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The PCI News



2025 PCI Building Bridges Award

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.

Each year, academics, policymakers, journalists, and other influential figures gather at an annual dinner to honor the recipients of this prestigious award, celebrating their dedication and significant contributions to fostering understanding and cooperation across the Pacific Rim.

This year, PCI is proud to recognize the **Honorable Michelle Steel** with the Individual Award and the **Asia Society** with the Institutional Award, represented by its President and CEO, **Dr. Kyung-wha Kang**. The awards will be presented at our Annual Awards Dinner on Thursday, March 6, 2025, at the Beverly Hills Hotel.



Michelle Steel is a public servant, immigrant, tax-fighter, and one of the first Korean-American women ever to serve in Congress.

Born in South Korea and raised in Japan, Michelle was the first of her family to move to the United States to attend Pepperdine University. With her mother and two younger sisters, Michelle settled in southern California.

She quickly saw her single working mother struggle to fight an unwarranted tax bill from the California State Board of Equalization, which is when Michelle realized that, however well-intended, the government was failing the people who needed it most.

In 2006, Michelle ran for the California State Board of Equalization, the very agency her mother had dealt with years before. (cont. page 2)



Asia Society, founded by John D. Rockefeller the 3rd in 1956, is a global non-profit dedicated to identifying future pathways for Asia and the world which enhance peace, prosperity, and sustainability. Headquartered in New York City, with 15 other locations across Asia, the United States, and Europe, Asia Society brings together leading thinkers on policy, arts, culture, business, and education for lectures and discussions, analysis and reports, exhibitions, performances, networking and family events, and more. Through this global platform we educate about Asia, share insight about current events in Asia, and celebrate voices from Asia and its diaspora. (cont. page 2)

PCI Annual Award Dinner
Date: Thursday, March 6, 2025
Venue: The Beverly Hills Hotel
Reception 6:00 PM | Dinner 7:00 PM



2025 Building Bridges Awardees

Michelle Steel—Cont. from page 1

During her two terms, she worked quickly to make much needed, common-sense reforms, successfully returning over \$400 million to California taxpayers and focusing on fixing a broken tax system that was hurting families and small businesses.

Michelle was elected to the Orange County Board of Supervisors in 2014 where she led efforts to oppose tax increases, helped lead the county’s COVID-19 response, and provided meaningful support to under-served and vulnerable communities.

During her time in Congress starting in 2021, Michelle led the charge to fix a broken political system that is hurting middle-class families. Michelle is a known champion of lowering taxes, bolstering our economy, supporting our law enforcement to keep our families safe, and fixing a broken healthcare system to ensure Americans have access to quality, affordable healthcare.

Michelle has been blessed to live her American Dream, having earned a Master’s in Business Administration from the University of Southern California and running a successful small business with her husband Shawn. Now as the grandmother to four young grandchildren, Michelle continues to dedicate herself to ensuring future generations have hope for a better future and more opportunities to prosper.

Dr. Kyung-wha Kang
President & CEO, Asia Society

Dr. Kyung-wha Kang is an accomplished diplomat who served as South Korea’s 38th Minister of Foreign Affairs (2017 to 2021). She is the first woman appointed to this post in the nation’s history, endeavoring to garner global support for South Ko-

rea’s initiative to engage with North Korea toward lasting peace and complete denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula. She previously held key leadership roles at the United Nations, including as Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator and Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, and Senior Advisor on Policy to Secretary-General **António Guterres**.



(Dr. Kyung-wha Kang, President & CEO, Asia Society)

Before joining the United Nations, Dr. Kang held various positions in South Korea’s Foreign Ministry, specializing in multilateral affairs and intergovernmental organizations. Among others, she served as Minister at the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Korea to the United Nations, during which she chaired

the 48th and 49th sessions of the UN Commission on the Status of Women. Additionally, she spearheaded efforts to highlight women with disabilities in the drafting of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Dr. Kang graduated from Yonsei University in Korea with a BA in political science and diplomacy and holds an MA and PhD from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Her doctorate research was in the field of international and intercultural communication. Dr. Kang served as Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Ewha Womans University and is Distinguished Professor at the Institute for Global Engagement & Empowerment at Yonsei University.

Please visit: <https://asiasociety.org/>
for more info on the Asia Society



Board Member Opinion Editorial

This opinion editorial by PCI board member, Glyn Ford, appeared on the website 38North on December 15, 2024.

Yoon’s Political Implosion: Making Pyongyang’s Day

by Glyn Ford

The pantomime that has been South Korean politics for the past fortnight has brought swift smiles to the lips of both Kim Jong Un and Vladimir Putin. For Kim, in particular, this is the perfect gift and validates the strategic choices made in his last New Year’s Address. The South may outgun the North by a factor of ten and more, but the fiasco that was an on-off martial law declaration merely made public that the South’s military leadership is ill-disciplined, insubordinate and confused, and the dithering of Seoul’s governing party was worse. What’s not to like in Pyongyang? The North’s much lauded secret weapon, ‘single minded unity,’ has never looked more powerful in the face of Seoul’s indecision and incompetence.

This did not just happen overnight. Recent reports reveal early stages of this plan have been in play for several months as Yoon tried to hide his domestic woes by raising tensions on the Peninsula. This includes the provocative use of the South’s drones to spread propaganda leaflets in Kim Il Sung Square. When that did not elicit a military response, Yoon ordered the South’s military to fire on the sites of the North’s ‘trash’ balloons launches, directions that were apparently refused.

The term ‘leaderless resistance’ is normally applied to the tactics of terrorist groups fearful of infiltration by the state. In Seoul, the term is stood on its head with a state structure inchoate and incompetent. Now with the National Assembly, at the second time of asking, voting for impeachment, the South’s decision making goes into limbo for up to 180 days as the Constitutional Court ponders the

legitimacy of the vote. All this makes Kim’s day as it confirms his strategic pivot while comprehensively sidelining Seoul in any future talks with Trump.

The Backstory

After the car-crash in Hanoi in 2019, Kim Jong Un abandoned the family’s forty-year-long venture to normalize relations with Washington. Across four decades—after the fall of the Soviet Union—American presidents proved immune to any deal, but in 2017, Trump seemed different. Gently coaxed by Pyongyang’s foreign affairs establishment, Ri Su Yong in the International Department of the Party and Ri Yong Ho in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kim was convinced a deal was possible that would see cross-recognition under the protective covering of punctuated progress over a decade and more of slow step-by-step initial freezing and incremental backtracking of the North’s nuclear program.

But 2017 turned out to be a false dawn. Kim viewed the failure of the 2019 Hanoi Summit as the Republican establishment encircling Trump sabotaging the process and preventing the conclusion of any deal. Concluding Washington’s willing were unable to make meaningful changes, Kim purged the doves within his regime in favor of hawks and began to change the course of the country’s external affairs.

Subsequent global events reinforced Kim’s view of the world and shifting power dynamics. The chaotic US retreat from Afghanistan demonstrated the vulnerability of American military might to the wrong warfare, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine exposed spineless decision makers among Ukraine’s partners, and Israel’s devastation of Gaza proved that Washington’s allies could now slip the leash.

(Cont. Page 7)



Project Bridge

Project Bridge, a youth exchange and leadership program at the Pacific Century Institute (PCI), fosters understanding between the U.S. and Asia. In partnership with the Korea Society and the Mansfield Center, it selects diverse high school students for cultural exchanges, including a study tour to South Korea. The program enhances students' knowledge of international relations, builds leadership skills, and promotes cross-cultural awareness, empowering them to become ambassadors of peace and positive change. Here are the 2024-2025 Youth Ambassadors.



(2024-2025 Youth Ambassadors, Los Angeles, CA)

Hello, I'm **Kezia Araujo**, a senior at Downtown Magnets High School. I am Dartmouth-bound and plan to major in engineering sciences. I was born and raised in LA alongside my four older siblings. Project Bridge has so far provided me with a large breadth of insight on a culture different from mine. The program has allowed me an exploration of history and social norms that guide Korea. Each time we meet, I feel compelled to explore more and expand my scope of knowledge. The sessions with my fellow ambassadors have also built a sense of community in our collective growth. I look forward to the program's study tour to Korea. As someone who rarely has a chance to travel, the study tour is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that I hope to thoroughly enjoy. I am excited at the idea of experiencing aspects of Korean culture and society that I have only seen or heard of. I love sightseeing so visiting cultural and/or historical monuments will

be particularly thrilling to me. The cuisine is also a characteristic of Korea that I highly anticipate to be novel and delicious. The vast experiences to be had during the study tour highlight the significance of the learning done throughout the program.

Hello my name is **Evelyn Diaz**, I am currently in eleventh grade at John H. Francis Polytechnic High School. I have been interested in both visual arts and history at a very young age, which enkindled a love for the history and art of other cultures. I identify as Mexican-American and I live in a community heavily influenced by the diversity of Latin American culture. I have always enjoyed trying the foods and participating in the cultural events of other Latin American cultures. I applied to Project Bridge because I have been wanting to branch out and explore other cultures and it has been a great step in that direction. I have learned so much about the history behind Korean culture and geography, and the impacts that Korean immigrants have had on Los Angeles. I am excited to meet people from New York, Montana, and Korea and I hope to make connections as well as memories that will last a lifetime. I have barely been out of California let alone the United States, so I look forward to the study tour to Korea because of its rich history and notable art.

Hi, My name is **Logan Li** and I am currently a junior attending Mark Keppel High School. I am a patrol leader for Boy Scouts of America, Troop 349. I am also an active member in the High School Missionary team at church and a group leader in my fellowship. I enjoy planning for discussions and activities every week to help build relationships and bond with others. I applied for the Korea Bridge Project to improve my leadership and communication skills. I believe that it is important to learn about different cultures and understand why it's important to build relationships and communicate

(Cont. Page 5)



Project Bridge

with others. By being a part of this program, I can meet others with similar goals. I am excited for the study tour to Korea, to see and experience the culture and history of Korea and how it can shape lives everyday. I look forward to trying new foods and visiting historical sites. I hope to improve myself as a person through these experiences, and make lasting friendships with those I meet along the way.

I'm a curious and kind kid who grew up in a Hispanic-dominated community, Boyle Heights. My name is **Bryan Lopez** and I am a junior attending Theodore Roosevelt High School, a part of the Law and Public Service Magnet Pathway. I come from a household of ten that includes my father, mother, grandfather, four brothers, and two sisters. My family blossomed the strong character within me through the many lessons they've taught me. My family is my biggest support group, they are by my side whenever circumstances arise. I applied to this transformative Project Bridge program to explore my interests and get out of my comfort zone. As I previously mentioned, I come from a Hispanic-dominated community excluding any variety, setting limitations. Learning and incorporating other cultures with my own will expand my mindset and find similarities within our cultures. Also, learning Korean Culture will give me the ability to teach my peers about Korea, bridging the gap between our cultures. Throughout the weekly workshops, I've learned about the origins of Korea, the differences and commonalities between North and South Korea, and their culture which all contribute to the preparation for the study tour to South Korea. Visiting South Korea will allow me to achieve one of my dreams, which is to explore the world.

Hi! I'm **Yarel Mendez**, a 17-year-old Mexican-American and senior at Abraham Lincoln High School. Being raised in a multicultural environment has sparked my curiosity to understand and learn different cultures. I viewed the Project Bridge Pro-

gram as a chance to travel and gain firsthand cultural knowledge. South Korea, a country recognized as a global powerhouse in various aspects such as economy, technology, and innovation, has piqued my interest, and through this program I hope to gain insight into the history and heritage of this nation. Furthermore, I want to step out of my comfort zone and develop my ability to work and communicate with others. Being a Youth Ambassador has given me the privilege to learn the historical hardships Korea has faced and begin studying Korean alongside my peers. I am thrilled to immerse myself in the culture of Korea firsthand and have the chance to interact with the other Youth Ambassadors who share a passion of learning foreign cultures through the study tour. Additionally, I am looking forward to the opportunity to conduct research on a subject I am enthusiastic about regarding South Korea, share my findings with others, and hopefully spark their interest. Through this journey I aim to understand South Korea's rich history and not only learn but share the lessons I gain along the way.



Hello! My name is **Joel Nam**, and I am currently a junior attending Van Nuys High School. I am a second-generation Korean-American, but have never felt comfortable claiming my parents' ethnic heritage as my own. Born in Bakersfield and raised in Los Angeles, I've always identified most strongly as "American," with nothing else attached. For that

(Cont. Page 6)



Project Bridge

reason, Project Bridge immediately sparked my interest when I learned about it. Hoping that this program would help me form a deeper connection with my culture, I applied. I'm delighted to share that Project Bridge hasn't disappointed in the slightest. Alongside peers of various backgrounds, I've already learned so many new things. Learning about modern developments in Korean history, particularly concerning North Korea and Japanese occupation, has been very interesting and insightful. Additionally, our assigned reading, *Pachinko*, is the most gripping novel I've read in a long while. Even beyond strictly Korean history and culture, we've explored the dynamics of race relations in recent America (the 1992 LA riots) and day-to-day life. I feel very fortunate to be able to participate and learn in our workshops, and couldn't be more excited for all that's left to come. Of course, I look forward to meeting the other Youth Ambassadors from Montana and New York, and have high hopes for the study tour to South Korea.

My name is **Abdallahman Sheer**. I was born and raised in Egypt and I immigrated to the United States in 2022. I'm a senior at Francisco Bravo Medical Magnet High School. I'm passionate about the intersection of technology and medicine and look forward to pursuing biomedical engineering in undergrad. Growing up with an Egyptian heritage, I had limited opportunities to meet people from other countries, which restricted my exposure to different cultures. When I immigrated to the United States, I didn't fully grasp just how different my culture was from others. However, I was eager to embrace this opportunity to not only adapt to my new environment but also to learn from my peers about their cultures: how they live, their traditions, and their ways of interacting. This experience has empowered me with new perspectives and broadened my understanding of how others see the world. Learning about other cultures is one thing; truly experiencing them is another. Project Bridge

has transcended the idea of merely learning about South Korean life. Being part of Project Bridge is giving me the chance to connect with like-minded peers who share the same mission of cultural exchange, while also learning from their perspectives. This experience has further emphasized the power of understanding and appreciating different cultures. Through our biweekly meetings, guided by Mrs. Pak, we delve into the Korean language, the history of South Korean leaders, and more, immersing ourselves in a new cultural narrative. The upcoming 10-day study tour to South Korea in April is incredibly exciting and promises to be one of the most unique and transformative experiences of my life.

Hello everyone! I am **Ashley Yu**, a junior and proud eagle at South El Monte High School. As a student, I am deeply involved in my school and community, striving to be the bridge between adults and teens, with a strong focus on the well-being and empowerment of my fellow students. In the future, I aspire to become an attorney, practicing in either entertainment or business/corporate law. I applied to the Project Bridge program because it is the best way to spread my love for Korean culture to those around me, as spreading awareness and education is something I can contribute to better my community. In our workshops, we've learned about pre-modern history going back millennia, how Korea's society became what it is today, how the Korean community in Downtown LA was affected during the 1992 LA riots, traditional games, and much more. These next few months excite me because I'll be able to travel to the place we've focused on as our case study, have the opportunity to new experiences, learn more about race relations/Korean society, and, most of all, create lifelong connections and memories I will have the privilege of share with my fellow youth ambassadors. I am thrilled and I will do my best to represent this year's 2024-2025 Project Bridge program.



Board Member Opinion Editorial

Yoon’s Political Implosion: Making Pyongyang’s Day

(continued from page 3)

Mixed Messages for Kim

No longer the only game in town, Kim saw Washington’s loss of control and reaction to China’s challenge as the opening encounters in a second Cold War—a lens through which Kim Jong Un now views the world. The crass and chaotic failed coup d’état by President Yoon in Seoul confirms his analysis and strengthens his hand. Yet there are spots on the sun. First, Kim needs to massage and spin the events in Seoul for the readers of Rodong Sinmun. Pyongyang has never been enthusiastic over advertising the world’s color revolutions; wary the North’s own citizens might be infected with similar gaudy ideas. Here and now it is possibly worse. Kim started the year designating the South as the “most hostile state”. It replaced the previous portrayal of the South Korean citizenry as misguided and misled, intimidated under the thrall of Washington and its domestic dupes with a picture of monochrome malevolence. But the fierce resistance to martial law and overwhelming outcry for impeachment over the last two weeks is clearly at odds with Kim’s propaganda created to help sell why unification should be abandoned.

A second challenge is the ouster of Assad from Syria. The Assad regime had been a Russian proxy propped up by Moscow and Tehran. Its house of cards collapse suggests a fragility to that support and an inability and/or unwillingness for Moscow to fight a two-front war, even in the long shadow of a threatened Trump-inspired ceasefire in Ukraine. It must strike Kim that were the Peninsula’s mutual provocations to turn to skirmishes and threaten escalation to war, like in 1950, Russian engagement could turn out to be coaching from the sidelines with the heavy lifting of mutual

assistance sub-contracted to Beijing, which is likely to limit help to the minimum for survival, far short of the resources for victory.

Conclusion

Despite domestic disturbances, semi-insurrections and coups in South Korea, North Korea has never seized these opportunities to renew civil war. Nevertheless, Yoon’s failed attempt to consolidate power will give Kim confidence to continue on his chosen path of joining what decades ago Jimmy Carter’s National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski called the nightmare coalition for the US of China, Russia and Iran. The North’s chilly relations with Beijing are likely to become more tepid, while Pyongyang, Moscow and Beijing will all welcome and be grateful for the postponement and cancellations in Seoul’s further integration into NATO, the Quad+ or any kind of East Asian Security framework, and the early prospects of a progressive presidency in the South.

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.

JOIN US!!!

PCI Annual Award Dinner

Date: Thursday, March 6, 2025

Venue: The Beverly Hills Hotel

Reception 6:00 PM | Dinner 7:00 PM



PCI Sponsored Programs

Update from Junior Fellow grant recipient Gene Kim
(PhD candidate at Harvard University)

I have been working on my dissertation, which traces the oceanic history of Korea-Japan relations by focusing on how the societies, economies, and bilateral relations between the two countries were deeply intertwined out at sea from the late nineteenth century to normalization in 1965. This year I have been finishing up research in Japan, mostly based in Tokyo, and will be flying to Korea in a few months to conclude my research there as well. Alongside archival work and writing, I have also had the chance to meet up with fishermen and women to get a

sense of their experience on the waves in various locales across Japan. As a PCI fellow I had managed to get a significant chunk of research done, and look back fondly on those months in setting the foundation for the chapters I have been able to write so far.



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