

Asan Plenum 2015

“Is the U.S. Back?”

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안녕하십니까? 참석해 주셔서 고맙습니다. 양해해 주시면 영어로 말씀드리도록 하겠습니다.

Good morning and welcome to the *Asan Plenum*. Please allow me to start with a joke that I heard from a Mexican friend. He is the former general secretary of the OECD. One day, the president of Mexico said, “Mexico is far from God but too close to the U.S. and it is a big problem.” Later the prime minister of Israel said, “Israel is very close to God but is too far from the U.S. and it is a big problem.” How about South Korea? South Korea is a deeply religious country with a large Christian population. So I can say that South Korea is close to God but too close to Japan, too close to China, and too far from the U.S. and it is a big problem.

In the real world it is not a joke. Today we face North Korea that is on the verge of acquiring an operational nuclear arsenal. Ten years ago, even before North Korea’s first nuclear test, Graham Allison of the Harvard Kennedy School warned in his book *Nuclear Terrorism* that on the current course, North Korea’s development of nuclear weapons and nuclear weapon production line promises to become the greatest failure in the nearly 230-year history of American foreign policy. Unfortunately, few heard his warning. Currently the world’s attention seems to be on Iran. In contrast, there seems to be little attention on North Korea’s nuclear program. The irony is that North Korea’s nuclear program is several years ahead of Iran’s.

North Korea also continued to develop unconventional warfare capabilities such as cyber warfare, electromagnetic pulse (EMP) bombs. North Korean cyber attack on Sony has received global attention. However, their attacks on South Korea have been much more extensive and threatening. Two years ago, North Korea hackers attacked South Korea’s leading television networks such as KBS, MBC, and YTN as well as major financial institutions such as National Agricultural Corporative Federations and Shinhan Bank. Last year they also attacked South Korea’s hydro and nuclear power headquarters. In this month, North Korea fired more than 20 short range missiles off its coast. They received little attention even from the South Korean press. They have almost become routine events.

However, former CIA director James Woolsey warned that North Korea may be testing EMP bombs. North Korea may use one of the missiles to detonate an EMP bomb as part of its “quote unquote” routine test firing. An EMP bomb will be a disaster for South Korea—destroying power grids, computers, and electronic devices. A North Korea EMP bomb will be a game changer.

This morning we are all gathered here but we do not know what the end game of the North Korea's nuclear program will be. However, we will all agree that the current situation cannot continue at it is.

The ultimate goal of the Republic of Korea is peaceful unification. It can be a disruptive process even if a war is avoided. As German unification showed, Korean unification can only be achieved with the help of our neighbors China, Japan, Russia, and the U.S.

Distinguished guests and friends, if we look at the sheer magnitude of the geopolitics of this vast Eurasian continent, the fact that a small country like South Korea, located at the Eastern tip of the continent, remains a free democracy is a miracle in progress. As someone said, "The better idea does not have to win just because it is a better idea. It requires great powers to champion it." We are fortunate that the U.S. has been willing to champion our cause.

What is the U.S. to South Korea? First, it is a country that has no territorial ambition on the peninsula. Second, it is a rare country that tries to balance realism and idealism in its foreign policy to have its foreign policy reflect an idealistic component. Chaibong used to tell me that the U.S. is on its way back. I hope the deliberations of the *Asan Plenum* can help us understand what this means.

Thank you very much.