

**Opening Address by  
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OSCE Chairman-in-Office, Minister Rupel,  
Secretary General Kubis,  
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the people and government of the Republic of Korea I extend a warm welcome to all of you. I hope that your stay in Seoul will be a pleasant and memorable one.

You have come to Korea at a most challenging time for security and cooperation in our region. Let me briefly touch upon some salient challenges that Northeast Asia faces today.

The specter of nuclear proliferation from our neighbor to the north is by far the most dire and intractable challenge to peace and security on the Korean Peninsula, Northeast Asia and beyond. The North Korean nuclear issue now stands at a critical crossroads. Pyongyang is playing a dangerous nuclear gamble, in defiance of pleas, admonitions and calls for restraint from all sides. It is now openly claiming the possession of nuclear weapons, while threatening to build up its nuclear arsenal. They have been trying to negotiate the terms and conditions of their return to the Six-Party Talks which have been in limbo for almost ten months now. Such an approach will only work against them.

We still believe that the window of opportunity remains open for a peaceful resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue through the Six-Party Talks. We will spare no efforts to resolve this issue through diplomacy. However, only North Korea's strategic decision to abandon its nuclear ambitions once and for all will bring about a breakthrough in our diplomatic efforts. We count on all countries represented in this Conference to work together in persuading North Korea that the security assurance and economic rehabilitation they need are in store for them once they make such a strategic choice.

Beyond the Korean Peninsula, we have a volatile Northeast Asia of great flux, dynamism and complexity with the attendant uncertainties these bring. While the bilateral alliances shaped during the Cold War era underpin the security structure of the region, the geopolitical

landscape of our region is in the process of being reshaped by the force of geo-economics. Northeast Asia is undergoing rapid economic integration driven by market forces rather than the deliberate policies of governments. As a result, the Republic of Korea's economic future lies more with China than any other traditional trade partner. Likewise, our energy security in the future may lie as much with Russia as with any other current major supplier of energy. As we go down the road, a major new challenge is how to manage the inevitable tensions between economic interests and security interests within the region.

Another emerging challenge Northeast Asia faces is the return of great power politics and strategic competition between our powerful neighbors. The last thing we want to see in our region is competition for power and influence, an arms race and heightened tensions fueled by the resurgence of nationalism. Over a little more than a century, four devastating wars involving major powers of the world have been fought on or around the Korean Peninsula. Located as it is at the epicenter of the regional geo-strategic tectonic plates where the strategic fault lines among four major powers of the world intersect, the Korean Peninsula always ended up the hapless prime victim of rivalry among our neighbors.

The legacy of history still weighs heavily on the minds of the people who had to live through the misfortune of aggressions and occupations from a neighboring country. People in Europe may wonder when they read newspaper headlines about our region why East Asian people make such a fuss about how history textbooks should be written in Japan, how the souls of the war criminals should be treated, what a body of water lying between the Korean peninsula and the Japanese archipelago should be called, and why East Asian countries cannot resolve territorial disputes in an amicable manner. The fact is that we in Northeast Asia have yet to come to terms with the past.

The legacy of history has proved to have far greater resilience and staying power in Northeast Asia than in Europe. Officially, apologies have been offered and accepted. However, emotions are easily enflamed and old wounds are reopened through insensitive gestures, words or actions that raise doubts about the sincerity of the official apologies and commitments offered. There have been missed opportunities to win the hearts and minds of the afflicted neighbors which stand in the way of moving forward to build a common future of peace and prosperity in the region. Europe provides a shining example of what it takes to turn yesterday's animosities into the friendships of today and tomorrow. In sum, healing the wounds of history and thus achieving genuine reconciliation is a challenge Northeast Asian countries have yet to overcome in order to build a bright future together.

The relations among the Northeast Asian countries are too important to be left to chance or to the vagaries of great power politics often haunted by the ghost of history. In order to deal effectively with these challenges to peace, security and prosperity facing our region, my government is committed to building regional institutions for security and cooperation in Northeast Asia. Judging from the threat perceptions shared in the region and the magnitude of the stakes involved, no other region or sub-region is in more dire need of security cooperation than Northeast Asia. And yet, unlike in Europe, we in Northeast Asia have no tradition of region-wide cooperation on security issues. Nevertheless, somebody has to take the initiative somewhere. In this task, the Republic of Korea considers itself to be well positioned to take the lead.

We have to cast aside the Cold War mindset first and start from scratch. There is a long way to go even to reach the stage Europe was at in 1972 when the Helsinki Process was launched. Nevertheless, what Europe has achieved over the past three decades, through the height of the Cold War, is instructive and provides ample inspiration for Northeast Asia as we embark upon the task of building institutions for cooperative security. We wish to draw from the collective wisdom of Europe and learn from the European experience.

In this connection, the Republic of Korea aspires to become a proactive and positive force in maintaining the strategic stability in our region, which is essential for sustainable peace and security in Northeast Asia. Some raise doubts with respect to our capability to play the role of regional balancer or the compatibility of such a role with our bilateral alliance with the United States. It is true that our power resources cannot match those of our neighbors. Nevertheless, we believe that the eleventh largest economy in the world, located at the pivot of Northeast Asia, will be a force to be reckoned with in the maintenance of peace and stability in our region.

Regarding the question of how the role of regional balancer fits into our alliance obligations, I see no better answer than the example of the OSCE and NATO in Europe. The ROK-US alliance has been and will remain our ultimate insurance policy against the kind of threats that will come to bear upon our vital security interests. This alliance will assume even greater importance for a unified Korea. The US will remain the ultimate outside balancer to step in when the need arises. However, we cannot expect the US to step into each and every intra-regional issue or friction that does not affect vital US interests or that can be resolved through the concerted efforts of the regional players concerned without US intervention. That is how we see the utility of a balancer at the regional level.

Regional institutions for security cooperation and our role as an intra-regional balancer cannot be a substitute for the ROK-US alliance. Instead, they will be a supplement to the alliance, just as the OSCE supplements the Atlantic Alliance. Our goal as a regional balancer is to build and consolidate the foundations of sustainable peace, security and prosperity so that history does not repeat itself in our region. In sum, what we need in Northeast Asia is a multiple layered security structure tailored to the nature and scope of new and emerging security threats. It is time to explore a new security paradigm in response to new security threats in Northeast Asia. In so doing, we are lucky to have the OSCE as a model to emulate. That is precisely why my government attaches such great importance to this Conference and cooperation with the OSCE.

I sincerely hope that this Conference will enlighten us on how to move forward in building an institution to manage and resolve new threats to peace, security and prosperity in Northeast Asia and beyond.

Thank you.

Seoul, 25 April 2005