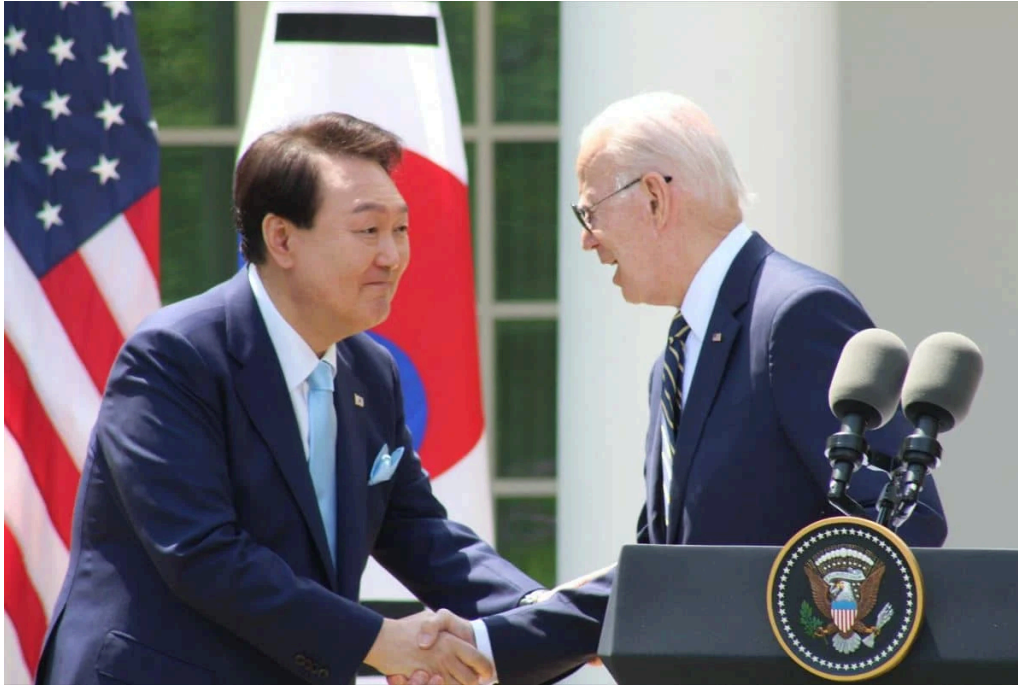


Crowd Swoons as Yoon Caps State Visit With Song

April 27, 2023 **by Dan McCue**



South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and President Joe Biden in the Rose Garden of the White House on Wednesday. (Photo by Dan McCue)

WASHINGTON — There likely won't be a capper to a formal state dinner at the White House as memorable as the one enjoyed last night, for a very long time.

After a lengthy day of diplomacy and an hourlong press conference in the Rose Garden, President Joe Biden and his South Korean counterpart, Yoon Suk Yeol, might have been expected to quietly enjoy their Maryland crab cake and yellow squash soup among friends and invited guests at last night's state dinner in the East Room.

But in yet another example of the transformative power of rock and roll, something unique happened toward the end of the night.

As Broadway stars Norm Lewis, Lea Salonga and Jessica Vosk brought the evening's official entertainment, a performance of show tunes, to a close, against a backdrop of cherry blossoms and celebrities, including Angelina Jolie and the Olympic snowboarder Chloe Kim, they offered a surprise encore.

They explained they'd been told "American Pie" was one of Yoon's personal favorites, and that they would perform it in his honor.

"Yes, that's true," the South Korean leader said through a translator.

"When I was going to school, it was one of my favorite songs," he added.

But after the professional singers finished, Biden turned to Yoon with a request.

"We want to hear you sing it," the president said.

A beaming Yoon hesitated, but when First Lady Dr. Jill Biden joined in the urging, he could hardly resist.

"It's been a while," he said as he took the microphone.

With that, he launched into his own take on Don McLean's 1971 folk rock classic, a rendition that inspired cheers and applause and even had Biden pumping his fist.

"I had no damn idea you could sing," the president said as Yoon returned to their table.

Biden then turned to the crowd and quipped, "The next state dinner we have ... you're looking at the entertainment."

An Enduring Partnership

The official reason for Wednesday's state visit was to acknowledge and celebrate the 70th anniversary of the alliance between the Republic of Korea and the United States.

The surprise performance capped a day that featured many public expressions of close ties and friendship, amid private talks that focused on tough issues including China, the future of the silicon chip industry, deterring North Korea's nuclear weapons ambitions and recent revelations that the U.S. has spied on South Korean officials.

In fact, the two leaders were an hour late to a scheduled Rose Garden press conference as their talks stretched on in the Oval Office.

When they emerged they announced, among other things, that the United States will deploy more strategic assets on temporary missions to South Korea to send a clear message to the North Korean regime in Pyongyang.

"We've made it very, very clear how we feel about [North Korea's] advancing nuclear threat, and let [it] be equally clear that a nuclear attack against the United States or its allies is unacceptable and will result in the end of whatever regime committed such an act," Biden said.

For now, the leaders said, both the U.S. and South Korea have decided to take the "prudent course" of engaging in "closer cooperation" and more frequent "consultations."

"We're not going to be staging any nuclear weapons on the peninsula, but we will have port visits [to South Korea] by nuclear submarines and things like that, and we are not walking away from that," Biden said.

The president went on to say the strategy “affirms how aligned our two nations are, and the similarity of our respective visions for the region.”

South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and President Joe Biden in the Rose Garden of the White House on Wednesday. (Photo by Dan McCue)

In addition to threats posed by North Korea, the president said he and Yoon also discussed how to work together to promote peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, thus ensuring freedom of navigation in the South China Seas, and both nations’ continued commitment to stand with the people of Ukraine “against Russia’s brutal assault on their freedom.”

“The Republic of Korea is a strong supporter of Ukraine and that’s important because it sends the message that Russia’s flagrant violation of international law matters to nations everywhere in the world, not just in Europe.”

Gesturing toward Yoon, Biden went on to say “we share the same values, the same vision. ... We both understand that our democracies and our people are our greatest source of strength and ... working together on things like the climate crisis and global health ... makes both our countries better suited to meet the challenges ahead.”

Silicon Chips

Ahead of Wednesday’s extended meeting, the White House reportedly asked South Korea to encourage its major silicon chip manufacturers, Samsung Electronics and SK Hynix, not to fill any gap in the chip market if China bans Idaho-based Micron from selling its chips in its market.

The request came after China launched a national security review into Micron, one of the three dominant players in the global memory chip market, that the U.S. contends is just a case of economic coercion.

Among the issues the Chinese Cyberspace Administration is reportedly investigating are information infrastructure and hidden security risks involving China’s massive technology supply chain operations.

The move comes in the wake of recent U.S. actions that include refusing to sell certain semiconductor technologies to China on the grounds these products could be used for corporate or governmental espionage against the United States.

Biden didn't address whether the request had been made, but insisted that U.S. policies regarding semiconductors are not aimed at hurting anyone.

"My desire is to increase U.S. manufacturing jobs," he said. "This is not about China. America invented semiconductors; we invented them. And then, over the last, I don't know how many decades, we decided it would be cheaper to import them than to make them.

"The pandemic, however, taught the U.S. a hard lesson," the president said.

"Before the pandemic, we didn't have to worry about having access to semiconductors; then the pandemic happened and suddenly we all learned what a semiconductor was because we didn't have access to them and it hurt our economy.

"So we cannot just sit back and worry about whether or not we'll have access to semiconductors in the future because of some kind of problem in the supply chain. That's why we've worked so hard to encourage investment in the United States in this area, and to date, we've seen an investment in the U.S. of over \$200 billion.

"So again, our policy is about building our economy, it's not designed to hurt China," Biden continued. "The only thing I did say with regard to China involved semiconductors we have built that are usual for nuclear and other weapons systems.

"Those we are not selling to China or anybody else," he said.

Many Signs of Friendship

Though the two men initially looked drawn as they exited the Oval Office and entered the Rose Garden Wednesday afternoon, both displayed repeated signs of cordiality.

For his part Yoon, who didn't utter a word of English during the press conference (his remarks being translated and transmitted through headsets provided to news conference attendees), warmly shook Biden's hand not once, but twice — once at the start of the news conference and once afterwards.

Biden responded by talking at length about their great friendship and respect.

Later, during toasts at the beginning of the state dinner, Yoon quoted one of the president's favorite Irish poets, Seamus Heaney.

"Behavior that's admired is the path to power among people everywhere," Yoon said through a translator.

Later, he elicited cheers from dinner attendees when he directed another Irish saying to the American president.

"A good friend is like a four-leaf clover," Yoon said, raising his glass to Biden. "Hard to find and lucky to have."

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