

GUEST ESSAY

I Know How Nuclear War Is Waged, So I'm Calling for Peace With North Korea

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By Dan Leaf

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Not many people know how to wage nuclear war. I'm one of them.

As a young U.S. Air Force fighter pilot in the late 1970s, I was trained to carry out nuclear strikes in a rigorous process designed to ensure that no contingencies — mechanical or ethical — deter your mission. Certain things remain burned into my memory: maps and photos of my target and the realization of the Armageddon I would leave in my wake. Training culminated with a sworn pledge to vaporize that target without hesitation.

Much of my 33-year career was spent as a nuclear warrior — I later oversaw the U.S. intercontinental ballistic missile fleet and served as deputy commander of American military forces in the Pacific — experience that informs my deep alarm over the growing risk of nuclear conflict with North Korea.

The United States has tried for decades to prevent the country from becoming a nuclear threat, veering from diplomacy to pressure to patience. None of these approaches have worked.

Here's something that might: End the Korean War.

On July 27, 1953, an armistice was signed that halted combat, but the United States and South Korea technically remain at war with the North. This is no longer acceptable.

North Korea has nuclear weapons. It has conducted missile tests at a record pace since last year, including powerful ICBMs believed to be capable of delivering a warhead anywhere in the continental United States. In January, Kim Jong-un, North Korea's leader, ordered an "exponential" expansion of the country's nuclear arsenal, and last year his government passed a law authorizing a pre-emptive nuclear strike. In response, President Yoon Suk Yeol of South Korea has said his country may consider developing nuclear weapons.

In this hair-trigger environment, one bad decision or misunderstanding could kill millions.

I spent four years in South Korea, including in high-level positions at the headquarters of combined U.S., South Korean and U.N. forces, overseeing the vast destructive forces amassed for a war that was no longer being fought. In my time in the region, I went from scratching my head to pulling my hair out. The standoff is one of the great absurdities in global geopolitics.

You must be aggressive to win wars but assertive to make peace. No matter how challenging the negotiations and politics of securing peace on the Korean Peninsula may prove, they are nothing compared with nuclear war.

A permanent peace agreement would undermine Mr. Kim's portrayal of the United States as an existential threat and his justification for building up his conventional and nuclear arsenal. It could also short-circuit the siege mentality underlying his repressive regime. Sanctions relief and economic development could follow, leading to long-hoped-for improvements in the quality of life and human rights for North Korea's 25 million people.

The United States, North Korea and South Korea have all pledged in recent years to pursue a lasting peace agreement. Separate meetings that President Donald Trump and then-President Moon Jae-in of South Korea held with Mr. Kim in 2018 committed to that goal. It brought an immediate easing of tensions. Land mines were removed from portions of the Korean Demilitarized Zone,

Korean families held reunions, Mr. Kim declared a moratorium on long-range missile and nuclear tests, the North returned remains of U.S. servicemen and released three detained Americans. Even after Mr. Trump's outreach to Mr. Kim collapsed in 2019, Mr. Kim indicated he was still open to diplomacy.

There is currently a bill in the House of Representatives calling for a peace deal. The Peace on the Korean Peninsula Act would require the secretary of state to submit a "clear road map for achieving a permanent peace agreement"; pursue "serious, urgent" diplomacy in pursuit of a binding agreement; and begin to address America's lack of diplomatic relations with North Korea by establishing liaison offices on each other's soil.

The bill is imperfect. Much of it focuses on creating the conditions for Korean Americans to visit relatives in the North. (U.S. law currently bars travel by Americans to North Korea unless it serves an ill-defined "national interest.") It also lacks other steps necessary to entrench peace, such as a process for U.S.-North Korean reconciliation, normalization of disputed maritime boundaries and a framework for talks between the opposing military forces.

There is an urgent need for progress. After the diplomatic overtures of recent years fell apart, Mr. Kim has only become more belligerent and the risk of conflict is more acute. Passage of a strengthened Peace on the Korean Peninsula Act is essential to securing a lasting solution, yet the current bill has not advanced since it was introduced in 2021.

Critics argue that a peace agreement may actually increase the risk of war by undermining safeguards put in place by the armistice nearly 70 years ago. These include specific demarcation lines and protocols for communications, movement and other actions within the DMZ. But there is nothing foolproof about the armistice. President Bill Clinton considered bombing North Korea in 1994, and Mr. Trump reportedly discussed using nuclear weapons in 2017. North Korea occasionally carries out provocations, and the North and South have exchanged artillery fire on several occasions.

There are other risks: Pyongyang may use a peace agreement as a pretext to demand the removal of U.S. troops from South Korea, which is a matter between Seoul and Washington.

But the hardest part of ending the war might be building the political will for it in Washington. Accommodating North Korea would inevitably lead to accusations that we are rewarding bad behavior and legitimizing a totalitarian regime. But the Kim family has ruled for 75 years; it's time to accept that this is unlikely to change anytime soon.

At this moment, the next generation of men and women north and south of the DMZ are preparing for nuclear war. May they never have to put their training to use.

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