

Session: Plenary Session 4 (North Korea’s Nuclear Threat)

Date/Time: May 14, 2024 / 16:20-17:40

Rapporteur:

Damin Jung, Korea National Defense University

Moderator:

Sue Mi Terry, Council on Foreign Relations

Speakers:

Ahn Ho-young, Kyungnam University

Naoko Aoki, RAND Corporation

Bruce Bennett, RAND Corporation

John Everard, Former UK Ambassador to DPRK

Morimoto Satoshi, Former Minister of Defense, Japan

Su Hao, China Foreign Affairs University

Session Sketch:

Plenary Session 4 "North Korea’s nuclear threat" discussed the growing nuclear and missile threats from North Korea amid the changing security environments on the Korean Peninsula including the increasing trade of weapons between North Korea and Russia, and the competition in satellite development between the two Koreas. A key theme of the session was differing thoughts on how the regional players could produce an effective deterrence against the North Korean nuclear threats. Sue Mi Terry, senior fellow for Korea studies at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), opened the session by asking the speakers whether the United States would need to change its policy towards North Korea, citing some Korea watchers who argue that Washington should give up its unrealistic goal of persuading North Korea to denuclearize and instead turn to sanctions relief in exchange of freezing North Korea’s plutonium nuclear facilities.

Ambassador Ahn Ho-young, chair professor at Kyungnam University and former ambassador to the United States, saw suspending North Korea’s development of nuclear weapons in return for sanctions lift as an undesirable option when negotiating with North Korea. Ambassador Ahn pointed out that even though the idea of freezing North Korea’s nuclear program has long been discussed, we should note that the context has changed since the meeting between Vladimir Putin and Kim Jong-un last September. He said lifting sanctions amid the intensifying ties between Russia and North Korea would only increase tensions when North Korea can strengthen two different capabilities of nuclear and conventional capabilities at the same time, which could turn into a substantial threat.

Professor Bruce Bennett, an adjunct international/defense researcher at the RAND

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Corporation argued that the United States and South Korea should find creative ways to coerce North Korea to freeze its nuclear weapon production. Mr. Bennett emphasized the importance of using outside information when North Korea’s leader Kim is extremely concerned about outside information like K-pop or K-dramas.

Dr. John Everard, Former U.K. Ambassador to DPRK, addressed the worsening geographical situation on the Korean Peninsula since the collapse of the summit between former U.S. President Donald Trump and Kim in February 2018. Amb. Everard noted that North Korea’s change of policy last December, where they abandoned the previous peaceful reunification with South Korea. He cited North Korea’s collapsing economy and erosion of state control as reasons behind this policy shift. Amb. Everard then emphasized the role of China in dissuading North Korea from continuing their nuclear programs.

Dr. Su Hao, professor in the Department of Diplomacy and founding director of the Center for Strategic and Peace Studies at China Foreign Affairs University, observed that the deepening division of Koreas is beneficial for North Korea in that it could continue its nuclear weapons development. Professor Su also noted that the United States is also getting benefits from the current situation in that it is forging a huge Indo-Pacific coalition. However, he said the regional players should go back to the principle of denuclearization by focusing on their common interests.

Dr. Naoko Aoki, associate political scientist at the RAND Corporation, focused on the importance of the top-level political commitment of the trilateral cooperation among the United States, South Korea, and Japan. Dr. Naoko said that even though such trilateral efforts will not stop North Korea from testing missiles, it could still complicate North Korea's strategic calculations.

Minister Morimoto Satoshi, former Japanese Minister of Defense, pointed out the growing nuclear and missile threats from North Korea, citing its development of reconnaissance satellites and increasing trade of weapons with Russia, as well as the policy shift of abandoning the unification with South Korea. Minister Morimoto noted that the U.S. Initiative for Integrated Air and Missile Defense could tackle complex threats such as North Korea’s solid-fuel missiles and space-launched vehicles.

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