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Next Steps for the U.S.-Republic of Korea Alliance

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Opening Statement

This year marks a truly important milestone in the U.S. - South Korean alliance as we commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Armistice that ended the Korean War. This conflict claimed the lives of more than 170,000 U.S. and South Korean soldiers and more than 370,000 civilians. 60 years later, our friendship endures and, in fact, has grown stronger.

Just a few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to visit South Korea with my good friend, the Ranking Member, Mr. Faleomavaega, to meet with President Park, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and other Korean government officials, as well as tour the Demilitarized Zone and visit with our American troops who live and work in that stressful and dangerous environment.

Today in South Korea, a once war-torn nation has become a world-class economy and leader in high-tech innovation. South Korea's growing commitment to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law is a strong contrast to its northern neighbor.

The past 60 years of the U.S.-South Korea relationship is best characterized as a close friendship that has steadily grown. Today, I think I can confidently say that our bilateral relationship is at its best, particularly given the passage and implementation of the U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement just a little over a year ago. The bond between the people of the U.S. and the people of South Korea is strong and continues to grow. One group that certainly deserves special recognition is the Korean American community which has worked tirelessly to ensure that the U.S.-Korea relationship remains strong, relevant, and forward-looking. With the threat of North Korean belligerence always imminent, it is in the United States' and South Korea's best interest to ensure that the next 60 years of this relationship are as strong and as vibrant as the past 60 years.

South Korea's economy depends heavily on clean, low cost energy. Without the benefits of domestic energy reserves, South Korea depends almost entirely on imported energy with the exception of power generated by its domestic nuclear energy power plants. Given the ROK's continuing economic growth, it is unlikely that the government can continue to provide enough

low cost electricity to fuel its economy. The ability to recycle nuclear fuel would ease this problem. That is why it is vitally important for the U.S. and South Korea to complete negotiations on a modern, 21st Century civilian nuclear agreement. The adoption of a new “1-2-3 agreement” would also have a direct impact on American jobs -- in particular, manufacturing jobs for those industries supplying South Korea with the components it needs to grow and maintain its power supply.

Earlier this month, I joined Chairman Royce and Ranking Member Engel, as well as Judge Poe, Mr. Faleomavaega, Mr. Collins and Mr. Kinzinger in introducing HR 2449, legislation to extend for two years the current U.S. – South Korea civilian nuclear energy cooperation agreement, which is scheduled to expire in March of 2014. A clean extension of the agreement while negotiators continue to work on and refine substantive issues, I believe, is an important and necessary step in this process. I look forward to working with the Chairman and my colleagues in moving the legislation forward.

When President Park addressed a Joint Session of Congress last month, she reaffirmed South Korea’s commitment to the vision of “a world without nuclear weapons,” which must start on the Korean Peninsula. South Korea has said time and time again that it is firmly committed to the principle of non-proliferation. In fact, South Korea hosted the 2nd Nuclear Security Summit last year. On the other hand, North Korea has made its intentions clear. The Kim dictatorship has no desire to halt its nuclear weapons program, and its recent calls for talks with conditions have to be taken with a grain of salt. North Korea takes no responsibility for its behavior but blames the United States for the worsening situation on the Peninsula. The U.S. must maintain a consistent position that makes it crystal clear to the regime in Pyongyang that we will not concede to its unreasonable demands. I hope the Administration pursues a path that will increase security for both South Korea and the entire international community.