

## Session Sketch

Asan Plenum 2025: “80 Years of Independence and 60 Years of Korea-Japan Normalization”

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**Session:** Session 2-1, Visions for Northeast Asia

**Date/Time:** April 23, 2025 / 13:10-14:30

**Rapporteur:** Prof. Yang Xiangfeng, Lingnan University

**Moderator:** Victor Cha, Center for Strategic and International Studies

**Speakers:**

Kim Sung-han, Korea University

Andrey Kortunov, Russian International Affairs Council

Nakabayashi Mieko, Waseda University

Sheila Smith, Council on Foreign Relations

Su Hao, China Foreign Affairs University

### Session Sketch:

Concurrent Session 2-1 of the 2025 Asan Plenum, titled “Visions for Northeast Asia,” reflected on the evolving security dynamics in the region. The session, moderated by Dr. Victor Cha of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), featured influential voices from each of the major powers in the region. Dr. Cha opened the session by expressing his disagreement with the premise that there might be just one single vision for regional order.

Professor Kim Sung-han, a professor of International Relations at the Graduate School of International Studies (GSIS) at Korea University and former national security advisor, began by differentiating the “idealistic” vision from the “feasible” one in terms of peace and security on the peninsula, as well as regional cooperation, and democracy and human rights. He contended that a realistic and feasible vision should first and foremost aim to “manage the tensions” on the peninsula with a view toward preventing war while also attempting to negotiate with North Korea. At the same time, he emphasized the importance of institutionalized cooperation with the United States and Japan, noting that future developments may depend on the outcome of the upcoming presidential election on June 3. Dr. Kim also noted that South Korea must simultaneously manage the AJK (America-Japan-Korea) triangle and the CJK (China-Japan-Korea) triangle. He placed greater emphasis on AJK with a view toward promoting cooperation within the CJK triangle. Speaking about U.S.-China competition, Dr. Kim suggested that it would persist for many years to come and admitted uncertainty over which areas of cooperation are “feasible” for the two superpowers. He suggested that Korea could “assist the United States” in balancing competition and cooperation.

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Dr. Andrey Kortunov, former Academic Director of the Russian International Affairs Council, noted a “telling” resonance between ROK-Japan cooperation and future Russia-Ukraine relations, now that negotiations to end the Ukraine war have already started. He observed that Russia has historically been a “minority shareholder” in this part of the world and sought to “preserve” its influence by maintaining relations with North Korea with an eye toward denuclearization. However, in light of recent developments, North Korea has become a far more important partner for Russia, while China’s importance remained. Going forward, Dr. Kortunov noted China remains Pyongyang’s most vital partner, and Russia is likely to calibrate its approach to North Korea in line with Beijing’s preferences. He added that Moscow will seek not to “irritate” Beijing when dealing with North Korea. Meanwhile, he commented that U.S.-Russia relations are also evolving under President Donald Trump.

Prof. Nakabayashi Mieko of Waseda University highlighted a contrast between the region in the past that was characterized by the emphasis on economic growth and the current situation of “strategic fragmentation” following closer relations between China and Russia. She noted that issues such as economic security and digital security are also gaining prominence, while discussions on defense budget increases remain a contentious issue. In Japan, public opinion is “ambivalent” as businesses do not want to take sides between the United States and China.

Dr. Sheila Smith, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, noted that it is too early to reach a definitive conclusion on what the future might hold. Despite the uncertainties introduced by President Trump, she noted that the twin goals of the United States in the Northeast Asian region—maintaining regional peace and stability and upholding treaty commitments to allies—continue to “define the U.S. agenda moving forward.”

Su Hao, Emeritus Professor at China Foreign Affairs University, viewed it as a positive sign that the discussion had moved beyond the North Triangle comprising China, Russia, and North Korea versus the South Triangle. He outlined the Chinese vision of international order in four dimensions: hedging and engaging in the security arena, peaceful co-existence, a greater emphasis on economic cooperation over military security, and integrated diplomacy, particularly through ROK-Japan-China trilateralism.

During the Q&A segment of the session, Dr. Cha posed the question of “who benefits and who loses” in this state of disorder. Prof. Kim claimed that the first winners are China and Russia, regional leaders or “swing states” in the Global South such as Saudi Arabia, India, Turkey, and North Korea. Losers are liberal democracies, fragile states in the Global South, and multilateral institutions including the UN, WTO, and WHO.

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Dr. Andrey Kortunov, however, argued that there are no winners but only losers because all countries need a stable environment and norms in which they can operate safely. Prof. Nakabayashi did not address the question directly but speculated on what might happen if both President Trump and Xi Jinping visit Russia on May 9th. She also noted how the recent events, especially those between China and the United States, have left us "devastated" while the world "hungers for rules and leadership." Dr. Smith argued, considering the events, that Europe, especially the Baltic states, have experienced a deep sense of anxiety, while noting that Iran was a "huge loser." The United States is currently a significant loser due to the "self-inflicted" damage caused by Trump. Global institutions have suffered too, with the Security Council being "neutralized."

Prof. Su stated that it was not easy to give a straightforward answer. In the context of the trade war under Trump's second term, all are losers. Finally, Dr. Kim argued that the current disorder was likely to regionalize, as the balance of power would be maintained in Europe, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific.

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