

Session Sketch

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

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Session: South Korea and Its Neighbors

Date/Time: April 23, 2025 / 10:10-11:40

Rapporteur: Francesca Frassinetti, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies & Ca’ Foscari University Venice

Moderator: Karen House, Harvard University

Speakers:

Jia Qingguo, Peking University

Lee Sook Jong, Sungkyunkwan University

Nagamine Yasumasa, Anderson Mori & Tomotsune

Shin Kak Soo, NEAR Foundation

Soeya Yoshihide, Keio University

Victor Cha, CSIS

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Plenary Session 1 of the Asan Plenum 2025, titled “South Korea and Its Neighbors,” discussed Korea’s foreign relations 80 years since independence. A key point of discussion in the session was the role of alliances in shaping South Korea’s relations with its neighbors. Most participants noted that the ROK-U.S. alliance has been central to how South Korea deals with its neighbors, including supporting closer ties with Japan. By contrast, some participants expressed concerns that South Korea’s alliance with the United States could negatively affect its relations with China in a zero-sum manner. The Session was moderated by Ms. Karen House, a senior fellow at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard Kennedy School of Government. Ms. House invited the session’s six distinguished speakers to reflect on what they thought were the key issues that South Korea should be dealing with its neighbors.

Dr. Jia Qingguo, former dean and a professor at the School of International Studies of Peking University, noted that over the past eight decades South Korea achieved remarkable accomplishments becoming a modern and prosperous country and a vibrant democracy earning respect on the global stage. Dr. Jia assessed that South Korea and Japan have become major trading partners and that this bilateral relationship is underpinned by a high volume of people-to-people exchanges and visits. Dr. Jia noted that in the last few years, South Korea and Japan have managed to stabilize their relationship and that more concerted efforts on both sides are needed moving forward. Now, Dr. Jia warned the audience that the Japan-South Korea bilateral relationship finds itself at another crossroads given the tremendous pressure stemming from the U.S.-China rivalry. Dr. Jia noted that many people on both sides believe that in South Korea there are many who advocate for anti-China policies and the same can be observed in China

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vis-à-vis South Korea. In these circumstances the question remains: Can these two countries experience good relations in the years to come? The future of this relations depends on the bold choices that these countries will make.

Prof. Lee Sook Jong, a distinguished professor at the Graduate School of Governance at Sungkyunkwan University, emphasized that when we talk about South Korea’s neighbors, we used to refer to the four great powers surrounding South Korea notably China, Japan, Russia and the United States. However, Prof. Lee noted that “the term surrounding powers term is no longer used so often, which underscores how South Korea has emerged as a very influential partner at the regional and international level.” Prof. Lee argued that South Korea and Japan should work with the United States to let the liberal international order prevail in the Northeast Asia region. Prof. Lee believed that a confrontational attitude towards China is very detrimental for South Korea’s interests. For this reason, she pointed out that resuming cooperation with Japan and China is important. Japan is an important regional partner for South Korea as the two countries share liberal values as stable democracies. Based on these commonalities, Prof. Lee believed that South Korea and Japan should join forces and support the global liberal order. Moreover, she stressed that more should be done to deter greater collaboration between North Korea and Russia. Finally, she noted that South Korea’s neighbors are global and not limited to the surrounding countries in Northeast Asia as shown by the global outreach of South Korea’s soft power and cultural contents.

Ambassador Nagamine Yasumasa, an Attorney-at-Law and Counsel at Anderson Mori & Tomotsune, recalled his years as the Japanese Ambassador to South Korea (2016-2019). He noted that towards the end of his tenure the South Korea-Japan bilateral relationship soured due to the issue of forced laborers. However, following the inauguration of a new government in South Korea and the lifting of the pandemic-induced constraints, the downward spiral stopped, which led to positive ties being resumed. Amb. Nagamine praised both sides’ efforts to move forward in their relationship through the announcement by the South Korean government of a foundation to compensate victims of forced labor during Japanese colonization, which was welcomed by the Japanese administration. Finally, Amb. Nagamine noted that people-to-people exchanges between South Korea and Japan are remarkably strong and this is an aspect that can be useful to overcome temporary dips in diplomatic relations.

Ambassador Shin Kak Soo, Deputy Chairman of the NEAR Foundation, stressed how South Korea has been dealing with severe domestic constraints recently. Regarding the June 3 elections in South Korea, Ambassador Shin expected that the outcome of the elections would have a significant influence on the relationship between South Korea and its neighbors.

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According to Ambassador Shin, if the Democratic Party candidate prevails, he is expected to pursue better relations with China and dialogue with North Korea. If the People Power Party candidate wins, his administration will pursue a foreign policy agenda in continuation with that of the outgoing conservative government. Adding to that, Ambassador Shin mentioned the other challenges for South Korea particularly stemming from Washington’s likely expectation that South Korea increases its contribution to the country’s own and regional security. Ambassador Shin also pointed out that the ROK-U.S. relationship has already been affected and will be even more affected by disruptive tech wars. Against this backdrop, Seoul should negotiate with the Trump administration in a way that Seoul can accommodate some of the U.S. needs while preserving South Korea’s national interest and prosperity. Moreover, Ambassador Shin reiterated that South Korea should defend the liberal international order by strengthening ties with Japan and enhancing intra-regional partnerships and minilaterals with other countries in the Indo-Pacific region such as New Zealand and Australia. By the same token, South Korea should reach out to the Global South, particularly Southeast Asia, to provide alternatives to the great power rivalry. In conclusion, Ambassador Shin hoped that another priority for the next ROK administration will be that of nurturing better ties with Beijing.

Professor Soeya Yoshihide, Professor Emeritus in the Faculty of Law at Keio University, noted that the ROK-Japan relationship has come a long way since diplomatic normalization. He shared with Prof. Lee her disagreement with the concept of “four great powers” arguing instead that South Korea, Japan and China are three great powers. Professor Soeya noted that South Korea and Japan share a global agenda as vibrant democracies and developed economies. Moreover, he pointed out that South Korea and Japan are parts of minilateral cooperation frameworks namely the ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateral cooperation and the ROK-Japan-China framework. If strategic alignment between these two frameworks can be achieved through greater ROK-Japan cooperation, regional stability and prosperity can grow. Professor Soeya concluded by saying that for the time being, South Korea and Japan should continue to cooperate with other like-minded countries to protect multilateral institutions and uphold the global liberal international order amidst worrying signals coming from the Trump administration regarding Washington’s commitment to its partners in the Indo-Pacific region. In conclusion, he suggested replacing the concept of deterrence with that of a “stable balance of power.”

Dr. Victor Cha, president of the Geopolitics and Foreign Policy Department and Korea Chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), shared his memory of the late Richard Armitage, who served under then-U.S. secretary of state Colin Powell from 2001 to

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2004, as one of the staunchest supporters of the ROK-U.S. alliance. Dr. Cha said that many say that President Trump has a transactional approach towards the U.S. partners and allies. By adopting this same logic, Dr. Cha argued that the Trump administration should have an interest in deepening the relationship with its allies because these alliances are paying growing dividends that even a transactional administration can see as important. Secondly, Dr. Cha noted that the Trump administration should continue to invest in cooperation with South Korea and Japan because it provides the United States leverage towards China. Third, Dr. Cha believed that President Trump’s antipathy toward Europe and multilateral institutions should lead the United States to support a more prominent role for South Korea on the global stage to balance Europe. The fourth point that Dr. Cha made was that “America First” policy always talks about greater burden sharing among the U.S. allies. If we consider that security in Europe is interlinked with security in Asia, the Trump administration’s retrenching position toward the Washington’s allies and partners could encourage these allies and partners to work more with each other.

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