

Session: North Korea’s Nuclear Threat

Date/Time: April 23, 2025 / 16:10-17:30

Rapporteur: Han Jae Eun, George Mason University

Moderator: Ahn Ho-Young, Kyungnam University

Speakers:

Ahn Byung-suk, Pyeongtaek University

Bruce Bennett, RAND Corporation

John Everard, Former UK Ambassador to the DPRK

Shin Beom-chul, Sejong Institute

Sydney Seiler, Center for Strategic and International Studies

Yabunaka Mitoji, Osaka University

Zhu Feng, Nanjing University

Session Sketch:

General Ahn Byung-suk, a Distinguished Professor at Pyeongtaek University, stressed four core principles for reshaping nuclear deterrence policy. First, he insisted on upholding the goal of complete denuclearization and denying North Korea nuclear state recognition to limit its strategic leverage. Second, he urged consistent application of incentives and pressure. Third, he advocated for “strategic patience” grounded in deterrent strength. Fourth, he called for a pivot from reliance on external pressure to cultivating internal pressure through a focus on human rights. On the evolving U.S.-ROK Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG), Ahn acknowledged improvements but flagged concerns over credibility and feasibility, especially in light of North Korea’s growing ties with Russia. He emphasized strengthening joint operational planning to reinforce deterrence.

Dr. Bruce Bennett, a senior defense analyst at the RAND Corporation, highlighted North Korea’s military transfers to Russia and growing nuclear arsenal, suggesting a shift toward discretionary nuclear use. He criticized the “one-size-fits-all” deterrence model and proposed a conditional approach—such as setting inspection deadlines or threatening U.S. nuclear modernization in South Korea—as leverage. While potentially controversial, he argued such steps could pressure China to intervene constructively. Citing a 2017 *Global Times* editorial, he reminded the audience that China has, in the past, issued stern warnings against North Korean transgressions.

Ambassador John Everard, a former UK ambassador to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) warned that while the probability of a North Korean nuclear strike remains below five percent, it is still too high to ignore. He pointed to two potential triggers: regime instability due to economic collapse, and a conventional attack on South Korea after

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depleting munitions through support for Russia. He labeled this scenario a “dark grey swan” and urged proactive preparation. He also emphasized reengagement with Pyongyang to deter escalation and expressed doubt that China would side with the ROK-U.S. if intervention risks large-scale Chinese casualties.

Mr. Sydney Seiler, a Senior Advisor for the Korea Chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), critiqued denialism surrounding North Korea’s nuclear development, and called for more realistic strategic thinking. He emphasized that provocations from Pyongyang are coercive rather than defensive. Reflecting on U.S. diplomacy, Seiler noted that President Trump’s engagement may have backfired, as unmet expectations led Kim Jong Un to accelerate nuclear development. He warned that unless Kim shows genuine commitment to denuclearization, future engagement will not gain traction. Even with low likelihood, the risk of nuclear use demands contingency planning.

Dr. Shin Beom-chul, a senior research fellow at the Sejong Institute, asserted that denuclearization in the near term is unattainable due to limited leverage. Instead, he recommended a three-track strategy: reinforcing U.S. extended deterrence, pursuing a European-style nuclear-sharing mechanism, and developing independent nuclear capabilities. He underscored the importance of coordinating closely with Washington, particularly before any future U.S.-DPRK deal. He also urged long-term investment in advanced capabilities like SLCMs and nuclear submarines. Shin warned that a Korean Peninsula crisis could overlap with Taiwan tensions, reinforcing the need for robust bilateral planning.

Professor Yabunaka Mitoji, a professor at Osaka University and the former Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs of Japan, reflected on Japan’s experience during the Six-Party Talks. While acknowledging today’s environment differs significantly, he advocated for a new form of multilateral dialogue. With Japan increasingly reconsidering its traditional “Three no’s” nuclear doctrine, Prof. Yabunaka argued that renewed diplomatic channels—potentially even with Russia’s participation—remain essential for regional stability.

Professor Zhu Feng, the Dean and professor of the School of International Studies and Director of the China Center for Collaborative Studies on the South China Sea at Nanjing University, emphasized that while denuclearization remains China’s priority, the humanitarian costs of North Korea’s isolation—especially since the pandemic—have been overlooked. He criticized the hardline posture of the United States and South Korea and cautioned against overreacting to North Korean threats, which he interpreted as desperate efforts to maintain regime survival. Though skeptical of Pyongyang launching a nuclear strike, he declared unequivocally that if North Korea did launch an unprovoked nuclear attack, China would side with the United States and South Korea. Prof. Zhu condemned Cold War-style dynamics and warned that escalating tensions on the Peninsula not only threaten regional stability but also jeopardize China’s critical trade relationship with South Korea.

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