

2008 Ambassadors' Dialogue Program Reaches Audiences Coast-To-Coast

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KEI recently completed its seventeenth annual **Ambassadors' Dialogue** program. The tour was the third featuring **Lee Tae-sik**, the Republic of Korea's Ambassador to the United States, and **Alexander Vershbow**, United States Ambassador to the Republic of Korea; both of whom were accompanied by their wives. The 2008 tour took place from January 23–February 1, with the Ambassadors visiting **San Francisco, Yorba Linda, and Riverside, CA; Santa Fe, NM; Austin, TX; and Little Rock, AR.** Ambassador Lee proceeded to stand-alone events in **New Orleans, LA**, and Ambassador Vershbow to events in **Washington, DC and Boston (Medford), MA.**

The ambassadors delivered remarks and responded to questions at core events in each city, reaching an estimated 1,200 people through live events, and additional audiences through broadcast and print media. The attendance at core events ranged from around 60 to well over 200, including a wide spectrum of community leaders, businessmen, students and faculty. Three of the core events took place at presidential libraries (Nixon Library in Yorba Linda; LBJ Library in Austin, and Clinton Library in Little Rock). The ambassadors also participated in a number of ancillary events, including at local universities—Stanford University (Asia Pacific Research Center); and University of San Francisco, CA; The University of Texas, Austin (LBJ School of Public Affairs); The University of Arkansas, Little Rock (Clinton School of Public Affairs); Loyola University, New Orleans; and Tufts University in Medford, MA. Mrs. Vershbow spoke at separate programs on the topic of “**Art and Diplomacy**” before civic groups in San Francisco, Santa Fe, Little Rock, and Washington.

The ambassadors focused on the evolution of the U.S.-ROK alliance and the tremendous economic achievements of South Korea, the continuing challenges posed by the North Korean nuclear issue, and the opportunities offered by the KORUS FTA. While providing different perspectives, they underlined the broad agreement between the two countries on major issues.

Ambassador Vershbow described the U.S.-ROK alliance as one of the most successful alliances in history. He pointed to political/security cooperation between the two countries, defining the relationship as having become more of a “global partnership,” as they work together to denuclearize North Korea, and have both committed forces to promote security in Iraq and Afghanistan. He noted that the coast guards of both countries had recently worked together in cleaning up a devastating oil spill off the South Korean coast. In describing how the relationship is becoming a more equal partnership, Ambassador Vershbow explained that “the Koreans are taking greater responsibility for their own defense,” and pointed to the planned transfer of “wartime operational control (OPCON) over Korean troops from the current Combined Forces Command, headed by a U.S. General, to the South Korean military in April 2012.”

In reference to the recent election of Lee Myung-bak as president of the ROK, Ambassador Vershbow remarked that the “transparency and liveliness of the elections were a testament to how far Korea has come in just twenty years of democracy.” He also acknowledged President-elect Lee's “great emphasis on strengthening U.S.-Korea relations.”

On the topic of a combined approach to North Korea, Ambassador Vershbow noted that “the main security issue our alliance has to grapple with is North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons.” While acknowledging that significant progress had been made in the past year, with the Yongbyon facility no longer producing plutonium, he asserted that the North Koreans “have not yet honored their commitment to fully declare all of their nuclear programs and activities.” Once North Korea has taken

these steps toward denuclearization, then “the United States is prepared to take steps toward a more normal relationship with North Korea—including removing it from the State Sponsors of Terrorism list and from the jurisdiction of the Trading with the Enemy Act.”

Regarding economic issues, he said that the KORUS FTA would enhance both economies. Ambassador Vershbow noted that “the United States will eliminate our minimal tariffs of 3 percent on manufactured goods, and tariffs of 12 percent on agricultural products; Korea will eliminate its tariffs of 10 percent on manufactured goods, and tariffs of 50 percent on agricultural products.” He explained that this FTA is the largest since NAFTA, and is expected to give the U.S. economy a \$10 to \$12 billion boost while helping to make Korea’s market more competitive. Additionally, he asserted that “the spillover benefits of this FTA will go beyond bilateral U.S.-Korea relations and have a broader impact on the entire region,” by encouraging the Japanese to rethink their policy of agricultural protectionism, and the Chinese to improve their regulatory framework. In regards to the potential of the FTA’s moving forward, he expressed optimism “that the Koreans will fix the beef situation, after which we will be in a good position to move this FTA forward in Congress next year.” He also noted that a visa waiver policy that is expected to take effect by early 2009 will ease the process for Korean visitors to the United States. He explained that U.S. air carriers expect the number of Koreans traveling to the United States to double once the program is in effect.

In discussing the recent election in Korea, Ambassador Lee said that the special envoy of President-elect Lee Myung-bak to the United States emphasized that the president-elect strongly values the U.S.-ROK alliance as the backbone of Korea’s foreign policy and wishes to continue the “strengthening of the ROK-U.S. alliance to protect and promote mutual interest based on the shared values of democracy and market economy.” He indicated that President Lee is expected to visit Washington this spring at the invitation of President Bush. Like his counterpart, Ambassador Lee acknowledged that, although some progress had been made toward denuclearizing North Korea, several hurdles remain, and that “we need to have patience and maintain a creative and open-minded approach” in the six-party-talks process.

The Ambassador said that the U.S.-ROK economic relationship continues to become more reciprocal, noting that the United States currently holds approximately \$36 billion of investments in Korea, while Korean investments in the United States are about half that amount and continuing to rise. Ambassador Lee pointed to the broad benefits which are expected to be realized with the implementation of the KORUS FTA and to adverse consequences for U.S. exports that could ensue from failure to do so. In comparing the KORUS FTA to the other FTA currently being pursued by the United States (Columbia, Panama and Peru), he explained that “Korea’s GDP of \$900 billion is more than 3.5 times bigger than that of those three countries combined (\$246 billion).” Ambassador Lee also noted that the KORUS FTA is a comprehensive agreement—covering the full range of trade-related areas—and would eliminate 95% of all tariffs on goods within three years.

He provided examples of how the FTA may benefit the economies of individual states, e.g., the boost to California’s wine industry from elimination of Korea’s current 15% tariff on wine imports. Speaking before a group in Austin, Texas, he noted Korea’s strong economic ties to the Texan economy, explaining that Samsung operates one of the largest manufacturing plants in the United States, located in Austin, with a payroll expected to grow from \$60 million to \$100 million in the near future, and that Texas ranks second among the U.S. states with exports to Korea, totaling \$5.3 billion in 2006. Both ambassadors asserted that the FTA needs to be concluded as soon as possible, with Ambassador Lee noting that Korea must resolve the beef issue soon in order for the FTA to be concluded by the summer of 2008.

Art in Diplomacy: Lisa Vershbow, American metalsmith and spouse of Ambassador Vershbow, described how she has woven more than 30 years of working as an artist and educator together with her

duties as the wife of an American diplomat. Her presentation included a slide show representing her own art work, pieces from the collection of American crafts in the ART in Embassies collection at the Ambassador's residence, and some of the projects she has done for public diplomacy. She also discussed how living abroad has influenced her work and underscored her strong belief that art is one of the great tools for public diplomacy.

Mrs. Vershbow delivered presentations at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco, the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum in Santa Fe, the Clinton School for Public Service in Little Rock, and the Sackler Gallery in Washington, DC.