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# Policy Forum 08-023: North Korea Extends Its Freedom Overture



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## Recommended Citation

"Policy Forum 08-023: North Korea Extends Its Freedom Overture", NAPSNet Policy Forum, March 20, 2008, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/north-korea-extends-its-freedom-overture/>

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# North Korea Extends Its Freedom Overture

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Policy Forum Online 08-023A: March 20th, 2008  
North Korea Extends Its Freedom Overture

By Katharine H.S. Moon

CONTENTS

[I. Introduction](#)

[II. Article by Katharine H.S. Moon](#)

[III. Nautilus invites your responses](#)

## I. Introduction

Katharine H.S. Moon, Professor in the Department of Political Science at Wellesley College and Associate Fellow at the Asia Society in New York, writes, "The US government has kept a long arm's distance from the musical overtures between Pyongyang and the Philharmonic, but it also has missed a unique opportunity to assert one of the best examples of its "soft power" not only to North Korea but to the rest of the world."

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## **II. Article by Katharine H.S. Moon**

- "North Korea Extends Its Freedom Overture"

By Katharine H.S. Moon

Was the New York Philharmonic's visit to North Korea a historic breakthrough? It clearly signified the beginning of a new strategy of cultural diplomacy by the Pyongyang regime-having now invited Eric Clapton to play there next year, while North Korea's Philharmonic is already scheduled to perform in London this summer. But does it signify the beginning of a new, more open relationship with the West, or is it in fact no more than a manipulative rendition of musical diplomacy?

These questions have been thrown around since the Philharmonic's visit to Pyongyang, but they miss the mark. The real import of the New York Philharmonic's visit, and potentially the other exchanges, lies with the unsung individuals who make them happen and their behind-the-scene efforts to reconcile historical animosities. Their belief in the power of individuals to break through political boundaries contrasts Washington's unwillingness in the last eight years to move hearts and minds-in America's favor-around the world. The Philharmonic's trip hasn't, and won't, make or break America's relationship with North Korea, but it is one giant step toward a much needed reinvigoration of public diplomacy.

The US State Department quietly but definitively made the "groundbreaking" visit possible. But it took many individuals who straddle both the Atlantic and the Pacific to make the visit and performance happen. Yoko Nagae Ceschina, 75, a Japanese woman who is a former harpist and the widow of a wealthy Italian businessman, largely funded the Philharmonic's expenses. Although hardly noticed in the United States, her facilitation of the event was not lost in Asia and Europe, where she resides.

As symbolisms go, this is pretty big, given that Japan's former colonial hold over the Korean peninsula has plagued its official relationship with both Koreas. And many Japanese today shudder at the thought of North Korea, not only because of its nuclear ambitions but because of their abduction of Japanese nationals a few decades ago. Ceschina self-effacingly stated that although she doesn't know much about politics, she offered her support "hoping that music will bring about peace." Mrs. Ceschina's efforts remind us that peace between North Korea and the United States is not the only peace that matters, but that peace-making by both the governments and peoples of East Asia is still unfinished and requires their creative attention.

As important as funding is, one person cannot move mountains. In making the Philharmonic's visit happen, the Korea Society of New York was instrumental in organizing and mediating various governmental and nongovernmental actors. A small non-profit, non-partisan organization "dedicated solely to the promotion of greater awareness, understanding and cooperation between the people of the United States and Korea," it doggedly pursued its stated purpose to make a difficult project happen.

The truth is that there are many private individuals and organizations in the United States who are already engaged with North Koreans in a variety of areas and seek to do more: science and technology training and exchanges; sports exchanges; humanitarian work; even tourism from the US to North Korea. Smaller groups with no fanfare at all have been paving the way for the New York orchestra. So, we shouldn't put the onus of "diplomatic pioneer" or "dupe" on the shoulders of the Philharmonic.

Neither private individuals nor governments can change the world on their own. The beauty of democracy lies in the creation of order through dissonance, not unlike the relationship between conductor and musicians. An orchestra needs both. The US government has kept a long arm's distance from the musical overtures between Pyongyang and the Philharmonic, but it also has missed a unique opportunity to assert one of the best examples of its "soft power" not only to North Korea but to the rest of the world. Trying to force democracy and freedom through the barrel of a gun has left us with few friends and many enemies. The New York Philharmonic and its supporters have done what billions of American dollars and lost lives have failed to do in recent years: show the world that freedom of expression and creativity, the drumbeat of democracy, are best embodied and conveyed by its people.

### **III. Nautilus invites your responses**

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: [napsnet-reply@nautilus.org](mailto:napsnet-reply@nautilus.org) . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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[Return to top](#)

[back to top](#)

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