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Interview of the President by Jei Choon Yun, KBS TV, Korea

Map Room

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2:15 P.M. EDT

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Q You are scheduled to go pay a visit to Korea next month. And if you have any particular message to Korean people, let us know, please.

THE PRESIDENT: My message is, one, I'm honored to come back. I'm looking forward to visiting with your President. I'm looking forward to seeing the beautiful country. And I bring a message of friendship. And we've had a long history together. We've got many ties, whether it be economic ties, or political ties, or ties of people on both -- people who live here in America that were born in Korea, and people who got relatives in Korea. There's a lot of ties. And we've had good relations in the past, we'll have good relations in the present and good relations in the future.

Q I'd like to ask you about the -- (inaudible) --. U.S. Agency for Geographic Names recently changed the country code of Dokdo from South Korea to undesignated sovereignty.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Q From the Korean perspective it may be seen as an act of acknowledging the Japanese claim of the ownership of the island. So are you willing to reverse the -- restore the original name or Korean sovereignty?

THE PRESIDENT: First of all, this issue must be solved between South Korea and Japan. Secondly, I asked Secretary Rice to review the data, and I'm pleased to tell you that the data has been -- the whole issue has been restored the way it was seven days ago.

Q Oh, really? Very good.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Q Thank you very much, sir.

In regard to free trade agreement, do you have any specific plan to persuade the Congress leadership into moving forward the approval of FTA within this year?

THE PRESIDENT: First of all, the goal is to get it done this year. I told your President I would like to get it done this year. I am pressing hard. I am constantly talking about the importance of a free trade agreement with Korea to our interests. Yesterday I met with important business leaders of the Korean-U.S. Business Dialogue Council. I, one, made it clear to them that I am very much for this; and secondly, I made it clear to them that we've got to work a common strategy, that they've got to help us on Capitol Hill move the issue.

I've told the President I make no promises, except I'll push as hard as I possibly can to get it done before I leave the presidency.

Q Now I'd like to ask you about Korean-North Korea issue.

THE PRESIDENT: Please.

Q And the verification protocol is not completed yet. If you don't have the protocol until the 11th of next month, are you willing to reverse the process to rescind North Korea as state sponsor of terror?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, our position is very clear, and we've made that clear to our partners in the six-party talks, including your government, that we expect there to be a verification regime that we're comfortable with -- not only us, but that we're both comfortable with. After all, we're partners. And it's verification not only of a plutonium program, but verification of a highly enriched uranium program, and verification of proliferation activities.

And it's very important for us to get confidence that we're being told the full extent of -- the questions we're answering are being -- asking are being answered fully. And so verification is a very important test as to whether or not North Korea wants to honor the agreement that they agreed to with all of us.

And so, you know, some say, well, he just wants to move forward. And the answer is, no, I want to have results. And it's very important for us to get something that we're comfortable with.

Q And do you think the six-party nuclear negotiations can move toward to the third phase of dismantlement during your presidency?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, it all depends on whether or not we can complete the second phase. And that second phase is going to -- what matters in the second phase is whether or not we get a good verification process. There's a lot of people in this country saying, why are you going forward when you can't trust them? And my answer is, why don't we go forward with a process that will enable us to trust them? And so, in order for us to get to the third phase we got to get through the second phase. And I'll answer that question better when North Korea honors their commitments. We'll honor our commitment, but they've got to honor their commitment.

And as you mentioned in your question, are we comfortable with the verification? Well, until we are comfortable, then we don't move forward.

Q Will North Korea give up their nuclear weapons ultimately?

THE PRESIDENT: Do I think they will? That's the question. That's the fundamental question. And I can't answer that for you. I know that it's good to put a process in place that gives them a chance to, in return for a different relationship with all of us. In the past it was, okay, we'll give you something, North Korea, and hope you respond. What's changed is, you must honor your agreement and then you can have a better relation.

And there's a lot -- North Korea is the most sanctioned nation in the world. And we've agreed to take them off just one aspect of many of the other restrictions placed on them, if they perform. And so, to answer your question, I hope they give up their weapons programs. It will be good for the North Korean people if they do. There will be a different relationship between the United States and all the parties involved if the leader makes that choice. But it's his choice to make. We've made our choice -- South Korea and the United States, China, Japan and Russia have made our choice.

Q This sense that normalization of relations between U.S. and North Korea is still a long way to go. Do you have any plan to establish liaison offices in Pyongyang and Washington?

THE PRESIDENT: No.

Q No?

THE PRESIDENT: No, we don't. Our focus is on this relationship that -- with North Korea, bound in the six-party talks.

Is that good? Very good.

Q Thank you very much.

THE PRESIDENT: You made some news today.

Q Yes. Thank you very much for the news.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, absolutely.

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