Lessons from Korea

Drawing from her experience in Korea over the decades, Stephens will reflect on South Korea’s extraordinary economic rise, and its democratic and cultural transformation. She will describe North Korea’s alternate journey, and relate both to the role the United States and other powers have played – or tried to play – since the Korean War. What lessons can we draw – positive or negative – from the Korean experience about outsider efforts at nation-building, about the relationship between economic development, human rights, and democratization, about the role of security alliances and development assistance? And what does the future hold for the still-divided Korean Peninsula, and for a North Korean leadership determined to be accepted as a nuclear power?

Kathleen Stephens was American ambassador to the Republic of Korea from 2008 to 2011. She first went to South Korea in the 1970s as a Peace Corps volunteer, teaching for two years in rural Korea. She returned in the 1980s as a diplomat at the U.S. Embassy in Seoul covering South Korea’s tumultuous political scene. Before her nomination to be U.S. ambassador to Seoul, Stephens was Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs from 2005 to 2007, involved in the Six-Party Talks efforts with North Korea.

Ambassador Stephens was the first Korean-speaker and first woman to hold the top U.S. job in Seoul. Her Korean-language blog was published in book form in 2010. She is the recipient of numerous awards in Korea, including the Hangul Goodwill Ambassador, Sejong Cultural Prize, Kwanghwa Diplomatic Order of Merit, and YWCA Woman Leader Special Prize. She was named the State Department’s Linguist of the Year in 2010.

Stephens’ other diplomatic assignments over three decades included postings in India, China, and fracturing Yugoslavia. She was U.S. Consul General in Belfast, Northern Ireland from 1995 to 1998. In Washington, she was Director for European Affairs during the Clinton Administration, negotiator on post-conflict issues on the Balkans as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs (2003-2005), and acting Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs (2012).

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