

This column by PCI co-founder, Spencer Kim, appeared in the JoognAng Daily on Thursday, March 23, 2023.

[Column] Dialogue: The Only Path to Understanding

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By Spencer H. Kim /



Thirty-six years ago I helped co-found the Pacific Century Institute (PCI). Our goal was to build “bridges of understanding” between the peoples living on the vast Pacific Rim because we saw the coming century as the “Pacific Century.”

That this is now the Pacific Century is certainly true. But have the peoples on the Pacific Rim increased their understanding of each other? Or are they angry, fearful, mistrusting, and headed for dangerous confrontations? And have the efforts of PCI, and the kinds of initiatives it supported, borne any fruit, or was it all for naught?

I asked myself that question as the Pacific Century Institute held its annual gala dinner in the ultra-luxurious Beverly Hills Hotel in Los Angeles last month to honor the winners of its “Building Bridges Award.” Ewha University was honored for its work in becoming an acknowledged international leader in academia and research. We also honored Donald

Gregg, former US Ambassador to Korea, former President of the Korea Society, and former Chairman of PCI, for a lifetime of work.

Sitting among the glitz – was it all just a show? For all that the Pacific Rim has achieved in prosperity and sophistication so far in the Pacific Century, will it now reverse all that progress in snarling ignorance, and sometimes, arrogance?

But I listened closely to what Donald Gregg had to say that night, and I was reminded of the key points he has made all his life. In ignorance, potential adversaries will demonize each other. Demonization only increases the chance of confrontation. The only path to reverse demonization is dialogue. Only by talking can you go from ignorance to understanding. And it's not enough to just understand what your prospective adversary wants, you also have to understand what he needs – no matter if you think he “deserves” it or not. And he has to understand what you need. Only when each side is going to get what they need, can they cooperate.

There is a matrix of many moving parts on the Pacific Rim right now – China's assertiveness, North Korea's nuclear weapons, South Korea's fear of North Korea's nuclear weapons, Japan's remilitarization, disputes in the South China Sea, the future of Taiwan, a US-UK-Australia weapons/intelligence alliance, historical grievances, the rise of the ASEAN countries' relevance, the impacts of climate change, etc.

Now is the time for all parties to maximize their dialogue, and resist the easy siren song of demonizing those who don't agree with them. To talk is not to be “soft”; to talk is not to agree; but dialogue is the only way to separate need from want, and solution from confrontation.

A serendipitous by-product of the PCI dinner was the gathering of PCI board members for the dinner. Several, expert in the nuclear situation on the Korean peninsula, and its global context, accepted the invitation of the Joong Ang Ilbo to be interviewed on the subject. The interviews (published in Korean and English) with [Siegfried Hecker](#), [Robert Carlin](#), Robert Gallucci, and [Glen Ford](#) make for good reading. All came to two conclusions: first, South Korea needs dialogue with the North, and the North with the South; second, not only does South Korea not need its own nuclear weapon, the process of obtaining them would increase, not decrease, the danger of nuclear conflagration and do significant harm to the South's economy as well as its global reputation and influence.

And so, I recommitted to PCI's purpose – building bridges of understanding. Because if we wallow in mutual ignorance and mutual demonization we are going to see the glorious Pacific Century shatter. Ended not by some outside force, but because the very peoples of the

Pacific Rim could not sustain a dialogue among themselves that allowed them to mutually find solutions that met their core needs.

The Pacific Century Institute's website is: <https://pacificcenturyinst.org/>



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