

**Remarks of Rep. James A. Leach (R-IA)**  
**Chairman, Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific**  
**Hearing on “U.S.-R.O.K. Relations: An Alliance at Risk?”**  
*September 27, 2006*

I welcome today’s timely hearing on relations between the United States and our esteemed ally, the Republic of Korea.

The people of South Korea are deservedly proud of their nation’s emergence as a global actor in recent years – economically, militarily, and culturally. The United States not only welcomes those changes without reservation, we celebrate them together with the Korean people. Perhaps uniquely in the world today, America is committed to a strong, independent, reunified Korea. Having sacrificed blood and treasure in defense of freedom for the people of South Korea, we understand that freedom necessarily implies independence of judgment.

But in wanting to assert psychological independence, Seoul would be wise not to casually eschew alliance structures in the 21st Century, especially when those structures have proven so critical to developing South Korea’s political and economic stability in the 20th Century. There may always be short-term political gain to any government’s distancing itself from another government in the name of self-reliance. But whether this is wise long-term policy or a thoughtful relational approach in general is open to question. Alliances, after all, involve the profound self-interest of societies and are designed to precede and supersede particular administrations. Indeed, strong alliances do not infringe national sovereignty; they presuppose strengthening it in the most elemental sense.

These cautions hold parallel lessons for the United States. One of the issues of the last several years that has caught Washington off-balance is the growth in critical South Korean attitudes toward the United States. We should have been more cognizant that real or perceived expectations of gratitude for past acts sometimes lead to social friction. With respect to both Koreas, there is also an historical concern for big-power chauvinism, whether from its neighbors China, Russia and Japan, or even from across the Pacific. Ironically, attitudes about American policy may be more generous today among the youth of former enemies, Japan and Vietnam, than among those of historical allies, South Korea and France.

In this context, it must be admitted that the emergence of differing national security priorities, generational change of political leadership in the South, contrasting attitudinal judgments toward North Korea as well as other countries in the region, and rapid shifts in America's global defense posture have led some in both countries to question the future viability of our alliance.

I emphatically reject this view. While tensions do exist, as long as leaders in the Blue House and the White House are able to balance the political immediacies of the present with attention to long-term national interests, issues of concern can and should remain eminently manageable.

Here it is perhaps worth restating why the US-ROK alliance remains profoundly in America's national interest. In broad terms, of course, our two vibrant democracies remain tightly bound through a deep and long-standing security relationship, ongoing political and cultural affinities, extensive economic bonds, and extraordinary people-to-people ties, cemented in many instances by a common educational experience and led by the million-and-a-half strong Korean-American community here in the United States. It should be underscored that the United States is extraordinarily proud of its Korean population, which is the largest in the world outside of Northeast Asia.

It should also be noted that despite substantial public controversy, the government of South Korea was one of the early contributors to the U.S.-led operations in Iraq and currently has about 2,300 troops in country. As I am often reminded by my constituents, while the American people are divided as to the wisdom of our Iraqi intervention, they are united in deep appreciation for the assistance the United States has received from others in this endeavor to bring stability and to help forge a new democracy.

More concretely, the US-ROK alliance helps deter North Korea and preserve a free and open society in the South; it reduces the prospect that other powers will once again compete for undue influence on the peninsula; and it lays the basis for regional economic and security cooperation.

American critics of the US-ROK alliance should perhaps ask themselves whether U.S. nonproliferation and counterterrorism policies in Northeast Asia would be more effectively advanced if our security relationship with

Seoul were in tatters. Likewise, South Koreans who advocate a fully self-reliant national defense posture must ponder whether a traditionally conflict-prone Northeast Asia, in which great power interests have often clashed in the past, would be more stable and peaceful without U.S. security guarantees. Indeed, is it likely that any country other than the United States would be prepared to defend South Korea's strategic interests?

From a Congressional perspective, America's commitment to South Korea has to be steadfast and our alliance unquestioned as the unpredictable unification process with the North proceeds. The North must not be allowed to drive a wedge between the U.S. and South Korea. The United States must take the long view, and the tone of our public and private diplomacy must give voice to our inner conviction that, as a vibrant democracy committed to economic and personal freedoms, the Republic of Korea is a nation the dignity of which deserves our deepest respect.

If our policies are informed by that spirit, there is every reason to be confident that Washington and Seoul will succeed in forging a new strategic framework for the alliance, not only for the purpose of managing a range of complex contingencies related to North Korea, but to cement a common democratic partnership well into the 21st Century.

A good place to start a revitalized relationship is to advance a free trade agreement and complement it with a flexible visa waiver approach.

Thank you.