

New U.S. Focus on Pacific Puts UC San Diego at Leading Edge of Critical Foreign Policy Issues

The rise of the Pacific region has been a focus of U.S. foreign policy. In the last presidential debate between candidates Mitt Romney and Barack Obama, the president said the U.S. “pivot” to the Asia-Pacific is partly because it is “going to be a massive growth area in the future.”

The growing role of the Pacific region in the 21st century was the focus Thursday for “The Future of the Korean Peninsula and the U.S.-Republic of Korea Alliance” open forum between the U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Korea (South Korea), Sung Kim, and the Republic of Korea’s Ambassador to the U.S., Young-jin Choi. The forum was hosted by UC San Diego’s School of International Relations and Pacific Studies (IR/PS) and was moderated by Susan Shirk, Ho Miu Lam Professor of China and Pacific Relations at IR/PS and former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in the Bureau of East Asia and Pacific Affairs.

Throughout the event, Kim reiterated that the 21st century is the “age of the Pacific,” which is home to some of the world’s most important economic and geo-political alliances, between nations such as the Republic of Korea, Japan, China and the U.S.

Peter Cowhey, dean of IR/PS, echoed these sentiments and discussed how this philosophy is integral to IR/PS’s mission.

“This is something remarkable because our school was founded with the belief that the Pacific region is even more important now than ever, and it’s likely to continue to grow,” he said.

IR/PS is unique in its geographical focus on the Pacific (the Americas and Asia). The school is the only professional program in the U.S. to concentrate exclusively on the diverse political and economic systems of the Pacific region.



Shirk and Kim: both worked at the Bureau of East Asia and Pacific Affairs in State Department during the same time period.

In addition, many IR/PS faculty, such as Shirk, engage outside of the classroom in high-level meetings and special assignments at the U.S. State Department, Office of the United States Trade Representative, Department of Defense, World Bank and other national and international agencies and organizations.

Kim formerly worked for Shirk while she was in the State Department. “Susan is a big reason for me being here,” he said. “I wouldn’t be in the position that I am in [as ambassador] if it wasn’t for Susan, so I thank her for her contributions.”

Both Kim and Choi spoke about the strong relationship between the U.S. and the Republic of Korea and how it benefits the entire region.

“We have common values,” Kim said. “We believe in the free market, freedom, individual rights and democracy. Our relationship will continue to be strong in the future because it will serve both nations.”

He added that the free trade agreement between the U.S. and the Republic of Korea is the “gold-standard.”

Shirk brought up the issue that while leaders in the U.S. or the Republic of Korea have not had a big provocation with North Korea recently, the threat of North Korea’s nuclear capabilities still plagues the region.

In response, both Choi and Kim spoke about the complexities of North Korea’s military presence and its isolationist regime.

Choi said that the U.S. is willing to make diplomatic efforts for nuclear nonproliferation in the region and it will not accept North Korea as a nuclear state.

“We have been consistent,” Choi said. “We want to engage, but North Korea has to be serious. We want to have substantive conversations that lead to progress.”



osing with students after the forum.

He added, “This is why it’s so important to have as much cooperation with the Republic of Korea as possible... Any divergence from the U.S.-Korea alliance is unlikely because there is too much at stake.”

Shirk, a China scholar, asked both ambassadors how the U.S. and Republic of Korea will manage the issue of China’s rise as a global superpower.

“China is on board with us,” Choi said. “They recognize that we’re living in an economic paradigm, not a military paradigm, and that cooperation is necessary because of the strong economic ties between countries in the

Pacific. There is more than a trillion dollars' worth of trade every year between the U.S., South Korea, Japan and China.”

Kim, Choi and Shirk discussed how Seoul will host the United Nations Green Climate Fund, a signal of the Pacific's growing presence in international affairs. The Green Climate Fund is a multi-billion dollar fund to help developing countries adapt to and mitigate climate change.

“The center's location [in the Republic of Korea] is a milestone because it is the first U.N. office that will be established in the Pacific region,” Kim said.

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