

## KOREA CHAIR PLATFORM

## Korea Scores a Milestone with President Park's Address to U.S. Congress

By Dennis Halpin  
May 14, 2013

*Dennis Halpin is a former Peace Corps volunteer in Korea, former U.S. Consul in Pusan, and former professional staff of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. He is currently a visiting scholar at the U.S.-Korea Institute at SAIS (Johns Hopkins University).*

Despite reports of a scandal involving a member of the Korean President's official party, the recent Washington visit of President Park Geun-hye scored some notable successes. Perhaps, most prominently, President Park's May 8th address to a joint meeting of the Congress demonstrated that the Republic of Korea is in the top rank of American allies. The last foreign leader to address Congress before her, in fact, was another Korean president, Lee Myung-bak, in October 2011 (There was no address by a foreign leader in the election year of 2012). With President Park's address, the Republic of Korea is now in fifth place (tied with Ireland and Italy) as to the number of times one of its leaders have addressed Congress. South Korea is behind only the United Kingdom, France, Israel, and Mexico in this regard.

More importantly, the Republic of Korea is unique among America's Asia-Pacific allies in having had six appearances by its presidents. Australia and the Philippines have only had three such occasions and Japan has never been given this honor (two Japanese Prime Ministers, Kishi and Ikeda, addressed House meetings but NOT joint meetings of both Houses of Congress).

Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi was widely expected to address a joint meeting of Congress during his 2006 visit. A letter from then-Chairman of the International Relations Committee Henry Hyde, a World War II veteran of the Pacific campaign, to then-Speaker Dennis Hastert, however, raised concerns about Koizumi's reported plans to visit the Yasukuni Shrine after his Washington visit. The shrine contains the spirit tablet of Hideki Tojo, mastermind of the Pearl Harbor attack, as well as other Class-A war criminals. While Hyde said that he welcomed Prime Minister Koizumi, on behalf of a major U.S. ally, addressing Congress, he added the concern that then visiting Yasukuni would be "an affront to the generation that remembers Pearl Harbor and dishonor the place where President Roosevelt made his 'Date of Infamy' speech." When the Hyde letter leaked to the Asian press, the informal plans to have an address to a joint meeting of Congress were dropped. President George W. Bush's trip with Prime Minister Koizumi to Graceland (Mr. Koizumi being an Elvis fan) ended up being the high point of that visit.

President Park also received a rare honor in being invited to address Congress so soon after her inauguration as the Republic of Korea's eleventh chief executive. It was common knowledge

## KOREA CHAIR PLATFORM



among Congressional staff in 2009, of which I was one, that, when President Lee Myung-bak first visited Washington in his official capacity, informal feelers sent out by the Korean Embassy for an address Congress were rebuffed.

Then Speaker Pelosi reportedly thought that it was premature for Lee, having served only a little over a year in the Blue House, to be given such an honor. President Lee had to wait until a return visit in 2011, and the successful passage of KORUS FTA, to be invited.

One of the reasons that President Park may have received this honor so early on in her tenure is her status as the first elected woman leader from East Asia. The failure to shatter the glass ceiling in the White House during the 2008 presidential campaign continues to be a source of severe disappointment for a number of American women, including those in political leadership positions. Honoring Confucian Korea which achieved this goal before the United States would, then, seem quite natural.

One hundred and nine foreign dignitaries and leaders have addressed joint meetings of Congress (and only two foreign dignitaries have addressed Joint Sessions of Congress the French Ambassador in 1934 on the 100th anniversary of the death of the Marquis de Lafayette and the Cuban Ambassador in 1948 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Cuban independence following the Spanish-American War of 1898). But among those one hundred and nine, only twelve were women. Two additional women addressed Congressional bodies prior to that: Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands addressed the Senate in 1942 and Madam Chiang Kai-shek of the Republic of China addressed the House in 1943.

President Park, thus, joins a small, elite set of women leaders, including Queen Elizabeth II, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who have been given the honor. She also is included in the smaller number of five Asia-Pacific women leaders who have appeared before the American Congress, including Madam Chiang Kai-shek, Philippine President Corazon Aquino, Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, and Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard.

Thus, from several different perspectives, President Park's recent address to the Congress was historic. It also represented a major diplomatic achievement for the Republic of Korea.

## KOREA CHAIR PLATFORM



The *Korea Chair Platform* is made possible by the generous support of Samsung Electronics America. The views expressed in the *Platform* do not necessarily reflect those of Samsung Electronics America or of CSIS. The Office of the Korea Chair invites essays for consideration for the *Platform*. For inquiries, please email [KoreaChair@CSIS.org](mailto:KoreaChair@CSIS.org).

**The *Korea Chair Platform* is published by the Office of the Korea Chair (<http://www.csis.org/program/korea-chair>) at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).**