

Relieving Borders: Youth, Soft Power, and the New Diplomacy for Peace in Korea

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Abstract

Despite decades of summits, declarations, and symbolic gestures, the Korean Peninsula remains ideologically divided and militarized. Traditional diplomacy has struggled under cycles of hope and disappointment, constrained by entrenched geopolitical realities and threat-based discourse. This paper argues that youth participation, cultural exchange, and soft power represent an emerging form of “new diplomacy,” a concept advanced in the field of peace and conflict resolution. This approach emphasizes positive and sustained forms of both direct and indirect contact, through cultural media, inter-Korean exchanges, and youth-driven initiatives, that reshape perceptions and identities beyond formal negotiations. Incheon, with its global networks and institutions, is highlighted as a strategic cultural gateway for fostering such exchanges. By analyzing cultural diplomacy, defector narratives, and peace education initiatives, the paper suggests that meaningful progress toward peace may be less about treaties and more about cultivating shared emotions, narratives, and imagination across borders.

Keywords: Cultural Diplomacy; Youth Participation; Incheon Global Campus; Soft Power; Peacebuilding; Contact Theory; Conflict Analysis and Resolution

Introduction

This year marks the 75th anniversary of the start of the Korean War. Yet, even after decades of engagement between the two Koreas, with summits, declarations, handshakes, and symbolic gestures, the Korean Peninsula remains one of the most militarized and ideologically divided places in the world. For many observers, and especially for young Koreans, a paradox emerges: why is peace still elusive after so much effort?

Setbacks, from missile launches to border skirmishes, often follow each apparent step forward. Agreements have been signed, cross-border projects initiated and halted, yet frustration lingers. Modern forms of diplomacy, constrained by bureaucracy and ritual, often increase the

emotional distance between the two Koreas rather than reducing it. Indeed, the Track I, II, and III forms of diplomacy no longer seem effective.

In this environment, military and cultural provocations are no longer isolated acts but reflections of deeper structural incompatibilities. A K-pop concert at the DMZ may symbolize hope to some, but evoke resentment in others. A satellite launch may be seen as defense by one side and aggression by the other. These divergent interpretations highlight that the divide is not only military but also symbolic and emotional. This paper emerges from that recognition: What if peace is not only made in war rooms but is already being built in cultural contact zones, shared media, and the imagination of a new generation?

This study argues that a new form of diplomacy rooted in youth participation, cultural media, and soft power is emerging as a transformative force on the Korean Peninsula. Drawing on key peace and conflict theories in a constructivist framework, it emphasizes that identity and perception are socially constructed and shaped by interaction and symbolic exchange rather than being fixed or inherited. As Wendt notes, “actors do not have a ‘portfolio’ of interests independent of social context; instead, they define their interests in the process of defining situations.”¹ This perspective is reinforced by Track II diplomacy, which highlights the role of youth, civil society, and non-state actors in advancing peace outside formal negotiations.²

Affective diplomacy further underscores how emotion, imagination, and cultural intimacy shape the diplomatic atmosphere, particularly in contexts such as Korea, where official relations have stagnated.³ As Bleiker and Hutchison argue, “emotions are not irrational residues of politics but constitute a fundamental part of political decision-making and perception.”⁴ Allport’s contact hypothesis provides a crucial lens, suggesting that sustained, positive contact between groups, under supportive conditions of equality and cooperation, can reduce prejudice and transform perceptions.

Finally, John Paul Lederach’s transformative peacebuilding approach emphasizes that true reconciliation requires sustained, multi-generational commitment to repairing relationships and building new social structures. Incheon, with its institutions and modern infrastructure, can serve as the site where these generational efforts are anchored. If youth-led cultural initiatives are to offer opportunities for transformation, it will be because traditional diplomacy has failed to deliver sustainable progress. To

understand why new approaches are needed, the failures and limitations of summit-centered diplomacy must first be examined.

While high-level diplomacy continues to struggle under geopolitical constraints, a parallel shift is taking place among younger generations who increasingly view peace not as a singular political achievement but as a social, cultural, and emotional project. Surveys of South Korean youth show a deep ambivalence toward North Korea mixed with a willingness to imagine new forms of coexistence shaped less by ideology and more by personal experience, cultural similarity, and shared vulnerability. This indicates that the landscape of peace is evolving from state-driven frameworks toward relational ones that emerge through education, digital media, and grassroots interaction. Such developments reflect a broader global trend in which young people redefine security as human-centered and future-oriented, suggesting that they may already be building the foundations for a new diplomatic culture even before formal institutions recognize it.

The Dead End of Traditional Diplomacy

Due in large part, to alternating progressive and conservative administrations, inter-Korean diplomacy has repeatedly stalled, producing cycles of hope followed by frustration. While former Presidents Park and Yoon emphasized security and deterrence, former President Moon and now President Lee emphasize engagement and peacebuilding. Yet both approaches remain constrained by structural geopolitical realities.⁵ Stalled negotiations thus reflect not only ideological differences but entrenched threat-based state practices.

Summits have carried symbolic and strategic weight.⁶ Meetings in 2000 and 2018 involving Kim Dae-jung, Kim Jong-il, Moon Jae-in, and Kim Jong-un created moments of optimism, offering short-term de-escalation. However, most summits ended without lasting results, constrained by shifting U.S. policy, North Korea's focus on internal stability, and the absence of mechanisms for follow-up.⁷

These limitations reveal how summit diplomacy privileges symbolism over the long-term work of building trust. Abraham Maslow and John Burton's theory of Human Needs argues that sustainable peace requires addressing fundamental human needs such as security, recognition, and identity. Summits, while symbolically important, fail to address these deep needs, leaving grievances unresolved and conflict cycles intact.

Solomon argues that emotions are constitutive of politics, not irrational residues. Ballbach shows North Korea scripts danger to produce identity and legitimacy, portraying the U.S. as cowardly and itself as heroic, fostering internal cohesion.⁸ Such affective framing demonstrates how rhetoric functions as reason, binding identity and interest.

South Korea similarly employs threat-based discourses, but its predictable responses allow Pyongyang to exploit the “grey zone” of low-intensity provocations.⁹ Seoul’s aspiration to act as a “middle power” further illustrates the gap between identity and reality. As Kim argues, this discourse constitutes South Korea’s diplomatic role, but structural constraints posed by North Korea’s provocations and the U.S.–China rivalry limit its effectiveness.¹⁰

If traditional diplomacy is structurally incapable of addressing identity, recognition, and emotional needs, then alternative tools must be considered. Soft power and cultural diplomacy, rooted in attraction rather than coercion, provide one such pathway.

In this sense, traditional diplomacy has reached a saturation point. It is not only limited by the interests of great powers, but also by its own inability to adapt to generational change and new forms of identity. Peace processes based solely on deterrence or short-term engagement overlook how deeply social narratives and collective emotions shape inter-Korean relations. The absence of sustained relational work creates a vacuum that is quickly filled by suspicion, media sensationalism, and political rhetoric. Furthermore, the rigid formats of summit diplomacy marginalize non-state actors who often have greater flexibility to build trust. For peace to become plausible, diplomacy must shift from episodic events to processes that address human needs, cultural memory, and long-term relational transformation. These limitations demonstrate why new approaches are urgently needed.

Soft Power and the Silent Revolution: Culture as a Pillar of Peace Infrastructure

Amid rhetorical escalations and structural traps in inter-Korean relations, cultural diplomacy offers a non-coercive path that builds emotional identification rather than fear. Joseph Nye defines soft power as influence through attraction, rooted in values, culture, and emotion.¹¹ In South Korea, where militarization has proven ineffective, popular culture, especially K-pop, has introduced North Koreans to new experiences of freedom and self-identity, challenging rigid ideology.¹²

This influence, however, is uneven and often dangerous. Gendered surveillance makes women especially vulnerable to punishment, and executions for consuming South Korean media remain documented.¹³ Internationally, human rights resolutions and sanctions remain limited, while depictions of North Koreans as passive victims ignore their agency.

Here, Galtung's positive peace framework is essential. Positive peace requires not merely the absence of violence but the presence of justice, equity, and human dignity. Cultural exchange, when conducted safely and with respect for human agency, can cultivate conditions of positive peace by normalizing dignity and recognition across divides.

Still, cultural exchange must prioritize safety, dignity, and careful management, ensuring that experiences strengthen rather than endanger participants. This fragile but powerful structure of empathy may precede and sustain formal reconciliation. While cultural diplomacy is promising, it needs institutional grounding to be sustainable. Incheon, and particularly Songdo, with its Incheon Global Campus, offers a unique setting in which youth-led peace education and intercultural initiatives can be anchored.

Beyond entertainment, cultural influence generates subtle shifts in worldview that can slowly erode rigid ideological boundaries. Young people who engage with foreign media often begin to question inherited narratives, widening the space for empathy and alternative futures. This is not a threat to national identity, but rather a sign of how identities evolve through organic and voluntary contact. Social media platforms have amplified this process, creating informal networks of exchange that bypass state control. These developments suggest that soft power is not only an instrument of attraction but also a catalyst for reimagining community and belonging across divided societies. When ethical safeguards and peace education accompany cultural contact, it can support the emergence of a shared emotional landscape that makes future coexistence more possible.

Incheon and Songdo: Cultural Diplomacy Opportunities and Risks

Incheon has shifted from a site of military conflict, marked by the 1950 Incheon landing that shaped the outcome of the Korean War,¹⁴ to a hub of global exchange through its airport, seaport, and Songdo International City. Songdo also hosts the Incheon Global Campus (IGC), where international universities collaborate in education and research, offering an ideal foundation for youth-led peace education that integrates conflict and peace studies with intercultural dialogue.

Institutions such as the UNDRR Northeast Asia Office and Global Education and Training Institute (ONEA & GETI) further enhance Songdo's role as a platform for resilience, civic education, and cultural diplomacy. Building on programs like the International Disaster Resilience Leaders Forum, Songdo, and IGC, the organizations could expand into inter-Korean youth workshops, art-based exchanges, and digital academies that link resilience training with peace studies.

Yet engagement with North Korea carries risks. As Cathcart and Denney note, DPRK cultural diplomacy, from early exchanges to the 2008 New York Philharmonic visit, has often served propaganda, elite enrichment, and provocation.¹⁵ While defector accounts indicate that South Korean culture has inspired resistance among youth, outreach must avoid reinforcing the regime's legitimacy or exposing participants to harm.

To navigate these challenges, Songdo's institutions, particularly IGC, can serve as neutral spaces for indirect and culturally sensitive engagement. Storytelling projects, diaspora workshops, exhibitions, and youth simulations can foster empathy, shared memory, and trust without requiring political consensus. Supported by UNDRR and UNESCAP, Incheon and IGC are well-positioned to balance opportunity and caution in advancing sustainable cultural diplomacy.

Moreover, if Songdo can host youth-led diplomacy that fosters safe and positive contact interactions, its initiatives must also align with long-term reconciliation goals. The conclusion explores how cultural strategies, when sustained across generations, can lay the foundation for durable peace.

Incheon's potential extends further when considering its growing academic networks and creative industries. The presence of research institutions, multinational companies, and global organizations allows for interdisciplinary collaborations that link peacebuilding with innovation, design, public diplomacy, and community outreach. Songdo's architecture and urban planning already communicate values of openness and connectivity, offering symbolic and practical opportunities for cultural diplomacy. If leveraged effectively, these attributes can help Incheon position itself as a regional hub for youth dialogue, cultural diplomacy, and peace-oriented research. Such initiatives would not replace formal negotiations but would provide a stable ecosystem where trust, creativity, and shared narratives can be cultivated over time.

Conclusion

Cultural strategies that emphasize emotional engagement, shared memory, and human connection remain essential pathways toward any sustainable vision of peace on the Korean Peninsula. They reach beyond the limitations of formal diplomacy by addressing the deeper relational fractures that have prevented mutual understanding for decades. When young people engage in dialogue, artistic expression, or digital collaboration, they are not merely exchanging ideas; they are quietly reconstructing the foundations upon which future political agreements may rest. These cultural and interpersonal spaces help counteract the inertia of mistrust and introduce relational depth into a conflict long dominated by geopolitical tension.

The layered nature of North Korean society, as revealed in defector narratives and diaspora testimonies, further illustrates the possibilities for change. Even in restrictive environments, the desire for dignity, connection, and recognition persists. This confirms that peace efforts should focus on empowering human agency and fostering relational bridges rather than reinforcing rigid state-centric approaches. If cultural exchange is carefully structured, it can cultivate forms of empathy and solidarity that transcend borders and challenge narratives that sustain division.

Incheon's Songdo district, with its unique combination of academic institutions, international organizations, and global infrastructure, stands as one of the few places capable of hosting such transformative work. Youth-led initiatives anchored in this environment can offer credible, safe, and constructive platforms for indirect cooperation and relational understanding. Simulations, collaborative storytelling, civic education, and digital cultural projects can nurture the emotional and imaginative capacities needed to envision shared futures. These efforts are most effective when viewed as part of a long arc of peacebuilding, one that unfolds across generations rather than within the short cycles of political administration.

Importantly, emerging scholars in Conflict Analysis and Resolution have a vital role in shaping this new diplomatic landscape. Their training emphasizes systems thinking, cultural awareness, negotiation, and relational understanding. These young practitioners offer tools and perspectives that traditional diplomacy has often overlooked, especially in contexts where social identity, symbolism, and memory are central to the conflict. As they participate in peace education, youth exchanges,

community research, and cross-cultural simulations, they become part of a growing cohort capable of bridging societal divides and modeling new approaches to diplomacy grounded in human connection rather than power politics.

The task ahead is therefore not limited to restoring dialogue between governments, but to nurturing environments in which shared emotions, narratives, and relationships can take root.

Future research should deepen our understanding of how cultural diplomacy can be ethically sustained, how defector communities can act as bridges for mutual understanding, and how youth across borders can co-create new visions of coexistence. When these efforts are carried forward with care and commitment, we begin to see that peace is not solely produced in treaty negotiations, but also in the everyday practices of empathy, collaboration, and imagination that slowly weave a common future.

Notes:

¹ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

² Louise Diamond and John W. McDonald, *Multi-Track Diplomacy: A Systems Approach to Peace*, 3rd ed. (West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1996)

³ Roland Bleiker and Emma Hutchison, "Fear No More: Emotions and World Politics," *Review of International Studies* 34, suppl. S1 (2008): 115–35

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Jong-hwa Ahn, "The Missing Link in Understanding South Korea's Foreign Policy: Panmunjom Declaration and Beyond," *Pacific Forum Issue Insights* 19 (Honolulu: Pacific Forum, 2019)

⁶ Beomjong Park, "Background, Achievements and Limitations of the Inter-Korean Summit and Tasks," *Korea and Global Affairs* 4, no. 3 (2020): 83–114.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Eric J. Ballbach, "Constructions of Identity and Threat in North Korea's 'Diplomatic War' Discourse," *Tiempo Devorado* 2, no. 2 (2015): 27–49, <https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/tdevorado.24>.

⁹ Michael McDevitt, "Deterring North Korean Provocations," Brookings Institution, February 7, 2011, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/deterring-north-korean-provocations/>; Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*

¹⁰ Sung-Mi Kim, *South Korea's Middle-Power Diplomacy: Changes and Challenges* (London: Chatham House, 2016), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2016-06-22-south-korea-middle-power-kim.pdf>.

¹¹ Joseph S. Nye, Jr, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004).

¹² Sunny Yoon, “Mobile Media and Its Impacts on Social Change and Human Rights in North Korea,” *International Journal of Communication* 14 (2020): 1480–97, <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/download/10903/3005>.

¹³ The Korea Herald, “North Koreans Executed for Sharing K-pop, Films: Seoul,” *The Korea Herald*, June 28, 2024, <https://asianews.network/north-koreans-executed-for-sharing-k-pop-films-seoul/>.

¹⁴ Naval History and Heritage Command, “History – Inchon Landing (Operation Chromite),” United States Navy, accessed August 1, 2025, <https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/wars-conflicts-and-operations/korean-war/korea-operations/inchon.html>.

¹⁵ Adam Cathcart and Steven Denney, “North Korea’s Cultural Diplomacy in the Early Kim Jong-un Era,” *North Korean Review* 9, no. 2 (2013): 29–42, accessed August 1, 2025, <https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/80373/1/North%20Korean%20Cultural%20Diplomacy.pdf>