

Center for Strategic and International Studies

Online Event

“Keynote Address by Rep. Joaquin Castro (D-TX), Vice Chair, House Foreign Affairs Committee”

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FEATURING:
Representative Joaquin Castro (D-TX),
Vice Chair,
House Foreign Affairs Committee

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John J. Hamre:

Well, I would – I do want to say just a few things, but we should very quickly turn to Representative Castro. You know, America's going through a journey at this stage. The last four years were confusing because I think President Obama – or, excuse me – President Trump gave the impression that we were doing a favor to Korea by having our troops there. That was wrong. You know, we weren't rewarding Korea by having troops in Korea. We were helping ourselves, because we were deep partners with Korea. Our whole goal is to ensure that there is democracy and freedom on the Eurasian – on the Eurasian continent. And Korea is the great champion of that. And so having Korea be strong was a key criteria for us.

We created some confusion in this country, I'm afraid, by not being clear about this. America is in a partnership with Korea. We're not giving you anything. We're not – this isn't a tributary relationship and it's not a mercenary relationship. We are partners because it's in our mutual interest to be partners on a security basis. Now, we do want to see a unified Korea. It's obviously very important that we want Korea to be unified so that North and South Korea are together and North Korea does not become a tributary state of China. That would not be in our interest. So we support this campaign to try to bring peace to the Korean Peninsula. But we have to have sensible policies to do that.

Now, there's nobody who is better equipped to help us understand this than Representative Castro. He is an authentic leader, a young, vibrant voice in the Congress, who is helping Americans understand the importance of foreign policy for our own security. And he has a great, great perspective on the importance of Asia and how America should play a role in Asia. So I think we should turn to Representative Castro now, and to hear his thoughts about where we're going.

And, Seok-Hyun, gosh, it's good to see you. I miss you so much. I look forward when COVID is over and we can see each other. We should turn together now to welcome Representative Castro.

Mark Lippert:

All right. Dr. Hamre, Ambassador Lippert here. I am under your charge, under your supervision and under your permission to introduce the great Representative Castro here.

So good evening to those in the United States. "Joeun achim" to those in Korea. And it's really an honor to be here participating in one of the most important Track Two events we have in the U.S.-ROK bilateral relationships.

And I'm just going to say a few brief words about one of the most impressive members of Congress, one of the most impressive thought leaders we have in Washington, Representative Castro. As vice chairman of the House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs, he has been extremely active, I would even say tireless, in strengthening the relationships, in pushing forward key initiatives, and bringing expertise on Asia to the halls of the United States Congress.

Let's quickly go through some of the highlights of his very impressive biography. Since 2012 he's representative – represented, excuse me – Texas's 20th congressional district, which covers a large portion of San Antonio and outlying county.

In addition to his seat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, he is a member of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, as well as the House Education and Labor Committee. He was the 2013 co-president of the House Freshman Democrats and currently serves as chair of the Texas Democratic Caucus. And among a number of caucus memberships in foreign policy, he is the founding member of the Congressional Caucus on ASEAN, something that dovetails nicely with Moon Jae-in's southern policy.

And finally, prior to being elected to Congress, he served five terms in the Texas state legislature, a graduate from Harvard Law School, and I should add he is a proud graduate with honors from Stanford University, where we overlapped and have mutual friends. But he was way cooler than I was on campus.

So ladies and gentleman on both sides of the Pacific, it's my pleasure, my honor, to introduce one of the most important voices on Asia and foreign policy writ large in the United States Congress.

Congressman Castro, your keynote address we are anticipating. And the floor, they say, is yours.

Joaquin Castro (D-TX): Well, thank you. It's an honor to be with you all tonight. And thank you, Ambassador, for your very kind words.

And also, John, great to see you. I think last time we saw each other was a few years ago in Tokyo; good to be with you and everybody at CSIS. Thank you also for the invitation to be with you tonight.

As we all know, the Republic of Korea is one of America's oldest and closest allies. The U.S.-ROK alliance is critical, not only for prosperity and peace on the Korean Peninsula, but in the region and around the world.

This event comes at a pivotal time, a pivotal moment in our alliance, with the Biden administration about to assume office. The Center for Strategic and International Studies has assembled some of the best experts on both sides of the Pacific to discuss many of the opportunities and challenges on the horizon. And I'm looking forward to this conversation.

I want to begin tonight by discussing – or today, I should say – by discussing something I'm optimistic about, and that's the endurance of the U.S.-South Korea alliance. That might seem surprising to some, given the deep anxiety about this exact topic in recent years.

It's no secret that President Trump, at least in my estimation, didn't value our longstanding alliances as a president of the United States should have. And that includes the U.S.-ROK alliance in particular. This has included waging a trade war against our close allies, pushing to unilaterally withdraw military forces from the peninsula, and canceling military exercises.

As difficult as times have been, I always reminded myself that this wasn't the first time our alliance went through such turbulence. In the 1970s, successive

U.S. presidents called for drastic troop drawdowns in Korea. But Congress always stood up and prevented that from happening.

In the past few years, something similar occurred. Although my Republican colleagues have refused to stand up to President Trump on many critical issues, Democrats and Republicans have been united in protecting our alliance with South Korea. For the last few years, there was near-unanimous support for legislation that prevented President Trump from withdrawing from South Korea.

For these reasons, I view Congress as the linchpin of U.S. support for the U.S.-ROK alliance, which itself is a linchpin of regional security. And long term, that's a good thing for stability and continuity. Although U.S. presidents grab most of the foreign policy headlines, as you all know, Congress has outlasted every president to date and will continue to do so. The same, of course, is true of the Korean National Assembly. That is why I believe it's absolutely crucial that we strengthen the bond between our two countries' legislatures. This is why I've called for more frequent and extensive congressional trips to other nations, especially allies like South Korea. By holding regular dialogues in Washington and Seoul between legislators, we can build lasting personal bonds and deep appreciation for our respective countries, helping our alliance flourish and go to even greater heights.

These greater heights must include going beyond some of the traditional areas of focus. Our alliance was forged out of war, repelling North Korea's invasion in 1950. Many people sacrificed their lives for our two countries' freedoms, and we must continue to honor them. Our military alliance and the threat that North Korea poses will continue to be important, but too often our relationship is defined by our defense ties and North Korea when this relationship is also so much more.

When our alliance began, the ROK was not a democracy and its economy was devastated by war. Today, Korea is not only a thriving democracy but an economic powerhouse around the world. Korean companies and entertainment have gone global. Our alliance must also go global. Sometimes this can mean America following South Korea's lead.

Despite the recent spike in COVID-19 cases, South Korea has been a model of how democracies can respond to pandemics effectively. America has a lot to learn from Seoul on global health issues and there's room for cooperation. In 2020, the United States will spend over \$12 billion on global health programs. The effectiveness of these programs can be enhanced in close cooperation with partners like Korea.

Climate change is another example. In October, President Moon announced that South Korea will be carbon neutral by 2050. And earlier this month, Seoul announced a major initiative to achieve that goal. The new initiative will include funding to invest in cutting-edge renewable technologies. Like their American counterparts, South Korean technology firms are leaders around the world. We should tackle the biggest global problems together, such as building better batteries to store solar and wind power. This will enable our two nations to promote these renewable technologies around the world.

And our two countries can also team up to combat corruption, both at home and abroad. In 2018, President Moon announced a five-year comprehensive anticorruption plan and has set a goal of South Korea being in the top 20 of the Corruption Perception Index by 2022. We are making progress on combating corruption in the United States and around the world.

Sadly, because of loopholes in our legal system America has become a safe haven for all sorts of illicit financial activities, from money laundering to tax and sanctions evasion. But this month, Congress took an important step towards ending this by passing landmark legislation that will end fully anonymous shell companies. Now law enforcement will have the tools it needs to identify and prosecute criminal activities.

Of course, this is only a first step. As revelations like the Panama Papers have shown us, corruption is a global problem and an increasingly complex one. It, thus, requires a global response, and the United States and South Korea can be leaders around the world in the fight against corruption.

Even as we forge new areas of global engagement, the decades-old challenges that we face won't just go away. In many respects, they're increasing in prominence. That's certainly true with respect to China.

The United States has done more to facilitate China's rise on the world stage than any other country except China itself. Like South Korea, we haven't seen the Chinese government as an inevitable enemy. In fact, we have hoped that it would be a partner. I still hope that that can be the case. The United States will continue to make good-faith efforts to cooperate with the Chinese government wherever we can, including global health and threats like climate change. Still, the United States and our allies must stand up for our values and interests when it comes to China.

Take economics, for example. I have long said our goal should be to ensure China competes without cheating. As Chinese state-owned firms increasingly go abroad, I believe there will be more ways we can try to even the playing field. For instance, Congress just passed important legislation that will require Chinese companies to submit to the same auditing standards as other companies listed on the U.S. Stock Exchange. This is common sense and long overdue action.

I am deeply troubled by the Chinese government's use of its growing economic weight to coerce countries on political issues. Today we see this happening with Australia, but Japan – but Australia, Japan, Norway, the Philippines, Mongolia, Taiwan, and countless others have been targets in the past. South Korea is no stranger to this, as we all remember the economic sanctions Beijing imposed on Seoul for deploying THAAD in response to North Korean missile launches.

The Chinese government believes it can get away with these policies because, as a former foreign minister put it, China is a large country and others in the region are smaller. That mentality, where large countries push around smaller ones with impunity, has no business in our globalized world. The United States stands with its allies, and together we must use our collective strength to deter the Chinese government from using its economic power to bully other countries.

North Korea is another challenge our countries must stand united on. The Kim regime has usually greeted new American presidents with major provocations early in their term, and I expect that to be the case with President Biden. We must prepare for that unprovoked escalation to occur with the incoming Biden administration. This will require strengthening our alliance with South Korea, but also a creative engagement with North Korea and the rest of the world.

North Korea's nuclear capabilities not only threaten the United States and South Korea, but also countries like Japan. North Korea also has a long track record of secretly selling nuclear and missile technology around the world, as you know. And President-elect Biden faces a North Korean nuclear program that is far more developed than it was four years ago. Unsurprisingly, President Trump's photo ops and love letters to Kim Jong-un did not stop the advancement of North Korea's nuclear arsenal.

I'm not inherently against holding leadership summits to address difficult issues, of course. But the Trump administration's approach to North Korea cannot, by any measure, be considered serious diplomacy. Last minute meetings with minimal groundwork and unclear objectives always seemed more geared towards photo ops rather than achieving results. I say this because we have to remember that past and the mistakes in order to move forward in a more productive way.

As past efforts have showed us, negotiations over North Korea's nuclear program won't be easy. I believe our long-term goal must continue to be denuclearization. However, DPRK's nuclear and missile programs must be seen, at least for now, as an arms control challenge. We should be prepared to work towards a strategic step-by-step process to get our ultimate goal. This could begin with verifiable freeze in North Korea's fissile material and missile production, followed by a gradual denuclearization process. Although Iran and North Korea are at very different stages with their nuclear programs, the JCPOA model could offer some lessons for our dealings with North Korea.

Whatever path the incoming administration chooses, I am confident that President Biden will bring a serious experienced approach to this issue, as well as a team of first-class experts to help tackle it. And perhaps the biggest difference between President Trump and President Biden is their approach to allies. In light of the growing threat from North Korea, it's more important than ever for our military alliance to be ironclad. Unfortunately, President Trump views America's alliance with South Korea as a money-making enterprise. He believes American soldiers are in South Korea to act as mercenaries.

As a result, our two countries SMA expired at the end of last year and a new agreement hasn't been reached. President Biden recognizes that having a military presence in South Korea is essential to protect U.S. interests. Accordingly, although burden sharing is an important issue, and South Korea can and should do more, I expect the incoming administration will be able to work out the differences with our Korean counterparts. In dealing with challenges like China and North Korea, nothing is more important than a strong and stable U.S.-South Korean alliance. In sum, I am optimistic about our alliance's future.

I want to say thank you for the invitation to be with you, and I look forward to work – to the conversation and, of course, to working with you in the coming years.

Mark Lippert: All right, Congressman. Well done. As expected, you vaulted well over the bar we set for you, and we expect nothing less from a Stanford grad and one of our top members in Congress. So well done.

If I – we've got about 10 minutes left for questions, so if I may I probably – we'll probably have time for two or three questions, if it's OK.

Joaquin Castro (D-TX): Absolutely.

Mark Lippert: I just thought the first one I would bring together two of your big themes in the – in the speech you laid out. First, you gave us really a tour de force of the challenges posed in the region, from China to rebuilding the alliance to a whole host of other elements extant in Northeast Asia. At the same time you also mentioned the critical role Congress has played, is playing now, and will likely play in the future. Given your leadership role as vice chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, as well as on the Intelligence Committee, where do you see Congress playing, where do you see your role, what are some of the things that Congress can do to move the ball forward, for lack of a better term, in Northeast Asia?

Joaquin Castro (D-TX): Well, a few things. I think that the Biden administration – the incoming administration and Congress both have a lot of work on their hands to rebuild our alliances around the world. So there are a few things that we have to do very early on.

The first thing is that I believe Congress needs to be a partner with the Biden administration in doing a damage assessment around the world in terms of our alliances with longstanding allies, including South Korea. And that damage assessment also has to include the damage that has been done over the past four years to what I would call the United States' infrastructure for diplomacy. As you know, Ambassador, at the State Department morale right now is fairly low. Less people are taking the Foreign Service exam. It's getting harder to keep diplomats – to retain them, to keep them from walking out the door. And so for all of these reasons we need an immediate damage assessment. And also, Congress must be a partner with the administration in going around the world and letting friends like South Korea know – and hopefully, once folks have been vaccinated and it's safe to travel, meeting face to face to let our friends know that we're back, that we're back as a North Star on the things that we've worked on for generation(s) – on freedom, democracy, human rights, rooting out corruption, all of these things that are very important to both of our nations. So I look forward in the coming months to working with the Biden administration on those things.

Now, for the U.S. Congress, of course, there's also the issue, as you know, of Congress standing up for its own constitutional powers regardless of who the president is. And that means its constitutional powers over declarations of war and military engagement. So I think that what you'll see in the coming years is also a revamping of the AUMFs, which many folks in Congress feel are outdated

and whose scope has been a bit broad. But those are some of the challenges in front of us.

Mark Lippert: Got you. And just for our audience, AUMF is?

Joaquin Castro (D-TX): Authorization for use of military force.

Mark Lippert: Yes, there you go. It empowers our counterterrorism operations, largely, around the world. I'm afraid it's a(n) overstatement, basically, but it – and there's – that goes all the way back to, basically, post-9/11, so 20 years. And your argument, not to put words – time for a refresh and a relook.

Joaquin Castro (D-TX): Right.

Mark Lippert: Right, OK. So I worked in the Pentagon, so I'm used to dealing with acronyms and people always stop me on that. So – (laughter) – yeah.

Joaquin Castro (D-TX): No, I know.

Mark Lippert: Next, the other question I – probably two more questions.

One is just on North Korea. You spoke very passionately about North Korea, what needs to get done. Congress here, too, has been quite active. You've got human rights issues you've considered. You've got sanctions legislation. You've shaped policy. Talk a little bit more about your expectations just in terms of where the North might go – you predicted a bit of an early provocation in your speech – but also how the Congress might work with the administration, work with our allies on North Korea policy as well.

Joaquin Castro (D-TX): Yeah. You know, as you mentioned, I think part of what the Trump administration suffered from was really lack of a comprehensive or holistic approach to North Korea. In short, I don't know that the administration ever set a real end goal and pursued it strategically, and certainly didn't engage our allies, I think, in the way that they could have.

So I think what you're going to see with the new administration, the Biden administration, and the Congress is, you know, taking stock of where we are, figuring out how far along North Korea truly is with its nuclear arsenal, and making a determination about how we approach it from here, and also not just the nuclear arsenal but, as you mentioned, issues like human rights that also have to be front and center in America's consideration of how we deal with nations around the world, including North Korea.

So you're going to – we're going to take a fresh look at how we approach this relationship. And, you know, as we talk about how it involves other countries, you think about the effect that China has on the North Korea economy and how China can be helpful to the United States if it's willing and if it's participating in a productive way to help guide North Korea ultimately, you know, towards the end that we're after, which is denuclearization.

Mark Lippert: No, absolutely, and well put. And let me take that piece about allies and engagement that you just discussed, Congressman, and take it to another

direction. You mentioned it throughout your speech. You mentioned it in your answers to the questions that I posed.

But let me ask you to put your domestic hat on a bit. You stand for election. You were just reelected. Congratulations. But you straddle the line. You're someone with a big domestic portfolio, but also someone who engages in the world and thinks that's an important part of U.S. policy writ large.

How should our allies, friends and partners be thinking about the U.S. election and the current transition? I guess if you showed up overseas as a leader of a congressional delegation, this would be one of the first questions you would get from one of your counterparts in a parliament or legislature.

What should the takeaways be from this election, the last four years, and the incoming Biden team?

Joaquin Castro (D-TX): Yeah. No, that's a great question, Ambassador.

I think, most of all, what I hope the world takes away is that the American people stood up for the candidate that better reflects American values; as I mentioned, things like freedom and democracy and human rights, rooting out corruption, but also for the rule of law within our own country.

You know, I'm editorializing here, so this is my perspective, and take it for what it's worth, but we had in President Trump a president who often skirted the rule of law, who I think sometimes may have broken the law, who didn't value the alliances that had been built up over 70 years, some of them longer. And you've got a president now who's coming in in Joe Biden that appreciates all of those things, whose government is going to be full of people who are not novices at their job but who are seasoned professionals, who know what they're doing.

And hopefully that will be refreshing for the world to be able to count on the United States as a north star again on these issues, because I think what has happened in the past four years is that people have doubted whether they can trust the United States and whether the United States is really the north star that it's been for generations.

And they also started to move around the United States. And I think that it actually helped give lift even more to a nation like China, with its One Belt, One Road initiative, that's gone out to places like Africa and Latin America and started to make some strong partnerships in those places, and other areas as well, including Europe.

You know, so what the world can expect is a commander in chief who values professionalism, who values America standing up for its principles and working with our allies around the world.

Mark Lippert: All right, thanks, Congressman. Having worked closely with Vice President Biden when he was vice president, now President-elect Biden, I will absolutely agree with that last comment that you went out on.

And on that note, I think we're going to bang the gavel down. We're going to thank Congressman Castro for his outstanding keynote speech, for enduring my probing questions. And mea culpa for him being way more popular at Stanford than I was back in the day.

Joaquin Castro (D-TX): (Laughs.)

Mark Lippert: So I'm going to throw it back to the emcee and thank the congressman, the good congressman, for his time once again.

Joaquin Castro (D-TX): Thank you.

(END)

