

Workshop Report:*

**America in Question:
South Korean Democracy and the Challenge of Non-Proliferation on the Peninsula**

~ Co-hosted by the East Asia Institute and the Liu Institute for Global Issues ~

Shilla Hotel, Seoul

10-11 May 2005

The workshop was the first in a series of three meetings on “Rebuilding American Security” funded by the Ford Foundation and organized by the Liu Institute for Global Issues in cooperation with partner institutions in Asia. The basic question informing the series is how democratization in Asia affects national security priorities, views of US security policy, and relations with the US.

The primary objective of the Seoul workshop was to assess the responses of South Korean publics and elites to the Bush administration’s security strategy, its approach to non-proliferation in the context of the North Korean nuclear program, and the future of the alliance.

The thirty-five participants at the workshop were selected to represent a variety of political, ideological and generational perspectives. About two thirds were from Seoul and the remainder from the United States, Canada, China, Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand. The discussion was conducted in English.

Public Perceptions and Policy Gaps

Most observers agree that there is a substantial and possibly widening gap between the South Korean and US governments on how to manage relations with North Korea and the alliance itself. After 9/11 and especially after the Iraq invasion, public opinion in Asia, like other parts of the world, has tended to be critical of the Bush administration’s security policies. The administration is committed to using American power to bring about structural change in the international system that will protect American interests as the US continues to enjoy global and regional predominance in military power and before other powers—China in the case of East Asia—attains the level of development that enables it to challenge the U.S. This has increased pressure on other countries to make changes they may not want or like. At the same time most governments in Asia have improved relations with Washington or accommodated shifts in US policy.

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Here South Korea has been both typical and distinctive. In the areas of regional and global policies, the Roh Moo-hyun government, after initial doubts, opposition and public criticism, has been pragmatic, in the end supporting the US-led invasion of Iraq and the Rumsfeld initiatives focusing on Military Transformation and alliance restructuring. On the other hand, regarding the

* Prepared by Paul Evans and Kim Byung Kook. Thanks to Gordon Flake and Balbina Hwang for their notes on the morning and afternoon sessions and comments by Amitav Acharya and Peter Geithner on highlights of the discussion.

North Korean nuclear crisis and inter-Korea relations, both public attitudes and government policies moved in a direction different from the United States, continuing support for the conciliatory Sunshine Policy initiated by Kim Dae-jung. The Roh government made what it felt to be “concessions” to the US at the regional and global policy levels in the expectation that the Bush administration would respond with its own concessions in addressing the North’s nuclear weapons program. The strategy of issue linkage, accommodating US policy in regional and global security areas in return for the Bush administration’s acceptance of the policy of dialogue vis-à-vis North Korea, has sometimes worked and sometimes became a cause of even greater conflict and tension between Seoul and Washington.

In light of this history of conflict, accommodation and issue linkages, the presentation by Lee Nae Young examined whether there has been an erosion of South Korean public support for the alliance, increasing anti-Americanism, and growing differences in perception and policy with respect to the threat posed by North Korea and how to respond to it. “Anti-American” sentiment, largely expressed in public demonstrations, reached a peak in December 2002. As measured by opinion polls it has begun to wane despite reports in the American media to the contrary. Two distinctive characteristics of the South Korean public opinion on alliance issues are polarization and volatility. There exists a sizable force (20-30% of the total population) on both the right and the left of the ideological spectrum. The rest (40-60%) are extremely volatile, shifting toward the either end of the spectrum depending on the state of domestic politics, inter-Korea relations, and bilateral US-South Korea relations. Though public opinion tends to be volatile, surveys indicate that South Koreans -- regardless of their ideological preferences and views on domestic politics, inter-Korea relations and bilateral US-South Korea relations -- consider the US to be the best “strategic partner” among other alternative regional powers, including China. Lee argued that public opinion in the US and South Korea are not hostile to each other. In many respects, they are similar in sharing concerns on terrorism and even the rise of China. Polarization and volatility are characteristics of US public opinion after the Iraq invasion, too. However, he argued the real gap is between the two governments in understanding both the nature of the threat and measures to address it.

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One of the participants outlined seven differences in elite perceptions in the US and South Korea on how to deal with North Korea, related to: the nature of the threat (whether it is North Korean strength or weakness); the severity of the threat and the degree to which it would be increased if North Korea possessed nuclear weapons; intelligence on the stage of development of North Korea’s weapons program; the right balance and sequence of carrots and sticks; the comparative virtues of bilateral and multilateral approaches; the sequencing of economic engagement and the resolution of the nuclear problem in a Six Party context; the definition of the key issue as preventing proliferation or solving the broader issue of gradual regime transformation by integrating North Korea into the world system; and the comparative advantages of a step by step or big package approach.

Peter Beck’s paper, prepared earlier for the International Crisis Group, argued that despite the events of the past year – in particular rising tensions over the nuclear issue – and unlike the issue of U.S.-South Korea alliance, there is a strong public consensus in the South for engagement of North Korea. This engagement strategy includes economic cooperation, a preference for gradual regime transformation rather than abrupt regime change, a preference for incremental rather than immediate unification, humanitarian assistance with minimal conditions, and addressing the nuclear issue without derailing North-South engagement. The Sunshine Policy appears to have transformed views of even the South Korean right, shifting them away from confrontation to humanitarian assistance. The right and

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left look at North Korea as a failing or failed state incapable of threatening the South without destroying itself. They both draw a sharp distinction between the North Korean regime and its people, coming out to support humanitarian aid even if aid helps ameliorate the regime crisis in the North. The consensus breaks apart on how to weigh and promote human rights in North Korea, legal restrictions on relations with North Korea, and views of American leadership in responding to the nuclear question.

Beck emphasized generational factors that are increasing support for a strategy of dialogue and engagement with the North rather than confrontation or isolation. Government policies are a both a cause and effect of changes in public sentiment. The embrace of engagement by Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun have had a lasting effect on South Korean public opinion and this has been reinforced by a rejection of the traditional print media, an embrace of the internet and e-sources of information, and the emergence of a more active civil society, especially NGOs and religious groups. However, it is too early to say whether the conservatives' loss of public support and trust will translate into a corresponding rise of public support and trust for the progressives. The politicization of North Korea-related issues and the role of NGOs in that process appear to have seriously weakened both the ethical and professional credibility of the progressive camp, thereby transforming the conservatives' crisis of trust into a national one.

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Explaining South Korean Attitudes and "Anti-Americanism"

Lee contended that there has been a major shift to the left in the ideological orientation of the political elite or organized political there has been a major shift to the left in the ideological orientation of the political elite or organized political forces in South Korea between 2000-2004

This provoked an intense debate about why American policy and relations with the United States have become major political issues in South Korea, why the alliance has been politicized, and why it appears anti-Americanism has increased.

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The argument in Beck's paper concentrated on generational change in South Korean society. Several participants supported this view, observing that there are stark differences between the 386 generation and previous and later generations, and that seminal events like the Kwangju incident branded the 386 with a particularly anti-American view that has been exacerbated by the role of the Teachers' Union within the educational system.

Other participants argued that the generational divide is certainly sharp, but that it is necessary to go beyond the concept of generation to fully understand the scope of the political transformations occurring in South Korea. Some argued that the politicization of views of the US is rooted in a more fundamental struggle to create a new national Korean identity. When Korea has come under external pressure or internal turmoil it has traditionally turned to formulating a national identity based on being "against" an external power. In the 19th century, the response to Western imperialism was the creation of an anti-Western identity; during the Japanese occupation, to be a true Korean, one had to be anti-

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Japanese; during the Cold War, a true (South) Korean had to be anti-Northern and anti-Communist. The end of the Cold War forced the South to go beyond the Cold War identity of anti-Communism to answer the rationale for the existence of the Republic of Korea as a sovereign entity separate from the North. Participants debated whether this same pattern is being played out in contemporary South Korea, that is, whether anti-Americanism is replacing anti-Communism, or whether South Koreans are forging a positive identity for themselves that happen to be expressed into anti-Americanism in the historical context of 2002-2005, but will eventually develop into something more positive and larger than anti-Americanism.

One participant advanced an alternative explanation that focused on the dynamics of democratization in South Korea and the maturation of civil society. Negative comments about the US reflect the diversity, plurality, and individuality of new actors in political life who are attempting to correct the imbalances and biases of the past. Anti-Americanism is thus a reaction to and a reexamination of the past as part of an identity building process that is responding to a crisis of legitimacy in both South and North Korea. Instead of denying civil society, political elites in South Korea are now encouraging civil society participation and the evolution of an ethical politics and foreign policy.

Another participant argued that the United States should not consider anti-American sentiment in South Korea as a problem for America, but rather as a healthy sign of democratization. This prompted the observation that the US is good at promoting democracies, but not very good at accommodating them, and that a “democracy gap” exists not just in South Korea, but in the United States, where there is little opportunity for the public to influence U.S. leadership. In contrast, in South Korea, foreign policy seems to be driven by the public but in a manner some feel to be irresponsible. Because democracy is still in the process of consolidation, the government has been ineffectual in informing the public and framing a healthy and responsible debate. A participant from Southeast Asia observed that South Korea seems to have problems managing diversity and pluralism. There is a need for civic education, civil debate, and the cultivation of a feeling of ownership of government among South Koreans.

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An alternative explanation of the politicization of the American role in South Korea concentrated on the cultural hegemony of “populism” or “*minjung-ju*” that has taken hold in South Korean society. The citizenry can be divided into three groups: (1) the traditional right, which has largely remained intact, (2) the ideological left, which has generally comprised of the “populists,” and (3) the middle, which has been the vast majority. The distinctive aspect of this division is that, unlike in Europe or North America, it is the South Korean left that is more nationalist and the South Korean right that is more internationalist. The left is critical of the establishment and the US is criticized for its support of the establishment. The middle has shifted from right to left, been increasingly critical of the US, and been resentful of South Korean elites that are perceived as morally bankrupt, lazy and corrupt. The experience of the Roh government appears to shift some of the moderates from the left to right after 2003, especially after stronger signs appeared of continued economic stagnation and conflictual alliance relations.

A final explanation was that in South Korea, as elsewhere, “the young are young” and tend to be critical of established authority. For many of the participants, the views of the younger generation in South Korea did not sound exceptional or unusual. Young South Koreans feel more empowered to speak their views and express dissent. Ironically, they seem to have higher expectations of American behavior than they do of their

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own government. The younger generation around the world is in fact globalized in many aspects of culture and consumption even as it voices nationalist sentiments and anti-American views. Rather than generic “anti-Americanism,” this in fact is “situational anti-Americanism” because those South Koreans most “anti-American” tend to be the most Americanized.

Views of the US and the level of anti-Americanism depend in part on American behaviour and world events well beyond the peninsula. The failure of the US to live up to its own ideals and the specific policies of the Bush administration are contributing to global, not just South Korean, disenchantment with the US. American policy makers continue to view issues from the perspective of domestic priorities and tend to see them in bilateral contexts rather than appreciating the extent to which US policies in one part of the world, like Iraq or the Middle East, affect perceptions of the US around the world. Policies as much as values are leading to new stresses in the bilateral relationship.

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Implications for the Alliance

“Anti-Americanism” may be too loose a term. But whatever its motives and form it makes relations between the two governments more difficult. There is a high level of mistrust and mutual suspicion. It has been joined by a new form of “anti-Koreanism” in the US. Several American participants commented on growing criticism of South Korea in Washington, particularly in Congress, something one described as an anti-Korea backlash. American sensitivity post 9/11 has been increased by a sense of bewilderment and betrayal at the Roh administration’s response to the North Korean nuclear weapons program and the popular view in South Korea that the US poses a greater danger to peace and stability on the peninsula than North Korea. Some in Washington believe that South Korea underestimates and misreads the North Korean threat, fears Washington more than Pyongyang, acts as an apologist for North Korea, refuses to use any sticks and instead prefers only carrots, increases the risk of miscalculation by North Korea, and is in denial about the reality and implications of North Korea’s weapons programs. The American public expects gratitude rather than resentment from South Koreans.

These views are exacerbated by media coverage of anti-American protests in South Korea and the fact that many of the interlocutors in South Korea with the longest and closest relationship with Washington are now out of power and have been replaced by individuals with far fewer connections and lesser experience in the US. The government lacks competent policymakers who understand the U.S., its government, the American people, and frequently reacts emotionally to U.S. initiatives.

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The worry is that this kind of mistrust and suspicion may lead the US to lose patience in accommodating the views of the Roh administration and absorbing the criticism from various quarters in South Korea. Washington may decide to terminate the alliance. The real challenge to the alliance does not come from South Korea, but the United States which has the power to review the utility of the alliance from a “zero base.” South

Korea is internally too polarized, heterogeneous, and volatile to formulate a consistent foreign policy perspective, let alone a fundamental reformulation of South Korea’s identity, place in the world and relationship with the U.S.

Assessing the Bush Administration's Non-Proliferation Policies

Wade Huntley's paper focused on American reactions to the North Korean nuclear program but placed them in the broader policy context of US approaches to global security and non-proliferation. After examining the ideational foundations of the US approach, he critiqued the US strategy for dealing with North Korea as "unrealistic" and instead advocated a policy that included genuine respect by all parties for the non-proliferation treaty, a focus on demand as well as supply side factors in fueling proliferation, and respect for a revitalized multilateral process. He characterized the security outlook of the Bush administration as "unilateralist militant idealism" that included a doctrinal commitment to maximum spectrum supremacy, a shift from a threat-based to capabilities-based responses to potential challengers to American interests (hence opening the door to the idea of preventive war), and at least a rhetorical commitment to promoting democracy through the use of force.

Several of the foreign participants expressed deep concern that the US was eroding the nuclear

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non-proliferation regime. While the U.S. is happy to use the NPT for its own ends, such as to pressure North Korea, it is abandoning or disregarding some of its main provisions, including the commitment to disarm and to forego development and testing of new types of nuclear weapons. A Southeast Asian participant noted that South Korea is approaching the issue of North Korean nuclear development in a myopic way, treating it as an inter-Korea issue, when it is a regional and global threat.

Despite statements by the South Korean government that it will not tolerate a nuclear North Korea, several participants also questioned the South Korean commitment to the NPT. There is evidence that a considerable number of South Koreans would actually welcome a nuclear North Korea under the presumption that after eventual unification, such weapons would then belong to the ROK. South Korean participants, by contrast, argued that this is not a seriously considered option. Regional participants in particular warned that this was a dangerous line of thinking and that the reaction of other countries in the region, particularly Japan should be considered.

South Korea's view that any resolution to the crisis must be peaceful and that war must be avoided "at any cost" led some to question South Korean priorities. Since avoiding the resumption of war on the peninsula is clearly South Korea's highest priority, its commitment to the NPT was called into question. This was particularly true in scenarios in which a military response to a nuclear North Korea was considered.

None of the South Korean participants joined the discussion on American policy except as it connected directly to the peninsula or Northeast Asia, perhaps reflecting the inward-looking perspectives of South Korea.

Addressing the North Korean Nuclear Problem

The paper by Kim Sung-han focused directly on the North Korean nuclear problem and the strategies of the US and South Korea in responding to it. He noted some of the new tensions between Washington and Seoul and observed that even conservatives in South Korea are, rightly or wrongly, concerned about US policies that seem to emphasize coercive measures rather than peaceful negotiation. He advocated a better balance between the use of carrots and sticks and urged the Bush administration to be more specific about the content of what he called its "bold approach." The Bush administration seems to be approaching engagement not so much a way of inducing negotiations but as means of building a coalition for future punishment even as allies, including South Korea, need to be convinced that non-coercive strategies have been tried sincerely. The biggest gap in policy and perception is between Washington's fear of nuclear exports from North Korea and Seoul's fear that stopping these exports might produce war.

Washington questions Seoul's resolve to confront the North when all peaceful means are exhausted, and Seoul questions whether Washington is sincere in trying to reach an agreement with the North.

The ensuing discussion centered in part on a debate about values and interests. The difference between the positions of the Bush and Roh governments appear to some to reflect that the U.S. views North Korea in the context of broader values such as human rights and nuclear non-proliferation and expects South Korea as a fellow democracy to share the same values and thus the same approach to addressing the current crisis. The ROK perspective has been that, while such values are important, the U.S. fails to understand the more immediate South Korean national interests in preventing a conflict, avoiding instability in the peninsula, and forestalling a collapse of North Korea. Several participants resisted reducing the debate to values vs. interests and were skeptical that the U.S. was motivated by such values.

In addition to the nuclear issue, the South Korean government was also criticized for failing to speak out on the question of human rights in North Korea. Again, such reticence was attributed to a desire to avoid provoking the North and thereby increasing the risk of conflict.

Several participants from outside South Korea challenged the presumption that South Koreans best understood the North. One participant compared the ROK to a victim in an abusive relationship and indicated such a position colored its views of the North. Some of the South Korean participants claimed that South Koreans are avoiding the tough choices, wanting a denuclearized peninsula, not wanting war, wanting peace with North Korea, and wanting a strong alliance with the US. The government and public have failed to articulate a clear hierarchy of priorities and goals, which is understandable given the stakes at hand, but dangerous and irresponsible in the current state of North Korean nuclear crisis. Criticism was leveled at politicians in both the ruling and opposition parties who want Pyongyang and Washington to change course but don't seek adjustment of South Korean policy.

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Despite official denials and references made to numerous statements by top Bush Administration officials, several South Korea and international participants stated that the "real" U.S. policy towards North Korea was regime change. The use of the term "sovereign state" by top U.S. officials to describe North Korea was not seen as inconsistent with or precluding a policy for which regime change was the desired outcome. In particular, the personal vilification of Kim Jong Il by President Bush and the growing focus on human rights in North Korea, as evidenced by the passage of the North Korean Human Rights Act in 2004, were seen as strong indicators that the U.S. was not serious about dealing with the current leadership in Pyongyang. Some South Korean participants indicated that a focus on human rights in the short term would make difficult, if not block, the long-term gradual transformation of the North Korean regime.

Some American participants voiced surprise that "regime change" in North Korea has become such an undesirable outcome from a South Korean perspective. They likewise questioned whether it was possible to have real verification and surety of the denuclearization without regime change in North Korea. They also responded to the charge that the current format of the Six Party Talks was "faux multilateralism," since the talks are multilateral in form but not function and that many believe that the current crisis can only be solved unilaterally by the U.S. Only

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the simultaneous multilateral application of both inducement and pressure, they argued, holds any real prospect for convincing North Korea to reverse course on its nuclear program.

China's role in a potential resolution of the nuclear crisis was raised on several occasions. Whenever China has been drawn into military involvement on the Korean peninsula, it has been China that has suffered. The Chinese leadership was described as being deeply concerned about the way the situation in the Korean peninsula was playing out, but lacking any real strategic vision for the resolution of the crisis. Instead, China has largely been seeking to avoid the instability in the region that would accompany a crisis.

As the U.S. pressures China to help solve the crisis, Chinese officials claim that they have little actual leverage over North Korea. The U.S. would need Chinese cooperation if the issue is to be taken to the UN Security Council. Of equal concern to some was the likelihood that the U.S. would blame China for the failure of the six-party talks and the failure to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. One participant observed that China's role was partly framed by the upcoming 2008 Olympics in Beijing. Given the international attention paid to the Olympics, China would be unlikely to take any major risks in the Korean peninsula or in cross-strait relations with Taiwan in advance of the Olympics.

Impact of Democratization

The papers and discussion raised several ideas about how democratization in South Korea is influencing South Korean national security policies and relations with the US.

First, there is a widely-held view in South Korea, and in other parts of Asia, that the United States is better at promoting democracy than accommodating it. Senior leaders in Washington have considerable experience in managing diverse points of view on foreign policy within the US, but they seem to be having difficulty absorbing the increasing diversity of opinion within Asian societies that are becoming more open and democratic. Democratizing governments in Asia face a similar challenge. They have long had to adjust to public opinion as an influence on US foreign policy, but not at home. These tendencies are made more complex by the tendency of the media to emphasize differences and amplify shifts in public attitudes.

Second, democratization in South Korea has brought new voices into the discussion of security policy and a new regime to power. This has been accompanied by the rise of domestic civil society and more pluralism in recruitment of officials.

Third, democratization appears to erode support for traditional balance of power concepts and Cold War mindsets. Most Koreans appear to want significant adjustments in the US-ROK alliance and more emphasis on multilateral and cooperative security arrangements in Northeast Asia and on an East Asian basis (e.g. ASEAN Plus Three). A similar pattern seems to be emerging in other newly-emerging democracies in Asia including Indonesia, which is promoting the idea of an ASEAN Security Community, Thailand and the Philippines.

Fourth, the presence of the common value of democracy and the institutions of democracy do not necessarily outweigh differences in identities and interests. The gap of perceptions and policies that separates South Korea and the US on how to respond to North Korea and how to restructure the alliance are deeply affected by a new openness in South Korea on issues including views of the past, sovereignty, ethnic homogeneity, and nationalism. Volatility, diversity and complexity in public opinion and public policy are to be expected for many years to come.

The discussion will be continued at a second meeting in Indonesia later this year.

Appendix I: Agenda

Tuesday, May 10

- 19:00 **Reception Dinner**
 Roundtable on “The State of US-ROK Relations” led by LEE Hong-Koo,
 Chairman, Board of Trustees, EAI, and Ezra F. VOGEL, Professor Emeritus,
 Harvard University

Wednesday, May 11

- 09:00-09:30 **Welcoming Remarks**
 Paul EVANS, Professor, University of British Columbia
 KIM Byung-Kook, Director, EAI
- 09:30-12:30 **Session I**
Moderator
 KIM Byung-Kook, Director, EAI
 ♦ “Changing South Korean Public Opinion on the US and the ROK- US
 Alliance,” LEE Nae Young, Korea University
 ♦ “Evolving Public Opinion in South Korea on the U.S. Approach to the
 North Korean Nuclear Program,” Peter BECK, ICG
- 12:30-14:30 **Lunch**
Speech: KIM Kyung-won, EAI Trustee and former Ambassador to the United
 Nations
- 14:30-17:30 **Session II**
Moderator
 Paul EVANS, Professor, University of British Columbia
 ♦ “Coping with the North Korean Nuclear Problem: A South Korean
 Perspective,” KIM Sung-han, IFANS
 ♦ “Goliath's Game: U.S. Policy toward North Korea in Strategic Context,”
 Wade HUNTLEY, Simons Centre for Disarmament and Nonproliferation
 Research, Liu Institute for Global Issues, UBC
- 19:00 **Dinner**
Speech: Han Sung Joo, Professor, Korea University

Appendix II: List of Participants

1. Presenters

Session I

LEE Nae Young, Korea University
 Peter BECK, International Crisis Group

Session II

KIM Sung-han, Institute of Foreign Affairs & National Security,
 Wade HUNTLEY, Simons Center for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Research, Liu Institute.

2. Discussants

International Participants

Amitav ACHARYA, Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies, Singapore

Dewi Fortuna ANWAR, Indonesian Institute of Sciences, Indonesia
 Paul EVANS, University of British Columbia
 Gordon FLAKE, The Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation
 Peter GEITHNER, Asia Center, Harvard University
 Marius GRINIUS, Canada's Ambassador to the ROK
 Balbina HWANG, The Heritage Foundation
 Mark MINTON, Chargé d'Affaires ad interim to the Republic of Korea
 Surin PITSUWAN, Member of the Thai Parliament
 Scott SNYDER, The Asia Foundation
 Ed REED, The Asia Foundation
 Wiryono SASTROHANDOYO, Former Indonesian Ambassador to Australia
 Ezra F. VOGEL, Harvard University (May 10th dinner only)
 ZHU Feng, Peking University

South Korean Participants

HAN Sung-Joo, Former R.O.K Ambassador to U.S. (May 11th Session 2)
 HAN Yong Sup, Chairman, Research Institute on National Security Affairs, Korea National
 Defense University (May 11th Session 1)
 IM Hyug Baeg, Professor, Korea University
 JUNG Young-Tae, Professor, Inha University, The Democratic Labor Party
 KAHNG Gyoo-hyoung, Professor, Myongji University, Member of Liberty Union
 KIL Jeong-Woo, Publisher, JoongAng Daily
 KIM Byung-Kook, Director, The East Asia Institute
 KIM Kyung Won, Former R.O.K Ambassador to U.S.
 KIM Sun-Hyuk, Professor, Korea University
 LEE, Daehoon, Deputy Secretary, People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy
 LEE Hyeghoon, 17th National Assemblyman, R.O.K, The Grand National Party
 LEE Hong-Koo, Chairman, The East Asia Institute · Former Prime Minister, R.O.K
 LEE Shin-wha, Professor, Korea University
 YOO Kun-II, Former Editor-in-chief, Cho-sun Ilbo