



Women Mobilizing
to End the War
KOREA PEACE NOW

Korea Peace Now Factsheet #2

A History of Relations Between the United States and North Korea

In 1953, the Armistice Agreement temporarily halted the Korean War. All parties were supposed to negotiate a formal peace settlement within three months, but that never happened. Ever since, relations between North Korea and the U.S. have been characterized by distrust and fear that fighting could resume at any time.

A look at U.S.-North Korea relations over the years reveals why the narrow U.S. focus on denuclearization has failed to resolve hostilities and, in fact, only magnified them.

1980s-early 1990s:

- In December 1985, North Korea joined the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, which requires non-nuclear weapon states to forswear the development and acquisition of nuclear weapons.
- In 1991, following the end of the Cold War, President H.W. Bush authorized the withdrawal of most U.S. tactical nuclear weapons from South Korea. (The U.S. first began stockpiling nuclear ordinance and missiles in South Korea in 1958, a process that continued unabated for over three decades.)
- The U.S. and South Korea announced the cancellation of their annual “Team Spirit” joint military exercises.
- Concerned about North Korea’s nascent nuclear ambitions, the Bush administration began to open up diplomatic communication channels with Pyongyang.

The Agreed Framework (1994-2003):

- The U.S. continued to maintain long- and intermediate-range nuclear assets in readiness for immediate deployment against North Korea. As a result, Pyongyang’s nuclear ambitions have been tied primarily to its security needs, as well as to energy shortages caused by the loss of Soviet fuel subsidies at the closure of the Cold War.
- On October 21, 1994, the U.S. and North Korea signed the Agreed Framework, which called for North Korea to freeze and eventually dismantle its nuclear weapons program in exchange for security and energy guarantees, and for the two countries to move toward normalized political and economic relations. In return, the U.S. pledged to provide North Korea with two light-water reactors for generating electricity by 2003, and to supply it with 500,000 tons of heavy fuel oil in the interim.
- While the Agreed Framework alleviated the immediate sense of crisis surrounding Pyongyang’s nuclear program, U.S.-North Korea relations remained tense. Washington did not live up to its end of the bargain. The U.S. Congress, skeptical of the agreement’s merits, was reluctant to fund the promised heavy fuel oil shipments, and little progress was made toward normalizing diplomatic or economic relations.
- The Agreed Framework finally broke down in 2003, and North Korea subsequently began developing an operational uranium enrichment capacity.

The Perry Process (1999-2000):

- In late-1998, amid growing concerns over North Korea’s missile program, suspicions of possible undeclared nuclear activities, and the uneven implementation of the Agreed Framework, the Clinton administration appointed former Secretary of Defense William Perry to conduct a comprehensive review of U.S. policy toward North Korea. Perry, with significant help from South Korean President Kim Dae-jung, managed to put the two countries back on the road to reconciliation.

- The final months of the Clinton administration saw a burst of high-level diplomacy and an accompanying warming of North-South relations following the first inter-Korean summit in June 2000.

Bush and the “Axis of Evil” (2001-2003):

- After taking office in 2001, President George W. Bush pursued a harder line toward Pyongyang, inducting North Korea into the infamous “axis of evil” along with Iran and Iraq, and imposing tough new sanctions against the nation.
- The relationship between the two countries deteriorated further after a leak of the administration’s classified Nuclear Posture Review, which revealed that North Korea was one of seven countries identified as potential nuclear targets in the event of the outbreak of hostilities. Kim Jong Il roundly condemned this revelation as a blatant violation of previous U.S. security assurances and declared Pyongyang’s renewed interest in the acquisition of defensive nuclear capabilities.
- With the subsequent collapse of the Agreed Framework in 2003, Pyongyang began speaking openly about building up its “nuclear deterrent force” unless the U.S. ended its “hostile policy” toward the nation.
- Nevertheless, while affirming North Korea’s right to the possession of nuclear weapons and acknowledging the existence of its enrichment program, Kim signaled his willingness to negotiate over the issue.
- The Bush administration, however, continued to press for a “complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement” (CVID) of North Korea’s nuclear program as a precondition to negotiations of any kind. The two countries were once again at a seemingly insurmountable impasse.

The Six-Party Talks (2003-2009):

- Multilateral negotiations between China, Japan, North Korea, Russia, South Korea, and the United States achieved a critical breakthrough in 2005 when North Korea pledged to abandon its nuclear weapons and associated R&D programs and return to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.
- By 2007, all parties agreed on a series of steps to implement the agreement, which included an explicit non-aggression declaration by the U.S. with respect to North Korea.
- Although Pyongyang took concrete steps to affirm its commitment to the agreement, including the much-publicized destruction of the Yongbyon reactor tower in 2008, the talks ultimately broke down in 2009 following disagreements over verification.

Strategic Patience and Failed Leap Day Deal (2009-2017):

- Before entering office, President Barack Obama indicated that he would actively engage North Korea. However, Jeffrey Bader, National Security Council Senior Director for Asia, said the administration pursued a policy of “strategic patience” in an attempt to break the pattern of “provocation, extortion, and reward” in U.S.-North Korea diplomacy.
- As a result, the Obama administration was disinclined to engage with Pyongyang when conflicts arose, preferring instead to increase sanctions and isolate the regime.
- Behind the scenes, however, Ambassador Stephen Bosworth began negotiations on a deal that would freeze North Korea’s nuclear program in exchange for food aid.
- But the deteriorating health and eventual death of Kim Jong Il in 2011, which stoked regime collapse theories, narrowed the possibilities for diplomacy in the Obama years. Although Kim Jong Il’s successor, Kim Jong Un, remained committed to the so-called Leap Day deal, which was announced on February 29, 2012, North Korea then launched a satellite for what it said was peaceful purposes. The U.S. considered the launch a violation of the agreement, effectively killing the deal.

Maximum Pressure Under the Trump Administration (2017):

- In its first year in office, the Trump administration announced a commitment to replace “the failed policy of ‘strategic patience’” with a tougher “maximum pressure” strategy to ratchet up sanctions and increase isolation against North Korea.
- In August 2017, following intelligence reports that North Korea may have developed the capability to mount a nuclear warhead on a missile, Trump stated that if North Korea continued its threats against the United States, it would “be met with fire and fury like the

world has never seen.” In a subsequent address to the UN General Assembly, Trump said that if the U.S. “is forced to defend itself or its allies, we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea.” Two months later, North Korea successfully tested the Hwasong-15 intercontinental ballistic missile.

The Singapore Summit (2018):

- In January 2018, Kim Jong Un declared North Korea’s nuclear arsenal “complete” and accepted South Korea’s proposal to participate in the 2018 Winter Olympics in South Korea. Trump agreed to postpone scheduled U.S.-R.O.K. joint military exercises until after the Olympics.
- North Korea’s participation in the Olympics led to a series of inter-Korean dialogue, including a meeting between Kim Jong Un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in on April 27 during which they outlined the shared goal of eliminating the danger of war on the Korean Peninsula.
- During a high-level meeting with South Korean officials in Pyongyang in March, Kim Jong Un conveyed his interest in meeting with Trump. Trump accepted the offer. As a demonstration of its intentions, North Korea released three U.S. detainees and destroyed several tunnels at the Punggye-ri nuclear test site leading up to the meeting.
- The Trump-Kim summit on June 12 in Singapore marked the first meeting between the leaders of the U.S. and North Korea, producing a joint statement pledging to improve relations and create a lasting peace regime, along with a commitment by the North to “work toward complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.”
- In a press conference held after the summit, Trump declared that he had agreed to suspend the upcoming large-scale U.S.-R.O.K. joint military exercises and indicated that Kim had promised to dismantle an intercontinental ballistic missile testing site. Trump also reportedly agreed to move swiftly to sign a declaration ending the Korean War, and subsequently declared the problem of North Korea’s nuclear program to be “largely solved.”

Post-Singapore Summit (2018-):

- After the summit, North Korea began to dismantle a missile-engine test site and returned 55 cases of remains of U.S. soldiers.
- However, the U.S. and North Korea have been in deadlock since the Singapore summit over the sequencing and meaning of denuclearization.
- The U.S. continued to maintain that sanctions would remain intact until North Korea denuclearized, while North Korea insisted on the normalization of political and economic relations or end enmity and reconcile, starting with an end-of-war declaration and some easing of or exemptions from U.S. sanctions.
- Even while criticizing the lack of reciprocal actions of the U.S., however, North Korea offered to dismantle its Yongbyon nuclear complex in exchange for “corresponding measures” and continued to praise Trump personally. During his State of the Union address, Trump announced a second summit would be held in February 2019 in Vietnam.
- Although a declaration ending the Korean War and a denuclearization deal appeared imminent, the second summit between the United States and North Korea in Hanoi ended abruptly and without any agreement. According to Trump, the U.S. walked away because Kim Jong Un demanded a total lifting of sanctions in return for his country’s concessions. But North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho countered that North Korea only sought partial sanctions relief in exchange for closing its Yongbyon nuclear complex. The two sides vowed to continue discussions.