



Session Sketch

Asan Plenum 2019: "Korea's Choice"
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Session: G1 or G2?

Date/Time: April 23, 2019 / 10:30-12:00

Rapporteur:

Peter Lee, Australian National University

Moderator:

Choi Kang, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Speakers:

Evelyn Goh, The Australian National University

Douglas H. Paal, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

James B. Steinberg, Syracuse University

Zhang Tuosheng, China Foundation for International and Strategic Studies; Sejong Institute

Zhao Xiaozhuo, Academy of Military Sciences, People's Liberation Army

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Plenary Session 1, "G1 or G2?", discussed the emerging regional order and how it would be shaped by US-China relations. A key theme of the session was differing thoughts on what kind of leadership would unfold in the coming years. Dr. Choi Kang, Vice President of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, opened the session by asking the speakers to share their observations on the current state of US-China relations and Korea's choices between them.

Professor Evelyn Goh, Shedden Professor of Strategic Policy Studies at the Australian National University, noted that this was the first Asian power transition in over two hundred years that involved more than just the great powers. Consequently, it involved more perspectives than just the United States and China. She then provided a regional perspective of how other states throughout the region, including Southeast Asia, had already been dealing with similar dilemmas, noting that the debate was especially difficult among US allies such as Korea which were only now facing this dilemma.

Mr. Douglas H. Paal, Distinguished Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, focused on how key officials and policymakers in both the US and China seemed to be buying into a more conflictual and absolutist view of China in recent years. He pointed out that many of the fears about China's rise had precedents in past US concerns about growing Soviet, and later Japanese, power. Mr. Paal cautioned that policymakers should take care not to sacrifice key features of the liberal international order, including openness, in dealing with China's rise.

Professor James B. Steinberg, Professor at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University, cited two reasons why the US-China relationship seemed to

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have deteriorated so badly in recent years. First, growing fears had led both sides to assume the worst about each other's intentions and created a security dilemma of mutual fear and suspicion. Second, there were growing US perceptions that even as globalization had produced absolute benefits to all states, that the United States was increasingly worse off itself than the past.

Professor Zhang Tuosheng, Senior Fellow and Chairman of Academic Committee and Director of the Center for Foreign Policy Studies at the China Foundation for International and Strategic Studies, outlined two potential scenarios for US-China relations. First, there was a small possibility of a new Cold War stemming from either a failure in trade negotiations and the ongoing trade war, a possible military crisis over Taiwan, or a security conflict in the South China Sea. Any of these contingencies would be disastrous for the US-China relationship. However, Professor Zhang Tuosheng stated that the current frictions were more evident of benign competition and could be stabilized based on constructive cooperation and coordination across issues such as trade, military cooperation, people-to-people ties, and denuclearization.

Senior Colonel Zhao Xiaozhuo, Director of the Beijing Xiangshan Forum Secretariat Office and Senior Fellow at the Institute of War Studies, Academy of Military Sciences, People’s Liberation Army (PLA), observed that three developments seemed to indicate a change in US policy towards China. First, recent US government reports had all labelled China as a rival or competitor. Second, the ongoing trade war and growing restrictions on people-to-people ties were cause for concern. And finally, increased US intervention in Taiwan all seemed to indicate that US engagement and cooperation with China had been replaced by a new desire to force China to change.

During the discussions, the speakers focused on areas where the US and China could cooperate on regional public goods such as safeguarding sea lines of communication, unplanned encounters at sea, limiting militarization activities in the South China Sea, and potential participation in development projects. Another topic of discussion was the differing interpretations of the Indo-Pacific as both a geographic and strategic concept. Speakers also focused on flashpoints in US-China relations, especially Taiwan and the South China Sea, where the two sides’ interests diverged and the perceptions of other states, including Korea. During the question-and-answer session, a range of questions focused on possible confidence building measures, the role of other regional powers besides the US and China, and the future of alliances amidst US-China competition.

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