



Session Sketch

Asan Plenum 2019: "Korea's Choice"
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Session: Welcoming Remarks & Keynote Address

Date/Time: April 23, 2019 / 9:30-10:30

Rapporteur:

Peter Lee, Australian National University

Welcoming Remarks:

Hahm Chaibong, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Keynote Address:

James B. Steinberg, Syracuse University

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In his opening remarks, Dr. Hahm Chaibong, President of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, began by stating that the theme of this year's Asan Plenum was "Korea's Choice." Dr. Hahm noted that Korea had made critical choices since its independence which had enabled the country to thrive as a free and prosperous country. Today, Korea was one of the foremost beneficiaries of the liberal international order. However, the tumultuous changes currently occurring on the Korean Peninsula and around the world were presenting Korea with new choices. The aim of this year's Asan Plenum, then, was how to best articulate the choices Korea faces and offer a clear sense of direction in order to secure the freedom and prosperity that has defined its success.

Professor James B. Steinberg, Professor at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University and former United States Deputy Secretary of State, began the keynote address by identifying four key choices that Korea faced today. First, what should be done about North Korea and its nuclear weapons program? While acknowledging the Moon Jae-in administration's efforts to facilitate dialogue between North Korea and the United States, as well as improve inter-Korean relations, Professor Steinberg noted that ultimate denuclearization must remain a core objective. To do so, South Korea's alliance and partnership with the United States needed to remain a core feature of any lasting resolution.

Second, Korea faces difficult choices in improving the South Korea-Japan relationship. Professor Steinberg stated that, despite deep historical and contemporary tensions, both countries have enormous stakes in working together. He noted that Korea-Japan cooperation remains critical to the security of the entire region and that more efforts needed to be made to overcome the current differences.

Third, Korea faces choices in how to position itself amid growing tensions and emerging rivalry between the United States and China. Professor Steinberg outlined several choices Korea could make, including either siding with China or the United States, adopting a neutral

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position, or choosing to make common cause with neighbouring countries. However, none of these options would truly safeguard Korea's security and Professor Steinberg suggested that Korea needed to leverage its relationship with both the United States and China whilst being clear about its own national interests vis-à-vis both countries.

Finally, the Korean economy faced important choices at a time of growing protectionist tendencies in the United States and China. Given Korea's dependence on an open trading system, Professor Steinberg noted that Korea needed to be a champion of open trade. Professor Steinberg closed his keynote address by noting that the growing pessimism surrounding US-China relations required greater effort by all sides. He added that policymakers had the ability and duty to help shape the relationship in a constructive manner rather than fall back on zero-sum views.

During the question and answer session, a number of questions were raised, including how Korea could practically mitigate US-China tensions, whether US allies like Korea should collectively seek to persuade the United States when their interests diverged, as well as how US-China relations could overcome issues in their bilateral ties. Professor Steinberg stated that Korea needed to avoid the emergence of any new Cold War between the United States and China and added that US pressure on its allies should be aimed at persuasion rather than coercion such as through third party sanctions. In conclusion, Professor Steinberg stated Korea needed to be a champion of globalization at a time of growing tensions.

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