

Session Sketch

The Asan Symposium:
“Celebrating Korea-US Relations: 140 Years and Beyond”
<http://asansymposium.com>

Session: Highlights from 140 Years of Bilateral Relations between Korea and the US

Date/Time: June 3, 2022/10:10-11:40

Rapporteur:

Moderator:

James Kim, AMCHAM Korea

Speakers:

Ahn Ho-Young, University of North Korean Studies

Lee Hong Koo, Seoul Forum for International Affairs

Lee Joon-gyu, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Na Kyung Won, Presidential Special Envoy to the Davos Forum

John Linton, Yonsei University Health System

Scott Snyder, Council on Foreign Relations

Joseph Yun, U.S. Institute of Peace

Session 1 of the 2022 *Asan Symposium*, titled “Highlights from 140 Years of Bilateral Relations between Korea and the US,” reflected on how the bilateral relationship has evolved since its origins with the 1882 Treaty of Peace, Amity, Commerce, and Navigation. Mr. James Kim, Chairman and CEO of the American Chamber of Commerce (AMCHAM) in Korea, moderated the session with influential figures from across the bilateral relationship’s political, security, economic, and health fields. He opened the discussion by noting that the relationship was off to “an amazing start”, with the high-profile leaders’ summit between U.S. President Joe Biden and newly inaugurated South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol in May 2022. Mr. Kim invited the session’s seven distinguished speakers to reflect on what they thought were the most memorable moments from the relationship, how the relationship has survived over the years, and what makes it special on the international stage.

Ambassador Ahn Ho-Young, President of the University of North Korean Studies and former Korean ambassador to the United States, noted that the 140 years of bilateral relations could best be understood as comprising two distinct periods: the first 70 years of “remote encounter” followed by the second 70 years of “close encounter.” In this second half, Ambassador Ahn cited three “memorable junctures.” First, the Korean War was a moment when South Korea made a clear choice for democracy, free market economy, and the rule of law that has guided its development. Second, the change to the rules-based international order in 1990 with the end of the Cold War was an opportunity to take advantage of new political, economic, and diplomatic opportunities. Third, he noted that we are currently in the midst of a third juncture where Korea’s past choices and the alliance with the United States will be of utmost importance.

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Dr. Lee Hong Koo, chairman of the Seoul Forum for International Affairs and former Prime Minister of the Republic of Korea and Ambassador to the United States, offered a personal reflection on two basic factors that made the bilateral relationship so successful. First, the “tremendous influence of the Founding Fathers” in the United States guided a different approach to diplomacy that shunned imperial conquest and colonialization compared to the European powers and Imperial Japan in the 19th century. Second, he emphasized the importance of religion and the remarkable success of Christianity in Korea. Dr. Lee noted that, “religion furnished a basis for Korea-US relations that can be expanded in many different ways” by guaranteeing mutual understanding and public sentiment.

Ambassador Lee Joong-gyu, Chairman of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, next turned to the value of the United States in managing Korea’s often troubled relations with Japan. After a decade of stalled negotiations between Korea and Japan on diplomatic normalization in the 1950s, it was only with the decisive involvement of Kennedy administration in the United States that a treaty was signed. With Korea-Japan relations having fallen to their lowest point in the last few years, Ambassador Lee expressed hope that more active US involvement would be forthcoming under the Biden administration in pushing for closer trilateral cooperation.

Dr. John Linton, Director of the International Health Care Center at the Yonsei University Severance Hospital, shared three stories of partnership from the sweeping history of Korea-US relations. First, he discussed how at the turn of the 19th century, Horace Allen, one of the earliest American missionaries in Korea at the time, provided critical medical treatment to King Gojong’s ill family after a failed assassination attempt. Second, Dr. Linton recalled how his family members had served in various roles during the Korean War. Finally, he told of how support from the US Eighth Army, together with Korean doctors and professors, was instrumental in combining a missionary college and a local hospital to form what would become Yonsei University.

Na Kyung Won, Presidential Special Envoy to the Davos Forum and former four-term National Assemblywoman of Korea, reflected on how the 1953 Korea-US Mutual Defense Treaty was a “pivotal turning point” that owed much to the efforts of President Syngman Rhee. The legacy of the alliance and its transformation was evident in the recent Yoon-Biden summit joint statement. Noting that joint statements used to be brief notes, Ms. Na pointed out that the length shows how the alliance is “evolving beyond security to encompass economic issues.” Similarly, the different applications of “freedom” and “global” as key words for the Yoon administration were values that would ensure the alliance would have a closer outlook going forward.

Scott Snyder, Senior Fellow for Korea Studies and Director of the Program on U.S.-Korea Policy at the Council on Foreign Relations, noted that despite the many changes to the bilateral relationship over the decades, there were two consistent factors. First, Korea’s geography has not changed, and its challenge of being surrounded by powerful neighbors

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endures. Second, the strategic logic of King Gojong’s strategy for opening up is also relevant, with the axiom to “stay close to China, associate with Japan, ally with America” still a topic of discussion.

Finally, Ambassador Joseph Yun, Senior Advisor with the U.S. Institute of Peace and U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for Compact Negotiations, as well as former U.S. Special Representative for North Korea Policy, listed three key events that significantly shaped the bilateral relationship. First, the 1997 election of Kim Dae-jung as Korea’s president was a turning point in closer leadership rapport with US President Bill Clinton as the two leaders worked closely to overcome the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s. Second, the miscommunication between the United States and Korea in the late 2000s over the beef imports during their free trade negotiations was a reminder that there remain fundamental gaps in understanding. Finally, he observed that while most US presidents tended to make their first stop to Korea a visit to the inter-Korean border and the Demilitarized Zone, President Biden’s decision to visit a Samsung factory shows the transformations that are happening in the nature of the relationship. Ambassador Yun suggested that these changes show how the “alliance is very much a living thing.”

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