

UPF's NE Asia Peace Initiative - Fostering Reconciliation on the Korean Peninsula

Tageldin Hamad
August 23, 2025
President, UPF-International



In anticipation of the August 25, 2025, summit between the presidents of the United States and South Korea, which is poised to emphasize defense strategies and deterrence measures on the Korean Peninsula, the Universal Peace Federation's Northeast Asia Peace Initiative (NEAPI) presents a complementary framework. This initiative advances reconciliation through ongoing civil society engagement to facilitate dialogue and exchange as pathways to enduring harmony.

Contextualizing NEAPI in the Shadow of a Security Summit

The forthcoming U.S.-South Korea summit occurs amid escalating tensions, including North Korea's nuclear advancements and intensifying great-power competitions, which have amplified priorities in military preparedness and alliances. Historical precedents demonstrate that sustainable peace on the Korean Peninsula requires more than defense pacts; while prior inter-Korean summits and denuclearization negotiations yielded incremental gains, they frequently stalled due to entrenched distrust.

NEAPI introduces a Track II diplomacy model, centered on citizen-led interactions, to augment governmental endeavors. It posits that deterrence should be paired with dialogue, and security reinforced by cultural connections.

NEAPI derives its methodology from UPF's principles of interdependence, mutual prosperity, and universally shared values, proposed and practiced by the late Rev. Sun Myung Moon and his wife, Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon, co-founders of UPF, in their efforts to promote global peace.

Interdependence

NEAPI underscores the profound linkages among Northeast Asian nations of South Korea, North Korea, China, Japan, Russia, and the United States, spanning economic, environmental, and cultural domains. Acknowledging these ties encourages collaborative rather than adversarial relations. For instance, South Korea's economic vitality and stability depend not only on its U.S. alliance but also on peaceful relations with North Korea and harmonious interactions with regional neighbors.

Mutual Prosperity

Sustainable peace emerges when benefits accrue equitably to all parties. NEAPI advocates for development initiatives that yield collective gains across the Koreas and the wider region, favoring a collaborative paradigm over zero-sum dynamics. A prominent motif in NEAPI forums is the Korean Peninsula Mega-Region, which envisions economic integration of North and South Korea with adjacent economies. This framework would combine North Korea's human and natural resources with South Korea's technological and financial capabilities, fostering advancement for both sides. Infrastructure corridors, special economic zones, and cross-border trade could generate employment and growth beyond the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). The International Peace Highway, initially proposed by UPF founders,

aligns with this vision: constructing roadways and railways from Seoul through Pyongyang to China, Russia, and Europe would catalyze commerce and development beneficial to all involved nations.

Universally Shared Values

UPF maintains that certain principles – such as familial devotion, reverence for life, and aspirations for freedom and dignity – transcend cultural boundaries. NEAPI's dialogues leverage these commonalities to bridge ideological divides. In interfaith and academic seminars, participants from North Korea and Western nations have identified mutual priorities, including concerns for future generations, national cultural pride, and aspirations for peaceful unification. By prioritizing shared human elements over divisive factors like political ideologies or historical disputes, NEAPI cultivates environments where individuals from North and South Korea, the United States, China, Japan, and Russia engage as equals.

The Legacy of Peace Philosophy

Principles of forgiveness, love, and unity guided UPF founders' 1991 visit to Pyongyang, where they met North Korean Chairman Kim Il-sung amid post-Cold War uncertainties. This encounter exemplified their conviction that reconciliation originates in personal transformation.

UPF emphasizes that unification demands a shift in mindset beyond political, economic, or military mechanisms, prioritizing authentic compassion. Rev. Moon advocated for inter-Korean interactions grounded in genuine concern for the other's populace, rather than strategic expediency. During his meeting with Kim Il-sung, he urged family reunions to address the human suffering of division, framing the Korean schism as a familial rupture involving separated parents, children, and siblings.

In the late 1990s and 2000s, UPF founders launched ventures in North Korea, such as an automotive partnership and tourism investments, intended as conduits for collaboration. They highlighted culture and faith as instruments of peace, pointing to the Korean people's shared spiritual traditions, albeit manifested differently in North and South. He posited that reclaiming these common roots and spiritual aspirations would facilitate natural reunification, informing NEAPI's endorsement of cultural exchanges and interfaith initiatives.

International Peace Highway

UPF founders' advocacy for connective infrastructure exemplifies their forward-thinking approach. In 1981, Rev. Moon proposed the Korea-Japan Undersea Tunnel as part of an International Peace Highway to unite former rivals. Subsequent ideas included linking Korean railways to the Trans-Siberian system and a Bering Strait crossing. Though aspirational, these concepts symbolize regional integration and continue to inspire discussions.

Cultural Exchange as a Mechanism for Reconciliation

NEAPI prioritizes cultural diplomacy, employing arts, sports, and heritage to mitigate animosities. A notable instance was the 1998 visit of the Little Angels Children's Folk Ballet of Korea to Pyongyang.

Founded in 1962 to disseminate Korean traditions and promote peace, the troupe of young performers fulfilled a long-held aspiration in May 1998. Amid North Korea's economic difficulties and South Korea's Sunshine Policy under President Kim Dae-jung, 36 girls aged 9 to 14 performed in Pyongyang, marking the largest South Korean civilian delegation to the North at that time. Invited by the North's Asia-Pacific Peace Committee, the group presented traditional dances and songs, including fan and drum routines and the folk melody "Arirang," evoking emotional responses and affirming shared heritage.

Track II Diplomacy: Citizen-Led Peacebuilding

NEAPI embodies Track II diplomacy, involving non-governmental actors in informal conflict resolution. In Northeast Asia's negotiation impasses, such channels sustain communication and innovation.

UPF has organized numerous NEAPI conferences and forums. Since the mid-2010s, Seoul-based Peace Forums have convened diplomats, experts, ex-military personnel, and civil leaders to deliberate on reunification. In August 2021, "Think Tank 2022" initiated global roundtables, featuring luminaries like former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, to generate policy insights.

NEAPI extends beyond elites, engaging citizens broadly. Youth programs include leadership workshops, essay competitions on reunification, and collaborative projects among young professionals from Japan, Korea, China, and beyond, cultivating cross-border relationships for future leadership.

Humanitarian efforts form another pillar, with NEAPI affiliates providing aid to North Korea, from famine relief to medical and agricultural support, fostering informal ties through compassion.

Regionally, NEAPI incorporates all stakeholders, addressing the Korean issue within broader dynamics like U.S.-China relations and Japan-Korea historical tensions. Conferences feature diverse perspectives, such as Chinese analyses of North Korea's economic integration or Japanese reconciliation proposals, building multilateral consensus.

A Regional Framework: Connectivity for Peace

NEAPI advances a proactive agenda for integration, envisioning a peaceful Korean Peninsula as Northeast Asia's hub. Key proposals emphasize infrastructure and cooperation to symbolize and sustain harmony.

The Japan-Korea Undersea Tunnel, akin to the Channel Tunnel, could enhance trade and tourism, mitigating historical frictions and linking Japan to continental Asia via Korea. UPF advocates view it as a collaborative post-reconciliation endeavor.

The Trans-Korean and Eurasian Railways would reconnect DMZ-severed lines to Chinese and Russian networks, enabling overland routes from Busan to Europe, benefiting northern economies and reducing shipping expenses. Symbolic "Peace Road" events trace these routes, advocating connectivity.

Energy corridors, such as a Siberian gas pipeline through North Korea to the South, offer mutual advantages: energy for South Korea, revenue for North Korea, and opportunities for Russia. Integrated power grids similarly promote resource sharing.

Transforming the DMZ into an International Peace Park would enable joint management for ecology, tourism, and symbolism, preserving its unintended biodiversity while aligning with UN Sustainable Development Goals on peace and land conservation.

These initiatives embody NEAPI's ethos of active cooperation, redirecting focus from conflict to opportunity, and aligning with global partnerships for development.

Conclusion: Integrating Defense with Dialogue for Comprehensive Peace

As the August 24 U.S.-South Korea summit nears, with its emphasis on military postures, NEAPI introduces essential human, cultural, and emotional dimensions absent from security dialogues alone. It asserts that enduring peace requires mending the 75-year schism through interpersonal healing.

Rooted in UPF's vision of Koreans as a unified family supported by global neighbors, NEAPI promotes dialogue, exchange, and reconciliation grounded in trust and prosperity. It confronts the roots of insecurity through consistent goodwill, complementing international frameworks like the UN's Culture of Peace and Sustainable Development Goals.

Policymakers and citizens can bolster such initiatives: alongside denuclearization and security, foster cultural and humanitarian exchanges. Civil society's parallel efforts enhance official regimes, rendering them viable through grassroots reconciliation and regional collaboration.

UPF's longstanding endeavors now call for collective action from leaders in Seoul, Pyongyang, Washington, Beijing, Tokyo, and Moscow. Defense safeguards security, but dialogue, understanding, and cooperation ensure permanence. NEAPI charts a course for the Korean Peninsula to transition from division to reconciliation. In this Year of Peace and Trust, collaborative efforts can realize this in Northeast Asia.