

Asan Plenum 2019

“Alliance of 70 Years and Beyond”

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Good morning, welcome friends, colleagues. Welcome to the 2018 Asan Plenum. We had one year hiatus last year but we decided to hold it again this year. Well, of course, it's our tenth anniversary and I promised a lot of our friends we would do it this year. But at the same time, we saw what happened to the world, the year that we did not hold the Plenum, how it completely fallen apart in the meantime. So we thought we need to do something about it and so here we are. As I said, it is the tenth anniversary; it is hard to believe it has been that long. We had the incredible ride. Tanks to so many of your support, friendship and, of course, participation, most importantly. And of course I had an incredible sponsor and backer, friend, mentor, Dr. M.J. Chung who has been incredibly generous in terms of everything and made everything we see here today possible.

We chose the theme, “Illiberal International Order” with this year for a couple of reasons. One reason is that, given the timing of our conference, we thought it would just completely turn into a North Korea summit-related meetings for two whole days, and I wanted to prevent that from happening. Although, obviously that is the perhaps the foremost in the back of all of our minds and perhaps the most important issue at hand.

But the second reason why we chose this title is because in order for Korea and for the region for everybody to strategize, to have our own grand strategy, we really need to have a very clear sense of where the world order is and where it is going. That is where I hope to bring everybody's wisdom together to try to chart where we think the global order is going and where our respective countries and where our respective regions are within their particular context.

Speaking of context, talking about the liberal and the illiberal international order in Korea, I always like to say that South Korea is really the poster child of the liberal international order. I mean, Korea was a former colony, national division, and terrible war, one of the poorest countries in the world. No liberal tradition or no democratic tradition to speak of, but look where South Korea is today. And in terms of liberal democracy and free market economy, I would say if South Korea can do it, anybody ought to be able to do it. So in that sense I think we really are the poster child of the liberal international order.

Of course, as our title indicates we are living at that stage, period in history, where many of us think that some of the pillars, the fundamental assumptions of the liberal international order that has brought so much peace and prosperity to South Korea and to many other parts of world are being defaulter. As for Korea, we find ourselves in a very interesting historical juncture. I think there are two big movements, pincer movements that are pressing South Korea at this point as a poster child of liberal international order.

One is, of course, as I try to show in the video, one is on the side of the builders and sustainers of the liberal international order. There is a sense in which the pillars of the liberal international such as the United States, the Great Britain, and EU are going through their own moments of very deep doubt regarding the viability of the liberal international order. In a sense, I would like to describe as sort of a post liberal democratic, post-industrial even postmodern reaction to, I guess, what could only be described as a very successful liberal international order that these leading industrialized and democratic nations of the world have enjoyed. So there is deep anxiety and doubt coming from the heart, the core of the liberal international order.

At the same time, we find again as you have seen in the video, many countries such as China, Russia and other places that are undergoing what I think are actually very pre-liberal, pre-democratic, pre-industrial and very pre-modern reaction to the liberal international order. What I am saying is that I think they are the liberal international order is being squeezed from two different directions; one from the pre-liberal countries and one from the post-liberal countries. And these are very fundamental reactions we need to deal with.

East Asia, I think we came to this liberal international almost by accident. As I said, I do not think any of our East Asian countries had a liberal or democratic tradition to begin with, but things worked out in such a way that we are enjoying this incredible regional integration. And look at the economic prosperity that we enjoyed amongst our East Asian nations. Now, I think, history is coming back, a lot of things are coming back which are actually beginning to undermine this liberal international order by accident that we have had in East Asia. North Korea and the development nuclear weapons and their provocations is part in one of the most important sort of spearhead of this reaction against the liberal international order in which, of course, North Korea is one of the clearest most obvious outliers.

So I think how we navigate these very turbulent times, what is that we can do to sustain this liberal international order, is there something that country like South Korea can do, is something others can do perhaps while liberal west is going through moments of deep self-doubt, is there something we can do to sustain it in the meantime.

So that is the theme for the next couple of days and as you have noticed we tried to organize many different panels covering all aspects of it. We are going to try to look at the economic trade aspect of the liberal international order that has brought so much prosperity. But at the same time, we are also going to look at the alliances system for instance what are the systems that have backed up, that have sustained the liberal international order. Last but not least, it is the domestic internal reactions to the liberal international order that so many of our countries are going through that we will be examining.

Thank you for joining us.