out in front of us.

So, the fact is even after 9/11, too many people thought we were on a holiday from history. And growing threats were ignored, particularly when it came to China and Russia. Even in 2014

when Russia invaded Ukraine for the first time, what was the West response? It was pitiful. And the lesson that was learned in Moscow and the lesson that was learned in Beijing was that NATO—perhaps not entirely “brain dead,” as French President Macron said, but weak and unwilling to respond.

What we have seen with Xi Jinping’s visit to Moscow, I think, was the confirmation that the relationship between China and Russia is now an axis. And unlike the Sino-Soviet alliance of the Cold War, China is very much the senior partner—Russia is not yet reduced to the status of satellite but it’s a very junior partner. Now, this is an axis that is accompanied by rogue states, outriders: North Korea, Iran, and Belarus. That has not yet completely gelled into a clear alternative military alliance, but as I will explain here in a minute, these adjunct outriders very much serve the interests of China and Russia. The complications that this means around the world is that when we formally thought and quite reasonably so in regional terms we again have to focus on global terms.

The Republic of Korea is already part of that. The remarkable fact that South Korea is selling armor and artillery to Poland tells us a lot. And all I can say to South Korea is ‘good for you.’ I wish it were the United States selling that armor and artillery to Poland, but part of our problem is that our defense production lines have grown from cold over the last thirty years and that’s an issue that the United States itself has to pick up. I think this evolving world is going to be very much part of the second Yoon-Biden summit, and not a moment too soon.

So, if my hypothesis is correct and we’ve passed beyond the post-Cold War era, I think the lessons that we need to carry away first are, we have to wake up from the ‘end of history,’ not just in political and military terms but in economic and social terms as well. The holiday from reality is over. Second, for the United States, we need a contemporary version of the famous NSC-68, the 1950 Truman-era document that was the foundation of American Cold War policy. 2025 when, I hope the next American president is inaugurated, will be the 75th anniversary of the NSC-68. I don’t know who today’s Paul Nitze is, I just hope we have one around somewhere because we desperately need it.

And for Korea, I think that, with all the problems faced here on the peninsula, with North Korea and China, it’s critical for this great country to think in larger East Asian and Indo-Pacific terms and to see where the risks and threats that Korea continues to face fit into this larger picture, particularly to understand how China’s threat to Taiwan directly affects South Korea. Now, we hear much about how economically interlinked South Korea is with China, and that is economic and political reality here. My free advice to South Korean business is to hedge your bets a little bit more—reduce your reliance on the Chinese market, make as much money as you can anywhere you can but make less in China. That is the only safe course.

Now, South Korea has had a laboratory experiment in dealing with authoritarian societies ever since it became a functioning independent state, and especially in the last thirty years a lot of dealing with North Korea and its nuclear threat to South Korean and the rest of the world. I think we can say with considerable confidence that after 30+ years of trying to negotiate with North Korea we can say that there is no evidence whatever that North Korea has ever made a strategic decision to give up its pursuit of nuclear weapons. In fact, I think that all of the evidence is the opposite that they’re determined to get deliverable nuclear weapons and if they can get it with economic aid or reduced economic sanctions from the US, South Korea, and Japan, they are going to do it. They have, for 30+ years since the joint North-South denuclearization declaration, lied and cheated about every commitment they’ve made on the nuclear front. I don’t know how much evidence you need before you conclude that they can’t be trusted and the negotiation with them is futile.

Let’s also be clear that China is not a disinterested party here. For the Chinese government, North Korea is a useful part and useful aspect of advancing Beijing’s strategic interests. They have consistently misled

South Korea, Japan and the United States about this. The six-party talks during the George W. Bush administration was a bad charade. The fact is that China benefits from North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons—there is no threat that China from North Korea, only a threat to China's adversaries.

Now, I want to stress one thing here. For the entire part of this thirty years, nearly everybody in the United States, South Korea, and Japan and elsewhere has said that it is unacceptable for North Korea to have deliverable nuclear weapons. I understand the word 'unacceptable' means 'we will not accept it.' What are we doing today? We are accepting it—we don't like it, but we've effectively given up. And I blame the people who have this 30 years told us about North Korea and Iran that 'but you have to negotiate with them.' These are the people who have said 'You can't use force,' 'You can't use regime change,' 'You have to negotiate' and we've done it over and over again. Now, we're told in effect certainly with respect to North Korea, 'well, too late. They're nuclear weapon state.' So you can't use force, you can't use regime change, it's still unacceptable.

But look at what they were saying. First, they are premature to try and take decisive action. 'Too soon.' Now, 'it's too late.' When did the moment pass? When really strong action to prevent contemplation of mutually assured destruction and the use of nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula. When did we miss that? This is what brings to my mind, for me, when Winston Churchill called the 'confirmed unteachability of mankind.' And it may be too late with respect to North Korea, and maybe with Iran. But just remember what Churchill said for the next aspirin for nuclear weapons—he said this in 1935—“When the situation was manageable it was neglected, and now that it is thoroughly out of hand we apply too late the remedies which might have effected a cure. Want of foresight, unwillingness to act when action would be simple and effective, lack of clear thinking, confusion of counsel until the emergency comes, until self-preservation strikes its jarring gong—these are the features which constitute the endless repetition of history.” That's basically where some people think we are.

Now, the moment is late, but North Korea has yet to demonstrate that it can make a real nuclear warhead with a functional missile that it can target effectively at a distance or they have reentry vehicles that can successfully reenter the earth atmosphere at ICBM level. I understand, of course, that the North can always put a nuclear device on a train and sail it into a harbor, but we're not yet at the moment when we have to say, 'There's nothing more we can do.' And, to the people of South Korea who have watched twenty-five million fellow Koreans live in a prison camp these last 75+ years, it seems to me that it's always opportune to think not how we're going to change the regime in North Korea, but how we will achieve success in the policy that we have all said our objectives since 1945, which is a reunited Korea. It is not impossible. We should not give up on it, simply because North Korea has gotten close while we wasted time and resources. Here, I think the conclusion we should consider, looking at the broader context I described a moment ago, includes that the totalitarian states and terrorists are essentially incapable of negotiating in good faith, unless a gun is held to their head. And they will renege on their commitments once the gun is removed.

Second, we should hold China responsible for North Korea's actions, and nuclear issue should be the top of the bilateral US-Chinese agenda. Now, let me turn to the 800-pound gorilla in the room and John Hamre mentioned it in his remarks. I think it's appropriate that we all consider, and that is the quietly asked question here and in many other countries: Does the United States still have the resolve and determination and willingness to come to the defense of its allies? I think the answer to that is 'yes, we do,' although there are problems, and I think we should acknowledge them.

The principal problem for four years in our country was Donald Trump and the virus of isolationism that is unleashed again in the Republican party. He didn't need to unleash it in the Democratic party—there is hardly anybody left in that party you can find who still believes in Harry Truman, Scoop Jackson's form of US national security. But within the Republican party, it is a problem—I think a solvable problem and

the one that I'm certainly spending a lot of time trying to solve. There are other things we've done that have called our resolve into question: withdrawal from Afghanistan, the catastrophic strategic mistake—the mistake first made by President Trump and then followed by President Biden. It is indefensible in my view. All I can say is that I hope we don't make that again.

And now, we've got strategic muddle in Ukraine because of the lack of broad thinking about what our objectives were and about NATO's objectives. That has legitimate grounds for concern. But, look at the other aspects that have happened where Macron was calling NATO brain dead, nobody says it anymore. We've got two new countries that ask to join NATO after the Russian unprovoked aggression against Ukraine—Finland which is now in and Sweden which will be shortly. That doesn't speak about the brain-dead alliance or the lack of American resolve. This is something that I think is going to be a major part of the debate in the 2024 presidential campaign. And on the positive side, I think I can say in Washington today it's driven by partisan disagreement and harsh personal politics. There is no issue on which there is greater bipartisan agreement than dealing with the threats from China. We don't have all the details worked out. This is a huge strategic discussion that is still ongoing. But it is something that I think we should find encouragement and that we need to push forward.

But there are certain things that have to be done—the US has to do and others have to do it as well. I think the United States has to return its defense spending to the Reagan era level, from about 3+ percent of GDP to something in the range of 5 to 6 percent of GDP. I think to bring our federal budget deficit down, we already need massive cuts in domestic spending. Increasing defense more requires more domestic cuts—so be it as far as I am concerned. A large welfare state will not defend us from foreign adversaries. I think that means our friends also have to increase their defense spending. Jens Stoltenberg, Secretary General of NATO has said that 2 percent of GDP, the current NATO goal, should be raised to 3 percent—I think they could go higher than that. I congratulate the ROK for 2.6 percent GDP spending rate on defense. I'm sure everybody here knows that Prime Minister Kishida of Japan recently said that he would double Japan's spending from 1 to 2 percent of GDP over five years. Assuming Japan's GDP increases, that's in real terms significantly greater than doubling. Defense expenditures will make Japan the 3rd largest military in the world, after the US and China. The ROK can certainly catch up with that as well.

And let me just spend a second here on what this means for the US extended deterrence commitment and whether the Republic of Korea needs nuclear weapons. I spent a good part of my public career dealing with non-proliferation and weapons of mass destruction that goes against the grain to say that any additional country should get nuclear weapons. I think John Hamre summed up a lot of the consideration, pros and cons. I would say this in the short term. I think the United States should redeploy tactical nuclear weapons on the Peninsula. And that could be made very clear to Kim Jong-un and whatever relative he is looking to succeed him in North Korea that we and the government of South Korea would use tactical nuclear weapons without hesitation. That's how you make deterrence credible.

And I think that buys time for South Korea to think long and hard about whether it wants a separate nuclear capability. And I think we'll find in the United States whether indeed our resolve and our determination remain. But it is a complex question. I just want to emphasize one more time—I refuse to give up on the possibility of stopping North Korea from getting deliverable nuclear weapons in the first place. That should remain the center of our attention. This is not over yet.

In terms of US resolve, I would just say, my conclusion is that they are in the US depended on shifts in public opinion, just like every other democracy, no better no worse. But I would advise everybody to remember another famous Winston Churchill's line: he once said, "You can always count on Americans to do the right thing—usually after they've tried everything else." And we are in the trying everything else category right now. But I have faith that we will come through in the end.

Now, what is this means for South Korean in the larger political context—we're seeing in Northeast Asia in particular, but East Asia more generally, and Indo-Pacific even more broadly, a lot of creative thinking about collective self-defense structures. I understand that there's not going to be an Asian NATO anytime soon—the circumstances are different. That's fine. But look at what else is going on. The Asian Quad—India, Japan, Australia, and the United States—a fantastic idea driven by Shinzo Abe when he was Prime Minister of Japan. I think this man will go down as a hero for his country and freedom-loving countries around the world. The Quad has a lot of possibilities—let me suggest one here in South Korea. I think it should be Quint. I think South Korea should join the Quad as soon as possible. I think it would make it far stronger and give many, many more opportunities. AUKUS—Australia, UK, US nuclear-powered submarine consortium—can be expanded both in terms of its membership and the range of its activities. We could do it with South Korea, we could do it with different combinations of countries. There's no one right formula. But AUKUS is something that throws a completely new configuration of power into the equation here and something that we should all be thinking about.

China and Taiwan—as I said a moment ago, a threat by China to Taiwan is a threat to South Korea. South Korea should play a larger role in the structures that are being created in this part of the world. There's every reason for South Korea to step up and take the leadership role. And I think, right now, we need to be thinking not about a war with China, but how to deter China, how to prevent the war. And in part doing that, not simply by arming Taiwan, but by articulating the cost that China will bear if it takes any form of military actions against Taiwan—whether invasion or blockade. Let's take it in pieces. First, what if they go after Kinmen or Matsu? What do we do to China then? I think we move, to cut off anything that looks like strategic trade.

We've all got to do this together, and maybe more because the attack to Kinmen or Matsu, which will be relatively easy, is just the first bite of the apple. And if they go after Taiwan itself, I think we excommunicate China from what many people call incorrectly the rules-based international order. Ask Vladimir Putin about that. He lost that memo somewhere. But, China becomes a priori state if it takes military action against Taiwan.

And then, finally, I think all of these need to be more creative about missile defense capabilities. Because whatever North Korea does, China has nuclear weapons, the US should remember the Ronald Reagan's idea about the strategic defense for ourselves, not just against rogue states but against real nuclear powers. Every advance in national missile defense technologically and scientifically is an advance in theater missile defense, which is really national defense for countries like Korea and Japan.

So, let me conclude. In this extraordinary fast-moving era, we need a regrounding and reaffirming of the ROK-US alliance and it should be, and I hope that's what's going to happen in Washington—be a top priority for both countries. We have to believe that in the next decades, we are facing Cold War levels of risks and challenges probably for the foreseeable future, and that continuing and strengthening the alliance is the only feasible approach to maximize the chances for peace and security in Northeast Asia.

Thank you very much.