

# South Korean President Park Geun-hye's First Visit to Washington, D.C.

By [Victor Cha](#)  
May 8, 2013

On May 7, President Park Geun-hye of the Republic of Korea made her first official visit to the United States and had a summit meeting with President Barack Obama at the White House. It is the first meeting between them since they were inaugurated in January and February of this year. The two leaders signed a joint declaration on the U.S.-ROK alliance in celebration of the 60 years of their alliance. Park and Obama reaffirmed their countries' shared values of liberty, democracy, and the market economy and highlighted the significant progress made in realizing the 2009 Joint Vision for the Alliance. The United States reiterated its firm commitment to the defense of the Republic of Korea, including extended deterrence and the full range of U.S. military capabilities. The presidents noted the positive results of the one-year-old Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement and recognized its potential to serve as an engine for future economic growth in both countries.

## **Q1: What is the overall assessment of the summit?**

**A1:** Quite successful. First summits are about messaging and personal chemistry. The messages on North Korean deterrence and the strength of the alliance in its 60th year were clearly sent. President Park's speech at a Joint Session of Congress was delivered in fluent English and met with a very warm reception from House and Senate members. She received several standing ovations during her speech and was asked to autograph programs as she left the chamber. The reception was equally warm among members in Speaker John Boehner's private chambers after the speech. At the White House, the two leaders were able to have some one-on-one time in addition to the regularly scheduled meetings and the working lunch. All of these atmospherics are important in setting the tone in the relationship.

## **Q2: Did they deal with the North Korean problem effectively?**

**A2:** The main message on this issue was that Washington and Seoul are "airtight" on North Korea policy. Park used very strong words about her willingness to retaliate at any North Korean provocation and President Obama clearly stated that the United States would not give concessions to climb down from any crises created by North Korea. Obama also said that he supported Park's "trustpolitik" which implied that should North Korean behavior moderate in the coming months, then the United States would support any humanitarian assistance that Park might want to provide to the people of North Korea. It was interesting that in all three of her public speeches (Smithsonian dinner, Joint Session of Congress, and Chamber lunch), Park mentioned unification several times as part of the vision of a future East Asian community at peace. The implication is that if North Korea can't be denuclearized, then the region must prepare for a different path that might entail unification.

## **Q3: What did the leaders discuss regarding China?**

**A3:** During the summit, there was news that the Bank of China had closed accounts of a North Korean bank, which showed some determination by Beijing to comply with UN sanctions. The most interesting statement during the summit on China was the interview that President Park gave to the *Washington Post*. In this, she used the usual strong language about pressing China to use its material influence to denuclearize North Korea but she added that if North Korea is unwilling, then President Park said she will ask China to choose a different path. She would like to "engage in candid discussions with [President Xi Jinping] about whether, if North Korea decides not to become a responsible member of the international community, whether this current path that it is taking is sustainable." These are fairly forward-leaning public comments by an ROK president and, coupled with her mention of unification, signals the broader context in which she would like to talk with Beijing about the peninsula. Following her visit to Washington, President Park will next visit China at some point soon.

**Q4: Was there discussion on Japan?**

**A4:** It is hard to imagine that this topic did not come up in closed door discussions. The United States wants better relations amongst all parties in the region, including those between Korea and Japan. At the May 7 post-summit press conference, President Obama specifically mentioned that the United States wants to continue to coordinate closely with both South Korea and Japan on issues such as the North Korea threat. However, there are rumors circulating that Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe may visit the Yasukuni shrine later this summer which will surely hurt ROK-Japan relations. Park expressed clear disappointment at the current state of relations with Japan and lack of any progress on history issues over past years. In her May 8 address to Congress she noted that “if we cannot honestly acknowledge what happened yesterday, there can be no tomorrow.”

**Q5: What about on trade issues?**

**A5:** There were many positive statements about the one year anniversary of the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement but many policy wonks in the United States were looking for clues on TPP. Park did not indicate much on this specific issue, but word is that South Korea is warming to TPP, in part because of the benefits of such a multilateral trade agreement but also because it could provide leverage in their desires for a ROK-China FTA. Seoul will also closely watch how the United States handles negotiations with Japan within the TPP framework to ensure that all parties are dealt with equitably within the agreement.

*Victor Cha holds the Korea Chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C. Ellen Kim is assistant director of the Korea Chair at CSIS, where she is also a fellow. Marie DuMond is a research associate with the Korea Chair at CSIS.*

**Critical Questions is produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).**

**© 2013 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. All rights reserved.**