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Power of Art: Why Human Stories and Connections Matter in International Relations

National security and international diplomacy are often perceived through the impersonal lens of statecraft, yet their true essence is deeply human-centric. The collapse of the Soviet Union serves as a stark example. It did not crumble under foreign invasion but fell apart because it failed to provide essential human security both at home and abroad. This failure highlights a critical oversight in international relations: the disconnection from human stories. Much like macroeconomists who may focus solely on economic data and trends without considering the individual voices within the market, policymakers can miss the crucial human element that should be at the heart of diplomacy and security.

Human-centric diplomacy suggests that international relations should be rooted in people-to-people connections and grassroots friendships. For instance, my personal journey transitioned from a military planner with a theoretical understanding of North Korea to someone deeply engaged with North Korean refugees. About a decade ago, I initiated an entrepreneurship education program for these refugees, who were struggling to adapt to a capitalist economy and faced a suicide rate three to four times higher than their South Korean peers. It was through listening to their stories and forming emotional connections that I gained a genuine understanding of North Korea—a perspective vital not only for humanitarian reasons but also for national security planning.

The value of personal connections is also vividly illustrated in the longstanding friendship between the United States and South Korea. Our nonprofit organization hosts an annual event called "Bridging Generations," where we bring together Korean War American veterans and young Korean children. These interactions, where children listen to the veterans' stories and share handwritten letters filled with innocent errors and heartfelt drawings, forge powerful emotional bonds. These connections often transcend into the realm of international diplomacy, as evidenced in 2016 when a child's letter was highlighted during a state visit by Korean President Park to President Obama, demonstrating how personal ties can significantly strengthen international alliances.

Moreover, the power of art in shaping these relationships cannot be overstated. Art serves as a profound medium of storytelling that bridges generations, cultures, and regions. Museums like the Peabody Essex, with initiatives such as the Yu Gil Chun Gallery of Korean Art, exemplify how art can facilitate connections and serve intercultural or international relations well beyond mere aesthetic purposes. Art transforms historical narratives and individual experiences into universal messages that resonate across borders, reinforcing the idea that shared cultural expressions and historical appreciation are foundational to building and maintaining strong international relationships.

In conclusion, human connections and stories are not just supplementary elements but the core of effective alliances and diplomacy. They remind us that at the core of all international relations are people—each with their own stories and lives that can profoundly influence global interactions. Through the power of art and personal narratives, we can truly transcend the constraints of formal diplomatic institutions and foster more meaningful and impactful partnerships.