

[Asan Plenum 2023] Welcoming Remarks

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This year marks the 141st anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Korea and the United States and the 70th anniversary of ROK-US alliance. With the signing of the Mutual Defense Treaty between Korean Foreign Minister Byun Young-tae and the United States Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, the ROK-US alliance was established on October 1st, 1953.

The alliance has contributed to the free and prosperous Republic of Korea. Today, South Korea has become the 10th largest economy in the world. According to the “2022 Best Countries Report” by the Wharton School of Business and US News & World Report, South Korea ranked 6th in terms of public perception of global power, surpassing other advanced countries such as Japan and France.

The ROK-US alliance did not have a smooth start. With the end of World War II, Korea was liberated from the Japanese colonial rule in 1945. In November 1947, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution which recommended “the elections be held not later than March 1948,” across the entire Korean peninsula. North Korea rejected the UN resolution, then the United States proposed a resolution to hold a general election in South Korea only. In December 1948, the UN General Assembly declared “there has been established a lawful government (the Government of the Republic of Korea). This is the only such Government in Korea.”

The geopolitics surrounding the Korean Peninsula at that time was very harsh. On August 9, 1945, one week before Japan's surrender, the Soviet Union unilaterally broke the Soviet-Japanese Non-aggression Pact and marched into the Korean Peninsula. To prevent the Soviet Union's occupation of the whole Korean peninsula, the United States decided to establish a military demarcation line at the 38th latitude between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Before Japan surrendered in August 1945, there had been a civil war in China between Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-shek. In 1949, China became a Communist country. In January 1950, the United States committed the blunder of announcing the “Acheson Line,” which excluded

South Korea from the U.S. defense perimeter in the Far East. Just six months after the announcement, North Korea started the Korean War on June 25th, 1950.

Within one month of the invasion, North Korea occupied most of South Korea, except the southern port city of Busan. UN Security Council adopted a resolution condemning North Korea's invasion and dispatched military units. The Incheon Landing Operation by General MacArthur helped recover Seoul and UN forces continued to advance north toward the Chinese border. People expected that Korea was going to be united. However, in October 1950, China intervened with one million soldiers.

The United States and fifteen other UN member states helped save South Korea by sending combat troops. 1.8 million American soldiers and 165,000 soldiers of other U.N. member states were dispatched to Korea. Six countries sent medical units for field hospitals. The Korean War was a fierce war. South Korean civilian casualties numbered over a million. 140,000 South Korean soldiers died and 38,000 UN soldiers died, of which 34,000 were U.S. soldiers.

I was born in the city of Busan in 1951 during the Korean War. Had it not been for the intervention of the United States, I would not be here today. I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to the United Nations and the United States. At the Korean War Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C., the inscription says, "Our nation honors her sons and daughters who answered the call to defend a country they never knew and a people they never met." We, Korean People, will never forget their noble sacrifice.

In 1953, the armistice agreement entered the final stage and South Korean President Rhee Syngman opposed the signing of the armistice agreement because he believed a mutual defense treaty with the United States was essential for the security of Korea. The United States did not see strategic value of Korea and was reluctant to sign defense treaty with South Korea.

Under these difficult circumstances, President Rhee, Ph.D in international relations from Princeton University, unilaterally released 27,000 anti-communist North Korean prisoners of war, which made the United States worry that President Rhee might continue the war by South Korea alone. This was one of the reasons why the United States accepted President Rhee's insistence on signing the mutual defense treaty.

In 1954, one year after the end of the Korean War, President Rhee visited the United States and delivered a speech in New York. He said, "I am not here to ask for more aid, more fund, more everything. ... Our people are not crying for help. We do not beg and never shall. ... Korea wants to make this contribution, not just for our own unification and survival, but to help assure

liberty, justice, and peace for all people everywhere.” President Rhee’s speech well explains the purpose of the ROK-US Alliance.

General MacArthur, the commander of the UN Forces, once said, “It will take them [South Koreans] 100 years to recover from the devastation.” In 1951, during the Korean War, the British newspaper, The Times ran a condescending editorial, saying that, “It would be more reasonable to expect to find roses growing on a garbage heap than a healthy democracy rising out of the ruins of Korea.” However, both predictions were proven wrong.

In 1981, just 28 years after the Korean War, during IOC Congress in Germany, Seoul competed against Nagoya, Japan, for the 1988 Summer Olympics. Seoul won the bidding and hosted the 1988 Summer Olympic Games. My father, Chung Ju-yung, the founder of the Hyundai Group, served as the chairman of the bidding committee. South Korea also co-hosted the FIFA World Cup Football Tournament with Japan in 2002. As the Vice President of FIFA, I proposed the 2002 FIFA World Cup to be the first World Cup co-hosted between two countries, Korea and Japan.

In 1953, after the Korean War, the per capita GDP of South Korea was \$67. Today, South Korea is a liberal democracy with a per capita income more than \$32,000. South Korea is the world's leader in semiconductors, shipbuilding, automobiles, and smart phones. Jimin, a member of BTS, reached number 1 on the Billboard Hot 100. He became the first solo South Korean artist to reach the top spot on the chart. In 2020, the British monthly magazine “Monocle” evaluated Korea’s soft power as the second most powerful in the world.

Despite these remarkable achievements, the alliance still faces many challenges. North Korea continues to maintain one-person ruling system for three generations. Observing the collapse of East Germany and the unification by West Germany, North Korea regards the existence of a free and prosperous South Korea as the very threat to the survival of North Korean regime. This is why they continue to seek the reunification of the Korean Peninsula under communist flag. Last year, North Korea tested missiles 39 times, and is threatening to turn Seoul into “sea of fire.”

While we need to pursue the denuclearization of North Korea for the long-term, we must first strengthen the ROK-US military deterrence. Since nuclear weapons can be deterred only by nuclear weapons, a Korean version of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) better be formulated. The key is to make North Korea realize that with its nuclear weapons, it may lose more than it can gain.

In the face of increasing North Korean nuclear threat, South Korea should declare that the 1992 Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula has been nullified by North Korea's nuclear armament. And the United States better bring tactical nuclear weapons back to Korea, which were withdrawn in 1991.

Despite the fact that numerous governments have enshrined concepts like liberty, democracy, and human rights in their respective constitutions, they often fail to implement these concepts.

The North Korean constitution stipulates that "the State shall effectively guarantee the genuine democratic rights and freedoms" and "citizens are guaranteed freedom of speech, the press, assembly." However, as we know very well, the reality is very different from these words. According to the Korean Ministry of Unification, there are five political prison camps in North Korea. The regime carried out public executions for watching South Korean TV dramas or reading the Bible.

We also learned that both Chinese and Russian constitutions carry the similar provisions such as freedom of religion, freedom of the press, and freedom of ideas. But again, the reality is different from those provisions. According to British weekly the Economist's "Democracy Index 2022," out of 167 countries in the world, Russia is ranked 146th, China 156th, and North Korea 165th.

In the recent summit in Moscow, President Xi and President Putin claimed that "the United States should take concrete actions to respond to the legitimate and reasonable concerns of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea." President Xi and President Putin simply try to justify North Korea's nuclear armament and blame the United States as the very cause of the problems. What they want is the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the Korean Peninsula with the 2nd Korean War in their mind. Such a preposterous claim is nothing new. During the Cold War, the Soviets insisted that the United States withdraw its forces from Europe and Eurasia.

If we look at the sheer magnitude of the geopolitics of the vast Eurasian continent, where Russia, China, and North Korea dominantly preside, the fact that a small country like South Korea, located at the southern tip of the continent, remains a free democracy is a miracle, a miracle in progress. It is our duty to maintain this miracle.

Strengthening the alliance between South Korea and the United States does not imply treating neighboring countries as adversaries. China is a neighboring country with good relationship for thousands of years. Buddhism and Confucian philosophy came to Korea through China in the 4th century.

Recently, at a Chinese Communist Party meeting, President Xi announced “We firmly oppose hegemony and power politics in all their forms. ... We advocate the common values of humanity, peace, ..., equity, justice, democracy, and freedom.” We sincerely hope President Xi means what he said.

Under the slogan of "We Go Together," "같이 갑시다," our alliance will be the driving force for freedom and democracy.

I hope this Plenum help the 70-year old ROK-US Alliance overcome current challenges and move forward into the future.

Thank you.

* The view expressed herein does not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies