



Session Sketch

Asan Plenum 2019: “Korea’s Choice”
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Session: Collective Memory or Collective Future?

Date/Time: April 23, 2019 / 14:45-16:15

Rapporteur:

John Jihyung Lee, Yonsei University

Moderator:

Philip Stephens, Financial Times

Speakers:

Hahm Chaibong, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

David Harris, American Jewish Committee

Aleksandra Gliszczyńska-Grabias, Polish Academy of Sciences

Volker Stanzel, German Council on Foreign Relations

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The second plenary session was centered on the issue of collective memory. In particular, panelists discussed the European experiences of reconciliation and how lessons learned from these experiences could be applied to Korea-Japan relations. Panelists agreed that memories are fluid in character, which can dangerously lead to manipulation and misuse for political purposes. At the same time, Israel’s reconciliation with Germany following the end of World War II gave hope—a critical driver in bringing about reconciliation—that both victims and perpetrators could come to reconcile for the future of the two communities. What made the Israeli-German reconciliation possible was the presence of two enlightened and visionary leaders on both sides who came to terms with the truth and saw the pragmatic value in moving forward. One participant added that reconciliation tends to work best when the first generations are involved in the process, which was certainly the case for Israel and Germany.

In terms of South Korea’s collective memories following the Japanese colonial period and the Korean War, there were two main ideologies that came to define the Korean identity: anti-communism and anti-Japanese sentiments. These two ideologies co-existed until the end of the Cold War when Korean nationalism started to take over and anti-Japanese and anti-communism began to clash. Interestingly, South Korea’s sense of victimization with regard to China and Japan were translated differently into South Korea’s foreign policies. For example, there was very little blowback from the South Korean public when Chinese President Xi Jinping had told U.S. President Donald Trump that the Korean Peninsula was once part of China. On the other hand, Korea-Japan relations have reached a nadir despite both countries sharing an interest to improve relations. These developments show the complicated and selective nature of collective memories and their impact on a country’s foreign policy.

** The views expressed herein are summaries and may not necessarily reflect the views of the speakers or their affiliated institutions.*