

Global Peace Forum Korea

The second Global Peace Forum on Korea, held at Columbia University in New York City on Saturday, September 28th. The forum brought together for a day of formal and informal discussion over a hundred scholars, religious leaders, and peace activists from the US, Russia, Canada and Vietnam with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) UN diplomats, and Members of the National Assembly (and numerous civil society activist) from the Republic of Korea (South Korea). The theme this year was "Making Connections: Global Challenges, Korea and Peaceful Coexistence." The meeting opened with a challenge from President Jimmy Carter. "Thank you for coming together to build the international relationships and support that are necessary to complete this process and fulfill the vision and promise of the Singapore Summit for a 'new era of peace and a peaceful land' in Korea."

Human relationships are the foundation of peacebuilding. The challenge in building relationships between Americans and Koreans from both the North and South is formidable. North and South Korea do not have diplomatic relations. Even phone, mail or email connections between the two Koreas is prohibited. The US also does not have diplomatic relations with North Korea and North Korea is one of the countries whose citizens are prohibited from traveling to the US, and a US travel ban makes it illegal for any American to travel to North Korea without a "Special Validation Passport." The travel ban has eliminated all tourism, academic and cultural travel by American to North Korea, although Quakers, Mennonites and a few other non-government organizations have occasionally been allowed to travel to North Korea for small scale humanitarian efforts. With sanctions and travel restrictions, few Americans, South Koreans or other people of the world have ever met a North Korean in person. The Global Peace Forum on Korea was organized to remediate that problem, at least for the participants of the Forum.

The forum was organized primarily by the religious community, with the National Council of Churches (USA), the World Council of Churches (Geneva) and Pax Christi International (full disclosure, Doug Hostetter from the PCI UN Advocacy Team was co-chair of the Planning Committee). At the time of the meeting, negotiations between North Korea and the US was at a standstill. The organizers of the forum wanted to offer a platform where North Korean diplomats could present their perspectives and hear the perspectives of Members of the South Korean National Assembly, as well as religious leaders, scholars and peace activists from around the world.

Out of that amazing mix of scholars, religious leaders, peace activists and government officials who have met now for a second year, we have reached a tentative consensus that we all hoped would be a roadmap for government negotiations to follow: 1. Ending the Korean War. 2. Calling of the US and North Korea to take reciprocal steps to deescalate tensions and normalize relations. 3. Requesting that North Korea actions in disarmament be responded to with reciprocal US lifting of economic sanctions. 4. Calling for the creation of a nuclear free zone on the Korean Peninsula as relations are normalized, and sanctions are lifted.

But the unique aspect of the Global Peace Forum, according a UN official who attended, was that North Korean diplomats engaged informally with the other participants of the Forum. The Forum organizers believe that making those connections and forming personal relations across “enemy lines” are essential for breaking stereotypes of the “other” and help to create trust which is essential for building lasting peace.

We celebrated our unity and affirmation of peace in a water ceremony in which a diplomat from North Korea, a National Assembly member from South Korea and Korean civil society peace activist bowed in front of an altar in which the waters from the North Korea and South Korea had been united in one bowl. Perhaps it was only a symbol, but for the more than 100 participants from 6 countries, it was an affirmation of our commitment to work to build unity and peace on the Korean Peninsula.

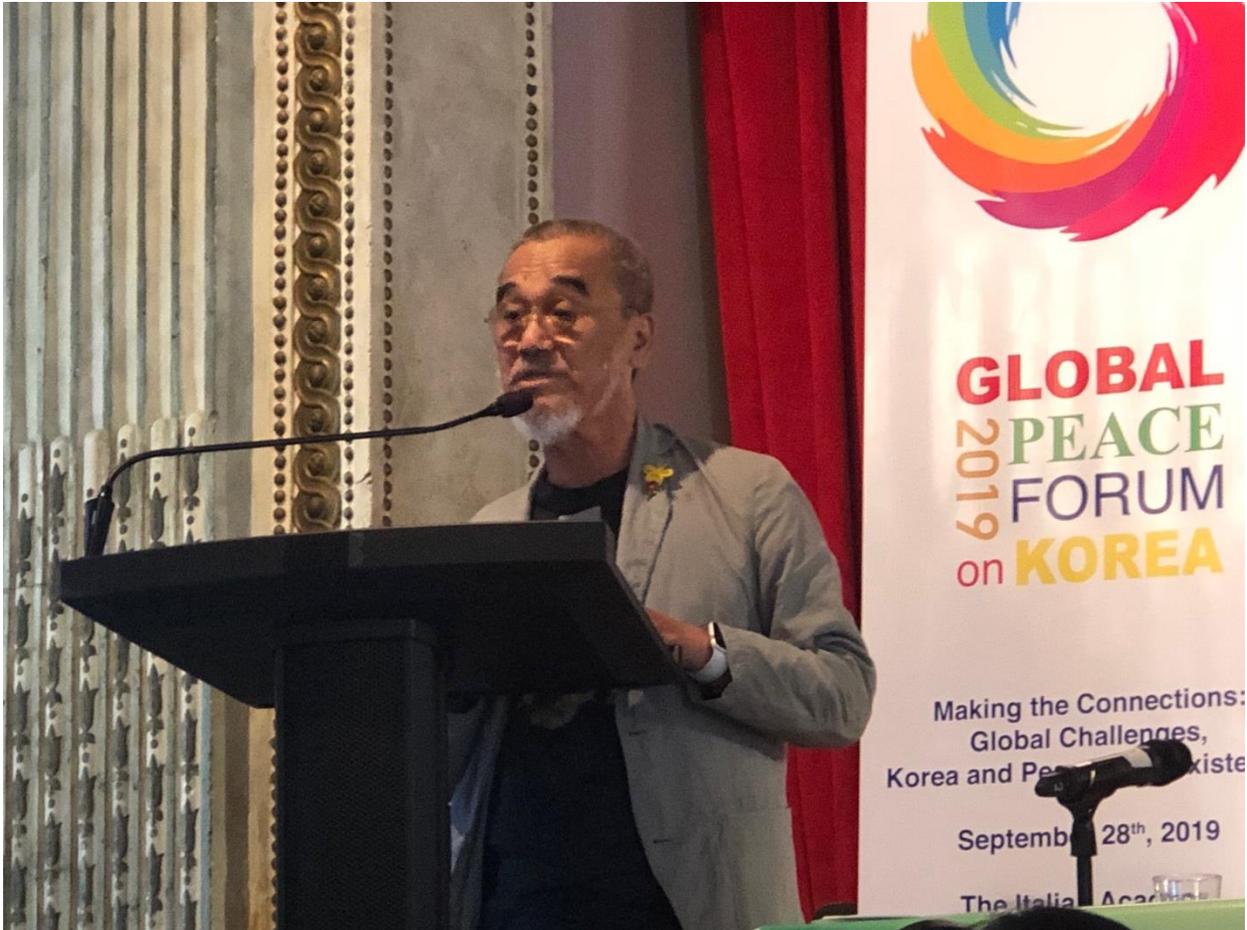


From left: Ri Ki Ho, First Secretary, North Korean Mission to the UN; Kim Won-wung, South Korean, President, Heritage of Korean Independence; Lee Jae-jung, South Korean National Assembly Member.

Photo: Doug Hostetter



Anselmo Lee, founder of Pax Christi, Korea, Doug Hostetter, GPFK Co-Chair, Planning Committee Photo: GPFK



Fr. Mun Kyu Hyun, President, Solidarity for Peace & Reunification, member Pax Christi Korea Photo: Doug Hostetter



Fr. Timothy Graff, Director of Social Concerns Office, Archdiocese of Newark, delivering Greetings from Cardinal Joseph Tobin Photo: Doug Hostetter

Doug Hostetter

UN Representative, Pax Christi International

Co-Chair Planning Committee, Global Peace Forum on Korea