

Session: Opening Ceremony

Speakers:

Chung Mong Joon, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Cho Tae-yul, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ROK

Mizushima Koichi, Embassy of Japan in Korea

Kurt Campbell, The Asia Group

Session Sketch:

The 2025 Asan Plenum, titled “80 Years of Independence and 60 Years of Korea-Japan Normalization,” began with welcoming remarks by Dr. MJ Chung, Founder and Honorary Chairman of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. Dr. Chung opened by noting that 2025 marked “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.”

He first provided an historical introduction to Korea’s relations with Japan, including major wars, colonial occupation, wartime atrocities, and the widespread public opposition to diplomatic normalization of relations with Japan in 1965, which only occurred 20 years after the end of Japan’s occupation. Dr. Chung also cited contemporary “points of friction in our relationship,” including “historical revisionism” as well as “unwarranted Japanese claims” to maritime and territorial features. Nonetheless, he stated that the “Korea-Japan relationship has made important progress despite our troubled history,” including with humanitarian assistance after natural disasters, emergency evacuations of each other’s citizens from conflict zones, record high people-to-people exchanges, and positive public opinion scores.

Turning to North Korea, Dr. Chung noted that, “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.” He emphasized the need for stronger deterrence measures, including against North Korea’s nuclear threat. One measure would be the redeployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to the Korean Peninsula. Dr. Chung observed that senior American politicians and experts are becoming more supportive of the redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons.

Finally, Dr. Chung concluded his welcoming remarks by proposing that “we need stronger collective security measures to deter aggression and miscalculation by North Korea.” He encouraged the audience to “think the unthinkable” when it comes to demonstrating “credible resolve.” Dr. Chung stated, “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.”

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Next, Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea, delivered congratulatory remarks. Minister Cho began by emphasizing that Korea’s success was built on a U.S.-led post-war international order, founded on “enlightened self-interest and the rule of law.” However, he warned that this order is “falling into despair,” and the world is entering a new post-Cold War era without clear rules. He urged that the future international order must reflect the “long-term interests of its key stakeholders” to remain durable. Minister Cho noted that the ROK-U.S. alliance has expanded beyond security to include critical technologies and economic security. The Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) was highlighted as a key achievement in extended deterrence against North Korea’s nuclear threat. He also pointed to joint economic initiatives like shipbuilding and LNG as examples of deepening “win-win cooperation.”

Minister Cho noted the positive developments in Korea-Japan relations, stating, “No relationship has seen more progress over the past two years than Korea’s partnership with Japan.” And emphasized that the strengthened cooperation with Japan is not a “matter of choice” but “necessity.” He advocated for future-oriented reconciliation by stating that, the “best way to shape a brighter future is to move first to change one’s own thinking, rather than wait until the other side does so.” He noted that Korea is seeking a mature and balanced relationship with China, recognizing differences but emphasizing dialogue. Moreover, Russia remains a “key player” to Korea despite Russia’s war in Ukraine and military cooperation with North Korea. He stressed the need to maintain diplomatic channels. He also warned of the danger in Russia providing advanced weapons to North Korea, which could decouple U.S. security from that of its allies in Asia.

Minister Cho further highlighted Korea’s increasing engagement with NATO, the EU, and the G7, highlighting the interconnectedness of European and Indo-Pacific security. He stated, “standing side by side with NATO has become such a natural part of South Korea’s diplomacy.” He also emphasized the importance of strengthening outreach to the Global South, and listed the achievements such as summits held with Pacific Island nations and Africa, established ties with Cuba and Syria. He emphasized Korea’s role in leadership in emerging norms, such as hosting the AI Seoul Summit and the Second Summit on Responsible AI in the Military Domain. He concluded by stating that “shaping the rules of the post-Cold War order is not something that can or should be done by a concert of great power. Others with stakes in the system too, must step up.”

Ambassador Mizushima Koichi, Japanese Ambassador to South Korea, next highlighted the significance of the Plenum’s theme, “80 Years of Independence and 60 Years of Korea-Japan Normalization,” emphasizing the importance of bilateral and trilateral cooperation amid growing global uncertainty. He praised recent diplomatic progress, noting that since the resumption of shuttle diplomacy in 2023, leaders have met frequently, including twelve summits and several high-level visits.

Ambassador Mizushima reaffirmed that Japan and Korea, as close neighbors, must deepen collaboration not only politically but also economically—with over 2,700 Japanese firms active in

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Korea and over 12 million people traveling between the two countries last year, a record high. Stressing that the strategic importance of Japan-Korea relations will only grow, he stated, “Neither country has any room to exhaust its energy in contending with each other. Rather, we should focus our energies on cooperation in solving various challenges together.” He closed by echoing the anniversary slogan: “Hand in hand, toward a better future.”

Dr. Kurt Campbell, former U.S. Deputy Secretary of State and Chairman and Co-Founder of the Asia Group, delivered this year’s Asan Plenum keynote speech. Dr. Campbell began by stressing that the ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateral relationship is no longer optional, but essential, stating, “the trilateral partnership [...] will be the most important strategic relationship any of our three countries will have in the decades ahead.” He outlined a long-standing internal division in U.S. foreign policy: one group prioritized managing the U.S.-China relationship, while the other focused on the tedious, often thankless work of managing alliances, especially with Japan and South Korea. He stated that the alliance-focused group has now taken precedence in shaping U.S. foreign policy, with the focus in partnerships. He emphasized that the importance of alliances and partnerships to U.S. strategy needed to continue under the second Trump administration as a bipartisan position, even while some advocated for an America First approach that risked becoming an “America only” approach.

Dr. Campbell then outlined the key technologies of the 21st century including AI, semiconductors, robotics, quantum computing, and stated that the United States cannot meet the challenge from China. He stressed that the ongoing U.S.-China technology competition is where the role of allies such as Korea and Japan is “absolutely vital,” praising South Korea’s leadership in semiconductors and Japan’s edge in robotics and nanotech. He also called for deeper trilateral coordination in tech policy, R&D, and supply chains to preserve an open, rules-based international order. He also stressed that the ROK is a “critical partner” in reviving U.S. shipbuilding capacity” stating that “The ROK has the ability to assist a largely moribund effort in the United States.”

Regarding ROK-Japan relations, he contended that it is in “American strategic interest” to encourage closer partnership between the two countries. He added that “continued rapprochement” between South Korea and Japan is essential to the security, prosperity, and stability of Northeast Asia. In the face of North Korea’s provocations, China’s nuclear buildup, and Russia’s nuclear threats that undermine confidence in the U.S. nuclear umbrella, he stressed that the United States is going to involve its key allies such as Korea in decision-making around military nuclear use. He praised South Korea’s development aid, peacekeeping, and global engagement as rare and exemplary, and called for Korea’s inclusion in G7, stating, “It is time for more ROK representation in the dominant forms of the day.”

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