

The US Must Trade Muscles for Diplomacy to End the North Korean Nuclear Crisis

By [Colleen Moore](#)

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Tensions are dramatically escalating on the Korean Peninsula, after a series of missile tests from Pyongyang in 2022. The United States and South Korea have responded to these threats with military maneuvers of their own, raising the stakes even further. But this is a recipe for disaster: To avoid an all-out war on the Korean Peninsula, the United States must stop the muscle-flexing, commit to diplomacy instead, and adopt a peace-first strategy.

North Korea's progress in weapons development should come as no surprise; in 2021, Kim Jong-un [announced](#) that North Korea would expand its nuclear weapon capabilities in order to deter what they perceive as hostility and aggression from the United States. This perception by Pyongyang is a direct result of the Biden administration's continuation of [decades of failed policies](#)—consisting of isolation, sanctions, and military threats—all these dotted with occasional flurries of diplomacy. To have even a chance of halting the expansion of North Korea's nuclear weapons program and preventing a conflict that crosses the nuclear threshold, the United States must address the root cause of tensions: the unresolved Korean War.

An enduring conflict. While an armistice signed in 1953 halted fighting between the United States and North Korea, the Korean War never legally ended; neither country signed a formal peace agreement. This 70-year state of war has ingrained mutual distrust between North Korea and the United States—which, since North Korea developed nuclear weapons, has cemented even further.

After the United States expanded its nuclear presence in Korea, [introducing](#) tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea in 1958, North Korea pursued technology capable of producing weapons-grade plutonium. Tensions boiled over in the 1990s, with North Korea announcing its intention to [withdraw](#) from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in response to United States-South Korea joint military exercises as well as the United States' push for inspections of suspected military facilities in North Korea. The [Agreed Framework of 1994](#), in which

North Korea agreed to freeze its plutonium-production complex in exchange for light-water reactors from the United States, simmered tensions. However, the deal collapsed in 2002 when the Bush administration [confronted](#) North Korea over fears of a clandestine uranium enrichment program. North Korea then restarted plutonium production and withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty—leading to its first nuclear test on October 9, 2006.

Since then, time and time again, the United States has insisted on North Korea's unilateral and complete denuclearization without first reducing tensions and building trust. Continuing to press North Korea to dismantle arguably its most effective deterrent without resolving its underlying contentious relationship with the United States is certain to fail: North Korea will continue to see such demand for unilateral denuclearization as a non-starter in negotiations.

For example, during the first round of the [six-party talks](#) in August 2003 (involving belligerents of the Korean War—the United States, South Korea, North Korea, and China—as well as Japan and Russia), the United States rejected North Korea's calls for normalizing relations and a non-aggression pact. Instead, the United States demanded that North Korea completely dismantle its nuclear arsenal before providing diplomatic or other incentives. To this demand, North Korea's Vice Foreign Minister Kim Gye-gwan responded, "The United States wants North Korea to drop its pants and be naked and humiliated before the United States is prepared to improve relations. We are technically at war with the United States. You want us to surrender unconditionally."

During the fifth and sixth rounds of the talks, the United States and North Korea agreed that Pyongyang would "provide a complete and correct declaration of all its nuclear programs" by end of 2007. But once the deadline arrived and the United States inquired about North Korea's actual number of nuclear weapons, Kim Gye-gwan said, "We're still technically at war with you. It would be inappropriate for us to discuss weapons with an enemy state."

Demanding again North Korea's unilateral denuclearization was also responsible for [ending](#) without a deal the 2019 talks in Hanoi between North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and US President Donald Trump. North Korea had offered to dismantle all its nuclear production facilities in Yongbyon in exchange for partial sanctions relief. But, maintaining its all-or-nothing stance, the United States countered by demanding that North Korea fully dismantle its nuclear weapons program.

Former US officials who had made progress on freezing North Korea's nuclear weapons program from 1994 to 2002 agree that security guarantees are necessary for North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons. Former US Secretary of Defense William Perry [argued](#) that since North Korea views its nuclear arsenal as a deterrent against a possible US invasion, South Korea and the United States should address North Korea's security concerns and normalize relations first before seeking its denuclearization. Former Los Alamos National Laboratory director Siegfried Hecker, who visited the Yongbyon nuclear site four times, also [said](#) that he believes North Korea "will not give up its weapons and weapons program until its security can be assured."

Unsustainable status quo. Despite these calls, the Biden administration—like the three US presidential administrations before—remains entangled in the failed policy of up-front denuclearization, like when the US State Department's Press Secretary Ned Price recently [rolled back](#) Under Secretary for Arms Control Bonnie Jenkins' comments on pursuing an arms control and risk reduction approach to North Korea's nuclear weapons program. While

the administration's North Korea policy review released in 2021 claims to strike a balance between President Donald Trump's "grand bargain" diplomacy and President Barack Obama's "strategic patience" approach, in practice, both approaches maintain the status quo of maximum pressure—through sanctions and military exercises—without putting anything on the negotiating table.

The status quo in US-North Korean relations will only worsen the security of the Korean Peninsula.

Diplomacy is the only option. To truly improve the security of the Korean Peninsula, the Biden administration should trade its bold approach for a strategy of diplomacy toward North Korea. An effective diplomacy must be fourfold. First, the United States should emphasize it is willing to resume diplomacy, focusing on immediate de-escalation of tensions and restoration of communication channels. Second, it should prioritize formally ending the Korean War with a peace agreement with North Korea. Third, the Biden administration should rebuild trust by offering to lift sanctions, especially those that impact the North Korean population. Fourth, it should also take steps to reduce tensions such as scaling down or ceasing joint military exercises with South Korea, especially since joint military exercises [do not deter](#) North Korea but rather provoke a cycle of tit-for-tat provocative rhetoric and actions.

Diplomacy has been the most successful method of making progress toward denuclearization. In 1994, the Clinton administration successfully persuaded North Korea to [freeze](#) plutonium production at the Yongbyon complex in the Agreed Framework. The 2018-2019 summits between the United States and North Korea resulted in several tension-reducing measures, including the [repatriation](#) of US soldiers' remains, [reunions](#) of Korean families separated by the war, [landmine clearance](#) in the demilitarized zone, North Korea's self-imposed [moratorium](#) on nuclear and long-range missile testing, and [suspension](#) by the United States of joint military exercises with South Korea. However, while past talks aimed solely at North Korea's denuclearization, future negotiations should instead first address the root cause of the security crisis to build toward longer-lasting agreements and mutual trust.

Amid heightened tensions with other nuclear-armed powers, including Russia and China, the United States must do everything it can to diffuse the situation with North Korea through peaceful and diplomatic means. The potential for escalatory responses heightens the risk of a catastrophic war that would put millions of lives at risk of death, suffering, and displacement. Decades of pressure-based tactics have failed to make progress on North Korea's denuclearization and only worsened global security. It's time to try something different.

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Colleen Moore is the director for advocacy at Women Cross DMZ, a non-profit organization of women mobilizing for peace on the Korean Peninsula. Moore is a policy, advocacy, and campaign strategy professional, with expertise in progressive foreign policy and national security, particularly focusing on East Asia, peacebuilding, and nuclear disarmament. She previously held positions at Beyond the Bomb, Global Zero, Win Without War, Seeds of

Peace, and East Timor and Indonesia Action Network.

Featured image: US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un shake hands at the Hanoi Summit in Vietnam on February 27, 2019. The summit ended without a deal after the United States demanded again North Korea's unilateral denuclearization. (Credit: White House)

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