

Session Sketch

Asan Plenum 2026

“Modernizing Alliances”

www.asanplenum.org

Session: Plenary Session 1 (Why Alliance Modernization?)

Date/Time: April 8, 2026 / 10:10-11:40

Rapporteur: Jennifer Hong Whetsell, Institute for Indo-Pacific Security (IIPS)

Moderator: Karen House, Harvard University

Speakers:

Rachel Ellehuus, Royal United Services Institute

Fred Fleitz, America First Policy Institute

Kim Sung-han, Korea University

Jonathan Malaya, We Protect Our Seas Foundation

Nakatani Gen, House of Representatives, Japan

Arthur Sinodinos, University of Sydney

Session Sketch:

Ms. Karen House, the moderator, started the session by noting the importance and “brilliance” of the opening comments from M.J. Chung, Senator Wicker, and former Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru, which provided a strong foundation for this panel.

Ms. Rachel Ellenhuus, Director-General of the Royal United Services Institute, then opened the panel discussion by stressing that the current disruption to alliances is driven by forces beyond any single actor. As she put it, the push for modernization is occurring in a context where not only is the United States “playing a less active role in safeguarding the alliance,” but where the foundational rules of the international order are being openly challenged in Ukraine, the South China Sea, and the Middle East, and new actors like industries are emerging. On the path forward, Ms. Ellenhaus drew on NATO’s experience to argue for diversification—not as a replacement for the United States, but in to promote collective efforts. “This isn’t about substituting the United States,” she emphasized, “but it’s about sharing the added burden.” She pointed to South Korea’s defense spending at 3.5% of GDP and its commitment to universal military service as signs that individual alliance members are increasingly taking responsibility for their own defense. She identified three structural imperatives for alliance modernization: first, reducing overreliance on a single partner; second, deepening bilateral ties; and third, expanding defense-industrial cooperation beyond procurement, such as through “co-production, co-development, joint maintenance, munitions stockpiling, and supply chain resilience.” She closed by raising the question of interoperability: whether, if the United States stepped back from command-and-control functions, the region could continue to operate together, pointing to NATO’s “Steadfast Storm” exercise as a model for testing such scenarios.

Session Sketch

Asan Plenum 2026

“Modernizing Alliances”

www.asanplenum.org

Mr. Fred Fleitz, Vice Chair of the America First Policy Institute, opened by reaffirming that “for over seven decades, the U.S.–South Korea alliance has been the cornerstone of peace and security in the Asia Pacific.” He expressed gratitude for South Korea's increased defense spending and advanced technology cooperation—including shipbuilding, nuclear-powered submarines, and next-generation missile defense—as evidence of a modernizing alliance. Outlining the Trump administration's approach, Fleitz distinguished between U.S. strategic flexibility and South Korea's more peninsula-focused posture, but described the Nuclear Consultative Group and support for U.S.-ROK-Japan trilateral cooperation as tangible signs of an “ironclad” U.S. commitment to the alliance. The centerpiece of his proposal for modernizing the alliance was the creation of a “QUINT”—expanding the existing QUAD framework by adding South Korea, which could support maritime domain awareness and supply chain cooperation through its “top-tier shipbuilding and AI” capabilities. Emphasizing this was not an anti-China alliance but “a vehicle for stability and deterrence,” he proposed three specific QUINT initiatives: a permanent rotating patrol in the East China Sea; a “QUINT Tech Shield Initiative” involving space-based assets for hypersonic missile tracking; and a “QUINT Supply Chain Rapid Response Task Force” covering chips and rare earth minerals. On Japan–South Korea relations, he expressed optimism, noting that the bilateral relationship had “fortunately not encountered the difficulties” seen in NATO, and predicted it “will continue to grow and shape.”

Professor Kim Sung-han, Professor at Korea University, identified a core tension between Seoul and Washington on the definition of alliance modernization that “belies a persistent perception gap.” From the U.S. perspective, alliance modernization is understood in operational terms, implying the expansion of the alliance's geographical scope into the broader Indo-Pacific, including, implicitly, the Taiwan Strait. From the South Korean perspective, modernization means upgrading deterrence while maintaining a primary focus on the Korean Peninsula. “The key question,” he argued, “is not whether the gap exists, but whether it can be closed realistically.” Kim warned that rapid alignment could generate friction, given differences in geography, domestic politics, and strategic culture that “cannot be adjusted overnight.” He made the case that the Korean Peninsula and the Taiwan Strait need to be treated as a “de facto one theater”—not because they require an integrated command structure, but because “they are no longer separable in strategic terms.” To treat them separately, he cautioned, would create “a coordination vacuum” in force allocation, command relationships, and operational planning. He proposed a three-part roadmap: first, institutionalizing joint exercises and consultation mechanisms, moving from ad hoc to structured cooperation with regular trilateral exercises designed for multi-contingency scenarios; second, clarifying in advance the roles and responsibilities among the United States, Japan, and Korea—arguing that “the biggest challenge is not capability but

Session Sketch

Asan Plenum 2026

“Modernizing Alliances”

www.asanplenum.org

coordination failure: who does what”; and third, expanding cooperation into non-traditional multi-domain areas, such as collaboration on cybersecurity, space-based ISR and situational domain awareness, and extended deterrence consultations. He concluded that alliance modernization “should not be understood as a binary choice between maintaining the status quo or fully transforming the alliance into a region wide military instrument,” but rather as “a gradual process of operational adaptation.”

Dr. Jonathan Malaya, Board Member of We Protect Our Sea Foundation, noted the need to modernize the alliance due to changing strategic environments, citing cyber, space, AI, and hypersonic missiles as several of those reasons. The current alliance framework dates back to the 1950s and does not account for the U.S. posture today or the rise of China. Today, the Philippines faces great grey zone challenges in the South China Sea, and the country needs to “modernize its alliance with like-minded nations to work closely, re-energize, and counter in a collective manner.” He noted that the U.S.-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty was signed in 1951, during the Cold War, primarily to contain communism. Today, the U.S. and the Philippines signed additional agreements, including the Visiting Forces Agreement and the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which allows the presence of U.S. troops at nine EDCA sites across the Philippines, and noted the expanded Balikatan exercises. He said the collective security is important for the Indo-Pacific and it can be achieved through three means: first, by strengthening bilateral relationships with as many nations as possible, citing its recent agreements with Japan and New Zealand, and the pending agreements with France and Canada; second, by supporting minilateral groups, such as QUAD and AUKUS, and trilateral with the U.S. and Japan, and being open to additional arrangements; and third, by supporting the “one theater approach by Japan, Republic of Korea, Australia, and the Philippines” to approach our common challenges together.

Mr. Nakatani Gen, Member of the Japanese House of Representatives, opened by situating the need for modernization in the evolution of alliances over the past several decades. He argued that while alliances have long contributed to regional stability in both Europe and Asia, their scope and role must now be updated to reflect contemporary realities. In modern times, he contended, an alliance cannot be defined by a single contingency: it must function as a multifunctional network, capable of engaging all member states across a range of scenarios. He cited the QUAD as an example of “mini-lateral” cooperation built around mutual interests—supporting the maintenance of national borders and enhancing capabilities for dealing with non-traditional threats. He argued that alliances must now serve deterrence not just in contingency but as a “functional” instrument during peacetime. He argued that alliances must now serve deterrence not just in contingency but as a “functional” instrument during peacetime. He described Japan’s modernization effort during his time as defense

Session Sketch

Asan Plenum 2026

“Modernizing Alliances”

www.asanplenum.org

minister in 2015, when the Japan Self-Defense Forces guidelines introduced cross-domain operations and intensified cooperation in new domains. More recently, during a ROK–Japan Defense Ministers' meeting in September 2025, he said both sides agreed to deepen cooperation—citing the example of Korean Air Force support for refueling in Okinawa. He also called for two priority areas of cooperation between South Korea and Japan: concluding an ACSA (Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement) and deepening technical and strategic cooperation for the Indo-Pacific. Nakatani revisited his “OCEAN” (One Cooperative Effort Among Nations) concept - a network of defense cooperation first floated during the 2025 Shangri-La Dialogue. He called for thinking about conflicts as part of one theater—noting that “the boundary between peace and wartime is now vague”—and for applying this lens even to energy security, citing the Strait of Hormuz. He concluded that “in this era of unpredictability, continuous effort to modernize alliances” was essential.

The Hon. Arthur Sinodinos, Chairman of the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, presented an Australian perspective, framing the central challenge for middle powers trying to grapple with how to tackle the “dissolution” of the rules-based order: “Will the world dissolve into spheres of influence? Will the concept of alliances, as we've done it for the last 80 years, dissolve into marriages of convenience?” As some of the assumptions on which “we have faced our defense and security politics have been upended,” Mr. Sinodinos also identifies an opportunity for Australia to “double down on relationships” in the region. For example, Australia's decision to purchase Mogami-class frigates from Japan as a signal of strategic intent, describing it as “an important strategic message about finding a way to deepen our relationship.” He argued for the region to integrate economies, defense industrial bases, and approaches toward the United States. He highlighted AUKUS Pillar 2 as not only significant for nuclear-powered submarines, but for what he called its most underappreciated dimension: the decision “to reduce and streamline export controls, international trafficking in arms regulations, and other things which impede the transfer of technology and information and personnel between the three countries.” He argued this creates a mechanism extendable to other regional partners—moving from interoperability to “interchangeability, where our defensive industrial bases are more integrated.” The benefit for the United States, he argued, was a genuine division of labor. On engaging the Trump administration, he advanced what he called the “mutuality principle”—the idea that alliances must be constantly reframed to emphasize mutual benefit at a time when the U.S. approach “has become overtly transactional.” He noted that the centerpiece of the recent U.S.–Australia Summit was critical minerals, and argued that framing security relationships in terms of tangible mutual benefit was the most effective tool available. He concluded with a note of caution: Southeast Asian countries are wary of being asked to choose sides, “they don't necessarily want to be on the ramparts saying we support this big power over this big

Session Sketch

Asan Plenum 2026

“Modernizing Alliances”

www.asanplenum.org

power.” He also cautioned that the other part of the challenge would be to persuade President Trump, who is “not necessarily a China hawk,” to recognize the importance of the United States to counterbalance the rise of China for the sake of not just regional security, but for American security.