

A TOUR DE FORCE BY TWO AMBASSADORS

by Greg Scarlatou (gs@keia.org)

U.S. citizens from many walks of life had the unusual opportunity in early September to hear from and interact with the two ambassadors responsible for maintaining the critical U.S.-Korea relationship. During KEI's annual Ambassadors' Dialogue tour between September 7 and 15, H.E. Han Duk-soo, ROK Ambassador to the United States, and The Honorable Kathleen Stephens, U.S. Ambassador to Korea, travelled to U.S. cities in the Midwest, the East Coast, and the Southwest, speaking to varied audiences of civic and business leaders, students and professors, veterans, and often state or local political leaders as well.

THE AMBASSADORS' DIALOGUE TOUR

This annual program is at the core of KEI's public affairs portfolio, usually covering five or more cities in the United States over a one to two week period.

The central figures on the tour are Korea's ambassador to the United States and the U.S. ambassador to Korea. In each city the two Ambassadors address varied audiences of civic leaders, students, veterans, local media, business representatives, and often state or local political leaders as well. These events are generally sponsored by a local organization engaged in public affairs programming. The ambassadors address the current security and economic situation on the Korean peninsula and the state of U.S.-Korea relations.

While in Missoula, MT, Chicago, IL, Detroit, MI, and Boston, MA, the 2009 Ambassadors' Dialogue program featured remarks by both ambassadors, Ambassador Stephens also addressed audiences at KEI's conference facility in Washington, D.C. and in the Phoenix, AZ area. Along the Ambassadors' Dialogue circuit, KEI had the highly qualified and enthusiastic support of local organizers, including: The Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center at the University of Montana; the Chicago Council on Global Affairs; the Detroit Economic Club; the John F. Kennedy, Jr., Forum at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, the Thunderbird School of Global Management, the World Affairs Council of Arizona, and Western International University.

At the destinations of this year's tour, ambassadors Han and Stephens delivered remarks through presentations and "moderated conversations." The impressive moderator line-up included Marshall Bouton, President of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Prof. Graham T. Allison of the Kennedy School of Government, and Gordon Flake, Executive Director of The Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation.

The topics addressed by the two ambassadors included: U.S.-Korea relations and the development of the special relationship between the two countries; the economic, political, and strategic significance of the KORUS FTA; and North Korea.

Ambassador Stephens' Remarks

In her remarks, Ambassador Stephens drew on her long established relationship with Korea, her thorough knowledge of Korean culture, civilization, and language, and her ample diplomatic experience and impressions of the time spent in the Peace Corps in Korea, to reflect on the astounding economic and political transformation that Korea has traversed over the past few decades.

Ambassador Stephens centered her observations on the U.S.-Korea relationship on the “three Ds” enounced by Secretary of State Clinton in one of her speeches: Defense, Development, and Diplomacy.

Regarding Defense, Ambassador Stephens noted that the alliance, which grew out of the Korean War, is the shield behind which other aspects of the relationship are able to function. Regarding Development, she pointed to the substantial bilateral assistance provided by the United States during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s but emphasized that the main driver of the high levels of growth achieved by Korea was the hard work of its people. Regarding Diplomacy, Ambassador Stephens underlined the emergence of the country on the world stage, as exemplified by the appointment of former minister for foreign affairs and trade Ban Ki-moon to be UN Secretary General.

Ambassador Han's Remarks

Ambassador Han set the background for his remarks by emphasizing the history and strength of the U.S.-Korea relationship, and addressed the economic, political, and strategic dimensions of the bond between the two countries.

Ambassador Han pointed out that a close U.S.-Korea partnership remains relevant and necessary for the following reasons: it maintains peace and security against threats from North Korea; it helps to maintain stability in the region; and it signals U.S. engagement in the region.

While emphasizing the importance of moving forward with ratification of the KORUS FTA and finding a solution to the North Korean nuclear problem, Ambassador Han pointed out that newly emerged global security challenges presented Korea and the United States with great potential to further strengthen their close cooperation and partnership, as stated by Presidents Lee and Obama in the Joint Vision for the Alliance, presented at their summit meeting in Washington, D.C., on June 16. He cited as examples cooperation on development of a smart electric grid, naval operations to combat piracy, and reconstruction of Afghanistan.

Regarding North Korea, Ambassador Han underlined the unified response of the international community, including China and Russia, as exemplified by UNSC Resolution 1874 and the subsequent announcement of the new list of sanctions against North Korean companies and individuals. He further pointed out that South Korea favors working with patience and consistency to persuade North Korea to return to dialogue on the premise that the goal is denuclearization, basing its efforts on close cooperation and coordination with the United States.

Regarding the KORUS FTA, Ambassador Han said that the intense negotiation achieved the best possible balance of interests and that ratification of the agreement would bring tremendous mutual benefits. He rebutted the assertion that the provisions of the agreement are unfair to the U.S. automobile industry, arguing that they represent an opportunity rather than a challenge. Implementation of the FTA would have important strategic implications and raise the bilateral economic relationship to a new level, while failure to implement it would risk creation of suspicion and misunderstanding. He noted the agreement of presidents Lee and Obama to find a way forward on the issue.

Features of the Programs

The substance of the presentations, as well as the two ambassadors' eloquence, charisma, and charm made a lasting impression on the over 1,200 attendees present at the live events along the Ambassadors' Dialogue tour. Most events were broadcast to larger audiences as well, thus considerably expanding the reach of the program.

While looking forward to the broadening and deepening of the U.S.-Korea relationship, the Ambassadors' Dialogue did not fail to honor those whose sacrifice became the foundation of Korea's astounding success story. In anticipation of the commemoration of 60 years since the beginning of the Korean War next year, a tragic conflagration that, nevertheless, laid the foundations of a "relationship forged in blood" between Korea and the United States, as stated by Ambassador Stephens in her remarks, the two ambassadors also honored American veterans of the Korean War. In the presence of Korean War veterans, Ambassador Han laid a wreath at the Montana Korean War Memorial, and both ambassadors jointly laid a wreath at the Massachusetts Korean War Veterans Memorial.

The 2009 tour also involved other events, such as a meeting of the two ambassadors with Richard Daley, Mayor of Chicago, a meeting with Michael Kontos, Senior Adviser to the committee spearheading Chicago's bid to host the 2016 Summer Olympics, and sessions with leaders from the business and academic communities, and with university and high school students.

All along the Ambassadors' Dialogue itinerary, through the remarks by the two ambassadors, live audiences—and those who followed the event through live broadcasting, video and audio recordings, or the local press—had a unique opportunity to learn about the importance of America's relationship with Korea, one of its closest allies, and also an emerging leader in the post-crisis, 21st century financial, economic, and political architecture. There is every indication that they took good advantage of that opportunity.