**CHOSUN conference**

**Korea 17 May 2023**

It is an honour to be one of the chosun few at this famous and distinguished conference

and after too long an absence it is exhilarating to be back in Korea

At dinner with President Yoon last night we discussed Korea’s status as a global pivotal state, in the world’s pivotal region

at a pivotal moment in the history of the early 21st century

What do we mean when we say Korea is pivotal to the great debates of our time? It is obvious

This was where national destiny once turned on a coin, where choices were made in the decades after the second world war

that turned Korea into the powerhouse of today – the great Kpop inventing Kdrama exporting poster child for LCD

I don’t mean Liquid Crystal display, though no doubt that was invented here too

along with the printing press, the machine gun, the trouser press – everything seems to have been invented here

I mean Liberal Capitalist democracy

and the tragedy is that so many other countries failed to make that choice

failed to pivot in the 1950s towards liberal capitalist democracy.

Leave aside North Korea.

There are countries around the world that had the same per capita GDP as Korea in the 1950s

I am too polite to mention them

but they failed – through lack of political leadership – to make the brave choices, for free markets and for democracy, that have created the extraordinary Korea of today

And this region – the Asia-Pacific region – is obviously pivotal to the future of the world because this is where we can expect to see so much of the economic growth

and the resulting tensions between the great powers

in the decades to come.

This is also a pivotal moment because I am afraid that in some ways the world has got more tense and more dangerous since I was last in Seoul

It was back in 2009 and the key speaker was Bill Clinton who had a mesmeric effect on some members of my staff

 We then went up to the DMZ and we looked out at that desolate landscape of the North

and we were told that people were eating grass to survive

I frankly could not believe that the communist dictator would actually make good his threats to create a nuclear weapon

It seemed outlandish, comical – like something out of Team America

Today, sadly, it has come to pass, with detonations and missile tests that threaten the security of the whole region

And I want to stress therefore that the UK will always stand shoulder to shoulder with you

with the people of Korea

in rejecting nuclear blackmail, in sanctioning North Korea

and in putting pressure not just on Pyongyang but on those whose indulgence makes this madness possible

 We must be frank about this – and I speak as a sinophile, a confirmed admirer of Chinese culture and civilisation

In the last 14 years we have seen the emergence of a different China

more assertive, more ambitious, more challenging

and today the world seems divided

between the democracies and the autocracies

We see an alignment between Russia, China, North Korea

We see an alignment between the US, the UK, the EU, Nato countries and of course Korea, Japan, Australia

and I believe that it was of immense significance that last June president Yoon came to Madrid and became the first Korean president to attend a Nato summit

and in between these two rival alignments of nations – smeared with blood in the sand of the global arena – we have the heroic people of Ukraine and their president Zelensky

fighting not just for their hearths and homes but for freedom everywhere

and that is why the war in Ukraine is the pivotal conflict at the pivotal moment

because it is a symbol of the struggle that is now going on between two ideas of government

two ways of living

liberal capitalist democracy versus autocracy

that is taking place here in the Asia Pacific as much as in the borderlands of eastern Europe

Let us be candid – and you have brought me all this way to be candid

There are many who think that this is turning into a struggle between two centres of global power

and let us leave aside Moscow and London and Pyongyang and Seoul and Paris and Berlin and all the other actors

 Strip this down to its essentials and it is a titanic arm wrestle between Washington and Beijing

Or that is how it seems. That is how it is presented.

There is a school of thought which holds that we are witnessing the transition of empires

The Persians gave way to the Greeks, the Greeks to the Romans, and so on until the second world war, when the British gave way to the Americans

and now the Americans are – or so it is claimed – about to give way to the Chinese

and there are those who argue that such transitions never happen without conflict

It is more than ten years ago that an American professor called Graham T Allison wrote a famous essay in which he explained the logic of this conflict

 by reference to the Peloponnesian war – the 5 century BC struggle between Athens and Sparta

 He called it the Thucydides trap, after the great Athenian historian of that war

and he quoted Thucydides’ observation on  the origins of the conflict

 “It was the rise of Athens, and the fear that this instilled in Sparta, that made war inevitable”

 And he postulated that a great hegemonic power is never able to let go easily

 He went through history, and he found plenty of examples that seemed to bear out his argument

 that when an existing or dominant hegemon is threatened by the rise of a new power

the old hegemon will attack, or at the very least that a conflict will be provoked with disastrous consequences

and that argument – that there is something inevitable about a conflict between the US and China – has been all too influential, both in Washington and Beijing

I am here to disagree with the learned professor

I don’t believe there is anything inevitable about the so-called trap

I don’t believe in the inevitability of conflict – the risk, yes, but not the inevitablity

In fact, I don’t even believe in the transition of hegemonic power from America to China

because I would go so far as to say that prof Allison has missed the crucial point about the conflict between Athens and Sparta

 Can you remember the differences between those two societies?

  Sparta – closed, racist, militaristic, with a most peculiar education system – they dropped new born babies in vats of wine

and if they cried they decided they weren’t tough enough for Sparta

and a general preference for self-reliance over free trade

autarkeia being the closest Greek equivalent to Juche

  Contrast Athens – open, free-trading, welcoming of talent

 from around the world

a place that gave birth to an amazing flowering of every art and science and that produced architectural masterpieces that still dazzle new generations

  Can you think of any pair of countries – also speaking the same language – that are a bit like Sparta and Athens today?

I’ll give you a clue – they are divided at the 38th parallel

  Sparta was the oligarchy, Athens was the democracy

and the reason the Spartans had to spend such a huge proportion of their GDP on defence – with military service lasting from the age of 7 to 60 – was because they were engaged in constant internal repression

 They had a subject race of slaves, called helots, and the reason they had to be so tough was that they kept them in place by continual warfare

So the first and most important point about the Thucydides trap is that the analogy is defective

The learned American professor has got it upside down

He says that America is Sparta and China is Athens

I say that is utter rubbish

America is the great arsenal of democracy, and America’s allies are the great constellation of democracies

and it is because we are democracies that we are going to prevail and thrive – culturally, morally, politically, economically

Why did Putin invade Ukraine? Why was he so mad as to violate international law and inflict so much suffering

not just on Ukraine but on so many Russians who have now lost their lives in a pointless conflict?

Precisely because Ukraine has chosen to be a Liberal Capitalist democracy

precisely because the people of Ukraine have looked at Russia – a kind of kleptocratic oligarchy

 and they have said no – we can do better than that

So for the last 32 years Putin has seen this young and beautiful country on his border to his south, growing more prosperous

and more successful, and more like the west

and he looks at Poland – and don’t forget that Poland and Ukraine are not just neighbours, but have a history that has been intertwined for centuries

 and he sees that Poland is now on course to be one of the largest economies in Europe

and he can see that this could just as well happen to Ukraine

and he can’t tolerate it. He can’t tolerate the possibility of that success

because the real threat to him is that the people of Russia will look at Ukraine

and say to Putin why have you been stealing from us, why have you been holding us back?

 It wasn’t about Nato – there was never any chance of Ukraine joining Nato, not until Putin invaded

(Ukrainian membership of Nato is now inevitable, by the way, since Putin has demolished the last argument against it)

Putin invaded out of a revanchist desire to rebuild the old Soviet empire and to crush a nascent democracy not because it was a military threat but because it was a moral rebuke to Putinism

He will fail. He will be defeated, because he has brilliantly managed to disprove his own ludicrous thesis about Ukraine

No one in history has done more to reveal the patriotism of the Ukrainians than Putin

No one has done more to intensify that spirit into an unconquerable national will for victory

You can tell that Putin will fail because his top aides are already quarrelling like rats in a sack

Was Prigozhin really prepared to sell out the Russian army to protect the Wagner group?

Who knows – but the mere fact that this is plausible shows the decay in the morale of the Russian high command

 I want to thank the government of Korea and president Yoon for the staunch support that you have given

 I can promise you – the world saw the position that Korea took

and they saw plenty of other countries that were not quite so brave or principled

  I believe that what you are doing is the right thing for the whole world – for the Asia-Pacific region as much as for Europe

  When the Ukrainians win – and they will – the signal will be sent that you cannot use force to exert your will on your neighbours

  and so if it is true – which I sometimes doubt – that Beijing really intends to use violence against Taiwan

 and to launch a risky seaborne invasion of that island

 where the people are also choosing a liberal, capitalist, democratic free market future

and if the Chinese government had been secretly calculating – like Putin – that with their overwhelming numerical superiority they would be able to achieve victory within days

 then the war in Ukraine will have come as a shock

a terrible lesson – just in time – of how badly things can go wrong

Nobody expected the US to provide so much support

Nobody expected the British and other European countries to do so much and so fast

and I believe that the sight of those Russian forces scuttling from Kiev, scuttling from Kharkiv and Kherson will have had a massive and salutary effect on the thinking of anyone planning an attack on peaceful and blameless Taiwan

 and that is a good thing

That is a great outcome for peace and stability in this region and around the world

Most importantly of all a Ukrainian victory means peace and freedom for Ukraine

for an innocent European nation that had done nothing – nothing – to deserve the barbarism of Putin’s attack

I cannot think of a clearer case of right and wrong, of good and evil

and I am honoured at this Chosun conference to be here with the President’s wife, Olena Zelenska

 I pay tribute to you both, to your fortitude

and to the inspirational leadership of Volodomyr Zelensky

slava ukraini!

  When the Ukrainians win those incredible fighters will show that after decades of drift and apathy and being pushed around

 the west has been willing to stand up for democracy

and that we are willing to defend it

 We do so not out of some abstract philosophical love of government of the people by the people for the people

 I truly believe that it is the Liberal capitalist democracies – the LCDs – that by and large produce more innovations, more Nobel prizes, better restaurants, more smash hit pop songs, blockbuster global movies and enduring works of literature

and if you want proof – look at music. It was true that a few years ago I was said to have been dancing gangnam style at chequers with david Cameron

It was embarrassing. My children thought it was lame. But imagine if we had been dancing to a north Korean tune or a Russian techno-funk melody

It’s just inconceivable

It’s the liberal capitalist democracies that write the soundtrack of the world, just as it’s the liberal capitalist democracies that produce the scientific breakthroughs

you doubt me? proof – who has been vaccinated? who had sputnik?

and there is a reason for this – because it is the LCDs that are open to the world and free-trading and attract the people of talent

and it has always been that way

Some people like to point back to the conflict between Athens and Sparta

 the democracy versus the oligarchy

 open versus closed

and they say – ah, but the Spartans won; and yes, it is true that after Pericles died – killed by the plague – the Athenians made terrible mistakes

 and it is true that they were defeated at Aegospotami in 404 BC

but my friends – have you ever read a work of Spartan history or politics or philosophy or a Spartan scientific treatise?

 of course not – there aren’t any

One of the peculiarities of the Spartans – apart from oppressing their helots and dunking their babies in wine – was that they said as little as possible

  Have you been to Sparta?

There is nothing except the wind blowing the dandelion seeds over a few formless and illegible lumps of stone

It was the Athenians, the democrats, who constantly dared to challenge, to debunk, to satirise and always to come up with something new

It was the Athenians whose legacy is everywhere in the culture and life of the modern world

and the final proof – the knock-down argument in favour of liberal capitalist democracy – is the country in which we meet today

which chose to be liberal, which chose to be open and which has prospered so mightily as a result

I am proud of everything that I have done as Mayor of London and fgn sec and then as PM to deepen our historic partnership

I am mindful of that sheer length of that partnership – more than 140 years

mindful of the graves in Busan of 886 members of the British armed services who fought for your freedom and democracy in that dreadful war

and I believe that now at this pivotal moment we need to do more together

more on defence cooperation, more on green technology, more on nuclear power

Our trade is booming after the miseries of covid – there were so many Bentleys on the way in from the airport that it felt like knightsbridge

but there is so much more we can do

if we were the sales force of some great Korean chaebol, this is the moment when we realise that together we have the market leading product

We have the thing that works, that has historically delivered peace and plenty to the people that adopt it

and all we need to do is rediscover our confidence in this mighty brand

It is called Liberal capitalist democracy

Let us defend it together, let us explain it patiently and calmly to our friends, and let us go out and sell it together around the world

  Thank you all for your kind attention this morning