

Towards Peace through Dialogue: The 11th Jeju Forum for Peace and Prosperity

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The beauty of Jeju Island needs no explanation. Every year over 10 million tourists visit Jeju from home and abroad. Jeju is designated as a world natural heritage, a global geopark, and a biosphere by UNESCO. Recently, it was also voted as one of the new Seven Wonders of the World.

Perhaps a lesser known but no less important fact is that it is also an “island of world peace,” and every spring, thousands of people gather to talk about peace and prosperity. This annual gathering, the Jeju Forum for Peace and Prosperity, is attended by some of the biggest names in Asia and around the world, including former and current heads of state, CEOs of global conglomerates, and renowned scholars. But it is also a gathering for everyone and anyone who cares about peace.

Almost 30 years ago, when the Cold War was drawing to a close, then newly elected President of South Korea Roh Tae-woo introduced “Nordpolitik.” Under the new doctrine, South Korea would reach out to countries it had previously considered enemies. It would seek to normalize diplomatic relations with the Soviet and China. The ultimate target was, of course, North Korea. South Korea’s efforts paid off. In September 1990, South Korea and the Soviet normalized their relations. The following year, then Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev was mindful of North Korea, and suggested that the summit be held away from Seoul and away from North Korea. As a result, Jeju was chosen.

The Roh-Gorbachev summit not only contributed to ending the Cold War, it also started a community-wide movement to turn Jeju into an “island of peace.”

In April 1996, former President Kim Young-sam and former U.S. President Bill Clinton had a summit in Jeju, followed by a summit between former President Kim and then Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto. China's former President Jiang Zemin also visited Jeju and famously played the piano there.

The Jeju Forum for Peace and Prosperity, which began in 2001, aims to promote peace through dialogue and achieve prosperity through cooperation. In essence, the Jeju Forum continues and expands the tradition of summit meetings to discuss peace among friends and former adversaries. In 2005, the Korean government officially designated Jeju as an "Island of World Peace."

In this time of heightened tensions in the region, one may argue that "peace through dialogue" is too idealistic. But existing "realist" mechanisms in Northeast Asia are becoming increasingly costly and irrelevant.

For instance, the ROK-US alliance is becoming irrelevant in deterring the North from cyber or nuclear attacks on the South or even on the United States. The North has already launched successful cyber attacks on South Korean and U.S. targets. A capable North Korean intercontinental ballistic missile or submarine-launched ballistic missile that can reach a U.S. mainland target will cast doubt on the credibility of the U.S. nuclear umbrella and the essence of the alliance.

Not only that, even an effective ROK-U.S. alliance is unable to force the North to denuclearize or provide an incentive to implement a regime change. On the contrary, past behavior by the North indicates that a stronger alliance is likely to harden its stance. In addition, efforts by the ROK-U.S. alliance against the North agitate China and deepen the security dilemma for the South. Indeed, it is time for fresh new approaches.

This is where the Jeju Forum can come in. From its very origin as a regional, multilateral security dialogue, the forum has been serving as a venue where new ideas for peace and prosperity have been proposed, discussed, and shared. This year's forum will also do just that. Thousands of participants from over 60 countries will gather and discuss Asia's new order and disorder and explore ways to develop a cooperative leadership. May is a great month to visit Jeju. Come to Jeju for its beauty and also to find peace.

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