

Plenary Session 1: A World Free of Nuclear Weapons: A Bold Dream vs. a Reality in the Making

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Summary

The opening session of the Plenum considered the goal of global nuclear disarmament and brought it into relief against the backdrop of the security situation on the Korean peninsula, which poses unique and difficult challenges to an NPT regime that is hoped to derive much-needed strength from the disarmament vision. Discussants took note of the crucial role that South Korea has to play in shaping the future nuclear landscape, observing the country's role as host to the 2010 G-20 Summit and the 2012 Nuclear Security Summit, as well as its growing importance in the global economy and in the nuclear industry specifically. Moreover, the goal of global nuclear disarmament, while embraced and supported by South Korea officially, faces one of its most acute challenges in the "grim reality" presented by a divided Korean peninsula with a nuclear-armed North; indeed, most of the discussion during this session focused on this very issue. And while there was general agreement among the panelists that the countries involved in the effort to rollback North Korea's nuclear weapons program must work in concert with one another, the discussion surfaced several difficult issues that complicate the ability to formulate and implement a common approach. The first, and perhaps most fundamental problem, is the lack of time and resources that several key states, in particular China and the U.S. but also South Korea, have to expend on resolving the dispute over North Korea's nuclear program. Each country has a number of other pressing concerns and political attention is finite. A second, more general challenge surfaced by discussion was one of balancing the parallel but competing objectives of disarmament and deterrence, as efforts to deter and respond to aggression can come at the cost of aggravating security situations that are already problematic. In this vein, the nature and mode of "extended deterrence" that the U.S. offers to South Korea was discussed, as were the

conclusions that North Korea drew from interventions in Iraq and Libya. A third difficulty that emerged was one of sustaining a coherent case and strong sense of purpose for the long-term goal of peninsular denuclearization while working towards the more limited goals of capping or containing North Korea's nuclear program in the meantime. It can be difficult to discern in what respects a strategy geared towards containment is quantitatively versus qualitatively different than a strategy geared towards complete nuclear dismantlement – and there may be tensions between the two. Finally, with respect to the long-term goals of peninsular re-unification and denuclearization, it was apparent that moving too slowly would be tantamount to accepting an unacceptable status quo while pushing too hard could stoke fears, especially within China, of destabilizing both the North Korean regime and the security situation in the region. So, while the severity of the problem is clear, it is equally clear that the way forward must be delicately crafted. Insofar as this is true for nuclear disarmament on the Korean peninsula, it is likely to be equally true for nuclear disarmament worldwide.

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