

Foreword

Rising Voices for Peace and Security: Reflections on the Next Generation of Changemakers

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The papers in this issue reflect the remarkable potential of a new generation of student-scholars whose voices increasingly signal a shift in how peace and security may be imagined on the Korean Peninsula and across East Asia. Mentoring undergraduate volunteers who prepared original research for the 2025 Incheon International Peace and Security Forum revealed a depth of curiosity, courage, and analytical maturity that challenges prevailing assumptions about today's youth. While public discourse often characterizes younger cohorts as digitally absorbed, civically detached, or emotionally strained, with evidence of declining motivation, rising unemployment, and worsening mental-health indicators across many societies, the broader picture is far more complex. Even amid heightened anxiety and institutional mistrust, many Gen Z and Millennial students are demonstrating a renewed commitment to purpose, values-driven action, and prosocial engagement. International polling and global initiatives, including Youth2030, continue to document thousands of youth-led efforts advancing the public good, from climate resilience and cybersecurity to peacebuilding and community service.

Over the years, from military to government civilian service, and more recently in academia, I have consistently observed that peace, particularly sustainable positive peace, is seldom delivered by fiat.¹ Moreover, there are few “conflict intelligent leaders” willing to lead us through or out of conflict.² Instead, we observe a lack of moral imagination, as the same leaders often create conflicts and then seek to be the peacemakers who resolve them. Yet, positive peace, which we all should strive for, can only be achieved by those willing to engage with complexity, uncertainty, and human frailty to create something more permanent.³

Drawing on my experience as a conflict resolution scholar and practitioner, a former U.S. Marine, and a government worker, I argue that these young scholars' insights should not merely be acknowledged; they must be cultivated and institutionally supported if we hope to build

resilient, peaceful societies. The emerging generation is not retreating from responsibility; it is actively searching for avenues to contribute. These students did not merely critique structures and have “pie-in-the-sky” ideas; they envisioned new methods and tools necessary to support peace and security in our global society. Collectively, the papers propose concrete ways academia, government, and civil society can help raise, mentor, and sustain these young talents, empowering them to become the changemakers shaping the future of peace and security in Korea, the region, and beyond.

Their research and themes spanned a vast terrain: how online/digital discourse shapes polarization, how diaspora identities can be solidified and leveraged for inclusion, how cyber cooperation might be advanced regionally, how education is key to shaping reconciliation, how youth diplomacy reimagines trust, how South Korea might navigate strategic competition, and how climate displacement, if not handled wisely, will transform human security and cause more conflict. Rather than disparate pieces, these themes are interconnected. The reflections that follow will first draw out each insight, then weave them together into a unifying narrative of peace and human-centered security, and finally suggest how institutions, including academia and governments, can foster such leadership at scale necessary for a more peaceful tomorrow.

One recurring insight from a student was that conflict increasingly plays out in the digital realm.⁴ As Shin Mo argues in “Beyond Laughter: How Political Memes Can Threaten Peace in South Korea,” memes, social media algorithms, and emotional manipulation can erode trust, deepen polarization, and inflict emotional violence that is harder to detect and counter than kinetic conflict. The young scholar’s analysis revealed that humor and satire on social platforms can function as ideological vectors: they embed identity, mock alternative views, and gradually shift the Overton window. Specifically, in a technology-dense society such as South Korea, this digital battleground may become as consequential as physical territory.

From my government and security experience, I have found that the digital domain is often underestimated. Yet as we saw in nation after nation, social media agents of division frequently precede violent outbreaks or the stymying of freedom of speech. Countering this requires more than fact-checking: it demands digital peace literacy and a training of citizens (especially youth) to recognize emotional triggers, decode manipulative narratives, and craft counter-narratives grounded in respect.

In practice, this might take the form of curricula taught in high school and university, digital civic labs in municipal governments, or public–private partnerships with platforms to promote empathy and civil discourse.

Another student focused on identity and inclusion, especially vis-à-vis diaspora populations and third-culture youth.⁵ In the paper, “Invisible Diaspora among Koryo-Saram Third Culture Kids (TCKs): What Incheon Can Do,” Hayoung Hwang writes about how when people feel excluded, alienated, or “less Korean” because of heritage or migration history, they internalize insecurity and distance themselves from national narratives. Yet these same groups can offer bridges: bilingualism, transnational networks, and hybrid identity sensibilities.

This young scholar proposed treating diaspora youth not as peripheral subjects but as carriers of soft power and cultural revitalization. This shift reimagines national resilience: not through assimilation but through plural inclusion. From a conflict resolution lens, sustainable peace is rooted not in homogenization but in recognition. Educational exchange programs, city-level diaspora councils, and cultural co-creation projects can actualize this recognition.

On a more strategic plane, one student examined how cyber threats, deterrence, and institutional gaps constrain regional stability.⁶ As articulated in Hyunwoo Joo’s paper, “The Case for Cybersecurity Cooperation in Northeast Asia: Songdo, Korea as a Minilateralist Model,” large alliances often stagnate. Therefore, there is a need for minilateralism, where small groups of technologically capable middle powers collaborate on cybersecurity norms and joint incident response. Such networks can help bypass geopolitical gridlock and promote trust through repeated, manageable steps of cooperation.

From my background in defense and government work, this is entirely feasible. Seoul could partner with Japan, Singapore, Australia, and Taiwan to prototype incident-sharing platforms or ethical AI governance protocols. If successful, these minilateral nodes could scale. Over time, these become trust axes that connect broader East Asia, transcending reactive security logic, and creating a natural bond among democracies. The generational mindset here sees technology not only as a threat but as a potential architecture for peace.

In line with the recognized push for other countries to be involved, another student, Suyoung Oh, in “Relieving Borders: Youth, Soft Power, and the New Diplomacy for Peace in Korea,” argues that diplomacy cannot remain the exclusive domain of elites.⁷ Youth-led cultural

exchange, people diplomacy, and creative collaboration must work to penetrate places where formal negotiation cannot. This concept of affective diplomacy is grounded in storytelling, shared music, and co-designed public art, mediums that humanize “the other.”

Many believe that sustainable and positive peace is relational rather than transactional. When youth from rival or formerly divided communities co-author online projects, run joint podcasts, collaborate on environmental restoration, and even come together for cultural and sporting events, they plant the seeds of trust beyond formal diplomacy cycles. These horizontal networks can complement official Track I and II diplomacy, opening effective corridors of communication and mutual understanding.

One student also engaged with the region's geopolitical dilemma.⁸ Yoochan Kong argues in his paper, “Between Giants: Strategic Autonomy for East Asia’s Middle Powers in the U.S.–China Rivalry,” that we should reject binary logic. The young scholar went on to advance a vision of normative strategic autonomy, anchoring South Korea’s policy in democratic values, multilateral agility, and institutional resilience. The student further argued that South Korea shouldn’t be a pawn, but instead a norm-shaper in regional security.

The challenge for many middle powers has always been how to balance alliance obligations among democratic partners, with a credible independent posture. The young scholar's proposals suggest institutional pathways, such as diversified security alliances, value-based diplomacy initiatives (e.g., digital governance standards), and internal checks that prevent overdependence. If South Korea aligns its training, research, and foreign policy trajectory behind this kind of normative leadership, it can become a pivot, not a proxy, while remaining a pillar for democracy in the region.

Finally, one student turned to climate-driven displacement and its implications for peace and security.⁹ In Yoonbeen Cho’s paper, “Environmental and Conflict Displacement: Pathways to Sustainable Peace in East Asia and Incheon,” the young scholar argues that climate change is not just an environmental issue; it is also a social and political issue. Rising seas, intensified storms, and resource stress displace communities, aggravate conflict, and create human security crises. In East Asia, such pathways are evident from coastal migration to contested water access.

To support this, the student focused on Incheon as a microcosm: a coastal city vulnerable to sea-level rise yet also capable of building resilient infrastructure and inclusive resettlement policy. The proposal was not just an emergency response, but also integrated displaced populations as co-creators of urban futures. This aligns with the growing scholarship that links climate adaptation and peace, which argues that we must imbue climate security agendas with principles of positive peace: justice, inclusion, and ecological regeneration.¹⁰

Although each young scholar addressed a distinct dimension, their insights connect to form a larger tapestry of hope and vision. Digital literacy counters polarization; recognition of identity builds inclusion; multilateral cooperation fosters trust; education fosters reconciliation; youth diplomacy rebuilds relational bonds; strategic autonomy anchors principled leadership; and finally, climate adaptation protects life. Together, these strands converge in a vision that could be called “people-centered peace and security,” a framework that situates technology, identity, environment, and human values at the core of peace rather than the periphery.

In this paradigm, peace and security are not delivered from above; they are cultivated in communities, networks, and institutions animated by education, empathy, imagination, and resilience. The role of Conflict Analysis and Resolution scholar-practitioners is not to preserve order but to help discover and design systems that allow new voices to enter, challenge, and rejuvenate our peace architecture for a better and brighter tomorrow.

If we are to build futures in which positive peace takes root, persists, and deepens, we must invest in those who will inherit and transform our institutions and societies. The work of these university students is not anecdotal: it is a clear signal for change. The question is, how do we move from promising scholarship to sustained impact? The paragraphs below outline possible levers that can transform young scholars' vision into durable, actionable architecture.

Universities must embed peace research and applied practice into their core structures. A consortium of East Asian universities, possibly led by Incheon Global Campus and its leading institutions, such as George Mason University Korea, could establish a Peace Incubator Network to connect students, faculty, and practitioners for problem-solving workshops, co-created understanding, field simulations, digital peace labs, and cross-border hackathons. Similar to the multiple peace and security conferences

being held in Mongolia, annual Peace Innovation Summits, rotating between Seoul, Tokyo, and Ulaanbaatar, could showcase youth-led solutions. These could range from digital empathy tools to methods for achieving transformational positive peace or climate-resilient urban designs. These initiatives would turn academic exercises into living laboratories of cooperation.

Governments should establish Young Peace Fellowships to place scholars within ministries, defense planning offices, cyber centers, or municipal councils. Similar to Incheon City's current efforts on Diaspora, a cohort working with the Ministry of Unification, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the local embassies, or even Incheon Metropolitan City could contribute to diaspora policy, digital governance, or local reconciliation projects.¹¹ By providing funding and support necessary to participate in real decision processes, youth will develop both technical skills and civic responsibility, bridging generational gaps in governance.

Peace forums must evolve from one-off conferences into sustained and committed regional partnerships. Korea, Japan, China, and Mongolia could co-organize annual dialogues led jointly by students, scholar-practitioners, and mid-career officials.¹² These would produce shared policy briefs that feed directly into regional planning cycles. When youth contributions are cited in white papers and strategy documents, their legitimacy becomes institutionalized, thereby opening up more doors and eyes to possibilities.

Mentorship should flow both ways. Students gain from diplomats and civil servants, while professionals learn digital fluency and cross-cultural insight from youth. Structured exchange programs where students shadow practitioners and government officials can flatten hierarchies and foster empathy across generations. Ideas could also include creating an Asian-specific Fulbright-type program for scholars to exchange, explore, and interact. Such engagement programs can help transform raw potential into trust and respect into collaboration, building a mentor-mentee-centric relationship.

Unfortunately, peace programs and other grassroots efforts often disappear when funding cycles end, as it takes time for transformation to occur and results to become apparent. To counter this, ministries and universities should commit to multiyear evaluation frameworks that track alumni networks, policy adoption, and community impact. Longitudinal data allow adjustment and scaling, ensuring youth programs remain responsive rather than ceremonial. Additionally, peacebuilding should not

reside in a single agency. Ministries of education, unification, defense, environment, and digital affairs must coordinate youth-oriented peace agendas. A National Council on Emerging Peace Leaders could institutionalize youth representation in national strategy and ensure sustained policy continuity.

Contemporary society tends to stigmatize mistakes, fostering a culture of fear rather than one of learning and experimentation. By doing so, it doesn't allow for authentic learning and discovery to take place. Both academia and government must stop living in a world of zero-defect mentality and expecting perfection. Pilot programs, if allowed to fail without stigma, yield invaluable insight for future change and true success. Ministries can publish learning reports from unsuccessful peace and security initiatives, modeling transparency. Universities can hold fail-forward workshops where students analyze and iterate on missteps. Such openness signals confidence in continuous learning and brings out the best of humanity.

For South Korea and the region, nurturing young scholars to become changemakers is not a passive conversation or action to delay and debate; it is a strategic necessity for the future of peace and security. The Korean Peninsula sits at the intersection of Cold War legacies, traditional and emerging revivals, technological frontiers, and cultural transformation. As conventional security models struggle to address recent hybrid threats from cyber warfare to disinformation and climate stress, South Korea's strength will depend on intellectual agility, leadership, social cohesion, and its ability to maintain peace. Investing in youth leadership equips the nation to navigate future unification hopes, demographic transition, and technological advancement with creativity and moral clarity.

Regionally, East Asia remains a paradox: economically integrated yet politically fragmented. Generational exchange and human-centered peace and security initiatives could help transform mistrust into long-term cooperation. When Korean, Japanese, Chinese, and Southeast Asian students learn to deliberate together, they model the intercultural empathy that regional diplomacy has long lacked. A network of young scholars focused on being peace professionals across ASEAN and Northeast Asia could become a stabilizing soft-power mechanism comparable to Europe's Erasmus generation.¹³ A program that supports such things as education, training, intercultural dialogue, youth initiatives, while fostering partnerships between organizations, and contributing to sustainable growth, social inclusion, and European identity.

These broader recommendations provided above are grounded in the analyses developed by the student authors, whose papers collectively shape the themes of this special issue. Their work shows a generation ready not only to understand the challenges facing our global society, but also to outline practical paths forward. Through their studies of digital discourse, identity, climate displacement, regional cooperation, youth diplomacy, and strategic autonomy, they show that peace is strengthened by people who are willing to question inherited assumptions and imagine new approaches to human security.

Across their contributions, a shared commitment is clear. They aim to build societies that are inclusive, resilient, and forward-looking. These young scholars do not wait for change. They explain how it can be shaped. Their analyses show that sustainable peace requires careful thinking, ethical judgment, and the ability to engage across differences. They also highlight that global instability, technological inequality, and information warfare demand young people who understand both global citizenship and local responsibility. This type of leadership is increasingly vital in the region and in the broader world.

Their work also makes one point especially clear. They are not future advisors waiting for an opportunity. They are present actors whose ideas link technology and empathy, identity and belonging, statecraft and the everyday work of building trust. The 2025 Incheon International Peace and Security Forum demonstrated that the next generation of leaders is already here. What they need now are steady platforms, meaningful opportunities, mentorship, and trust.

If East Asia and the international community choose to support these rising voices, they will strengthen regional stability and contribute to a more just and peaceful global society. The future of our global society will rest in the hands of individuals who can think clearly, act responsibly, and work with others. For this reason, we must help cultivate their voices and support their development. Their scholarship is more than academic reflection. It is a reminder of what can be achieved when young leaders are given the tools and guidance to help shape a more stable and humane future.

Notes:

¹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace: The Kuyper Lectures for 1981 Delivered at the Free University of Amsterdam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983); Roland Paris, *At War's End: Building Peace After Civil Conflict*, Conflict Resolution Collection (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

² Peter T. Coleman, "The Conflict-Intelligent Leader," *Harvard Business Review*, 2025, <https://hbr.org/2025/07/the-conflict-intelligent-leader>.

³ Johan Galtung, *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization* (London: SAGE, 1996).

⁴ Shin Mo, "Beyond Laughter: How Political Memes Can Threaten Peace in South Korea," unpublished manuscript, Songdo, South Korea, September 2025.

⁵ Hayoung Hwang, "Invisible Diaspora among Koryo-Saram Third Culture Kids (TCKs): What Incheon Can Do," unpublished manuscript, Incheon, South Korea, September 2025.

⁶ Hyunwoo Jo, "The Case for Cybersecurity Cooperation in Northeast Asia: Songdo, Korea as a Minilateralist Model," unpublished manuscript, Incheon, South Korea, September 2025.

⁷ Suyoung Oh, "Relieving Borders: Youth, Soft Power, and the New Diplomacy for Peace in Korea," unpublished manuscript, Incheon, South Korea, September 2025.

⁸ Yoochan Kong, "Between Giants: Strategic Autonomy for East Asia's Middle Powers in the U.S.–China Rivalry," unpublished manuscript, Incheon, South Korea, September 2025.

⁹ Yoonbeen Cho, "Environmental and Conflict Displacement: Pathways to Sustainable Peace in East Asia and Incheon," unpublished manuscript, Incheon, South Korea, September 2025.

¹⁰ Louise Wiuff Moe, "Imbuing Climate Security with Positive Peace: A Peace Continuum Approach to Sustaining Peace during Climate Crisis," *International Affairs* 101, no. 2 (2025): 691–705, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae322>.

¹¹ "Beyond Borders: Greater 'US' Overseas Koreans," Incheon Metropolitan Government, 2025, <https://www.incheon.go.kr/world/wd020302/2187055>.

¹² Jaehyuk Jang and Kisun Kim, "The Role of Mongolia in Multilateral Security Cooperation in Twenty-First Century Northeast Asia: Relevance of the 'Ulaanbaatar Dialogue (UBD)' Initiative," *Asian Perspective* 46, no. 2 (2022): 377–400.

¹³ Benjamin Feyen and Ewa Krzaklewska, *The ERASMUS Phenomenon - Symbol of a New European Generation?* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2013).