

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Event

**“Statesmen's Forum: His Excellency Lee Jae Myung,
President of the Republic of Korea”**

DATE

Monday, August 25, 2025 at 6:15 p.m. ET

FEATURING

Lee Jae Myung

President of the Republic of Korea

CSIS EXPERTS

John J. Hamre

President and CEO, and Langone Chair in American Leadership, CSIS

Victor Cha

President, Geopolitics and Foreign Policy Department, and Korea Chair, CSIS

Transcript By

Superior Transcriptions LLC

www.superiortranscriptions.com

Victor Cha: Good evening, everyone. Welcome to CSIS. Thank you for joining us for this very special event. My name is Victor Cha, president of geopolitics and foreign policy and Korea chair at CSIS, professor at Georgetown. Our guest of honor today is his excellency Lee Jae Myung, president of the Republic of Korea. President Lee will deliver an address on foreign policy and U.S.-Korea relations on the occasion of his first summit visit to the White House.

Some housekeeping issues before we get started. The first is that CSIS staff will serve as your safety officers at this event. So please follow our instructions, should the need arise. You would exit the same way you came in, right through those glass doors behind you. And then the second is the president will speak in Korean with simultaneous translation, followed by a brief conversation with Dr. Hamre with consecutive translation. And so you all have transmitters on your chairs. It's channel two for English and channel 10 for Korean. And at the end of the event we will ask you all to please remain seated until the president has exited the room. We will inform you when we are adjourned and can exit the conference hall.

So we're waiting for the president. (Laughter.) It's a nice day today. (Laughter.) Very nice weather. (Laughter.) They told me he's coming in three minutes. This is going to be the longest three minutes of my life. (Laughter.)

(Break.)

Dr. Cha: So could I ask you to please stand and give a warm welcome to the president of the Republic of Korea, President Lee Jae Myung. (Applause.) Let me now – please be seated. Let me now turn the proceedings over to our president and CEO, Dr. John Hamre.

John J. Hamre: Thank you, Victor.

Well, let me just say a hearty welcome to all of you. And let me say how surprised I am. I mean, when we heard the president was coming the last week of August, you know, I thought, we'll never get anybody to show up, you know? (Laughter.) And here we've got absolutely a full house. And I think that reflects the importance of Korea to all of us and it reflects the important leadership that President Lee is bringing to Korea. And we're really excited to have him here. And I want to say thank you to all of you for coming.

I've got just a remarkable lineup of dignitaries here. And I'm going to really screw this up, but I want to just say thank you: Carla Hills, former U.S. trade representative. You know, Roy Ryu, he's on my board and so

he's one of my bosses, so I really have to say thank you to him for coming. (Laughter.) Chuck Hagel, former secretary of defense and senator. Bill Cohen, secretary of defense and former senator. Chris Dodd, former senator. Rob Portman, former senator, U.S. trade representative, we're so grateful to have you here; he flew in from Ohio and he's flying back tonight to be here, so we're really delighted. Jim Jones, who was the former SACEUR, national security advisor, and commandant of the Marine Corps. Jim Clapper, national security advisor – national intelligence director. Kurt Campbell, who was the deputy secretary of state. Allison Hooker – thank you for joining us – undersecretary, policy, at the State Department. Mark Lippert and Sung Kim, who are both ambassadors. And where – and I think also where is – (laughs) – thank you, Seth. Thank you very much for coming, Kathy. Kathy Stephens is also here. So just want to say thank you to all of you for honoring us and honoring the president by being here today.

You know, President Lee's election was not a normal election. It occurred in the context of a diplomatic crisis and a constitutional crisis in Korea. And you know, I think all of us were just so unsettled by what we saw, and it was – we were – the Korean people stood up. The Korean people asserted their democracy, and it was very reassuring. To those of us that have dedicated our lives to building a stronger Korea, we were so gratified to see Korea being a strong democracy. And then, in a few months, they elected President Lee, and it was because you – you're bringing that new direction for Korea, President Lee, and we want to say thank you to that.

This is the first time that President Lee is going to give a talk on foreign policy. And so I would ask you with your enthusiastic applause to please welcome President Lee Jae Myung to the dais for his comments. (Applause.)

(Note: President Lee's remarks are made through an interpreter.)

President Lee
Jae Myung:

I understand that it is vacation time, but nevertheless there is a lot of people here. Thank you so much.

Before I read the prepared script, well, as it was just mentioned by Dr. John Hamre, it is true that the Republic of Korea experienced a crisis, and probably the entire world was alarmed, because in a country like Republic of Korea a coup, a martial law. And then again you were probably surprised that such a political crisis was overcome through the peaceful actions of the people. And you – the recovery of the democracy of Korea probably surprised the world.

As many people know, the Republic of Korea is the only country among

those liberated from colonial rule that has achieved democracy and industrialization at the same time. We were able to achieve rapid growth within a very short period of time. And probably the Korean people can be felt like the heroes and heroines of story – of a storybook.

But aside from the traditional religion of Korea, we have Christianity, and Buddhism, and many different religions. But we do not have religious conflicts. We have harmony among diversity. And we have been able to showcase a new type of culture to the world. Korea has established itself as a cultural powerhouse, but I do believe that it will also be soon known – it is my expectation and hope that it will be known as a model case of democracy. While in the textbooks we have learned about democracy and that how it has stemmed from Athens of Greece. But if you look in the reality, well, in – in 2024 winter, perhaps that might be recalled as the origin of democracy.

You might know that there is an animation, “K-Pop Demon Hunters.” And if you watch that, you might have caught a glimpse of what a country the Republic of Korea is. But if you look at the culture of Korea, well, I think that democracy, I think, is the ultimate form of culture and arts, because the entire world, well, at a time when there was confrontation, and conflict, and far right, and many difficulties and challenges, but nevertheless the Republic of Korea was able to overcome a chaotic situation, self-coup. But the protesters were enjoying themselves, singing. And also, without shedding a single drop of blood, we were able to overcome that crisis. And I do believe that that is a model case of democracy. So please keep your eye on the new Republic of Korea. And let me now go into my prepared script.

Honorable Dr. John Hamre, president of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, thank you so much for joining us – despite it being vacation time. It is a pleasure to meet you. At a time when the global landscape and regional security conditions remain challenging, CSIS, a leading think tank in Washington, D.C. which has long maintained a special focus on the alliance between the Republic of Korea and the United States, has graciously organized today’s event. And I would like to express my deepest gratitude to CSIS.

The Republic of Korea, as I mentioned before, is unique among nations liberated from colonial rule, having achieved both industrialization and democratization at the same time. It is a global leader of cutting-edge technology that is poised to reshape the future of humanity, and a cultural powerhouse that is rewriting the standards of creative industries, with content that moves and delights audiences around the world. At the heart of our shining achievements lies the determination

and talent of the Korean people, who have turned crisis into opportunities at every critical juncture in history. However, without the contribution of the U.S. and the international community, Korea would not be where it is today.

In the process of rapid economic growth, also known as the miracle on the Han River, and the fight for democratization against a brutal dictatorship, the support and cooperation from the U.S. have always been a great help to Korea. The solidarity between Korea and the U.S., which has endured for over 70 years, proved its strength as we overcame a military self-coup attempt on December 3rd of last year. The power to suppress the armed coup forces without shedding a single drop of blood came from the Korean people who participated in peaceful protests, demonstrating to the world the vivid vibrancy of K-democracy. Yet, it is also thanks to all of you, leaders in the American political and social circles, who have expressed unwavering trust, solidarity, and support for our efforts to restore democracy.

The new government was elected by the people who cherish freedom and democracy. And we are ready to further strengthen the alliance we have with the ROK – between the ROK and the U.S. As a member of the liberal democratic community Korea has benefited from growth and development, and it stands ready to shoulder its responsibilities in return. Korea's democracy and the ROK-U.S. alliance have endured numerous challenges, and we are faced with a turbulent international situation and new, daunting challenges.

Immediately after the June 3rd presidential election in Korea CSIS released a report titled "South Korea's New President: Frying Pan to Fire," and the title of this report speaks volumes about the grave reality facing my country. Today's challenges are numerous and complicated, including North Korea's continued nuclear and missile development and military cooperation with Russia, the serious security environment surrounding Ukraine and the Middle East, and global supply chain issues concerning energy and critical minerals. To address these unprecedented challenges, wisdom to turn crisis into opportunities and build a foundation for a new development is more urgent than ever. Against this backdrop I believe that the best approach we need is about responding to quickly-changing global affairs with strategy insight and flexible thinking, which can be called as pragmatic diplomacy centered on national interest.

And the backdrop and the backbone of pragmatic diplomacy centered on national interest is the ROK-U.S. alliance, which has played a pivotal role for peace and prosperity. Our two countries have fought side by side on many battlefields to defend peace and prosperity. And so we

stand together as security allies.

Once a recipient of American aid, Korea has become the largest greenfield investor in the U.S., helping Americans enrich their lives. And so we support each other as economic allies.

Building on our security and economic alliance, I am committed to opening a new chapter of pragmatic alliance centered on national interest together with President Trump. At the summit meeting today with President Trump, President Trump and I agreed to make and modernize our bilateral alliance to be more reciprocal and future-oriented in line with the changing security landscape.

The U.S. defense commitment to the Republic of Korea and our joint defense posture remain unwavering and ironclad. At the same time, Korea will take a more leading role in maintaining security on the Korean Peninsula.

First of all, we will increase our defense budget, which will be used to transform the Korean military into a smart military that will prevail in future warfare. And so we will use it to acquire cutting-edge technology and military assets. At the summit meeting, President Trump stated his willingness to actively support Korea's efforts to strengthen its military capabilities and further expand bilateral cooperation in the advanced defense industry. Our two countries' capabilities and posture will be further expanded and strengthened to thoroughly respond to a constantly-changing security landscape and rising threats.

While the ROK-U.S. alliance has made remarkable progress, there remains on the Korean Peninsula an unresolved legacy of the past century, which is the North Korean nuclear issue. Maintaining the goal of a denuclearized Korean Peninsula is extremely important to bring permanent peace to the Korean Peninsula and the world.

President Trump and I have agreed to work closely together to establish peace and achieve denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula. Obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty must be strictly observed on the Korean Peninsula, and it is evident that that is in the interests of both Koreas. The Republic of Korea will comply with the NPT regime and strictly keep its commitment to denuclearization.

The inter-Korean relations are not an exception to the principle of pragmatic diplomacies entered on national interests. Korea and the U.S. will make efforts to have dialogue with North Korea while firmly responding to North Korean provocations. The Korean government has taken a series of measures to reduce inter-Korean tensions in order to

prevent accidental confrontations, while North Korea has stopped propaganda loudspeaker broadcasts which harass residents in the border areas. Those residents who were not able to sleep at night even with the help of sleeping pills have expressed gratitude to my administration, saying that they can at last enjoy a good night's sleep.

I am confident that inter-Korean relations based on reconciliation and cooperation will benefit the Korean Peninsula, as well as the U.S. When a path for denuclearization, peace, and coexistence is finally open on the Korean Peninsula, the ROK-U.S. alliance will be upgraded in a global context. The approximately 200,000 Americans and 28,500 U.S. troops in Korea will be safer, and people in our two countries will lead more prosperous lives.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, in an era where national security significantly impacts the quality of people's lives and the future of a nation, security and economics cannot be thought about separately. Today President Trump and I agreed to cooperate closely to ensure that our alliance will make our people's lives more prosperous. The tariff deal that our two countries have made will serve as a stepping-stone to strengthen advanced technology cooperation between our two countries. The K-shipbuilding industry, equipped with the world's strongest capabilities, will bring about a renaissance of the U.S. shipbuilding industry and create a new historic turning point for mutual prosperity.

Korea and the U.S. will broadly take on the challenge of our times, where security and economics converge, through advanced technology alliance – a future where different countries cooperate and achieve mutually beneficial growth. Does it sound like a dreamy, rosy future? It is a dream that can come true because our people, the strongest foundation of our alliance, are realizing this ideal. Despite the vast distances across land and sea between the two countries, nearly 3 million Koreans and Americans are visiting each other's country annually, expanding exchanges, and deepening friendships. Hollywood movies and rock and jazz music have long been loved by young Koreans.

Now young people in Korea and the U.S. feel a strong connection as they listen to the soundtracks of "K-Pop Demon Hunters," which is streamed globally on Netflix. Just as hamburgers and pizza are no longer solely American, kimbab and ramyun are no longer exclusive to Korea. A video featuring a Korean American girl in a New York City elementary school making kimbab for lunch went viral on social media. A popular Korean hamburger franchise opened its first store in the U.S., home to the hamburger, drawing large crowds. Indeed, we are witnessing a new chapter in the history of the ROK-U.S. alliance, where our people share a

heart of trust and make each other's lives more prosperous.

And another partner who cannot be left out in this new chapter is Japan. Before I came to the U.S., I visited Japan first – a next-door neighbor sharing the same yard. I recall that President Trump has emphasized the importance of trilateral cooperation among Korea, the U.S., and Japan, since his first term in office. Together with Trump – President Trump, I will further strengthen trilateral cooperation, based on the ironclad ROK-U.S. alliance. The three countries will respond jointly to North Korean nuclear and missile threats and step up efforts to achieve peace and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region and the world.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, our great alliance was forged amidst trenches and gunfire on the battlefield, but over the past 70 years it has transformed into an alliance that covers a wide range of areas including shipbuilding, AI, semiconductors, quantum technology, and nuclear energy. And even at this moment, the alliance is authoring a new chapter of history. A future-oriented, comprehensive, strategic alliance is firmly rooted in the three pillars of security, economy, and advanced technology. And this ironclad alliance, founded on pragmatism and national interests for our people, will shine brightly. The golden era of the ROK-U.S. alliance has yet to come. Not because we lack in something, but because we have unlimited potential to realize. Together, we can achieve even greater things for our glorious moments to come.

Katchi kapshida. Thank you. (Applause.)

Dr. Hamre: Thank you, Mr. President. What a wonderful presentation. We're really grateful that you gave us the time.

Like everybody in this room, I'm going to ask the question they want to ask, which is, how did it go? (Laughter.) I mean, you had this private meeting with the president. He's kind of a – he's a different kind of a president. How did it go? (Laughter.)

President Lee: (Speaks in Korean.)

Dr. Hamre: I think your interpreter is going to now – (laughter) –

President Lee: (Laughs.) (Speaks in Korean.)

(Previous remarks continue through interpreter.) So, before – so, first of all, before I met with President Trump today, he posted on Truth Social a very threatening post, which I felt. (Laughter.) And then during the

press gaggle he mentioned about the Korean government's investigations regarding the previous government, and he mentioned that he would look into the search and seizure of U.S. bases. And so my staff was worried that we might face a Zelensky moment. (Laughter.)

But I already knew that I would not face that kind of a situation. That's because I had read President Trump's book, "The Art of the Deal." (Laughter.)

So as President Trump said, as a technique in negotiating, that he presents conditions that are hard to accept for the opponent, but at the final stage he does not come to an unreasonable conclusion. So – and this was the pattern that I observed in his previous negotiations with other countries. And because of the importance of the Korea-U.S. alliance, I was confident that he would not inflict a wound to our alliance.

As for the actual summit meeting and our luncheon meeting, we had very good conversations, and I would like to say that my meeting with President Trump was beyond my expectations. So we had very good conversations. We increased our understanding, and I received a lot of encouragement from President Trump. And so our meeting surpassed the planned time, which was why this event was also a bit delayed.

So the results were very good. Whew. (Laughter.) So everybody gave me the advice to have patience.

Dr. Hamre: Yeah. We're very happy. We're very happy it was a good meeting. Mr. President, I want to ask you maybe a hard question. You know, Korea has always had a very strong alliance with the United States, but you've also had very strong economic ties with China. And there are some people that say, well, you're going to lean to China on economics, you're going to lean to the United States on security. And then there are some critics, honestly, who say you're too pro-China. Could you respond to that?

President Lee: So before the U.S. had a very firm position against countering China or containing China, it is – I guess it could be said that Korea relied its security on the U.S. and its economic cooperation with China. However, within the – in the recent few years – and as the confrontation between the liberal democratic community and the community led by China – the competition has become fierce, and the supply chains are being readjusted accordingly, it's no longer possible to maintain that kind of logic.

However, if we look at the facts, while the U.S. is competing with China

in some areas, there are other areas in which the U.S. is cooperating with China. Korea has therefore distanced itself from establishing any special relationship with China in matters related to US export controls or dealings in global supply chain. But because we are geographically very closely located to China, we are maintaining our relationship with China at a level focused on managing the inevitable ties that arise from this proximity. At this point, we cannot act or make or make decisions that go against America's basic policy stance.

Dr. Hamre: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. President. That was very thoughtful.

Let me ask, you mentioned in your speech that you've taken steps to take provocative things away from North Korea. You've stopped with the loudspeakers, for example. You said people can sleep at night. And yet, you know, North Korea's responded with some really kind of rude things. Not very encouraging comments, that suggests that there's any prospect of working with Korea. What do you think are practical opportunities with North Korea that you could explore?

President Lee: So the Korean Peninsula, as you well know, is the only region that is facing a divided situation. It's not just a simple division, but it is a very antagonistic division where both sides aim to get rid of the opposite side. And both sides are maintaining large armies and have great weaponry. And the density, in terms of military strength, is very concentrated. And in response to North Korea, we have made efforts to deter North Korea and apply sanctions. But the result has been North Korea's continued development of its nuclear and missile programs. And now North Korea is close to completing this program. They are at the final stages of developing ICBMs, which can target far away distances. And they are accumulating 10 to 20 – they are able to produce 10 to 20 nuclear weapons per year.

For the past three to four years, the hard facts are that the number of nuclear weapons that North Korea possesses has increased 2.5 times during the past three to four years, and their ability to produce fissile material has increased tremendously. So, from the perspective of Korea, we are increasing our defense capabilities by developing overwhelming conventional weapons. So although we are way in advance of North Korea in terms of our conventional weapons capability, we do not have nuclear weapons. And therefore, there is a balance of fear between – on the Korean Peninsula. But the situation is deteriorating.

So my belief is that we should find a realistic way to prevent/stop North Korea from producing more and from proliferating, and stopping their development of ICBMs so that it cannot become a threat to North Korea. So we have to maintain a strong deterrence against North Korea, but we

have to make efforts so that the situation does not become worse. So we cannot solve the problem by simply suppressing North Korea. We also have to have the wisdom of managing the situation if it is necessary to do so.

Dr. Hamre: I think that's entirely right, Mr. President. I also think it's very important to emphasize deterrence and for Korea to trust America with its pledge of extended deterrence, because that becomes a foundation for this.

Mr. President, your schedulers have told me I have to end by 7:00, but I do want to ask one last question. You were elected after a tragedy with the declaration of martial law, and you became the president of a very divided country. Now, we're a very divided country, so I'm not – I'm not – we don't hold out a model, but how – what can you do to have – become the president of all Koreans?

President Lee: There is something that I want to show to you. So the Republic of Korea is a place where tens or hundreds or millions of people, citizens, gather and they put forth their political arguments and they resist. But all of this takes place peacefully – without violence, without people looting, fires, and without people vandalizing goods. And so this is the political situation, the strength of Korea.

And the Korean people, they resisted a living power without shedding blood. And they were able to remove a leader through singing songs and dancing dances. And this happened twice over the last eight years. And there is no other country that did this, besides Korea. So the political and cultural strength of the Korean people, I believe, is incredible.

So I believe that the things that politicians, including myself, what we should do is to make more compromises. And instead of setting barriers we should meet frequently, and have conversations, and increase our mutual understanding, and cooperate in areas that we can cooperate. And if we make such ceaseless efforts, I think this is the only way to achieve the question that – Dr. Hamre, that you – that you answered. And I believe that if we make sufficient efforts, then it is possible. But it is possible, because it is Korea.

Dr. Hamre: I think that's good advice for America too, I should say.

We're at the hour. Could I ask you all, with your very enthusiastic applause, say thank you to President Lee? (Applause.) Thank you all very much. (Applause.)

(END.)

