

Salon de Palace Garden 5th Session

Time and Date: 7:00 – 9:00 PM, May 2, 2017

Participants: Prominent members of Korean government, business, academia, media, culture; retired and active American diplomats, American and Korean academics. Pacific Century Institute co-founder Spencer Kim hosted.

Subject: The topic of Public Diplomacy.

The Salon session is the fifth, following up on PCI's 25th Anniversary dinner in Seoul on May 19, 2015. As with those previous sessions, this session followed the Chatham House Rule for discussions in order to ensure frank opinions.

The centerpiece of the evening was a “master class” on the principles and practice of public diplomacy by a former US diplomat who is considered an unofficial “dean” of the art of public diplomacy. Interestingly, however, one of the questions raised was whether the term “public diplomacy” is the right one—do we mean “citizen diplomacy”, of the kind that PCI members do, or are we talking about the ways that traditional diplomacy needs to be adapted to a world dominated by online discussion and social media? It was agreed that diplomacy as a whole has gone through a sea change from being a private activity, the prerogative of “high statesmen”, into a public one, and therefore in a sense we need to think about all diplomacy as public, rather than “public diplomacy” as a subset of diplomacy itself.

Another important challenge discussed was the “tyranny of preconceptions.” The better a diplomat comes to know a foreign country based on repeat assignments there, the greater the danger that they fall victim to the preconceptions they carry from a previous tour of duty. Thus, Americans who knew South Korea during the Yushin dictatorship had to come to a completely new understanding if they returned after the democratic transition; similarly, if you served in Seoul during the heyday of anti-American feeling in the early 2000s, you might miss the transformation in public sentiment towards the alliance today (although where it goes next remains an open question...). So, a lesson of the discussion was: do not lock yourself into preconceptions, even when they are based on prior knowledge and experience.

A related lesson was the importance of “other feelings;” that despite what one might see on the surface of public sentiment, there remains a need in good public diplomacy to remain sensitive to undercurrents. Everything can look fine on the surface, when trouble is brewing beneath. A false sense of certainty in thinking one knows the public and a false sense of security in thinking that everything is fine can have disastrous consequences.

A third topic of discussion was the fact that public diplomacy does not equal public relations. Public diplomacy is not about being liked or avoiding anything contentious and difficult. Public diplomacy at its best is about understanding what others really think, it is a kind of local knowledge, and then a skillful reporting back to one's own country on what one sees and hears. The age of constant, instantaneous communication creates an illusion that one doesn't need to go there or spend time there or live there to understand a place. Good public diplomacy is based on a more "traditional" notion of space and time, in which being on the ground for extended periods of time matters, it allows for a deeper and wider understanding of a foreign public, and no amount of Twitter or Instagram can replace it. On other hand, there was no debate over the reality that social media is one of the central tools of public diplomacy, especially in the Trump era.

Speaking of the Trump era, serious concerns were raised over the "political crisis" in the United States—political institutions under unprecedented stress, norms and principles called into question, and a leader who is considered by many foreign policy experts to be utterly unqualified, unprepared, and even unbalanced. Salon participants wrestled with the question of what this could mean for the alliance relationship. Intense discussion took place, and in many cases it broke into smaller groups, rather than as a collective body. Opinions were wide ranging and therefore defy easy summary. But, the evening succeeded in the ultimate aim of the salon, in bringing a wide range of views and expertise together in thinking through the pressing questions of our day as they concern public diplomacy.