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The PCI News



2026 PCI Building Bridges Awardees

The Pacific Century Institute established the Building Bridges Award in 2000 to honor one individual, and one institution (represented by an individual,) who have exemplified PCI’s vision of bringing the people of the Pacific Rim closer by building bridges of understanding.

The Pacific Century Institute held its Annual Awards Dinner on Thursday, March 5, 2026, at the iconic The Beverly Hills Hotel. The evening brought together leaders from government, academia, and the policy community to celebrate individuals and organizations dedicated to strengthening understanding across the Pacific Rim.

This year, PCI presented its Building Bridges Award to James T. Laney, former U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Korea, and to the National Committee on North Korea (NCNK), represented by its President, Keith Luse. The award recognizes those who exemplify PCI’s mission of bringing the people of the Pacific Rim closer together through dialogue, cooperation, and mutual understanding.



(Auxiliary Bishop Matthew G. Elshoff giving benediction, Beverly Hills, CA)

The evening opened with welcoming remarks from PCI Chair Kathleen Stephens, former U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Korea. The program was emceed by PCI President Raymond Burghardt, while the benediction was delivered by Matthew G. Elshoff, Auxiliary Bishop of Los Angeles for the Our Lady of the Angels Pastoral Region.

PCI Board Member Charles Morrison introduced Ambassador Laney, recognizing his decades of leadership in U.S.–Korea relations. Although Ambassador Laney was unable to attend in person, his daughters accepted the award on his behalf, and his recorded remarks were warmly received by the audience.

In his message, Ambassador Laney reflected on nearly eight decades of engagement with Korea, beginning with his arri-



(Video recording of Ambassador James T. Laney delivering a speech, Beverly Hills, CA)

val in the country as a young U.S. Army counterintelligence officer shortly after World War II. He spoke about witnessing Korea’s remarkable transformation from a war-torn nation into one of the world’s most prosperous democracies—often described as the “Miracle on the Han.” He emphasized the enduring importance of strong bridges of understanding between the United States and Korea, while also noting the challenges and evolving dynamics in international relations.

PCI Board Member Robert Carlin introduced the second honoree, NCNK. In accepting the award, NCNK President Keith Luse highlighted the organization’s more than twenty years of work fostering informed dialogue and principled engagement related to North Korea.

Originally established as a humanitarian bridge between the United States and North Korea, NCNK has become a leading network of experts—including nuclear scientists, former government officials, humanitarian aid workers, and scholars—dedicated to improving understanding of the Korean Peninsula. Luse emphasized the importance of dialogue and accurate information in reducing the risk of conflict and promoting more effective policymaking.

“Our work is rooted in the belief that engagement and understanding are essential to preventing conflict,” Luse said. “Greater dialogue among all stakeholders is critical to reducing tensions and avoiding miscalculation on the Korean Pen-



Board Member Opinion Editorial



(Former ROK President Moon Jae-in, former First Lady Kim Jung-sook)

insula.”

The evening’s honored guest was Moon Jae-in, former President of the Republic of Korea, who joined the program to assist in presenting the awards. PCI Board Member Nathan Park introduced President Moon to the audience and interpreted his speech.



(President Moon delivering a speech with Nathan Park, Beverly Hills, CA)

President Moon emphasized the importance of continued dialogue and citizen diplomacy at a time of rising global tensions. Reflecting on his presidency, he spoke about the urgent need to sustain efforts for peace on the Korean Peninsula, noting that while past diplomatic initiatives created an unprecedented period of dialogue among South Korea, North Korea, and the United States, the work of building lasting peace remains unfinished. He underscored that peace requires perseverance and cooperation, calling for renewed commitment to inclusiveness, democratic values, and international collaboration.

Moon further highlighted the importance of people-to-people engagement, praising PCI’s role in fostering understanding between Korea and the United States and recognizing the institute’s Project Bridge youth ambassadorship program for cultivating future leaders committed to cooperation and peace across the Pacific.



(Top: President Moon with BBA Awardee Keith Luse; Bottom: President Moon with BBA Awardee representative Mary Laney, Beverly Hills, CA)

During the ceremony, President Moon joined Ambassador Stephens in presenting the Building Bridges Award to Ambassador Laney’s daughters and to Keith Luse on behalf of NCNK. In his remarks, President Moon praised Ambassador Laney’s lifelong commitment to Korea and commended NCNK’s efforts to deepen understanding of North Korea among policymakers and scholars.

The evening concluded with a celebration of the enduring importance of dialogue, cooperation, and leadership in strengthening relationships across the Pacific community.

Please visit pacificcenturyinst.org for more information.



Board Member Opinion Editorial

This opinion editorial by PCI co-founder, Spencer H. Kim, appeared in the Korea Daily on April 5, 2026.

Statesman—A Word Korea Needs Right Now

by Spencer H. Kim

There is a unique word in English that somehow doesn't exist in Korean. I think we ought to change that.

It is a word of high meaning — statesman. Here's how the English-language books define it:

A statesman or stateswoman is a respected, skilled and experienced figure. In many respects the opposite of a politician. Politicians are thought of as people who say or do things to get elected or to gain power. A statesman is someone who does everything for the common good. To call a person a statesman is a mark of high regard for that person's integrity. An "elder statesman" is a term often defined as an older politician or advisor who is retired from office and thought to be above normal politics.

In the United States, for example, George Washington is always called a statesman. He refused to become "King" of the US when offered the title and stepped down after two terms as president saying no man should have such power for longer than eight years. In his Farewell Address to the nation he warned the US never to become so entangled with foreign powers that it would lose its independence.

In 51 BC, the famous Roman writer and philosopher Cicero published his work *On the Republic*. His subject was what made a true statesman. Cicero wrote that a great statesman did not have to descend from aristocracy, but he must have virtue, a sense of justice, and wisdom. He must also have dignity, temperance, generosity and be magnanimous.

Imagine my surprise when I looked up "statesman" in the English to Korean Dictionary and found the definition simply as "politician." But that does not mean that Korea can't have statesmen and that it doesn't need them. It needs them now perhaps more than ever.

Asia, and the world, is in a time of change and maybe confusion. What is the way forward? As for Korea, it will need all the wisdom it can muster. And it should come from all sides of the political spectrum — conservative, progressive, and middle. Only coherent and consistent policies will allow Korea to be both secure and prosperous in the coming decades. And true statesmen will point out that flipping policies every few years between conservatives and progressives will not

achieve coherence, consistency, security or prosperity.

My suggestion is that it is now time for Korea to be pragmatic. Leaders of all the factions making up the full political spectrum need to put aside their differences and, on the question of national security at least, sit down together and be statesmen. They had better find a way for Korea to create a coherent national security strategy and implement it consistently over the coming decades, no matter which political party occupies the presidency.

As Canadian Prime Minister Carney put it so colorfully in his now famous speech at Davos, if Korea as a middle power can't use its considerable economic, political, diplomatic, and cultural assets to get itself a seat at the table, it will be on the menu.

And as history shows, Korea has been too often on the menu. The people now in power across the political spectrum must be pragmatic and come together to find the way for Korea to have a seat at the table.

We know Korea needs statesmen. Now we just have to find the right word for it in Korean.

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This opinion editorial by PCI board member, S. Nathan Park, appeared in the Foreign Policy on April 2, 2026.

U.S.-South Korea Relations Area at Breaking Point

The Iranian war has confirmed how little Washington cares for its ally's welfare.

by S. Nathan Park

Few U.S. experts are as respected in South Korea as James Laney, former U.S. ambassador to the country. Laney first went to Korea in 1947 as an army intelligence officer and returned in 1959 as a Methodist missionary. Two of his three daughters were born in the country, which was recovering from the devastating Korean War. After serving as president of Emory University for 16 years, Laney served as the U.S. ambassador in Seoul from 1993 to 1997, playing an important role in diffusing the North Korean nuclear crisis in 1994. Yonsei University, one of South Korea's most prestigious universities, has a James Laney chair professorship as well as a James Laney lecture series, which features the most prominent minds in U.S.- Korea relations.

So it was no small news when the 98-year-old former

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Board Member Opinion Editorial

U.S.-South Korea Relations Area at Breaking Point

by S. Nathan Park

(Cont. from pg 3)

ambassador offered a blunt assessment of the current state of the South Korea-U.S. alliance on March 5, as he received the 2026 Building Bridges Award from the Pacific Century Institute (where I am a board member). In an event usually filled with fluffy grace notes, Laney’s prerecorded remarks offered a cold-eyed analysis that left the audience—which included former South Korean President Moon Jae-in—stunned:

“The [United States] has unilaterally turned the bridge [of the U.S.-Korea alliance] into a drawbridge, with controls only on the United States side. Even when the bridge is down, the gates, that is, tariffs, are controlled by Washington, and the entire edifice operates at the whim of a United States president.

“It grieves me to say it. Boy, I never thought I would have to say it. But I think Korea must begin to project its future on its own terms. Of course, it will do so wisely and prudently, but its interests are no longer congruent with those of the White House.

“What this means for troop command, independent nuclear capability and relations with China will require political skill and deftness of extraordinary range. ... [U.S. President Donald] Trump has made it abundantly clear that the [United States] is solely concerned with its own interest. Anything else is for the gullible.”

Laney verbalized what many Korea analysts have been thinking but were too afraid to say: the U.S.-South Korea alliance is close to rupturing, and Washington is at fault. Thanks to the Trump administration’s actions, Seoul must reconsider the fundamental building blocks of the alliance, including U.S. troop presence in South Korea, a nuclear umbrella instead of its own nuclear armament, and participation in U.S. deterrence of China.

One may disagree with Laney’s prescription, but his diagnosis is unassailable: Trump has shown no regard toward the value of the alliance. Trump’s 25 percent tariff against South Korea’s exports is a flagrant violation of the 2007 U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement, as well as the 2025 negotiation between the two countries to set tariffs at 15 percent. The latter agreement was coupled with South Korea’s pledge to invest up to \$350 billion in U.S. industries, but the Trump administration could not even gracefully accept the financial boon.

In September 2025, U.S. immigration authorities conducted a thuggish raid on a Hyundai factory that was under construction in Georgia. The South Korean public watched in shock as hundreds of South Korean engineers, most of whom had valid employment visas, were shackled in chains on live television. Even Chosun Ilbo, South Korea’s leading conservative daily paper with a staunch pro-U.S. stance, wrote in an editorial that the raid was “unacceptable between allies” and “raised fundamental questions as to what the United States means by ‘alliance.’”

Trump’s reckless war may be the straw that breaks the camel’s back, pushing the U.S.-South Korea alliance to the point of no return. Laney prepared his remarks before Trump began the attack on Iran, but his warning proved unusually prescient.

The Iran war has imposed significant costs on South Korea. More than 70 percent of South Korea’s crude oil imports pass through the Strait of Hormuz, which is now blockaded. So dire is the petroleum shortage in South Korea that the government has limited the operation of government-owned vehicles and is weighing restriction on driving—a drastic measure unseen since the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

Petroleum by-products are also affected. With no crude oil to process, South Korea’s refineries have been shutting down one by one, leading to a critical shortage of naphtha—the raw ingredient for all plastic products, including paint and plastic bags. The same is happening with helium, a by-product of liquefied natural gas and an essential material for semiconductor manufacturing. South Korea’s stock market had been flying high thanks to its world-leading semiconductor companies, but the possibility of losing up to 90 percent of its helium imports from Qatar has sent its market tumbling.

But the intangible costs of the war may be even harder. For the first time in its existence as an independent nation, South Korea is genuinely doubting whether the United States can in fact make good on its security guarantee. The Iran war was the moment when the U.S. military was supposed to show its might on a real-life battlefield. But since the rubber met the road, the United States has been reduced to watching helplessly as Iran blockades the Strait of Hormuz and Iranian missiles hit the glittering skyscrapers of Dubai and oil refineries in Saudi Arabia.

To be sure, South Korea has a much stronger self-defense capability than the United Arab Emirates or Saudi Arabia. (The UAE, in fact, uses South Korea’s M-SAM Cheongung-II



Board Member Op-Ed—PCI Junior Fellowship

missile defense system.) But it only takes a short mental jump for South Koreans to imagine a potential conflict between China and Taiwan, and Chinese missiles raining down on the high-rises in Seoul because of the U.S. military presence in South Korea.

One move in particular made the Trump administration seem pathetic to South Koreans. Because of his inability to prevail over Iran, Trump had to resort to redeploying the United States’s Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system from South Korea to the Middle East, while begging South Korea to send its navy to the Persian Gulf. The redeployment of THAAD is particularly galling for South Koreans; in 2017, after allowing the United States to deploy THAAD on South Korean territory despite China’s objections, Seoul suffered boycotts and trade restrictions imposed by Beijing. These wreaked havoc on large South Korean companies that were operating in China, such as Lotte, while the United States (then under the first Trump administration) stood pat and did nothing.

What good is the U.S. security guarantee against China when the United States cannot even handle a middle power such as Iran? What was the point of suffering through China’s economic retaliation to deploy THAAD in the name of upholding the U.S.-South Korea alliance when the United States makes a mockery of that suffering by unilaterally pulling THAAD to a different corner of the world? What good is a guarantor that asks you to spend your resources to cover the liability it created?

For many South Koreans, the logical move seems to be what Laney counsels: take full control of the South Korean military (over which the United States currently has joint wartime operational control,) develop nuclear weapons, and seek better relations with China while downgrading the U.S. alliance to a transactional relationship.

From a U.S. perspective, there is no good time for weakened alliance, but this moment could not be worse. In a world where China is the top geopolitical rival of the United States, South Korea may well be the U.S.’s most indispensable ally. Camp Humphreys in Pyeongtaek, South Korea, is the largest overseas U.S. military base, and the closest one to mainland China.

In nearly all future-oriented technology industries where China is poised to overtake the United States—including semiconductors, electric vehicle batteries, nuclear power, and advanced shipbuilding—South Korea holds technology and capacity that the United States simply does not have. For too long, Washington has arrogantly assumed that

Seoul could not afford to walk away from the alliance. It should have been asking if the United States could afford not to have South Korea as an ally.

Rupture in the U.S.-South Korea alliance is not a foregone conclusion. But to forestall this unwanted future, Washington must begin a full reverse from its current path of economic sanctions over allies and military adventurism that disrupts the global supply chain. The full reverse must come from all component parts of the U.S. government. Congress must exercise its oversight, and the judiciary must continue declaring Trump’s unilateral tariffs and undemocratic power grabs illegal.

The same is true for U.S. foreign-policy experts. It is a failure of the Korea expert community in Washington that a 98-year-old former ambassador is virtually the only one with the courage to speak up about the damage Trump is causing to the alliance, while the leading think tanks are cowed into silence. If nothing is done to stop Trump, Laney’s dire predictions will become grim reality.

PCI Board Members, Founders and Fellows often contribute to the media. The opinions expressed are solely those of the individuals involved and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Pacific Century Institute.

Junior Fellow



Caroline Kearney is a PhD candidate in Korean Studies at Yonsei University, where her dissertation analyzes DPRK state media to assess shifts in the regime’s diplomatic signaling toward the U.S.

She is also a Spring 2026 Research Associate at the Center for Global Security Research at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, where her work focuses on nuclear safety and risk reduction cooperation with North Korea.

As a PCI Junior Fellow, she will spend Summer 2026 at Middlebury Language Schools completing an eight-week immersive Korean language program.

Previously, she was a U.S.-Asia Grand Strategy Predoctoral Fellow at the University of Southern California’s Korean Studies Institute. She has authored analysis for NK Pro, the Institute for Security and Development Policy, and the Jeju Peace Institute. Prior to her academic work, she organized dialogues and workshops on Korean Peninsula issues at an NGO in Cambodia.



Project Bridge Study Tour

This year’s Project Bridge Study Tour to South Korea took place from March 28 to April 9. During the trip, the Youth Ambassadors deepened their understanding of international relations, strengthened their leadership skills, and built meaningful connections across the United States and the Pacific. Below are their brief reflections on the experience.

Clement Chen— Junior at La Cañada High School

“My trip to South Korea with Project Bridge really hit me with the realization of how lucky I am to be an American and go to a school like La Canada High School. Before the trip, I assumed my situation was like everyone else’s and took for granted everything I called “normal”. I met high schoolers in Korea who are literally studying from 6:30 am until 3:30 am the next morning. It was a total reality shock. Hearing their schedules and the hard work they shared made me realize that if those students went to a high school in LA or anywhere in the US, they would easily be at the top of any class. It is honestly just pure luck that I was born into a life with so many opportunities and so much flexibility, while they have to work ten times harder just to achieve much smaller goals within their own communities.

To be a Youth Ambassador is to place myself in someone’s shoes and realize the life I have is truly special. All it takes is a simple, honest conversation to flip someone’s perspective, whether talking to a student from rural Montana or a student in Seoul. This trip has made me beyond just interested in diplomacy: now it’s a burning passion. I am not just looking for a career for myself; I want to use the education and the life I have been given to serve my country as a way to express my gratitude to be an American and continue to build bigger bridges. I want to be a diplomat who makes a real impact because I know exactly how much value there is in the opportunities I have been given.”

Joshua Her—Junior at John Marshall High School

“During the Project Bridge study tour I realized that even though I had lived in Korea for a long time I had mostly been observing rather than truly connecting with my surroundings. What stood out most to me were the moments that made my identity feel more personal and real especially carving my own name during the Hangeul stamp workshop in *Jeonju Hanok* Village and taking part in a once in a lifetime Coming of Age Ceremony at *Yeungnam* University. Both experiences made me reflect on belonging in a way I had not before since they were traditions I had never fully taken part in. At *Naesosa* Temple completing the 108 prostrations brought me into a state of peace and gave me space to reflect on my life and values especially what it means to live fully and care for others. It felt like something beyond religion more like a quiet sense of clarity. Visiting industrial sites like Hyundai Motor

Company and POSCO shifted my perspective on how much of Korea’s identity is shaped by systems I usually overlook while standing at the border from the *Odusan* Unification Observatory made the division between North and South Korea feel immediate and real. As someone who grew up in *Jeju* Island the southernmost part of the country being at one of the northernmost points of South Korea gave me a different sense of how connected and complex the country really is. Overall, this tour showed me parts of Korea I had never truly seen before and helped me understand my own connection to it in a deeper way.”



(Top: PB YAs with ‘Coming of Age’ participants at Yeungnam University, Daegu, South Korea; Bottom: PB YAs at HD Hyundai, Ulsan, South Korea)

Amy Lucha—Junior at Theodore Roosevelt High School

“Each day in Korea was a new experience that I will never forget, especially with how many pictures I took of the scenery and the people I was able to connect with. I made good friends with some people from New York and we would laugh all the time that we were together. We met such sweet guides that truly made each day so much more memorable despite our full itineraries of activities. Even through our learning experiences, there was always something that made it fun and many activities being some of the first time things like working with the park rangers who were so sweet and kind our whole time with them. Or the coming of age ceremony in *hanboks*, which was already a once in a lifetime experience but also being their first American foreigner group.



Project Bridge Study Tour

Then, most of our favorite part, meeting with the students from Poongsan high school and partnering with one student each and we were all able to connect with one another despite the little time we had together. I personally loved my partner, Jang Myeonyong. We talked so much about our lives and what it's like where we live and she bought me so many snacks as a gift goodbye. Having so much time in Seoul was also really fun and I was able to brag to my friends on all the shopping and pictures I was able to have there aside from each new educational sights. And thank god we walked a lot overall because we also ate a lot of food, more than I do at home. (I miss the 7-11 coffee ice drinks) There are far too many things to talk about but having this opportunity was something that I would have never expected to have before so, I wish to look back at my pictures in the future and feel the same way I did in this captured moment. “

Hapse Kabir– Senior at Downtown Magnets High School

At first, the trip felt overwhelming and stressful, especially during the long flight and the first day in Korea. I was nervous, tired, and even a little homesick, but that slowly changed once we started exploring places like *Jeonju* and *Buan*. I really liked walking through *Hanok* Village, trying new foods like salt bread and *bibimbap*, and doing hands on activities like making my name stamp and participating in temple traditions. Some of my favorite moments were the more personal and fun experiences, like singing karaoke with locals, playing games at the beach, and wearing a *hanbok* during the coming-of-age ceremony. As the days went on, I started feeling more comfortable with the group, and the trip became less about being nervous and more about enjoying where I was and being open to new experiences.

As the trip continued, I found it really interesting to see both the traditional and modern sides of Korea. Visiting places like Hyundai, POSCO, and different schools helped me understand how much effort and history goes into the country's development, while places like the palace, museums, and the DMZ made everything feel more real and meaningful. One of the best parts for me was meeting Korean students, especially at the high school, because even with the language barrier, we were able to connect, laugh, and create real memories together. By the end of the trip, I felt more confident, open, and appreciative of new experiences. This trip meant a lot to me because it pushed me out of my comfort zone, helped me build strong connections, and gave me a deeper understanding of a different culture that I'll remember for a long time.

Kristin Kim– Junior at Rosemead High School

“Throughout the study tour, it was really interesting to visually see the industrialization of Korea that we learned about. I really enjoyed POSCO's tour, as it exemplified the rapid mod-

ernization and advanced technology. Hearing about the economy in KITA's presentation was also a development we discussed during the workshops. In addition, I feel like I made life-long memories and relationships. It was an experience like no other, and I am really grateful to experience this opportunity.”

Daniel Nagata– Senior at Gabrielino High School

“Project Bridge has allowed me to expand my horizons and completely changed the way I view international exchange and cultural connections. I'll never forget participating in the coming-of-age ceremony where I got to experience what it was like to be in the Joseon dynasty. From wearing the *hanbok* to receiving a new Korean name, this moment gave me additional appreciation for Korean culture, customs, and roles in society. I also really enjoyed interacting with all the Korean high school students, especially being able to play basketball with them and answer their questions about American culture. Their kindness and hospitality especially stood out to me as they always went out of their way to make sure we had everything we needed. Beyond the cultural experiences, one



(PB YAs with Korea National Park Rangers, Chaeseokgang Cliff, South Korea)

of the most valuable parts of the trip I took away was a new network of fellow youth ambassadors from all over the country, each with their own perspective and mentality. I am so glad I got to meet every one of them and look forward to touching base in the future. By the end of the trip, I stepped off the plane a changed person. I learned to appreciate differences while embracing similarities, returning home with a new sense of confidence and a wider network of friendships. This trip has truly changed my life and has enabled me to find a deeper understanding of what it means to be an ambassador. “

Marely Rodrigues– Senior at Polytechnic High School

“At the start of the study tour, I felt nervous about traveling so far and entering a new environment, but quickly adjusted



Project Bridge Study Tour

(Cont. from pg. 7)

and built meaningful connections with my peers. Through participation in cultural traditions, exploring temples, and engaging with Korean students, I gained a deeper and personal understanding of both traditional and modern Korean culture. Visiting places like the DMZ and the War Memorial made Korea's history feel especially real and impactful. As a first-generation, low-income student who had never traveled outside the continent, this trip was transformative, expanding my worldview and strengthening my interest in international issues. Ultimately, it inspired me to think on a more global level and reaffirmed my goal of pursuing a career in immigration law."

Steven Tu— Senior at Van Nuys High School

"Visiting South Korea was more than just a study tour. It was a life-changing experience. As someone who has traveled from the bright lights of Tokyo to the calm Milford Sound waterfalls in New Zealand, South Korea holds a special place in my heart. The interactions with the locals, students, and business officials really opened up my view of the world, realizing the world is so much bigger than just Los Angeles. While South Korea and America share differences in cleanliness, education, and business strategies, I have learned that both countries share highly urbanized cities, technological advancements, and strong democratic values. I hope to visit again soon and explore everything South Korea has to offer."



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