On Thursday, November 1, 2018, the East Asia Institute hosted Dr. Hyon Joo Yoo and Deputy Consul-General of the Consulate General of the Republic of Korea in Houston Jae Hui Kim, to present a lecture entitled “Korean Peninsula: The U.S.-South Korean Alliance.” This event was free and open to the public. Students and faculty from many different areas of study, and Korean community members attended to hear about the recent development between the Korean peninsula and their relationship with the United States.

Dr. Hyon Joo Yoo received her PhD from Georgetown University and is a current professor of Political Science at Trinity University. Deputy Consul-General Jae Hui Kim obtained his bachelor’s degree in Political Science from Yonsei University of Seoul and has served in multiple embassies such as Western Europe, Russia, and Israel to just name a few.

Before the lecture, a reception was held where the attendees could enjoy a sampling of Korean food and meet with the speakers. After the reception, the guests in attendance moved into the lecture hall for Dr. Yoo’s presentation. The lecture began with Dr. Wanxiang Yao, Director of the East Asia Institute thanking everyone in attendance and introduced the special guest speakers, city officials, UTSA faculty and staff and Dr. Lisa Montoya.

Dr. Montoya, Vice provost for International Initiative and Senior International Officer, stated the importance of events that enriched our students to understand the globalized world, different cultures and its people. She also highlighted the long-standing relationship between UTSA and the Korean Consulate General office. UTSA, with the generous support of the Consulate General office, has been able to send students to South Korea through the Teach and Learn in Korea (TaLK) and English Program in Korea (EPIK), host Korean language classes, and organize annual Korean events, such as the Korean speech contest and Kimchi festival. Dr. Montoya once again reminded the audience members her belief of the
importance for international engagement. She then introduced Deputy Consul General Kim.

“Our office is invested in the Korean studies, it is our work, and we will expand our investment and our cooperation with UTSA,” stated Kim. Comparable to the relationship between the Consul General of the Republic of Korea in Houston and UTSA, Kim spoke on the 65-year anniversary between the United States and South Korea, identifying the many variable corporations and cultivations between the two countries including security, trade, and various international agendas for development.

“Last September North Korea started nuclear tests and the world thought a second Korean war was going to start,” reflected Kim. However, there was a change, for the first time the North Korean leader crossed the demilitarized zone into South Korea. Since then, there has been three summits, one of which both leaders agreed to keep the peninsula denuclearized, with a fourth upcoming summit before the year’s end.

North Korea has also opened conversation with the United States, with Mike Pompeo, U.S. Secretary of State, who visited North Korea four times in 2018, and President Trump who met with North Korean leader, Kim Jong Un in June 2018. Deputy Consul-General Kim ended his remarks by reminding the audience that we are making history. “We are trying to change what we have grown accustomed to. For many South Koreans, North Korea is a threat and peace was an abstract concept. We are trying to change all that for the better,” stated Kim. “Change is never easy, but fortunately we have a written and shared condition that change is not just desirable but possible. “

Immediately following Kim’s remarks, Dr. Hyon Joo Yoo began her lecture. Yoo opened by thanking everyone in attendance. Her next remark laid out the focus of her lecture; the importance, challenges and future of the U.S.-Korean alliance. Yoo continued by emphasizing that the spirit of alliance between the two nations is an attitude of “we go together”, as quoted from the United States Forces Korea website. This quote implies that the U.S. and South Korea are equals in moving forward. “The core values of the alliance are security and prosperity of the Korean peninsula, deterrence of war, and stability in Northeast Asia,” stated Yoo.

According to Yoo, this alliance is beneficial to South Korea because they can rely on US economy and military assistance. Asia currently hosts 15% of U.S. active duty military personnel with 26,000 troops just in South Korea. South Korea has also seen a drastic economic growth going from 40.9 million in 1953 to 1.4 trillion in 2018. The U.S. is South Korea’s second largest trading partner after china. “As you can see these two countries are relying on each other not only for military reasons, but also for economic reasons (as well),” stated Yoo.

“There are multiple inside and outside challenges,” said Yoo. “The main outside challenges coming from Kim Jong Un, more importantly North Korea’s provocation. In 2017, North Korea has done nuclear tests with a Hydrogen bomb and has launched missiles 16 times. These events have increased the tension between North Korea and the United States. Nonetheless, both North and South
Korea have signed a peace agreement that have decreased North Korean threat.”

Yoo pointed out another challenge that can influence the U.S.-Korean relationship is China. For example, the recent speech from vice president Mike Pence on China, in which he declared the U.S. needed a more decisive action on China’s actions. If a confrontation between the U.S and China occurred, this would be problematic for South Korea, with China being Korea’s largest trading partner. Yoo added, “South Korea will be placed in a difficult position if either the U.S. or China requests South Korea to pick a side.”

“If we emphasize that the U.S.-Korean alliance is for North Korea, we will not see this relationship anymore,” claimed Yoo, “But we have invested so much effort, time, and money for the past 65 years, so we have to think about it a different way.” Yoo emphasized that we are democratic nations that can focus on something else the two nations have in common and share together for the future.

The lecture concluded with Deputy Consul-General Kim and Dr. Yoo receiving several questions during the Q & A session, including clarification on potential barriers to the reunification of Korea, such as the cost of reunification and the general public of South Korea’s stance on reunification, citing the previous historic example of East and West Germany in the past.

An audience member thanked Dr. Yoo for her presentation. “Her comments and thoughts were very insightful, I hope to see more Korean related events at UTSA,” she added.

Yoo’s lecture was profoundly timed considering the current events going on between the United States and both South and North Korea and the process of the reconciliation of the Korean Peninsula.