

Testimony of Mark Lippert
Ambassador-Nominee to the Republic of Korea
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Tuesday, June 17, 2014, 3 p.m.

Chairman Cardin, Senator Rubio, distinguished Members of the Committee: I am deeply honored to appear before you as the President's nominee to serve as U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Korea. I am humbled by the confidence the President and the Secretary of State have shown in putting me forward for this nomination.

Having proudly served as a Personal Representative of the Member to this Committee, it is very meaningful to be back in this Committee room today. In large part through my service on Capitol Hill, which spanned nearly a decade, I am keenly aware that close partnership with Congress is critically important to success in diplomacy. And if confirmed, I pledge to always be a strong partner and friend to this committee.

I would also like to thank my former boss, Senator Leahy, for his gracious introduction. I know just how busy he is juggling his many important responsibilities.

Please let me also say a few words about my wife. As Senator Leahy mentioned, I met Robyn when we worked together on Capitol Hill. She has been the best partner that anyone could ask for and has patiently put up with years of military deployments to Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, long hours at the Pentagon and the National Security Council, and the intensity of work for the Senate Foreign Relations and Appropriations Committees.

Members of the Committee, simply put: the alliance between the United States and the Republic of Korea is one of the most important relationships that we have in the world. Through my many visits to the Republic of Korea, I have come to greatly respect the people and culture of the Republic of Korea. Our two countries share deeply held values of free markets, democracy, and respect for human rights and the rule of law. And we share a common history of fighting together to uphold these values and to defend our security.

I am proud to say that the ties between our two countries have never been stronger. If confirmed, I pledge to work tirelessly, in close partnership with this Committee, to make our Alliance even stronger.

As the former Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Asia-Pacific, I have had the opportunity to work closely with our South Korean allies, Commanding Generals of United States Forces Korea, and senior members of our diplomatic team. I have seen the enduring strength of this alliance firsthand.

I continue to be vigilant about the stark threat that North Korea poses the U.S. homeland, to security on the peninsula, in the region, and around the world – including through its continued pursuit of nuclear weapons and ballistic missile technology, its worldwide proliferation activities, and egregious human rights violations against its own citizens.

If confirmed, I will work closely with the leadership of the Republic of Korea to ensure we are fully aligned in our efforts to achieve the complete and verifiable denuclearization of North Korea and prevent proliferation of key technologies. I have built a good working relationship with General Scaparrotti, the Commander of U.S. Forces Korea, and if confirmed, look forward to partnering closely with him and the Department of Defense as they work to strengthen our deterrence on the peninsula and ensure that the 28,500 U.S. troops stationed there are ready to “fight tonight,” if necessary.

Although our alliance was established with a mutual commitment to security, our nations have built deep and growing economic ties. The U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement, or KORUS FTA, is now in its third year, and American and Korean consumers, businesses, and workers have benefited from it. Last year, the United States achieved a large investment surplus with the Republic of Korea, and U.S. goods exports are up 11.7 percent this year so far. That said, the full potential of the FTA has yet to be fully realized; more tariff cuts and additional provisions will come into force in the years to come. If confirmed, I will work to ensure the KORUS FTA is fully implemented so that American exporters, entrepreneurs, and workers can receive the benefits for which this Administration negotiated so hard.

This alliance is also increasingly tackling global challenges as well. Our global partnership includes cooperation on everything from counter-terrorism and counter-piracy to climate change and development. The United States is also negotiating a successor 123 civil nuclear cooperation agreement with South Korea that will allow us to continue our cooperation in this field, while maintaining our strong non-proliferation standards.

Finally, our strong people-to-people ties reinforce our shared values and interests. Each year, the Republic of Korea sends more university students to the United States per capita than any other major country. We have innovative exchange programs between our students and our science experts. If confirmed, I will make public diplomacy a top priority and work to foster these exchanges and bring more Korean education and tourism dollars to the United States. And if confirmed, I will be proud to also represent the over 1.7 million U.S. citizens that are of Korean descent and who contribute vitally to the deepening ties between our peoples.

Our Embassy in Seoul has a talented team comprised of career diplomats, civil servants from a range of U.S. agencies, and local Korean staff who are dedicated to advancing U.S. interests every day. If confirmed, I will work to ensure my team has the resources, training, and guidance to strengthen and broaden our alliance with the Republic of Korea.

Mr. Chairman, the U.S.-ROK alliance is the linchpin of security and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula, in the Asia-Pacific, and around the world. Being nominated to represent the United States in Seoul is the honor of my lifetime, and if confirmed I will work night and day to advance this critical relationship.

Thank you very much for your consideration of my nomination, and I look forward to taking your questions.