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Director

“Revisiting Nuclear Safety and Nuclear Security in North Korea”

Asia Institute Seminar on the occasion of Seoul Nuclear Summit

My name is Emanuel Pastreich, I am a professor at Kyung Hee University and I serve as the director of the Asia Institute here in Seoul.

Thank you all for joining us today here for an extremely timely seminar on a most pertinent topic in light of the Seoul Nuclear Summit. That upcoming summit has been advertised as “Beyond Security; Towards Peace” around the city on broad blue banners. Not sure what that phrase means, but it suggests a radical, and rather overdue, paradigm shift in the concept of security.

That phrase, “Beyond Security; Towards Peace,” brings to mind the work of Albert Einstein in the 1940s and 1950s to address the issue of nuclear technology, a terrible dilemma, he felt, born of his own research. Einstein held that technology has now evolved to the point at which we have no choice but to find some means of preserving global peace because the dangers of technology have become so great. He was thinking about the dangers of nuclear weapons at the time, but today the range of issues has only multiplied.

I want to thank GCS for hosting us today and for supporting our efforts. GCS and Kyung Hee University are the products of Dr. Choue Young Sheek, a visionary intellectual in Korea who argued that we must strive for a radical change in the nature of human civilization if we wish to survive, and must make global peace the primary goal, moving beyond the limited concept of the nation state. Although he had great trouble finding acceptance in that time, today we see all too clearly what he spoke of. Dr. Choue passed away recently and his passing fills us with great sadness.

The Asia Institute was established as a new think tank congruent with the needs of an increasingly integrated Asia, an Asia in which Korea plays a critical role. In a sense, all our work is tied to international relations, but we have chosen to approach that issue primarily in terms of technology

and its impact on society, and in terms of the complex interplay between technology, the environment and energy.

We have conducted a great number of seminars on such diverse topics as biotechnology, climate change, carbon capture, technology convergence, Mongolia and its efforts at internationalization, the future of the research institute and the future of money in a digital age. We have done so in collaboration with major research institutes, primarily in Korea, but also in Japan, China, the United States and Finland.

Asia Institute has as its goal to be a truly pan-Asian think tank, a place where many voices can be heard and a new conception of Asia can be put forth. We also put a high value on working with young people, on creating a dialog between experts, leaders and the next generation. If high school and college students cannot enter into our discussions, then, as Richard Feynmann once said, maybe we do not understand the concepts ourselves.

This particular seminar is part of our 3E Program, which we started in cooperation with Tsukuba University, the site of the original 3E Forum founded by Professor Inoue Isao. 3E refers to “energy, environment and economy.” The three terms are grouped together in that manner because they are so completely inseparable, and therefore no one part of the problem can be solved without addressing the other two. Without rethinking the nature of the economy, and of energy, you cannot address environmental issues; without addressing the environment and energy issues, you cannot address economic issues. This seminar today fits in well with that theme.

This seminar requires a little bit of imagination. We have to imagine what would happen if we were engaged again with North Korea in negotiations concerning their energy needs and the possibility of North Korea operating nuclear power plants in a safe and secure manner in cooperation with the international community.

When we start to picture such a scene in our minds—please do go ahead and close your eyes, try to picture North Korea welcoming you to see their nuclear facilities—we are quickly struck by how much time has passed since such a discussion took place in earnest.

In October 1994, back when dinosaurs roamed the earth, the United States and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea) signed the Agreed Framework, under which the North Korea promised to freeze, and ultimately dismantle, its nuclear program. The facilities subject to the freeze included an operational 5 MWe experimental graphite-moderated reactor, a partially complete reprocessing facility, and a 50 MWe power reactor under construction, all at the Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center (a 200 MWe power reactor was also under construction at Taechon).

North Korea withdrew in 2003 from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and has been in isolation since then. There was an open discussion about the future of nuclear power in North Korea in the 1990s and early 2000s, and about the legitimate and illegitimate uses of nuclear technologies—but that discussion is almost a curiosity for historians today.

There are tantalizing suggestions that discussions about nuclear power in North Korea could start again in the future. But the fact is that the world has changed utterly since 2000, or 2003, and we face a panoply of new issues that were not in play the last time we discussed light-water reactors. For example, the crisis at the Fukushima Daiichi Plant in Japan has raised more general questions

about nuclear safety in a global sense. Also, China is planning to build a large number of nuclear power plants along its East coast, a decision that could be a potential security issue—one that many would say is as great as any threat from North Korea if proper “nuclear safety” standards are not maintained. Russia has entered into the nuclear power business on a large scale as well. And now South Korea has become a center for the technologies associated with nuclear power and is playing an increasingly important role, a leading role, in setting global norms for the industry. All these changes suggest that any future discussions with North Korea about its nuclear power programs (and risks for proliferation) will be profoundly different than was the case before.