

Asan Plenum 2023

“Alliance of 70 Years and Beyond”

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Hello to all my friends in Korea, and especially at the Asan Plenum 2023.

This was a wonderful opportunity to speak to you this way. Chairman Chung invited me to come over to Korea to be a real live participant in the conference, and I said, yes. I wanted to do that. But the conference is scheduled at exactly the same time that President Yoon is in Washington. He is going to be in Washington for his state visit with President Biden and his speech to the joint session of the Congress. So, we were asked by the Blue House to host a roundtable for President Yoon during his visit. So, I have to be here. So, we're recording this in advance, but I'll be thinking of you all and wish I could be with you at the day of the conference of the Asan Plenum.

And so, first of all, I would like to congratulate you. Asan Institute has really established a wonderful reputation, and it is doing important cutting-edge policy work every day. And so, my very sincere congratulations and best wishes to all of you. And this is an important conference.

But I'd also like, with your permission, to offer a little bit of what I would have said if I was there in person and giving a more formal speech. I would, I'd like to address an issue that I know that Koreans are talking about a lot these days, and that is “Should the Republic of Korea have its own nuclear weapons?”

It's understandable that Koreans would be thinking about this. Now, talking about it. We've been almost 20 years since North Korea pulled out of the IAEA system and kicked inspectors out and really started their aggressive program to develop and test nuclear weapons. And of course, in the last five years, they've been extremely active in launching missiles, short-range missiles, longrange missiles, just astounding program of launches. And it's very understandable that Koreans would be saying, okay, what do we do? I mean, we've gone going for 20 years trying to talk North Korea out of having nuclear weapons. That hasn't worked, obviously.

So, what do we do? You know, there are really only two options now. One option is that, you know, we invade North Korea with our conventional forces. We find the nuclear weapons, seize them, destroy them. Well, you know, that's one option. But of course, that would trigger a hellacious war and undoubtedly would trigger the use of those weapons. You know, so that's not a very good option.

The only other option really is deterrence. And I think that is at the core of our thinking in Korea now. What does Korea need to do to feel that they have adequate deterrence for, what, 30, 40 years? We have said to our Korean friends, “Trust us. We'll take care of that. You don't have to have nuclear weapons. You can rely on us.” But there have been events over the last three or four or five years that have really

caused Koreans to question, “Can they count on the United States for what we call extended deterrence? Are we reliable?” And I’ve had quite a few conversations with Koreans about this question.

It’s understandable why Koreans are asking now “What should they do?” And as I said, there’s an awful lot of talk about Koreans feeling that they need an independent nuclear retaliatory capability for their own deterrence. I, look, this is Korea’s decision, you know, ultimately. But I think we should, it’s a decision we have to be involved with as you make it, you know, because our troops are on the ground there and our troops are going to be targeted, too.

And so, we need we’re in this together. And so, we should talk about it together. I don’t really think we’ve had an adequate conversation about this with Korean friends. We’ve just said to you, trust us. But I think, you know, there’s a lot of questioning about that now. So, I think we really have to have a kind of a pretty focused and dedicated effort to think this through together. You know, building a nuclear warhead, that’s relatively easy. You know, Korea easily has the scientific and engineering talent to do that. You know, that would be easy. But building the warhead is really the easy part. It’s everything that goes with it that becomes much more complicated.

North Korean missiles are 5 minutes flight time, 4 minutes flight time away from Korea. Chinese missiles would be 8 minutes maybe, you know, depending on where they’re based. So how do you ensure that President Yoon or whoever is authorized to retaliate, how do you ensure that they survive? What is the procedure for that? What is the intelligence system that you would need to put in place so that you have minute-by-minute tracking of important indicators for indications and warning? How do you ensure positive control over nuclear warheads? Remember, you’ll be building a nuclear warhead and giving it to a 26-year-old pilot or a launch control officer. How do you ensure that only the president controls that warhead, not the 26-year-old pilot?

You know, these are very big and challenging questions. And so, building a nuclear warhead is the start of the problem. It is not the end of it. It’s not the answer. It’s the beginning of a very big and complicated, expensive and challenging program that will never end.

I think Koreans should think through all of that, every bit of that. And we should be thinking through that together. I think as a first step, it would be good for us to see if we can rebuild your confidence in the US. That may not be possible, but I think it takes more of an effort on our part to sit down and talk through all of these issues with you. Biden and President Yoon did enter into an important agreement last fall at Bali, and it was that we were going to have a joint early warning capability.

I think if we don’t really work at it hard, that’ll just end up to be two times a year and they’ll get together and talk about it. I think I personally think it needs to be very real minute by minute. Korean intelligence officers, American intelligence officers sitting there side by side looking at the satellite feed, you know, that we’re getting from early warning satellites, looking at the radar feed, looking at the indications and warning indicators that are being reported by the intelligence systems. I think we need to start building real capacities side by side. I hope that that gives you more confidence in us, but you’re going to need it if you decide you have to have your own nuclear deterrence. You’ll need to know what it means to take on this astounding burden of being a nuclear weapon state.

I think we should do that together. I think we should be talking quite openly with each other, candidly with each other about what it means, why it's in your interests or not in your interest, what our credibility is and what we have to do to reestablish our credibility with you. There's no way we can solve that without just a lot of direct conversations with each other at a very detailed level about what it takes.

You know, ultimately, this is, as I said, Korea's decision. It's very complicated because you live very close to the threat. But we do, too, now, because we've got 25,000 American soldiers who are just as close as Korean citizens are to this threat.

I should say that's what extended deterrence really means. Extended deterrence is not we extend our promise of retaliation to you. Extended deterrence means we're going to fight side by side with you. Our forces are there on the ground with you. We're going to fight side by side. And if necessary, we will extend that all the way up to and including the use of nuclear weapons.

Now, the question is, "Is that credible enough for Korean citizens to believe in and to work with us on an ongoing basis?" That should be our first step. And then if at some point, Korea feels it has to have its own nuclear deterrent, at least you'll understand what is involved in having that kind of a capability and the remarkable obligations that come with it.

If I had an opportunity to be in Seoul with you today, I would have said this to you personally. We're recording it in advance because it's the only way I can be with you now. But I do want to wish you the very best for this very important conference. I want to thank you for inviting me to be a part of it. I promise you I'll be there next year if you invite me. So very best wishes, and I hope that you have a very successful Asan Plenum 2023.

Thank you.