

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT
Online Event

**“What Lies Ahead for the U.S.-ROK Alliance? A Conversation
with Reps. Ami Bera and Young Kim”**

DATE

Wednesday, September 8, 2021 at 2:00 p.m. EDT

FEATURING

Representative Ami Bera (D-CA)

*Member, House Foreign Affairs Committee;
Co-Chair, Congressional Study Group on Korea*

Representative Young Kim (R-CA)

*Member, House Foreign Affairs Committee;
Co-Chair, Congressional Study Group on Korea*

CSIS EXPERTS

Victor Cha

Senior Vice President and Korea Chair, CSIS

Transcript By

Superior Transcriptions LLC

www.superiortranscriptions.com

Victor Cha

Good afternoon everyone or good evening, depending on where you are in the world. This is Victor Cha, Senior Vice President and Korea Chair at CSIS, Vice Dean and professor at Georgetown University. And I want to welcome you all to a special CSIS-Korea Platform featuring Congressman Ami Bera and Congressman Young Kim. These two individuals really don't need much of an introduction, but for the sake of our recording going forward, I thought it would be useful to introduce both of them to our – to our very large and distinguished audience.

Congressman Ami Bera has represented the California 7th Congressional district in the U.S. House of Representatives since 2013. He is currently member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, where he serves as chairman of the Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, Central Asia, and Nonproliferation. He is also co-chair of the Congressional Study Group on Korea.

So, for those of you who are not familiar, the Congressional Study Group on Korea is the newest legislative exchange at FMC, the Former Members of Congress, who are the co-hosts for our broadcast today, involving current members of Congress from both the House and the Senate in an ongoing conversation with government and elected officials in the Republic of Korea. For more than 30 years, the Congressional Study Groups have brought bipartisan groups of legislators together to discuss issues ranging from trade policy to global security. It is one of four such legislative exchanges housed at FMC. The other three are focused on Japan, German, and Europe. Each study group has four co-chairs from bipartisan, bicameral basis.

And also joining us, of course, is Congressman Young Kim. Congressman Kim represents California's 39th District in the U.S. House of Representatives. She also serves as the co-chair of the Congressman Study Group on Korea, with Congressman Bera. Congressman Kim started her public service as director of community relations and Asian Affairs for former Congressman Ed Royce, where she was a key liaison to the 39th district and an advisor on issues pertaining to the Asian-American community and foreign policy. Prior to serving in Congress, Congresswoman Kim was the first-ever Korean American Republican woman to serve in the California State Assembly. As an assemblywoman, she fought to grow jobs, support small businesses, ensure public safety, promote educational opportunities, support veterans, and protect victims of domestic violence.

So two highly qualified, highly distinguished members of Congress joining us today for this CSIS FMC broadcast. And let me just say first that we're really grateful that both of you could take the time – I know how busy you both are – both of you could take the time to join us today. And of course, it's really good to see everybody without masks on, since we're doing this – doing this virtually, and we can see everybody's smile. So, again,

Congressman Bera, thank you for joining us. Congresswoman Kim, thank you for joining us today.

So let's get right into it. You know, when we originally talked about doing this you all had just completed a very successful delegation going to Korea. I think that was some time in the summer. But because of scheduling and everything else, we couldn't bring us all together until this point. But I think perhaps maybe just to start us off you could both give us your impressions of that trip you took. I know a lot has taken place since then, but maybe give us some overall impressions of the trip that you took and maybe the things that most impressed you about the trip or left the longest-lasting impression, before we get into some of the other areas that we planned on talking about with regard to the alliance, North Korea, all these other things.

So I don't know how we – who would like to go first? (Laughs.)

Representative Ami Bera (D-CA) Young, do you want me to go ahead and start and then I'll kick it over to you?

Representative Young Kim (R-CA) Sure. Yes.

Rep. Bera Yeah, one first impression is that, you know, I get a lot of coverage in Korea because we do a lot of Korea, but Young Kim is a rock star – (laughter) – so I had to accept my humble pie and appreciate – you know, I get that attention when I'm in India as an Indian-American member of Congress, and you can tell the pride that the Korean people have in their Korean American members of Congress. So that was quite evident from the get-go.

I'd say just quick takeaway impressions were – you know, there were times where the U.S.-Korea relationship were rocky under the prior administration, you know, going from fire and fury to the summits and so forth. I would say my impression was U.S.-Korea relationships are really at a high point right now. I think you've had, successfully, bilaterals with Secretary Blinken, Secretary Austin fairly early in the Biden administration. You had a successful Biden-Moon summit which actually had some tangible takeaways. And you know, I think this is borne out in some of the polling data that people talked about in Korea where the Korean public's impression of the United States is really at an all-time high right now. So I think that was a quick takeaway.

I also think – you know, there are real tangibles. You know, we had a chance to visit Samsung Biologics and the semiconductor, and there are real areas where the United States and Korea are working together in the business community. Samsung – you know, the semiconductor business, you know, really helping us deal with some of the challenges and

shortages that we have, and I think they're ready to go to make some significant investments in the United States. And on the COVID-19 side, you know, Moderna partnering with Samsung Biologics to tap into Korean innovation and the Korean pharmaceutical sector to help both produce vaccines not just for the domestic Korean population but also to partner together to help stamp out the pandemic in Southeast Asia and Asia in general.

So real, tangible partnership areas and we can get into some of the areas that, you know, probably require some additional finesse, but let me turn it over to my co-chair, Congresswoman Kim.

Rep. Kim

Thank you. Thank you, Congressman Bera. First of all, I want to thank you for co-leading that bipartisan trip to Korea and I was very, very impressed with the involvement of other congressional members that were traveling with us. But I also want to take a very brief moment to thank all the staff at Congressional Study Group on Korea for their excellent preparation.

And I also want to thank you, Dr. Cha, and everyone at CSIS for the support that you've given us. Prior to our trip, you had given us, all the members, pre-briefing so we can see what to expect.

But before I talk about my impression, again, the one key takeaway is that as someone who was born and raised in South Korea, until I finished my elementary school – and, you know, during all those years I worked in the United States as a longtime congressional staff, I had the opportunity to go back to Korea on numerous occasions but this was very first time traveling back as an elected member of Congress with my colleagues and Congressman Bera, and the warmth and the warm welcome that my motherland had provided to us was something that I will always remember, and of course the good food. (Laughs.) One thing I missed was, oh my god, being able to go to, you know, Yeongdong and other places. I mean, we did take our CODEL members there, but because of COVID, we hardly saw anybody, not like the previous visits that we've had. So we didn't have the opportunity to eat those ddeok gook, odeng, and all those street foods that, you know, people go to Korea for, so I really missed that. But I know that Korea is still vibrant, and there's no doubt in our minds that Korea is one of the most vibrant economy and has really grown to be what it is today because of the South Korea and the Koreans', you know, resiliency of being able to weather through some of the tough times in their lives. But, again, having said that, really, I thought our trip to Korea in July was very productive and valuable, and during our trip we were able to meet with many of our counterparts in South Korea.

We were very blown away with the high-level members of the South Korean government, the military officials, industry leaders. As Congressman Ami Bera just mentioned, being able to visit with and tour some of the very high-tech businesses like Samsung, Hyundai.

repatriated back to North Korea. So I raised that issue and he personally promised that he will follow up. He asked me to go back to United States and continue to follow up on this issue.

So I really hope that while we have this short, small window of opportunity that we will do everything we can, use all of our diplomatic channels, to ensure the safe passage of the North Korean refugees to South Korea because that's where they want to go. This is the country they know. This is where their brothers and sisters – this is the culture, environment, language they're comfortable with.

So I think more than coming to United States they will want to settle in South Korea, and I really hope that that happens with the help of our South Korean government.

Rep. Bera

Victor, I'd probably briefly just add, you know, had a chance to meet with President Moon on prior trips to Korea. He was awfully generous with his time. You know, he gave us a fair amount of time. He allowed all the members to interact. And, you know, clearly, with the elections coming up in Korea, you know, he has some things that he'd like to see move faster before the end of his term.

It was both clear in our meetings with President Moon but also with those cabinet members: a resumption of dialogue with North Korea is seen as a legacy item and that's one where, you know, we may push back a little bit to say, let's – we're open to the dialogue but let's make sure we don't move too fast and, you know, if we do go in that direction that it's done on – you know, in a manner that we're also getting some victories as well, that it's not just given away. That's one that, you know, we've communicated to the Biden administration, that we ought to just pay close attention to in these last few months before the – you know, Korea goes into election mode.

Rep. Kim

Right.

Dr. Cha

So I could – yeah, there's a lot of stuff on the table, and I'd like to get back to North Korea. But I'd like to start – pick up from where both of you left off with regard to the state of the alliance, because I think we all agree that it's – oh, my gosh, it's in a much better place today than it was, you know, I mean, when we were talking about this, you know, even a year ago. I mean, it was just in such a horrible state; and so, you know, the May '21 summit, your visit. So I think we all agree the state of the relationship is good.

Ami, particularly in your remarks, you made reference to some of the things that we need to continue to work on and follow in terms of the alliance relationship. And, you know, maybe I could ask you to sort of elaborate on that a little bit. That'd be terrific.

Rep. Bera

Yeah. So I think, again, it was a very successful presidential summit. You know, at the time we were there in early July, you know, President Moon was scheduled to visit Japan for the Olympics. Obviously that trip didn't pan out. And now we're seeing, you know, Japan will have its own leadership elections and what happens there.

We did have a lot of conversation about the trilateral relationship, the importance, that – you know, perhaps separating historic issues that have to be dealt with between Korea and Japan from the geopolitical-strategic-economic issues that I think are in all of our interests. I think we had good conversations there, and I think that plays, along with the two-by-two dialogues that have taken place earlier, as well as conversations between the Biden and Moon administration. But there's still work to be done on, you know, smoothing the relationship with Japan.

I do have some worries that, you know, again, for legacy purposes, that the Moon administration may move too quickly. And we've seen gestures to resume talks with North Korea, even as North Korea goes to some – back to some saber rattling and so forth that is not conducive to saying let's resume dialogue.

So, you know, I think there's still pieces to work on. I do have some concerns about the Moon administration perhaps moving too fast and, you know, a resumption of dialogue. And, you know, again, you know, I think the Korea-Japan relationship is in a better place than it was a few years ago, but there's still work to be done here as well between our two friends.

Dr. Cha

Yeah.

Rep. Kim

You know, if I may, let me just talk – I know Ami talked about a lot of issues and even went to Japan-Korea relations. And I want to address that, but let me first address the U.S.-Korea alliance since, Dr. Cha, you mentioned it.

As both Ami and I agree, I believe that – and you stated that too – our U.S.-South Korea alliance is probably strong and more friendly than ever. But I agree with Ami that there are definitely areas we can move or we can improve on on both sides.

First of all, in our meeting with the president and with our counterparts and government officials, a lot of issues were dealt with. But even President Moon talked about the trading – trade issues. You know, South Korea remains one of our largest trading partners. In 10 years after implementation of Korea FTA, you know, we all refer to it as the gold standard for trade agreements globally. And it has greatly strengthened

our bilateral economic relationship over the past decade. But there is still much to improve.

So this is where President Moon also mentioned, and I also, along with Ami and many other Congressmembers. I joined Congressman Connolly in introducing that Partner with Korea Act that would create an allotment of, like, 15,000 E-4, highly skilled work visas for Korean nationals with specialized education and expertise.

Remember, I think we all agree that we saw similar visa allotments when we passed trade agreement with other countries like Australia, Singapore, even Canada. They got the highly skilled work visas with the passage of Free Trade Agreement, but not with the case of Korea FTA, which is why I fully support this Partner with Korea Act and then give additional visa categories. This is, you know, something that I think it's important for us to expand our relationship and benefit both of our countries, especially because South Korea is one of our most important allies and is home to highly skilled and diverse workforce, right? So we must treat them like the strong partner that they are, and leverage that KORUS FTA.

I also believe that we have the security side of our alliance – while it's strong, I think on North Korea I believe our alliance must continue to press for the complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization of Korea. And also, I'm very big on privatizing human rights and humanitarian crisis in our bilateral approach to North Korea. So this is one of the – the reasons why on our side, on the U.S. side – I've been pushing Biden administration all year long – I mean, from my very first House Foreign Affairs Committee meetings when Secretary Blinken came before us, I've been pressing this administration and Secretary Blinken to appoint a special envoy on North Korean human rights issues, because this was required by the law that we passed in the North Korean Human Right Act in 2004, and that's been reauthorized three times already, as far as I remember.

So finally, I think we are – you know, and I stand ready to work with South Korea on issues important to the alliance on the domestic front. There are some areas where I disagree with certain policies that have been advanced in the National Assembly in South Korea, including the Media Arbitration Act or anti-leaflet law, you know, as well as the religious freedoms in that country. But I think many of us, my colleagues in Congress and the United Nations, have shared their concerns as well.

Dr. Cha

That's great. That's a great rundown of some of the key issues. I really appreciate that. And they're all – they're all very important ones. And again, I want to dig a little bit more down on North Korea in a minute. But before we move onto North Korea and off the alliance, I feel like I should ask you, since everything these days is about – not about Korea, but about another country in Central Asia –

Rep. Kim

Yeah.

Dr. Cha

I know that with what has happened in Afghanistan and the U.S. pull out, I've gotten questions from reporters and others in Korea about what this means for U.S. security commitments to other countries, including treaty allies like South Korea. When they look at all the money and time and political capital that was invested in Afghanistan, and to see it end this way. Perhaps I could get both of your views on this – on this question. I mean, I know a lot of our audience that are watching this from Korea would have the same question about, you know, how do you think that this reflects on – or, does it reflect on the credibility of U.S. security commitments to other allies, treaty allies like South Korea?

So, maybe, Congressman Bera, if I could ask you to go first.

Rep. Bera

Sure. You know, to an audience in Korea, I would tell them not to read in too deeply into the decision by President Biden to withdraw out of Afghanistan. You know, while it was two decades trying to help Afghanistan, you know, develop its democracy and its own resources, I think it was also a decision by the Biden administration to let Afghanistan, you know, try to fly on its own. You know, Korea's a totally different country. It's one of the most developed democracies in the world. It's certainly a developed economy. We have a long geopolitical strategic relationship. And our security commitments are extremely important to members of Congress in a bilateral way. And, again, I think we've seen that from Democratic presidents as well as Republican presidents.

You know, the commitment to the region is probably more important than ever because of that other, you know, Asian nation that's a neighbor to others. You know, China, you know, certainly as we look at the various values and so forth, the geopolitical importance of East Asia is, you know, not lost on anyone. So I would tell audiences in Korea, as well as domestic audiences here, that, you know, Afghanistan was, you know, certainly a different type of engagement than the long-term commitments that we've shown over decades to Korea and the region.

Rep. Kim

Sure. If I could – yeah. I'll add very quickly. So, you know, with what's happening with Afghanistan and the way that we've pulled our U.S. troops out of Afghanistan, and the world is watching us and our leadership, and they are concerned. And so it is a valid question whether or not Korea should be concerned. But let me first say this, this – the question is not whether or not we should have pulled our U.S. troops out of Afghanistan. I think the question and concern is how we pulled out our troops, out of Afghanistan, leaving hundreds of Americans and even the Afghan partners behind. We are still trying to get them out, even after August 31 deadline has come and gone. So my office has been working around the clock since, you know, Taliban took over.

So we're still talking about this. We're still working with the troops on the ground. We're still working with many organizations – including in the civilians and former generals working on this. So with that, I think that the way that we pulled out – and many people are expressing concern. My district, which is very diverse – so I talk to a lot of Vietnamese Americans in my district in Southern California. And they are telling us: We are reliving the fall of Saigon about 50 years ago. And they are just concerned about our leadership in the world. And I'm talking to the Taiwanese American community, and they're asking questions like: Is Taiwan next? And I'm talking to a very large Korean American population here. And they're concerned that the United States – when we made a promise to our allies, we need to keep that promise.

But I'm hearing from my conversations – and, again, this is coming from all communities especially the immigrant community, especially those who fled communism, those who came here after fall of Saigon and so forth – they're really concerned: Can we trust the United States leadership in the world? I think what happened just now in the last few weeks, in the last month or so, what we've seen is the – our U.S. leadership, our role – America's standing in the world has been kind of going – eroding, I must say, to be honest with you. But despite all these challenges, I have to say America is strong. We're going to come out of this. We still have the leadership in the world.

We will – we will show that United States can lead. And I would like to also echo my colleague, you know, Congressman Ami Bera's comments that my friends in Korea, my Korean American community, and those who are watching, the United States commitment and our presence in South Korea, we are there as a deterrence to any potential conflict in the Korean Peninsula. We will be there. And I really want to assure you, as long as Ami Bera and I are in Congress serving as co-chairs of the Congressional Study Group, as members and co-chair of the U.S.-Korea inter-parliamentary exchange group, we will be there to lend our voice and be your advocate. And please trust us. United States can lead. And we will lead once again and show that we can come out of these difficult challenges.

Dr. Cha

Thank you very much for that – for those comments, both of you. Now maybe we should just – time is moving very quickly here. But maybe we should talk a little bit more about the North Korea situation. You know, very clearly the administration has, you know, made some overtures to North Korea. They haven't been responded to. As both of you have said, there was a clear message from the Moon government that they want to try to make progress, want to try to do really anything they can to try to make some progress in talks. But the North Koreans don't seem to be responding.

So I guess I have two questions. The first is: Why is it that you think that the North Koreans are not responding to overtures from the United States or from South Korea? Or, I don't know, maybe even from China, for that matter? Why is it the case? And also, what would you advise the administration to do at this point? Because they seem to be saying: Look, we're knocking on the door. We're happy to meet anytime, anyplace. And the North Koreans don't seem to be answering the phone – to mix my metaphors.

So perhaps, Congressman Bera, maybe you'd like to start.

Rep. Bera

Yeah. You know, it's hard to get a good read on what's happening inside North Korea, you know, given the COVID situation, given malnutrition, the harsh economic challenges that they face. You know, even speculation on, you know, what's happening within the leadership – with Kim Jong-un, with his sister. You know, what's the stability of himself? Et cetera. So those could all be factors at play here. I think the factors and the reason they're not returning to dialogue, even with the real open overtures by the Moon administration, is internal domestic challenges. And again, that could be COVID, that could be economic, and again, I don't want to speculate on stability of the regime or not. I think he'd be reluctant to reengage with a weak hand at this juncture.

I also think – you know, I can't speak for the Biden administration, but I think it's a challenging time to reengage in dialogue given the proximity of the Korean elections coming up. You can start to lay some of the table and do some of that, but I think, you know, as politics in the United States play out, I'm pretty sure Korean politics and Korean elections are a pretty competitive sport as well. So I think that's coming up very, very quickly, and I think it's a – it would be a dangerous time to start a dialogue.

Rep. Kim

Yeah. You know, for me personally, I mean, I've always been a proponent of having conversation, even when you hate somebody so bad. If you can come together and have a conversation, you can, you know, like, elevate a lot of the tensions and, you know, resolve some, you know, situation through the dialogue. But when it comes to North Korea, it's really hard to say when North Korea will come back to the table, as they have demonstrated their ability to surprise us before. And it's really hard to predict what North Korea will do.

You know, a couple things that we can do or I guess just come to mind is that, one, with respect to sanctions: I don't believe in relaxing sanctions just for Kim Jong-un to come back to the table. We tried that approach before and it's led to a rogue – a nuclear regime that has used its power to oppress its people for decades. So in order to move towards partial sanctions relief, I would like to see serious signs from North Korea that it's willing to move forward with reforms and denuclearization and human rights, as I mentioned – I mean, something that I consistently talk about –

that human rights should remain a core element of our combined approach to North Korea. If we cannot rely on Kim regime to respect basic human rights for its own people, it's hard to see how they could be trusted to maintain any comprehensive and binding agreement. So U.S. and South Korea should work together to ensure that any humanitarian aid that we send or consider sending into North Korea is used to support their North Korean people, not to prop up their malign regime. And we shouldn't waver in maintaining that sanctions pressure on Kim regime to bring the region back into compliance in the long run.

Again, I think, for all these reasons that I mentioned, I think it's really important that U.S.-Korea inter-parliamentary exchange that I talked about earlier, I think it can serve as a great platform and can be used as a great influence on that process, especially for debating and discussing options to bring North Korea back into negotiation. And I think the members of that inter-parliamentary exchange group can represent a broad political spectrum, as we've already seen, because this is a bipartisan effort, and I'm confident that if we can forge consensus here, then it will have a positive impact on our overall bilateral approach to North Korea.

Dr. Cha

Could I ask, to follow on from what – one point that Congressman Kim raised about humanitarian assistance to North Korea, if I could throw it back to Ami. I mean, if there's one thing that every world leader wakes up in the morning and cares about these days it's the COVID situation and, you know, clearly, you know, North Korea's border has been closed. Congresswoman Kim mentioned this. It's been what, now? Nineteen months it's been closed. Do you – I mean, what do you think about – is that at least tactically one lever that the U.S. can pull sort of on the humanitarian side and whether – I know that the North Koreans have not been open to Chinese vaccines – (laughs) – apparently, but what do you think about that, Congressman Bera?

Rep. Bera

Certainly. I think, you know, for lack of a better way of describing it, vaccine diplomacy, providing vaccines to the North, could be a door opener to dialogue. And, you know, certainly I know the COVAX facility has, you know, wanted to engage there as well, the challenge being that they also want to make sure the vaccines are getting distributed to the – to the masses and, you know, North Korea's reluctance to allow folks and observers to come into North Korea has been a bit of a sticking point.

That said, you know, again, just putting my doctor hat on, until we vaccinate the world, we don't defeat COVID. So that includes North Koreans' population as well and from a humanitarian perspective, certainly, providing vaccine and U.S. vaccines, you know, I think, could be really important.

Dr. Cha

Great. Terrific. So because there are a number of questions coming in, and they're coming in from all over – they're coming in from Europe and Korea and all over the place – and it's actually in line with our next topic, which is the whole question of China.

There are some who perceive that the Moon government has taken a, you know, for lack of a better term, more – much more of a pro-China stance than we've seen in the past at a particular time when the United States really has been focusing on – in a whole-of-government perspective, focusing on the strategic competition with China.

Perhaps we could – I could get your views on what were your impressions when you talked with folks in the Moon administration about policy towards China, and also what – I mean, what choice do you think that Korea – these are hard choices, but what would you advise them to do?

I mean, whether we're talking about 5G or free and open Indo-Pacific or, you know, investigation on the origins of COVID, national security on Hong Kong, these are things that, you know, many countries have weighed in on. But it's much more difficult for Korea. So I'd love to get your – and our audience would love to get your views on that one in particular.

Maybe, Congresswoman Kim, would you like to start or –

Rep. Kim

Sure. Specific to your question regarding China, I think we need to recognize that South Korea faces very difficult consideration given its geographical proximity and economic reliance on the mainland, and we understand that South Korea rely heavily on China for its economic and trade relations, as is the United States with them, too. But, you know, for us, House Republicans, we hope that policymakers in South Korea will realize that their long-term interests are best served by working with the United States and hold China accountable for its destabilizing behavior, their unfair trade practices, and their sponsorship of genocide.

As you know, we're talking specifically about the Uighur population. I even have – I'm a co-sponsor of the Uighur Policy Act and others and calling China's treatment of Uighur population a genocide. You know, so these are some of the things that we need to bring to light and really keep China accountable.

As a close alliance forged in blood and years of goodwill, our two countries – United States, South Korea – we share a strong bond and we share values that speak to the strength of our relationship. So we should recognize that and stand strong against those that seek to undermine those values.

That's my thoughts on China. But, again, you know, Ami has probably additional thoughts.

Rep. Bera

Yeah. I think just playing off of Congresswoman Kim, a message that, you know, we, certainly, delivered to the Koreans, which I think is how the Koreans are looking at it, and it's not a question of the United States or China. You know, given the geographic proximity, Korea is going to have a relationship with both countries, a trading relationship, and, you know, obviously, has a historic relationship, you know, with Korea.

That said, I think we emphasized the point that this is also, you know, a battle of ideas with regards to values, and, you know, the two countries – the United States and Korea – value free markets, value open competition, have values of democracy.

And, you know, Congressman Kim touched on human rights, intellectual property, freedom of navigation, freedom of movement, goods and services, and maritime security. Those are all values that are very important to, you know, not just the United States but also to Korea, but also to many of the countries in the region.

You know, I don't think Korea wants to formally enter, you know, a Quad+1 type of relationship. But I think Korea, as, again, a developed, mature democracy, you know, one of the leading markets and economies in the world, can play a role, you know, as this Quad coalition kind of matures, you know, particularly around COVID vaccinations development.

So, you know, I am very conscious of the fine line that Korea has to navigate. But I also – you know, if you look at the Korean public and look at polling, China polls worse than Japan right now. And I think there's a real angst among the Korean population towards China that, you know, certainly goes back to the heavy-handed approach they had when the THAAD batteries that we deployed were there for South Korea's self-defense purposes. It'll remain to be seen what happens, you know, as South Korea tries to move to develop its own defensive capabilities for its own protection. You know, I just saw the reports of, you know, their indigenous submarine, you know, testing its missile capabilities.

Those are, again, for – you know, I don't think any of us anticipate South Korea has any offensive ambitions. Those are for defensive capabilities, to defend their homeland. And I think those are perfectly acceptable. I can certainly see a Chinese overreaction to say, well, you can't do that. Again, I think that's totally inappropriate on China's end, and certainly support South Korea's ability to develop its own defensive capabilities.

Dr. Cha

Yeah, I think – I mean, that's an important – I mean, there is – there does appear to be a gap between the policies of the government and where the public is on China. And it's a larger gap, I think, than we've seen in quite some time, I think. And so I don't know if that's something that's eventually going to be worked out in the upcoming election. Maybe

there'll be a national debate on this issue as a part of the upcoming election. But it seems to me Korea has not had that national debate about China yet. I mean, they've clearly had it on Japan many times, so – (laughs)

Rep. Kim They may be avoiding that, right? (Laughs.)

Dr. Cha That could be true too.

Rep. Kim But, you know, with respect, to, again, just sum up what Congressman Bera and I have been saying about our relationship with China, I think, in order to work closely with China or hold China accountable, I believe that Congress and President Biden should make every effort to strengthen the trilateral U.S.-South Korea-Japan alliance, as well as our bilateral South Korea and Japan relationship, because I think that is very important.

And I know Congressman Bera earlier talked about the South Korea and Japan relationship, which I totally agree with him. We have a complicated history that continues to this day – historical, territorial, you know, wartime recognition and responsibility. These remain as important, as relevant as ever, right? But as democratic nations that all share the same core values and seek to protect the international rules-based order, I think we must come together as one to face those dangers that threaten to undermine our collective security.

And on that note, we've now – you know, South Korea is not a member of the Quad, but it's not just to counter security national threats from China. We've seen, through the COVID era, or as we are dealing with COVID, we have come together to address this issue. And how do we combat and be better prepared for another pandemic like this one that we've just experienced? So for that reason I strongly ask my counterparts in South Korea to consider maybe joining the Quad or make it a five-nation, you know, platform, something.

Dr. Cha Great. Terrific. All great points. I don't think there's any disagreement. Certainly on trilateral, I think all of us agree it's important.

We only have time for one last round. And I wanted to just give you both an opportunity to talk about your home constituencies and, you know, how engaged you find them on these issues. I mean, I know, for example, you know, you're both from California; a large Korean American community out there. How engaged do you find them on these issues? And what are the things that interest them? So maybe – who'd like to go first?

Rep. Bera I'll start and I'll let Congresswoman Kim close. She has the larger diaspora than I do.

I know, you know, when we came back from our trip, I was doing a public event and I had my Korean American diaspora come up holding their Korean American newspaper, which had a picture of us meeting with the president. You know, I think there's a level of pride that they have that their – and I'm sure Congresswoman Kim feels the same way – that their member of Congress is out there representing but also showing the importance of that relationship. So I think it matters.

I think, you know, when we talk about the partnership between the two countries – which really is a partnership now, because Korean companies are going to help us address our semiconductor shortage in not a small way. I think you'll see really big Korean business investment in the United States to create jobs here and help shore up some of our national security issues; and then vice versa, you know, that U.S. companies are partnering with Korean companies. And I think from that end, when I talk to our business community, they're very interested in, you know, bringing additional Korean businesses to California but also to the United States.

So while it may not be the driving issue with my – you know, I think the driving issue is getting kids back in school, getting businesses open, and getting past the pandemic. It's not a – certainly, for a Californian, you know, the relationship between the two countries is pretty vibrant.

Rep. Kim

Yeah.

Dr. Cha

Congressman Kim?

Rep. Kim

For me, because I'm in Southern California and I do have one of the large Korean American as constituents in my district, which make up – like, Asian Americans make up about one-third of my congressional district, so they pay a lot of attention. This is probably the second-largest Asian population in my district, Korean Americans, after Chinese Americans, so they pay a lot of attention with what's going on, especially more so than what's going on here in domestic, where they reside. This is their home, but more so in Korea they pay attention to the local politics, the domestic politics, what the National Assembly is working on, the bills that they're passing.

But again, you know, that is not to discount the fact that they pay attention to what's going on in their new home called America. We are definitely concerned about all of us getting back to – you know, I mean, opening schools safely, you know, making sure that our small businesses are thriving, making sure that as federal government and state government officials that we work on policies to help them get to where they need to be in order to remain open with their, you know, businesses so they can continue to live their American dream.

But part of that includes a large Korean American population in my area paying attention to some of the legislation that affect them and affect Korea, their motherland. And so one thing that they constantly talk to me about is the peace on the Korean Peninsula legislation that's been introduced, and it's moving through its congressional process. I don't think it has gotten out of the committee yet. It's just collecting co-sponsors. You know, I'm very passionate about working towards making a unified Korea possible one day. And as a Korean American myself, this is a very, very personal issue to me.

And I'm not sure – I'm sure the audience listening know what it is, but quickly, this Peace on (the) Korean Peninsula Act calls on United States to actively pursue peace negotiations with North Korea to formally end hostilities between North and South Korea and the United States. But as you know, this – you cannot just call for the end of the Korean War or end the hostility on the Korean Peninsula just passing legislation, right, because on that end – so I've been having a lot of conversation and I have a lot of talks with various groups that address this issue, like the Pyongtong members, which is the unification advisory members that is appointed by South Korean president. So the current members tend to listen and read the information that's coming out of the current administration, whoever is occupying the Blue House. So this one particular legislation seem to have piqued a lot of their interest.

But for me personally, I believe the bill does nothing to recognize the current reality that we face on the Korean Peninsula because it does not reflect the fact that the Kim regime has restarted its nuclear weapons production facilities. It does not reflect that the people of North Korea continue to face unspeakable violence, abuse, or sexual exploitation at the hands of the state and party officials. It does not reflect that North Korea continues to do everything within its power to undermine the international rules-based order in its illicit dealings with China and partnership, you know, with rogue regimes.

So I think this was also that one area that I raised issue when I visited. When we took the CODEL to Korea in July and when we visited the DMZ and had our conversation with our U.S. troops and also Commanding General LaCamera, we raised this issue. And I asked for their view on how it would affect the state of play between North and South. And the officers, they replied that the bill would do nothing to bring North Korea back to the table in a constructive way, and certainly not lead to long-term progress with the Kim regime. Some even went as far as to say that it would actively harm our leverage and standing against North Korea, and that the legislation's good intention was seriously misguided.

So I had the opportunity to talk about this one particular legislation. And I'm glad that I'm able to express how I feel about this at this forum too. But, again, to your question, Dr. Cha, about how engaged your Korean

American constituency is, this conversation alone, this one issue alone would exhibit how involved they are in the policies, the legislation, domestic and foreign, about what's happening that would affect Korea and Korean American community.

Dr. Cha

Great. Thank you so much.

Congressman Bera, do you have a quick comment on this piece on Korean Peninsula Act, or?

Rep. Bera

No. You know, I've always been open to trying to engage in dialogue and move forward. Again, I just – as stated previously – I think it becomes difficult as you get closer to the elections. And we really have to have a long-term strategy to finding peace and stability on the peninsula.

Dr. Cha

Great. Well, that is about all the time that we have. It's been an absolute pleasure to have both of you join us today. This was a wonderful discussion. We covered, you know, the full gamut of issues in great detail, expert detail as well. So, Congresswoman Kim, thank you so much for joining us. My only regret is that we can't host you in the building at CSIS, but that will come at some point soon. Congressman Bera, it's always a pleasure to work with you, and it's always good to see you again. Thank you again for joining us at CSIS. And so on behalf of CSIS and former members of Congress, we want to thank our audience for joining. And we hope to see you again soon on our next Korea platform broadcast. So thank you both very much, again.

Rep. Kim

Thank you for having us.

Rep. Bera

Thank you.

END