

Session Sketch

Asan Plenum 2026

“Modernizing Alliances”

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Session: Plenary Session 4: North Korea’s Nuclear Threat

Date/Time: April 8, 2026 / 16:10-17:30

Speakers:

Bruce Bennett, RAND Corporation

Ambassador Kim Gunn, National Assembly, ROK

Kim Joon Hyung, National Assembly, ROK

Michael Schiffer, Scalare Advisors

Georgy Toloraya, Russian Academy of Sciences

Mitoji Yabunaka, Osaka University

Zhu Feng, Nanjing University

Moderator: Ambassador Chun Yungwoo, Chairman, Korean Peninsula Future Forum

Rapporteur: Dr Edward Howell, University of Oxford and Visiting Fellow (Non-Resident)

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The fourth plenary session, entitled “North Korea’s Nuclear Threat,” was chaired by Ambassador Chun Yungwoo, Chairman of the Korean Peninsula Future Forum. Ambassador Chun outlined how “a nuclear-armed North Korea is here to stay with us for long, and North Korean nuclear threat is growing bigger and more sophisticated and coming closer.”

Bruce Bennett from RAND highlighted how the US’s ongoing war with Iran has confirmed to Kim Jong Un that North Korea’s pursuit of nuclear weapons “has meant that the United States has been deterred from attacking North Korea, but not Iran.” Kim Jong Un remains “determined to build hundreds of nuclear weapons, such that the United States becomes even less willing to carry out its deterrence commitments with its allies.” Given North Korea’s plan for succession and construction of underground facilities to protect its leaders, the elimination of the North Korean regime may be even harder than that of Iran. Mr. Bennett called for a “more tailored deterrence response” in making the West “better prepared” for an increasingly nuclear North Korea.

Ambassador Kim Gunn emphasized how “we must not lose sight of the final goal of denuclearization of North Korea,” arguing how “when dealing an international issue, it takes time”. Kim Joon Hyung drew upon U.S.-North Korean and inter-Korean summitry in 2018 and 2019, highlighting how after the failure of the Hanoi Summit in 2019, the Korean Peninsula “reverted to a confrontational framework.” Mr. Kim deemed inter-Korean relations to have

been “plunged into their worst state” during the Yoon Suk-yeol administration. Pyongyang’s nuclear arsenal is “vastly and clearly different from seven years ago,” having “diversified and advanced.” With respect to the possibility of a summit between President Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un, Mr. Kim asserted how Kim Jong Un likely had two contrasting thoughts following the assassination of Iranian leader Ali Khamenei and kidnapping of Venezuelan leader, Nicolás Maduro: firstly, “a sigh of relief thinking how fortunate he was that he did not abandon his nuclear weapons during the 2018 peace process,” but secondly, “a sense of threat.”

Next, Michael Schiffer of Scalare Advisors warned that North Korea is “more dangerous and complex than current policy frameworks suggest”. Not only is Korea’s nuclear arsenal “larger, more survival, and more tactical and diversified than a decade ago”, but the threat from North Korea is now “multi-domain,” especially in relation to North Korea’s battlefield forces in the Ukraine War and its expansion of cyber capabilities. Mr. Schiffer expressed that the United States “does not know what it wants” with respect to North Korea, noting the omission of North Korea from the 2025 National Security Strategy and, how, in the 2026 National Defense Strategy, the United States deemed South Korea to bear the brunt of responsibility with respect to North Korea.

Georgy Toloraya highlighted how North Korea has firmly become a “nuclear state outside the nuclear non-proliferation regime.” In response to a nuclear North Korea, he called for there to be an “original security system” to be created, akin to the Six-Party Talks. He suggested the possibility that North Korea meets with the five legal nuclear weapons states to discuss arms control, non-proliferation, and strategic stability. Professor Yabunaka Mitoji, himself a former Japanese advisor to the Six-Party Talks, highlighted how the situation today is a “totally different situation” to during the Talks. He raised concern that the threshold of nuclear usage has risen in light of Vladimir Putin’s assertion during the Ukraine War and suggested that Japan change its Three Non-Nuclear Principles to include the possibility for U.S. nuclear weapons to be brought onto Japanese soil. Ultimately, Professor Yabunaka concluded that the United States “must not legitimize North Korea’s nuclear status,” otherwise any further progress on nuclear reduction cannot be achieved.

Lastly, Professor Zhu Feng highlighted how China sees “no possibility” for North Korean denuclearization, which has been worsened by growing South Korea-Japan and South Korea-U.S.-Japan military security cooperation, coupled with the renewed relationship between Moscow and Pyongyang owing to the Ukraine War. He also highlighted how we will have to wait and see for the outcomes of the upcoming summit between Trump and Xi Jinping in May 2026, including whether Trump will meet Kim Jong Un on the sidelines. Professor Zhu highlighted how China’s best interests lie in the “reunification of the two Koreas,” saying that

“as long as the Korean Peninsula is still broken,” China will “see the possibility of war and inter-Korean confrontation” that will inevitably “involve and disturb China.”