

## How 11 US presidents failed to make peace with North Korea

*Some in the Trump administration have the same thinking which sabotaged peace talks with North Korea for 64 years.*



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Former US President Jimmy Carter meets North Korea leader Kim Il-sung on June 17, 1994 during what the Clinton administration called a 'private trip' to Pyongyang [File photo: AP]

Contrary to popular perception, the core issue to be resolved at the June 12 summit – and any subsequent meetings – between US President [Donald Trump](#) and North Korean leader [Kim Jong-un](#) is not North Korea's denuclearisation. Pyongyang's willingness to denuclearise is already clear.

What is not clear, however, is whether the [US](#) is prepared to give [North Korea](#) the guarantee of its security which is its main demand. There is no doubt that Pyongyang can disable and dismantle its nuclear arsenal. It is only a question of process.

But it will not do so if the US insists on unilateral denuclearisation without any reciprocal commitment. To paraphrase George Kennan, a renowned US diplomat: A concept of national security that fails to concede the same legitimacy to the security needs of others lays itself open to moral reproach.

In this sense, the historical record of US failures to deliver peace and security to the Korean Peninsula is discouraging. Successive US administrations have failed to offer and guarantee a security arrangement acceptable to Pyongyang and have repeatedly walked away from opportunities to strike a deal.

The recent remarks by National Security Adviser John Bolton and Vice President Mike Pence – which quickly led to a flare-up in rhetoric and a temporary suspension of the planned summit – show that such attitudes persist in Washington. It was this type of thinking that made US negotiators choose the language of machismo, ideological posturing and confrontation over compromise 64 years ago.

At the Geneva conference in 1954, where the USSR, China, the US, the UK and France had gathered to decide the fate of the Korean Peninsula and what was then called Indochina, US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles (serving under President Dwight Eisenhower) maintained an intractable position which in essence demanded something close to capitulation from his adversaries.

Although the 1953 temporary armistice signed by all sides in the Korean war was predicated on subsequent good faith negotiations to settle the political issue, he refused to negotiate directly with the Chinese. Dulles also made it a point to snub the Chinese envoy, Zhou Enlai, by refusing to shake his hand and left the conference early.

Then, in 1957, the US unilaterally abrogated clause 13(d) of the armistice when it announced that it proposed to introduce nuclear weapons to the Korean Peninsula. The next year it deployed nuclear-armed Honest John missiles to [South Korea](#).

As a consequence the role of the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission, which was established pursuant to the armistice to prevent all parties bringing additional weapons or military personnel on to the peninsula, was undermined and the armistice – sabotaged.

Throughout the 1960s (under the Kennedy and Johnson administrations), relations between the US and North Korea were understandably hostile. In 1968, the North Koreans intercepted and captured the USS Pueblo, a US Navy intelligence vessel. And in 1969, a US spy plane was shot down by North Korean MIG-21 aircraft over the Sea of Japan, killing 31 American personnel.

In the 1970s, North Korea adopted a different policy, one which it has continued ever since. It maintained, as it had in 1954, that a peace treaty was a necessary formality to the achievement of security on the peninsula. In its 1974 letter to the US Congress, Pyongyang publicly invited the US to join negotiations for a peace treaty to replace the armistice. Neither the Nixon nor the Ford administrations took any recorded action in response to this request.

Subsequently, North Korea's then-leader Kim Il-sung raised the idea of a peace agreement with President Jimmy Carter but nothing came out of it. And although the Carter policy was to reduce US troop numbers in South Korea, the [Pentagon](#) successfully opposed it.

When President Ronald Reagan assumed office in 1981, he increased US troop numbers. He was philosophically opposed to a peace treaty and embraced South Korea. His successor, George H W Bush, withdrew nuclear weapons deployed abroad, marginally reduced US troop numbers in South Korea, but did not seriously consider negotiating a peace treaty.

President Bill Clinton, who was in office 1993-2001, came closer than any of his predecessors to achieving a resolution of the frozen Korean conflict. The Agreed Framework in 1994 and the Joint Communiqué between Washington and Pyongyang in 2000 were significant milestones. But despite almost a decade of high-level peaceful engagement, the relationship was set back by George W Bush's hawkish foreign policy and his decision to include North Korea in his imagined "axis of evil".

By 2003, the US had not lived up to its pledge in Article 2 of the Agreed Framework to "move towards full normalization of political and economic relations", so in response, North Korea withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The Six Party Talks were convened in 2003, but the Bush administration remained hostile and the talks were inconclusive.

In 2006, Pyongyang commenced the [nuclear tests](#) that continued until last year. When the Obama administration came to office in 2009, it did not seriously engage but preferred to adopt a policy of "strategic patience", relying on sanctions and hoping for a collapse of the North Korean regime. It was never going to work.

Against the backdrop of these consistent failures by Washington to deliver peace and security on the Korean Peninsula, Kim Jong-un's strategy since coming to power in December 2011 is clear. Despite the known certainty of sanctions, he increased his country's nuclear tests and intercontinental ballistic missile launches, but coupled them with more frequent demands for a peace treaty. Between 2012-16, Pyongyang published at least five official statements expressly reiterating the need for the conclusion of a peace treaty.

This strategy culminated in the [March 6 official position](#) of the North Korean regime articulated through the office of the South Korean President. North Korea would have "no reason to keep nuclear weapons", the statement said, if the "military threat to the North was eliminated and its security guaranteed".

North Korea is now a nuclear state. Its offer is on the table and it is negotiating from a position of strength. President Trump should cherish the opportunity to do what his predecessors have failed to achieve and offer North Korea the end of the state of war, the termination of hostile relations and a peace treaty. The ball is in Washington's court again.

***The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial stance.***

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