

Asan Plenum 2025

“80 Years of Independence and 60 Years of Korea-Japan Normalization”

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Good morning, dear friends, ladies, and gentlemen,

Welcome to the Asan Plenum 2025.

The theme of this year’s Plenum is “80 Years of Independence and 60 Years of Korea-Japan Normalization.”

The 80th anniversary of national liberation and the 60th anniversary of normalization of diplomatic relations with Japan are both significant milestones that merit our discussion this year.

The number 80 is considered auspicious for Koreans. In the past, it was rare for someone to live to their 80th birthday. To celebrate, we used to hold a big celebration called *pal-sun janchi*.

Sixty years is also a symbolic number because it marks a full cycle of the East Asian calendar. We hold a feast to celebrate a person’s sixtieth birthday, known as *hwan-gap*.

This year is an opportunity to reflect on the past, assess the present, and consider the future of Korea’s security at this inflection point in world history.

Let me begin with Korea’s relationship with Japan. For thousands of years, Korea preserved its independence between the competing spheres of influence cast by China and Japan.

In the 1590s, two Japanese invasions devastated Korea. In the 1890s, Imperial Japan started ‘The First Sino-Japanese War.’ The war was fought on the Korean Peninsula and Japanese assassins killed Korean Empress Myeongseong in 1895 at Gyeongbok Palace. It led to the 1905 Eulsa Treaty and formal annexation in 1910.

For the next 36 years, from 1910 to 1945, Imperial Japan exploited Korea. In World War Two, millions of Korean men were drafted to be sent to Japan’s military frontlines. According to Professor Chong-Sik Lee of University of Pennsylvania, about 200,000 Korean women were forced to become “comfort women” for Japanese soldiers. Girls as young as fourteen were taken to the “comfort” stations. When the United States finally dropped atomic bombs on Japan to end the war in 1945, 40,000 Koreans working at factories in Hiroshima and Nagasaki were also killed.

Thanks to America's victory in 1945, the Japanese occupation of Korea ended. It took 20 years for South Korea to normalize diplomatic relations with Japan in 1965. Many Koreans opposed the government's decision to establish diplomatic relations with Japan and demonstrated on the streets violently.

Despite 60 years of relations, there continue to be many points of friction in our relationship. On history issues, these include historical revisionism by a group of people in Japan about wartime crimes and denial of justice to Korean victims such as comfort women and forced laborers. On territorial issues, we continue to see unwarranted Japanese claims to the South Korean island of Dokdo and unilateral interpretations around the continental shelf.

Dear Friends, Ladies, and Gentlemen,

Throughout my career, I have tried to contribute to improving the Korea-Japan relationship. As a PhD student at Johns Hopkins SAIS, I wrote my dissertation on the Japanese industry. As a politician, I wrote a book in 2002, titled "This I Say to Japan." And as the Vice President of FIFA, I tried to make the 2002 FIFA World Cup to be co-hosted with Japan.

Over the past 80 years, the Korea-Japan relationship has made important progress despite our troubled history. We have helped each other in times of need. For example, we have provided medical aid after natural disasters, such as the 1995 Kobe Earthquake and the 2011 Earthquake and Tsunami in Japan. Our governments have also evacuated each other's citizens from conflicts such as Libya in 2011 and Sudan and Israel in 2023.

Our people-to-people exchanges now exceed that with China. Last year, 7 million Korean tourists visited Japan, making up a quarter of all foreign tourists, while over two million Japanese tourists visited Korea, making up a fifth of all tourists.

The Asan Institute's annual survey shows that the positive feeling of Korean public towards Japan is the highest in recent years. Support for closer trilateral security cooperation between South Korea, the United States and Japan is also over 80 percent.

Dear Friends, Ladies, and Gentlemen,

It has been 80 years since Japanese colonists and troops left the Korean Peninsula. At the end of the Second World War, in Europe, the Allied powers divided Nazi Germany as punishment. But in Asia, they divided Korea, not Japan.

Today, the greatest threat to our country comes not from Japan, but from the communist and hereditary regime in North Korea. The security threat posed by North Korea is more serious than ever. North Korea has unveiled tactical nuclear weapons and nuclear submarines. It has tested dozens of short and long-range ballistic missiles. It has sent thousands of North Korean soldiers to the frontlines against Ukraine. It evades sanctions and steals billions of dollars through cyberattacks.

If we want to overcome the challenge posed by North Korea supported by China and Russia, we better be prepared to “Think the Unthinkable.”

Last year, I claimed that “We better begin laying the groundwork for the redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons.”

Recently, senior American politicians and experts are becoming more supportive of the redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons. Senator Roger Wicker of Mississippi, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, has proposed examining the re-deployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to the Western Pacific. The United States still has over 100 nuclear bombs deployed in Europe.

Our concern begins with recognizing the reality that North Korea has broken its promises under the Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula signed in December 1991.

Under these circumstances, we need stronger collective security measures to deter aggression and miscalculation by North Korea. The relevant question we can ask is whether Russia would have invaded Ukraine if it had been part of NATO?

The United States and its allies need to show credible resolve to deter North Korean, Chinese, and Russian military adventurism. It is time for an Asian version of NATO. We may call it the Indo-Pacific Treaty Organization, IPTO. It could include South Korea, Japan, Australia, the Philippines, and India.

Dear Friends, Ladies, and Gentlemen,

This year’s Asan Plenum is an opportunity to reflect on 80 years of Korea’s independence and 60 years of Korea-Japan relations. During our Plenum today, we will discuss Korea’s relations with its neighbors, visions for Northeast Asia, the emerging security architecture, new faces of war, new horizons of economic security, and North Korea’s nuclear threat. I am delighted that we have with us experts from many countries.

I hope that our discussions today will help us find solutions to prevent tensions from erupting into conflict.

Thank you very much for sharing your insight and wisdom.