

Session Sketch

Asan Plenum 2026

“Modernizing Alliances”

www.asanplenum.org

Session: Opening Ceremony

Date/Time: April 8, 2026 / 9:00-10:00

Speakers:

Welcoming Remarks

Dr. MJ Chung, Founder and Honorary Chairman, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Congratulatory Remarks

Senator Roger Wicker, Senator for Mississippi and Chairman of the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee

Keynote Speech

His Excellency Ishiba Shigeru, Former Prime Minister of Japan and Member of the House of Representatives

Rapporteur: Sophie Kim, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Session Sketch:

The 2026 Asan Plenum, titled “Modernizing Alliances,” began with welcoming remarks by Dr. MJ Chung, Founder and Honorary Chairman of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. Dr. Chung opened his address by noting that the alliance system that the United States built after the Second World War now includes around 50 countries, of which “South Korea is one of the great alliance success stories.” Today, as the United States rethinks its place in the world, the United States has started to modernize its alliances in different ways. Dr. Chung noted that, South Korea is “playing our part” by increasing defense spending, investment of \$350 billion in the United States, cooperation for nuclear-powered submarines, and contributing to the development of U.S. shipbuilding.

Dr. Chung then asked, “Why does the United States want to modernize its alliances?” Is it to share the burden of collective defense in the face of rising threats or is to shift burdens, risks, and responsibilities onto allies? For example, he pointed out that “Many in Korea worry that the United States is no longer fully committed to addressing the nuclear threat from North Korea. The U.S. National Defense Strategy mentioned that South Korea should take ‘primary’ responsibility for dealing with North Korea.” If South Korea is being asked to take the primary responsibility for dealing with the North Korean threat without the support of the U.S. alliance, then this may require bold new thinking for Korean diplomacy.

Session Sketch

Asan Plenum 2026

“Modernizing Alliances”

www.asanplenum.org

For example, South Korea might rethink its diplomatic posture toward states that benefit from a relationship with Seoul while legitimizing the North Korean regime. One option that Dr. Chung pointed to is the idea of a “Korean version of the Hallstein Doctrine.” During the Cold War, West Germany adopted the Hallstein Doctrine to signal that it would cut diplomatic relations with countries that recognized East Germany as a sovereign state. The purpose was to show that opportunistic diplomacy would carry consequences. Dr. Chung observed that “A Korean version of this idea would send a similar message. Those countries which engage in opportunistic political behavior should also be held accountable. Partnership with South Korea must come with responsibilities.”

Dr. Chung next offered two ideas for what “a true modernization of the U.S. alliance system could look like.” First, he reiterated his call for “stronger nuclear sovereignty” for allies, including the re-deployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea and the Western Pacific. He stated that, “The debate must now move beyond whether such options can be discussed. This can include questions of command and control, escalation management, and alliance consultation mechanism. One possibility that we could consider is a coordinated approach involving both South Korea and Japan.” Second, he suggested that “stronger collective security cooperation should be the aim of alliance modernization.” Dr. Chung stated, “We need an Asian version of NATO. We may call it the Indo-Pacific Treaty Organization, (IPTO).” In closing, Dr. Chung noted that, “Modernization should not be allowed to transform into alliance termination. We should be careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater.”

Next, Congratulatory Remarks were delivered by Senator Roger Wicker, Senator for Mississippi and Chairman of the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee. Senator Wicker emphasized that “The U.S. enjoys a strong network of alliances. For decades, those bonds have given us a comparative advantage over authoritarian states like China and Russia. They continued to do so.” Today, he observed that “South Korea, Japan, and the United States are growing closer. North Korea wants to divide us, but our trilateral partnership makes clear that those efforts will fail.”

Senator Wicker then focused on the debate over alliance burden-sharing versus burden-shifting. He stated, “I have long understood the political, strategic, and moral benefits of America's alliances. I support what we have for decades called ‘burden sharing,’ a joint effort to shoulder the load. But some in Washington have spoken of this kind of alliance with derision. They have suggested that our allies have become little more than dependencies. These officials have begun eschewing mutual burden sharing and propose a new term they call ‘burden shifting.’ In such an arrangement, America would abruptly transfer conventional

Session Sketch

Asan Plenum 2026

“Modernizing Alliances”

www.asanplenum.org

deterrence responsibility away from the United States, and we would give it to our allies. I do not agree with these officials.” He continued that “Alliances are about collective defense, but burden shifting suggests the opposite. It suggests that the United States has a limited stake in conflicts that erupt or could erupt in key regions. It suggests abdication, not collective responsibility.”

In the case of the ROK-U.S. alliance, Senator Wicker noted that “collective responsibility” was a fitting description of how it has modernized over time. He added that, “Our alliance began as a military pact, but as the years have passed, it has grown so much more. Today, we share deep cultural ties, and we share a thriving trade relationship. We are committed to a free and open Indo-Pacific. We partner in shipbuilding, critical minerals, artificial intelligence, and energy.”

As for the mission of the ROK-U.S. alliance, Senator Wicker emphasized that the alliance “has never wavered from its original mission to deter and defend against aggression. The U.S.-South Korea relationship boasts America's only bilateral, integrated military alliance.” As such, even as the alliance modernizes, these reforms “should not detract from our focus on North Korea.” Senator Wicker concluded by reiterating that we must “keep our alliance focused on North Korea. The United States will continue to do its part. We will continue by credibly extending deterrence to South Korea and our other treaty allies. We will use all the means available to us, including our conventional forces, our missile defenses, and our nuclear arsenal.”

The Keynote Speech for the 2026 Asan Plenum was delivered by His Excellency Ishiba Shigeru, Former Prime Minister of Japan and Member of the House of Representatives. Mr. Ishiba has been a tireless advocate for deeper alliance integration and collective security measures in the Indo-Pacific as well as a leader in strengthening Korea-Japan relations. Mr. Ishiba’s keynote address covered five key areas of alliance modernization, including deterring North Korea’s military threat, nuclear-sharing options among allies, responding to possible contingencies in the Taiwan Strait, collective security measures such as an Asian version of NATO, and strengthening closer Korea-Japan relations.

First, on deterring North Korea, he shared Japan’s position, which is that, for the sake of preserving the integrity of the NPT regime, it does not recognize North Korea as a nuclear-weapon state. He also pointed out that “Now that North Korea is greatly improving its saturation attack capabilities and the ability to fly missiles at high speeds and anomalies, this is an urgent and critical task.” Moreover, there is “no managed mutual deterrence structure”

Session Sketch

Asan Plenum 2026

“Modernizing Alliances”

www.asanplenum.org

between North Korea and the United States, which makes escalation dynamics more unpredictable.

Second, on nuclear sharing, Mr. Ishiba stated: “I believe that sharing the decision-making process leading up to nuclear use and sharing risks is meaningful enough nuclear sharing, and I believe that this will increase the credibility of nuclear deterrence.” Considering the escalating North Korean missile capabilities, he asked, “Would not North Korea’s acquisition of the capability to strike the American homeland with overwhelming destructive force fundamentally alter the very nature of U.S. deterrence? I believe it is precisely for this reason that the debate over nuclear armament is being pursued with such seriousness in South Korea.” He added that “I do not believe that current efforts are sufficient to strengthen the credibility of the U.S.-Japan and ROK-U.S. nuclear deterrence. If we are to reinforce that credibility, we should urgently establish a standing framework in which the three countries can engage in continuous consultation and maintain close communication.”

Third, on a Taiwan Strait contingency, he noted the similar alliance questions that any conflict might present to Japan and South Korea from the United States, noting that “I believe Japan would have virtually no realistic option but to agree. Yet if China were to resort to coercion or intimidation, it is difficult at present to predict how public opinion in Japan would respond. In this scenario, South Korea will be asked to make the same decision.” In addition, there remain serious risks of a multi-front conflict, adding that “The scenarios we must fear most is the simultaneous eruption of a Taiwan Strait contingency and a contingency on the Korean Peninsula, and we must deepen strategic coordination.” He also asked, in the event of a Korean contingency, how the United Nations Command would “function in practice” and how the legal framework governing its rear-area bases in Japan would be applied. He stressed that these are issues on which “a shared understanding must be forged within Japan.”

Fourth, on the possibility of an Asian version of NATO, Mr. Ishiba observed that “it is a matter of the highest importance to consider building such a framework for the broader Asia-Pacific beyond the modernization of alliances.” After outlining several possible frameworks for collective and multilateral security, he explained that “we can consider strengthening horizontal ties between the United States and the countries that maintain security treaties, and, over time, developing those ties into a NATO-like framework in the future. I think this is the most realistic, and I have been advocating for the linkage between U.S.-Japan security and the ANZUS system for more than 20 years. In addition to this, I think the scenario that includes South Korea and the Philippines is worth serious consideration.”

Session Sketch

Asan Plenum 2026

“Modernizing Alliances”

www.asanplenum.org

Finally, on Korea-Japan relations, he reiterated that “close cooperation between Korea and Japan is of utmost importance for regional and world peace.” Mr. Ishiba called for a prompt conclusion of the Korea-Japan Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) as the next step in cooperation. Korea and Japan also have a global leadership role to play in current conflicts, such as in the Middle East. He stated that “A closure of the Strait of Hormuz would not constitute aggression against any one particular state; rather, by obstructing the transport of Middle Eastern oil, it would threaten peace throughout the world. For that reason, the response should not be framed merely in terms of self-defense. It should be treated as a collective security measure based on United Nations resolutions, to be undertaken by a coalition of willing nations, including Japan and South Korea, and we must play that role together in the United Nations.” He concluded by stating that, “It is my earnest hope that cooperation between Japan and the Republic of Korea will always be guided by a vision of the international order grounded in moral principle and universal values.”