

The Expanding U.S. – Korean Alliance

Testimony before the

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Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific

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It is a great pleasure to have the opportunity to testify before this committee on a subject of increasing importance to the United States: The U.S. – Republic of Korea Alliance.

For a generation of Americans, Korea was known as a long and difficult war tempered by a long and as difficult peace. That has changed. Through the decades since those terrible days in the early 1950s, that story began to evolve as the Republic of Korea recovered from war and embarked on a course of economic growth whose fundamental approach combined long-term investment in education and infrastructure with a commitment from succeeding generations to hard work and sacrifice. It has never been an easy process. As late as 1972, Korea's major exports were textiles, plywood and human hair wigs.

Korea is now considered one of the world's great success stories, with an economy that has become the envy of the world, a democracy that is one of the world's most successful and a vibrant culture whose wave has reaches the four corners of the globe. It is truly one of the great inspirations of our era.

Against this enormous success, however, remains one the world's great tragedies – the continued impoverishment and virtual enslavement of a third of the Korean people on the northern half of the peninsula. The tragedy of this division on the Korean peninsula is one of the saddest and most brutal of the great legacies of the 20th century. Next to this extraordinary success story sits a country, as impoverished as it is dangerous, only a short distance from The Republic of Korea's capital city of Seoul. Koreans had nothing to do with the division of its people and its lands. This was accomplished by foreigner countries including our own dealing with difficult decisions during the crucial last months of World War Two. Nobody at that time believed that this scar across the peninsula that represents the demilitarized zone could have endured so long and now into the second decade of the next century.

The United States is fortunate that out of these tragic historical circumstances we have had the leadership, in congress, among democrats and republicans, in

succeeding administrations now spanning one dozen presidents to understand the importance to our interests and the wisdom to stay close to the Republic of Korea, to be committed to its freedoms and its people and to count Korea among our most important alliances in the world.

It is altogether fitting that in the past month, that great alliance has now been strengthened by a free trade agreement that, as with other elements of our relationship, enjoys broad support between both our major parties – and also among all of the Republic of Korea’s major political formations. That free trade agreement rests on a broad and deep foundation that will endure. It is a foundation that will not only act to strengthen both of our economies, but also to be the basis for the global strategic partnership between the two countries stretching into the future.

Mr. Chairman, I spent many years as a diplomat doing my small part to try to help build this relationship. When I first was assigned to the Republic of Korea just over a quarter century ago, I worked in the American Embassy’s economic section dealing with the myriad of trade issues, focused primarily on issues of market access for American goods and services. The reward for problems solved seemed always to be a new set of problems. Such is often the nature of trade issues. But US and Korean trade negotiations were always dedicated to solving those next set of problems. This commitment, that spanned generations of trade negotiators, has never wavered.

I live in Colorado now, far from this city. Colorado, like many of our states, has not been immune to the problems facing our economy and ordinary people. Seeing the problems of unemployment first hand, I am very aware of the need for our trade agreements with other countries to be ones that work for both countries. I believe the Korean- US Free Trade Agreement does just that. As president Lee and President Obama both made clear during President Lee’s recent state visit to Washington, this trade agreement will create economic activity, not diminish it. President Lee’s pledge to our auto workers in Michigan was particularly poignant. For economists, the logic of free trade is fairly obvious, for workers it can be more of an elusive concept. Showing these workers in both Korea and the United States the benefits of the trade agreement in the coming years and months will be the challenge.

KORUS is of course the capstone of a relationship that has grown and grown. An important part of the relationship in recent years was the decision by the State Department to waive the need for visitor visas among Koreans. This has turned out to be, as many of us predicted, a benefit to both our peoples. It has strengthened the ability of our industries to work together, it has facilitated the gathering of families during the holidays, it has helped the tourist trade (and we see this in Colorado as well). And more broadly it has helped our countries get to know each other better.

In the run-up to KORUS, our presidents have met more frequently than ever to discuss economic issues that go beyond just the Korean peninsula. Korea's economy is of global significance a fact attested to by Korea's active participation in the G-20, the group of countries whose meetings have become the most important gathering of economic leadership in the world.

The US - Korea relationship, of course, also extends well beyond the economy and visas. Our security dialogue is one befitting this most important relationship. The US and Korea cooperate throughout the world. We have deployed together in Iraq and in Afghanistan. We have worked together on problems of piracy in the Indian Ocean, and in helping to address human suffering caused by natural disasters and poverty in the global south. There is no problem in the world that does not involve consultations between Korea and the United States.

Most importantly, the US and Korea have worked to keep the peace on the Korean peninsula. It has been the unshakeable alliance that no one should ever doubt.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to shift gears somewhat to the threat that continues to be posed by North Korea. The challenge from North Korea, both in conventional terms and in WMD remains one of the world's most difficult. North Korea remains committed to developing nuclear weapons not to protect itself, but rather to threaten its neighbors. It was altogether appropriate that President Bush and the then Korean president, the late Roh Moo Hyun worked hard to create and support a regional approach to this threat known as the Six Party process. The concept behind the approach was as sound then as it is today: the problem posed by North Korean aspirations for nuclear weapons is not just a peninsula issue involving the ROK and the United States. It is a broader issue that the international community needs to address with broader measures. Russia needs to be a part of a solution there. So does Japan, and so especially does China.

China in particular remains the country with the greatest leverage for dealing with this issue. There are many theories why China has not done more. The first, and this argument is obviously the one favored by the Chinese, is that this is proof that China does not have leverage. Another theory is that China fears potential refugees from North Korea. Still another is that there is enough "old think" in China that there are those who somehow worry that a North Korean collapse would amount to a victory for the United States and a loss for China. There are almost as many theories for why China has not done more than there are North Korean nuclear weapons.

What is clear is that United States and the ROK need to press diplomatically with others in the six party talks, especially China, to address the issue before the time comes that the North Koreans have succeeded in putting one of their crude nuclear devices onto a crude missile system.

In particular, China needs to be convinced by the US and the ROK that in the event of a North Korean collapse, our alliance will not seek advantage against the Chinese. We have our interests: securing the nuclear materials, protecting the population against hunger, but we will not look to disadvantage China's interest. China has nothing to fear from the US-ROK relationship, nor does it have anything to fear from the basic proposition that future arrangements on the peninsula are for the Korean people to work out. China's relations with the ROK are of enormous significance to China and to the ROK. In turn, the US has nothing to fear or oppose in a strong ROK relationship with China.

As supportive as I continue to be of the Six Party Process, I am not optimistic about any early breakthroughs. This lack of optimism does not mean our efforts should in any way diminish. The decision to meet with the North Koreans in New York and just this week in Geneva is a good one. It is not a negotiation as such, as I understand, but rather a needed conversation with the North Koreans to remind them of the obvious: we will not and we cannot accept North Korea as a nuclear power. To do so would fundamentally call into question the international non-proliferation regime not to speak of creating continued tensions within the region. The Six Party Process remains the best mechanism for dealing with the issues. We should be prepared wherever possible for interdiction efforts to prevent North Korean proliferation. We should also continue through sanctions to maximize the pain to North Korea of maintaining this appetite for nuclear weapons. North Koreans may not be fast learners, that they will eventually understand that we will never accept their aspirations as legitimate. We also should continue to make clear that should they decide to change their course and begin the long road of economic development and respect for human rights, a road they have to date shown no interest in taking, we are prepared, working with other countries, to help them on that road.

Mr. Chairman, some day, this issue will come to an end, and North Korea will either become a respectable member of the international community or it will collapse. We need to be prepared for however events take this. I am convinced that on its present course North Korea's days are numbered. I cannot predict when and nor can I predict how, but sooner or later, as history has shown in other parts of the world, North Korea will fail.


And when it does, and when the historians sift through its wreckage to find out what happened, they will see that the unshakeable US-ROK alliance, self-confident, able to engage other key players, including China, will be the reason why this terrible legacy of the 20th century finally came to an end.

I look forward to answering any questions the committee might wish to pose.

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs

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