

## **U.S.-ROK Relations and the Role of the Korean-American Community**

Park Joon-woo  
Former Korean Ambassador to the EU  
2011 Koret Fellow of Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center  
Stanford University

I am very happy to be able to speak to all of you today at this North American 2011 Chasedae Forum of the National Unification Advisory Council on the topic of US-ROK relations and the role of the Korean-American community.

I am sure all of you were deeply impressed as you witnessed President Lee Myung Bak arrive here in the US on a state visit three weeks ago. As President Lee's speech in the joint session of Congress received applause 45 times, including 5 standing ovations, I believe all of you would have felt great pride as Koreans.

In preparation for President Lee's speech, the US Congress ratified the KORUS FTA, 4 years and 3 months after it was signed, in only six working session days. This is one of the quickest ratifications in US Congressional history.

The International Herald Tribune reported on the front page with a headline "In Seoul, Obama finds a leader he can relate to," and described the warm welcome as "the carpet does not get any redder than that."

US experts on Korea chorused that US-ROK relations were at their highest point, and the two leaders stated that "the strength of the US-ROK alliance is unprecedented" and "a new chapter in the two countries' relations has opened." A Japanese expert on Korea has also expressed envy at this enhanced US-ROK relations, stating that "the Japanese archipelago has been surprised by President Lee's diplomacy," and reminiscing about the honeymoon relations Japan enjoyed between President Reagan and Prime Minister Nakasone, or the Ron-Yasu relationship, in the 1980s.

As the press and experts have evaluated, the surprising advancement and success in the US-ROK alliance was possible only because of the close personal relationship between the two presidents. The relationship between two countries is highly dependent upon the relationship between its leaders. President Obama himself has stated that he is closest to President Lee out of all the Asian leaders, calling President Lee his "most reliable partner."

However, I believe all Koreans living here in the US, including those of you in attendance today, should also receive these congratulations. This would not have been possible without the citizens of both countries making grass-roots efforts for friendship and cooperation with each other. This is impossible for governments alone to accomplish.

The US-ROK relationship will celebrate its 130<sup>th</sup> anniversary next year. Towards the end of the Chosun Dynasty, the US became the first Western power that Korea established diplomatic relations with, and the US left a deep impression on the minds of Koreans with its education programs and charitable activities founded on the spirit of democracy and respect for human rights. Compared to Japan or China, which competed to takeover the Korean peninsula, the US approached Korea as a benign nation, and Emperor Gojong actually attempted to maintain the independence of his dynasty through the help of the US.

However, Korea was sacrificed in the power politics of countries exercising imperialism and colonialism, and was annexed to Imperial Japan.

Even under Japanese occupation, many Korean pioneers came to the land of opportunity, the US, to be educated, and their education in democracy became a great asset for Korea when it established a new democratic republic and building Korea up to be the leading democracy in Asia, promoting democratic values and protection of human rights shoulder to shoulder with the US.

When the independence movement took place, the US provided good bases for our independence movement leaders such as Ahn Chang-ho in San Francisco and Syngman Rhee in Hawaii. The contributions made by your fathers and grandfathers to the independence movement here in the US greatly shaped Korea's independence movements in the US and China.

The reason why I have explained the timeworn stories of the previous generations to the Chasedae who are here today is to emphasize that such a close-knit history between the two peoples provided a fertile ground for the US-ROK alliance to develop into a comprehensive strategic partnership on global issues beyond the boundaries of the Korean peninsula or the Northeast Asian region.

During this past summit meeting, the two leaders confirmed that the US is the "First Axis of Security" for South Korea, and that South Korea is "the Lynchpin for Security in the Pacific region" for the United States, and that the two countries will continue to work together in a Pacific Partnership for Peace and Prosperity.

Furthermore, reconfirming the Joint Vision for the Alliance of US and ROK, issued on June 2009, the two leaders underscored the shared vision for the future of the alliance and stated that the alliance will continue to develop into a comprehensive strategic partnership which encompasses cooperation in global issues ranging from terrorism, WMD proliferation, climate change, economic crises, and poverty. The two countries also agreed to cooperate on current issues in progress such as stabilization and reconstruction in Afghanistan and democratization and economic development in Libya.

In short, South Korea and the US have acknowledged that their partnership will stretch beyond the issues that concern their two countries only and move onto the global stage. This serves as US acknowledgement that South Korea's participation and involvement in world affairs, as a world middle power, is essential, and that the US will cooperate with Korea in these efforts. Koreans should feel not only pride but also responsibility in this new role for South Korea. In reflecting on the aid and assistance given by the US and other countries to Korea for reconstruction after the Korean War, it is now time for Koreans to give back what they have received to the global community.

Now, we are wealthier and stronger, but we should not forget about the days when Korea faced extreme poverty and danger to its survival. When Korea joined the OECD Development Assistance Committee two years ago, the world praised that for the first time, an aid recipient country had become a donor country. The time has come Korea has to strive to advance into a mature and respected country in the global society instead of taking pride in a hardworking "nouveau riche."

Some point to the risks that the US-ROK alliance, now expanding on the global stage, could be exploited as a tool for US's global strategy, or that Korea could be a victim of US-PRC rivalry in Northeast Asia. This concern arises from China's rapid and seemingly aggressive rise to power, demonstrated through its reaction to the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong incidents where it took North Korea's side, the high-handed approach of embargoing exports of strategic materials to Japan in the islands dispute, and the threat and use of force on the maritime border disputes with Vietnam and the Philippines. The task of "how to manage its relationship with rising China" has emerged as Korea's most difficult choice.

In the past 30 years, China has grown at an amazing rate, with economic growth averaging 10% per year. Last year, it overtook Japan as the second-largest economy in the world, and some have predicted that by 2020, it will overtake the US as the world's largest economy. We can see China's growth through a few statistics

- China passed the US in 2009 as the top car market, with 13.6 million vehicles sold in China compared to 10.4 million in the US.
- In 2010, China took the position as the top energy consumer, using 2.252 billion metric tons of oil equivalents, compared to 2.17 billion tons in the US.
- China has engaged in a significant military buildup, with its defense budget totaling \$91.5 billion this year, second highest in the world and increasing by double digits every year.

China passed both Japan and the US as the largest export market for South Korea in 2003, and the trade between the two countries is expected to exceed \$200 billion in 2011, which is greater

than South Korea's trade with the US and Japan combined. South Korea's highest volume of tourism came formerly from Japan, but now is sourced from China.

The increase in social and economic exchanges between China and South Korea has infused vitality in the South Korean economy, but also posed a challenge for Korea's security. Throughout the long history of bilateral contacts, the emergence of a strong dynasty in China has consequently led to confrontation with the Korean peninsula, which has been one of the primary causes of the rise and fall of many Korean dynasties. In the long history of confrontations with China, our ancestors were able to preserve independence and identity by incorporating themselves in a Confucian order of international relations, long before the modern notion of an international system took shape in Northeast Asia.

We now live in the international system of the 21<sup>st</sup> century which adheres to the principles of equal sovereignty and non-use of force. No country is allowed to use force to overtake or pressure another country. The UN Charter outlaws war as a means of national policy, and also forbids the use or the threat of force. This was done already 65 years ago. Even if a nation is considered to be a "hyper power," it cannot coerce other countries by violating fundamental values of humanity such as freedom, democracy and human rights.

As I was working in Europe past two-and-half years, I witnessed many smaller nations in Europe gaining a greater voice on the international stage because of the respect they have earned from other nations by promoting universal humanitarian values and taking a step forward in addressing global concerns. We call such nations "small but strong countries." Countries in northern Europe such as The Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden can be classified as "small but strong countries." No strong country can take these countries lightly, and even if it were to happen, the international community would back these small but strong countries. When the specter of totalitarianism covered the entire European continent in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some countries tried to maintain their independence by siding with totalitarian dictators. These countries were not able to maintain their sovereignty or identity when World War II was over.

In the case of the military threat that South Korea faces from North Korea, the US-ROK alliance provides a security assurance. However, Korea can also receive significant international support by using its newly found role as a middle power to promote basic values of humanity and becoming more involved in the global community. No country can take Korea lightly or pose a security threat to Korea. Korea no longer needs to determine which global or regional power to stand behind.

The ultimate value of a multi-faceted strategic partnership between the US and Korea lies here. South Korea must play an active role in addressing global concerns of economic crises, climate change, and regional security issues like Somalia and Afghanistan, and the US will be able to compensate for South Korea's lack of experience in addressing these concerns. The future vision

of the US-ROK alliance and South Korea's vision of the future as a middle power and soft power, lies here.

During President Lee's state visit, the most important achievement was the ratification of the KORUS FTA by the US Congress. If the FTA comes into effect by next year with ratification by the South Korean National Assembly, the KORUS FTA will bring unprecedented benefits to both countries and will add another bond to the already strong US-ROK alliance.

The KORUS FTA will become an engine for future growth and provide critical assistance for South Korea to become one of the most dynamic economies in the world. By eliminating tariff barriers with the world's largest economy, not only will Korea see an increase in exports but also a transformation of its economic and social system to increase efficiency. An upgrade for the Korean society will also become possible.

According to an OECD report, the US's labor productivity per capita is still ranked number one in the world. France and Germany reach about 92.1% and 89.8% of US's productivity, and Japan still lingers at 66.2%. South Korea's productivity is just at 45.6% of the US. The KORUS FTA will expose South Korea's laborers, company, and government to competition with the most productive economy in the world, allowing Korea to improve its productivity as well.

For the US, the KORUS FTA will open up the largest market since the 1994 NAFTA with Canada and Mexico. For South Korea, the KORUS will be one of the most important FTAs, after the Korea-EU FTA put into effect this past July, out of the 17 FTAs it has ratified in the past. Taking into account that the FTA is more than an economic agreement, we can predict the impact this will have on the relationship between our two countries.

What I have learned, through the negotiation of the Korea-EU FTA, about the political nature of an FTA is that, in the case of the EU, it has a policy not to establish an FTA with a country that does not share its essential values of democracy, human rights, market economy, and the rule of law, no matter how great an economic benefit that trading with the country would bring. Additionally, when it comes to negotiations, the EU will not cede in the slightest on issues related to human rights such as basic labor rights or child labor.

I have reiterated that Korea should take great pride as being the first Asian country to ratify an FTA with the EU. The Korea-EU FTA is evidence that the Europeans recognize Korea as the leading democracy in Asia among the many Asian nations, including Japan and India. The KORUS FTA will serve not only as a stimulant for trade between Korea and the US, but also as a bond for partnership with the world's most advanced and developed nation.

Through President Lee's visit to the US, we can confirm that the US-ROK relationship is at its highest point. However, taking into account past experiences, even the strongest relationship

between the US and Korea can be negatively affected by unforeseen events or a change in administration. We must ensure that the US-ROK relationship does not waver even in the midst of such difficulties.

The Korean government is set to expand the membership for the Korea Caucus within US Congress, increase political interest in Korea, engage in public diplomacy with everyday US citizens, extend its networks within the US press and think tanks, and reinforce its ties with veterans of the Korean War and former Peace Corps volunteers in Korea, all in an attempt to solidify grounds for the relationships between Korea and the US.

The Korean-American community can play an irreplaceable role in the midst of such efforts by the Korean government. We see by examples from other minority communities that this is the field where we should expect greater participation and contributions in the future.

Recently, I read a letter to the editor in the Washington Post written by Ms. Soo Young Whitaker, the founder of the Washington Korean Women's Society, which criticized the Post for neglecting the contents of a State Visit by an important ally. In response, the Washington Post published this letter in its Ombudsman column, with a picture of President Lee and President Obama embracing. It wasn't surprising that the American press was less than interested in a summit visit by a foreign nation, but my guess is that this critique came especially from the pride that was felt in the enormous accomplishments Korea has made during the last two generations.

A few years ago, the Korean-American community demonstrated its strength in the adoption of, in face of Japanese opposition, the comfort-women related resolution in the US Congress. However, this should only be considered a beginning. There are plenty of minority groups such as Jewish, Chinese, Japanese, and even Vietnamese or Philippines communities that exercise significant influence in the US press, finance, and politics. In this "melting pot" of diverse cultures, the Korean influence can be seen as still relatively weak.

When I worked at the Embassy in Washington DC during the mid 1980s, a single police officer of Korean descent was considered newsworthy, but more than 20 years have passed since then, and the Korean-American community has achieved great progress in advancing into public and policymaking roles, including high-level positions in federal government offices.

Many Korean-Americans who have been successful in the US were invited to the State Dinner for President Lee at the White House. This demonstrates that those of Korean descent are playing important roles in a diverse range of fields in the US. President Lee also thanked American society during his address to Congress for embracing the Korean community, and members of congress responded with loud applause.

However, considering the size and economic importance of the Korean-American community in the US, the lack of any significant advancements into the US national political arena save for a Member of the House of Representatives 20 years ago is greatly disappointing.

Consequently, the level of participation by politicians and policymakers in the Korean-American community remains dismal, and the interest in issues related to the Korean-American community is relatively low. Out of all the minority groups and communities receiving federal and state grants for their activities, the Korean community receives one of the smallest amounts of funding. This can be attributed to low levels of political participation and advancement in the Korean-American community.

There are many possible reasons behind this situation, but a few could be the particular reservedness or passivity of Koreans. I would also venture to guess that the failure to see beyond short-term gains because of a lifestyle of being focused on economic success representing the “American Dream” could also have been a contributing factor in creating this situation.

It may also be the result of being interested more in Korea that Korean-Americans have left behind than succeeding in the mainstream American society because of linguistic or cultural barriers. There have already been voiced concerns of fragmentation within the Korean-American community because of the Overseas Nationals Election which is scheduled to be conducted starting next year. However, the Korean-American community must do everything within its power to prevent such a situation.

The passiveness of the Korean-American community in engaging in and cooperating with other minority communities or participating in a wide variety of community service projects within their localities can be another cause. The lack of a constructive system of contributions or donations within the Korean-American community has especially been an obstacle to the Korean-American community participating in these meaningful activities.

Additionally, the generation gap between 1<sup>st</sup> generation Koreans, who are not proficient in English and the American culture, and 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Koreans, who are more aligned with American values than Korean ones, has caused discrepancy and tension between these two generations. 1<sup>st</sup> generation Koreans have been described as having passion but lacking capacity, while 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Koreans have been described as having capacity but lacking will or motivation. The two generations, rather than trying to understand each other, are more prone to criticizing one another. Most likely, this is due to the differences in the environment and education that the two generations were exposed to while growing up.

I believe, however, as Korea has achieved economic, social, and political growth unprecedented in history, the Korean-American community can also become one of the most respected communities within the US if it establishes a positive vision for its future and makes substantial efforts to unite under these goals. The time is sure to come when many Korean-Americans will be elected Federal Congressmen and Congresswomen.

Korean-Americans must remember and hold onto their root identity. While it is important to settle into the mainstream culture in American society, Korean-Americans should take both pride in their roots and work hard to not lose their core identities. I believe this will not be as difficult

as it was in the past, because Korea is no longer associated with the image of being a poor, politically corrupt, authoritarian country.

When I was working in Washington DC during the mid 1980s, it was not easy for me to take pride in representing my country because South Korea was still under a military dictatorship, and I was afraid that Americans or diplomats from other countries would view me as a puppet of the dictator. This is probably why President Kim Young Sam, the first civilian president elected by popular vote in 1992, proudly encouraged ambassadors by saying that “my election as President alone may be enough to give our diplomats pride in representing a democratic nation.”

Recently, there has been greater recognition of Korea within the US, and a positive image of South Korea offers an ideal opportunity for Korean-Americans to pursue a dual track of both integrating into American society and preserving their identity as Koreans. Remarkable accomplishments in the IT and automobile industries; the spread of Korean culture, or Hallyu, through music and television; achievements in a variety of sports such as golf, soccer, and figure skating by Korean athletes; and outstanding performances by Korean artists, musicians, and ballerinas in international competitions, have all demonstrated to the world that South Korea is not a country which only manufactures products by working for more than 50 hours a week, but is as culturally rich and diverse as any other developed country in the world.

There used to be a period when Korean parents would not allow their children to speak Korean in order to help them adjust to American life, but now it is important for Korean-Americans to have abundant knowledge of both the Korean language and culture to be acknowledged and succeed in American culture. It is the job of the current generation to emphasize and inculcate Korean identity on future generations of Korean-Americans.

I hope that the Chasedae members who are gathered here will take a step forward in leading the Korean-American community, recognizing that you are all main actors for the future of the Korean-American community. I also hope that you will not forget the sacrifices and the work of the first generation, and will respect the previous generation in accordance with our traditional virtues as Koreans.

When the unity of the Korean-American community is strengthened, I believe significant efforts should be made to increase the community’s political influence. For this, Korean-Americans need not only to advance into key political or policy-making positions in the US, but also to encourage interest in US politics and policy making within the community. Also, by promoting low-level contributions by many members within the community, the Korean-American community should develop a constructive system of internal contribution and donation. Additional efforts have to be made to pick out and encourage young talents and to rally around devoted and self-sacrificing community leaders.

To conclude, I would like to reiterate that the Korean-American community is an enormous asset for the future of US-ROK relations. As the two countries grow closer together, your roles will become even more crucial. The Chasedae members here today of the National Unification Advisory Council must work actively to introduce to the American public the necessity and legitimacy of Korean unification, and increase the bases of support for its cause within the American political sphere.

Thank you.