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Linchpin under strain

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I've been traveling a lot this autumn to cities across the United States. There is no shortage of invitations to speak at universities and to community and business groups about Korea. I welcome the

increased interest I see everywhere in all things Korean. Whether stimulated by anxiety about North Korea or passion for K-pop, it creates openings to engage on issues related to Korea's remarkable history and culture, the U.S.-South Korea alliance, and the American role in Asia.

In Korea, I'm always asked about American opinions on the alliance, North Korea, the Moon government, and so on. In the United States, conversely, Americans are curious about how Koreans view President Trump, his North Korea policy, the U.S.-China competition, and much more.

My responses are always inadequate and uncertain, for both me and my questioners are filled with caveats and cautions.

It remains true that Koreans in general pay a lot more attention to what's happening in the United States than the other way around. In recent weeks, the huge attention the press paid to burden-sharing, the General Security of Military Information Agreement (Gsomia) with Japan, and the overall state of the alliance is just the latest example.

Americans tend not to be as steeped in the details of these issues. But in the United States too, there is increasing unease, in part stemming from the recognition of how challenging the road ahead with North Korea remains, but also, increasingly, related to tensions in the U.S.-South Korea alliance.

In early September, I gave a talk in Cleveland titled, "The U.S.-South Korea Alliance: Linchpin Under Strain?" I described South Korea's extraordinary economic and democratic rise, and its partnership with the United States over the years, a story American audiences find inspiring.

I talked about the importance of the alliance, about why it is called a linchpin. Then I described the strains in the relationship, much discussed in Korea, but less familiar to most Americans. These include the shifting geopolitical landscape of heightened U.S.-China competition, an assertive China and an American president with a transactional, suspicious view of alliances. Because and on top of all that has been the dramatic worsening of Seoul-Tokyo relations, spilling over into the Gsomia issue, and Washington's enormously increased demands in burden-sharing negotiations fueling anger as well as suspicions in Seoul about U.S. commitment.

I gave some version of this talk again several times over the autumn in Bangor, Maine, Houston, Boston and most recently on Nov. 21 in Milwaukee. By then I had removed the question mark from the title; there could be no doubt of the stress in the relationship, confirmed that very day by a New York Times editorial titled, "Trump's Lose-Lose Proposition in Korea: His exorbitant demands on the South alienate yet another ally in a dangerous region."

Fortunately, on the following day, Seoul announced it was postponing its planned termination of Gsomia, the South Korea-Japan intelligence-sharing agreement. But on the same day the Washington Post ran an op-ed under Bush administration Asia experts Richard Armitage and Victor Cha's byline entitled, "The 66-year alliance between the U.S. and South Korea is in deep trouble," highlighting a "collision of events" that might prompt Trump to "do the unthinkable" and withdraw at least some U.S. troops from Korea. So it was definitely past time to remove the question mark from my speech title.

I agree there is plenty of reason to be concerned. But I have heard firsthand the broad bipartisan support for the U.S.-South Korea alliance that exists in the United States Congress, and, to the extent that my travels outside Washington provide anecdotal evidence, I can confirm that I hear it across the United States.

When government leaders affirm, as our defense ministers did on Nov. 15, that the South-U.S. alliance is "the linchpin of peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and the Northeast Asian region," it may sound like a boiler-plate cliché in Washington, but when practical, pragmatic citizens in the American Midwest hear this term, they think about what an actual linchpin is, and what it does: it is a fastener that prevents a wheel from sliding off the axle, or that secures implements on the three-point hitch of a tractor. It's part of something bigger, more complicated and essential. This image resonates with Americans

who know that the prospects for a prosperous, sustainable and safe future for themselves and their children hinge on smart and successful American policy in Asia.

What also resonates are the deep ties Koreans and Americans have built in local communities over the past 70 years. I can tell many stories about this from my travels, but I will end with just one.

I was in Milwaukee to give the John K.C. Oh Memorial Lecture on Asian Affairs at Marquette University. John Kie-chiang Oh arrived at Marquette as an undergraduate in 1954, having served in the South Korean army during the war and, encouraged by an American journalist to pursue his studies, came to the American Midwest. John Oh went on to become dean of Marquette's Graduate School, professor of politics and dean of the graduate school at Catholic University, and author of many books including, "Korean Politics: The Quest for Democratization and Economic Development." In Milwaukee I met his widow, Bonnie Oh, also a distinguished professor and author, and their adult children, and learned of now three generations of this Korean-American family's contributions to scholarship, law, medicine, the arts, and more. The extraordinary growth and success of the Korean-American community in the last half-century, epitomized by the Oh family, has created another kind of linchpin, deepening our bonds in a profoundly human way.

Thanks to the Marquette University students in Milwaukee, and to the Oh family, I came back to Washington in time to celebrate Thanksgiving Day feeling hopeful. We in America are living through a political period where the stakes are dizzyingly and disturbingly high — in the United States for the legitimacy and strength of our democratic institutions and values; globally for the viability and health of the U.S.-led network of like-minded alliances and partnerships.

Milwaukee will host the Democratic Party convention next summer — Hillary Clinton lost Wisconsin in 2016 and with it the presidency — and Wisconsin will be, as the Washington Post put it, "the sizzling center of the 2020 presidential race." Democracies and alliances rely on informed citizens prepared to engage on all these issues, and I am thankful to have met such Americans.