

## OPINION

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## North Korea: Why negotiations can't wait for denuclearisation



North Korean leader Kim Jong-un speaks in his annual address in undisclosed location. AP

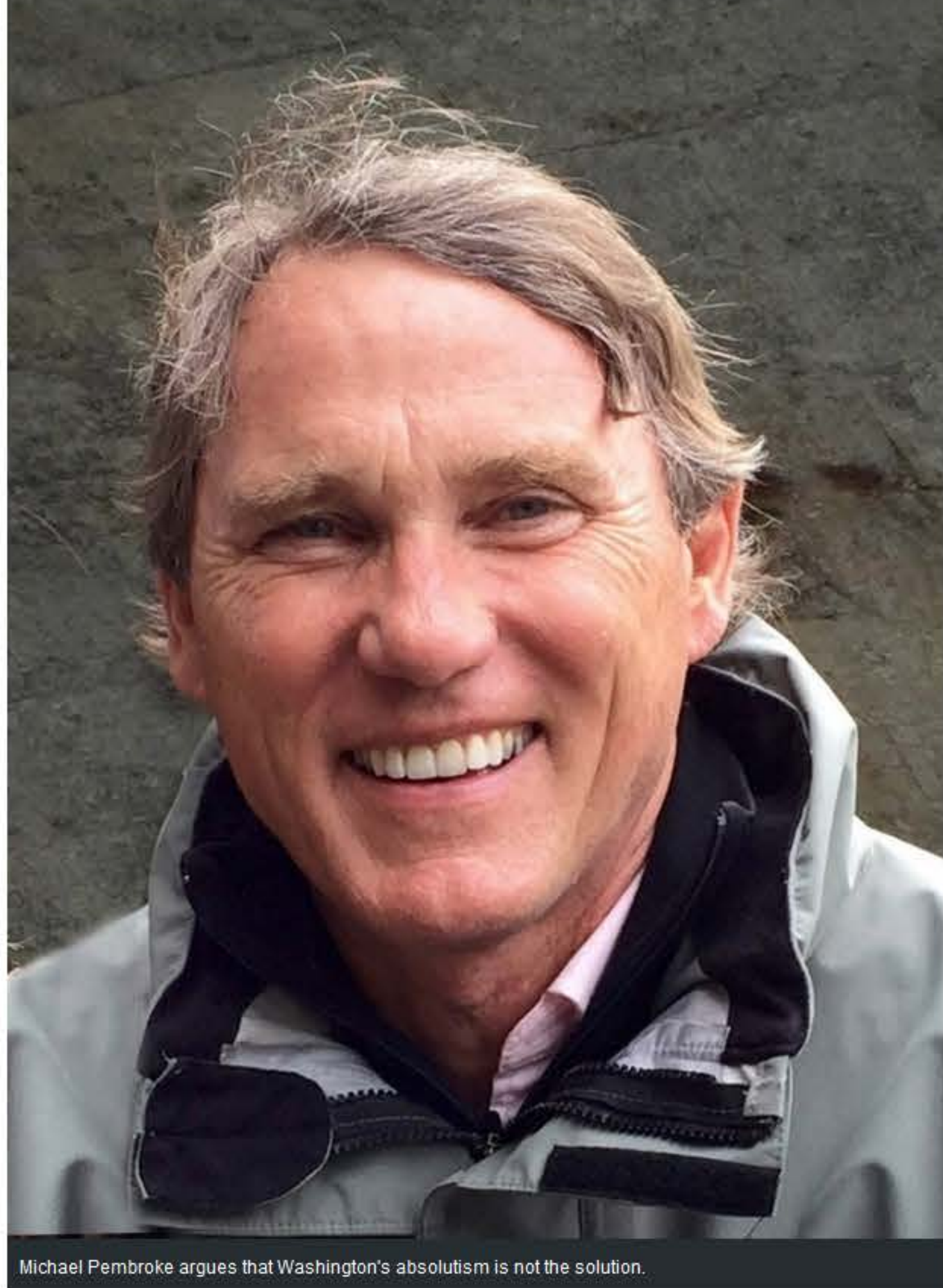
by Michael Pembroke

Few people know the true story of the Korean War; few understand the reasons for North Korean bitterness toward the United States; most are unaware of the extent to which Washington shares responsibility for the creation and perpetuation of the mutual hostility that has persisted for almost 70 years.

The war has not ended. There has been no peace treaty between states, merely an armistice between military commanders. The armistice's stated objective is to ensure a cessation of hostilities "until a final peaceful settlement is achieved". But this has not occurred. The armistice did not solve the political issues, it merely hardened them. Washington resented the drawn outcome and treated North Korea as a pariah, and still does.

The war itself was tragically extended. It should have been over in three months, after the North Korean armed forces had been beaten back to the 38th parallel. Instead it lasted more than three years. Washington was not content with the restoration of the status quo and overreached. In late September 1950, president Harry Truman secretly authorised the invasion of North Korea in a failed attempt at regime change. This caused China to enter the war to protect its border on the Yalu River. It had done so in past centuries and may do so again. The resulting retreat at the hands of a superior Chinese force was the longest in American military history, the "most disgraceful" and the "most infamous". The US-led forces were hounded out of North Korea, just as they would later be from Vietnam.

In November 1950, in response to China's entry into the war, the US Air Force Strategic Air Command unleashed a punitive bombing campaign of North Korea that was unrestrained by a sense of proportionality and not confined to military targets. Orchestrated by Curtis LeMay, the world's foremost practitioner of obliteration bombing, it was "long, leisurely and merciless". Over nearly three years, most of North Korea was levelled – "systematically bombed town by town". In the rebuilt streets of Pyongyang, the legacy of bombing is bitterness. Even General Douglas MacArthur conceded: "I have never seen such devastation ... If you go on indefinitely, you are perpetuating a slaughter such as I have never heard of in the history of mankind". Dean Rusk, later secretary of state, said that the United States bombed "everything that moved in North Korea, every brick standing on top of another".



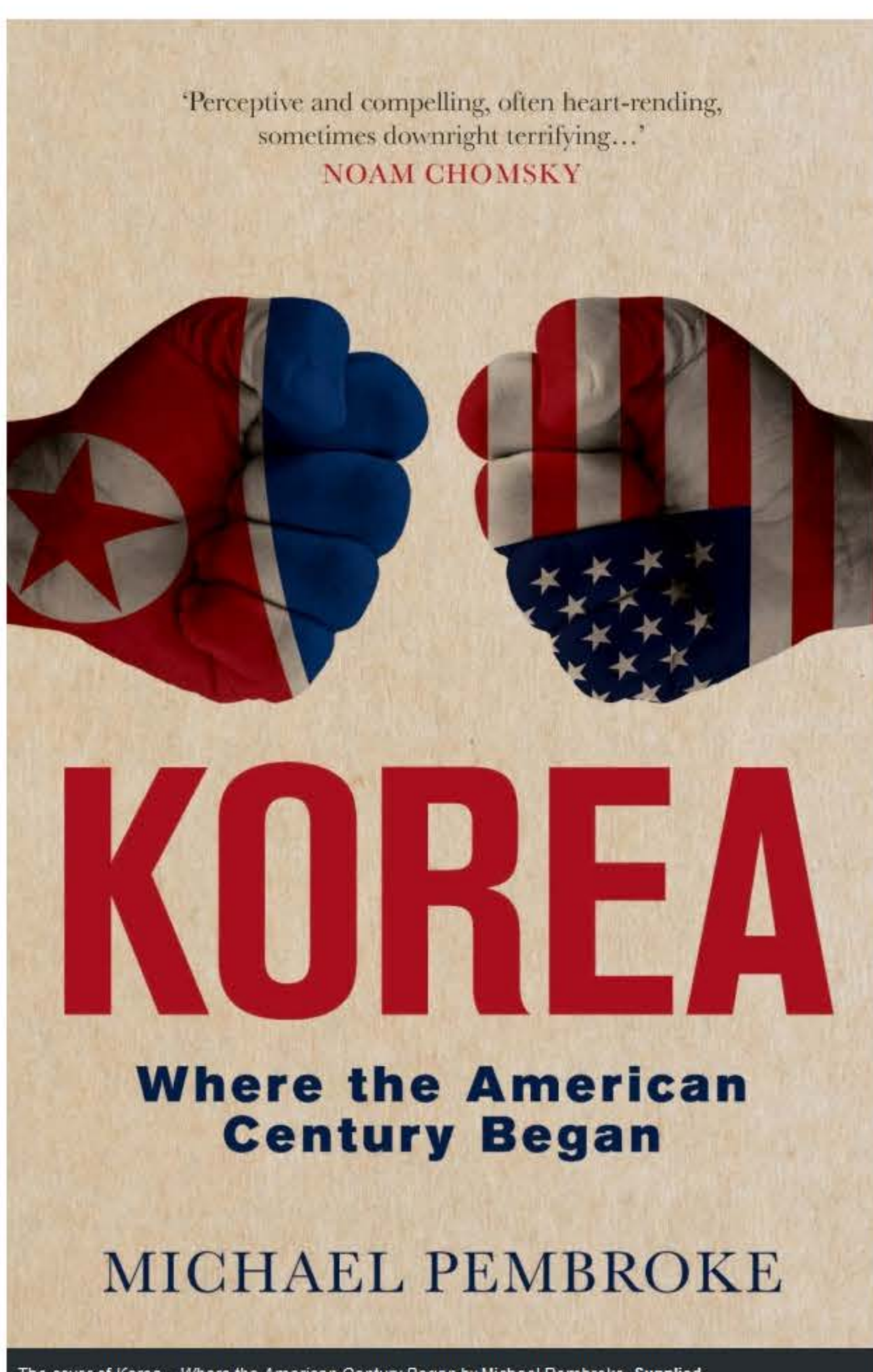
Michael Pembroke argues that Washington's absolutism is not the solution.

At the Geneva talks that were held in 1954 to attempt to negotiate a peace treaty, Chinese foreign minister Zhou Enlai held out his hand to the US secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, but the latter refused to shake it and turned his back. North Korea was treated with disdain. A few years later, the United States announced that it was unilaterally abrogating clause 13 of the armistice treaty by introducing nuclear weapons on to the peninsula. The pattern has continued. In March 2001, within weeks of assuming office, president George W. Bush's fundamentalist beliefs led him to conclude that Kim Jong-il, the father of the current leader, was "evil" and that – despite almost a decade of high-level engagement during the Clinton era – the United States government should no longer deal with North Korea.

The origin of North Korea's nuclear research and development lies in the 1950s – in response to the United States bringing missiles on to the peninsula. The continuing presence of US troops in South Korea and the regular naval exercises off the Korean peninsula are seen as an ongoing security threat. Washington's unwillingness to entertain a peace treaty to end the war merely adds to the atmosphere of distrust. Pyongyang's nuclear program is seen as "an important deterrent to external aggression and a security guarantee for the regime's survival". It is obvious that North Korea will not denuclearise in the face of military threats and economic sanctions. The underlying problem is not the existence of North Korea's nuclear capability but the hostile relationship that fosters it. The harmonisation of that relationship requires a long-term strategy of transforming relations. Presidential bullying and threats will only make things worse. China has warned that "you will only drive them in the wrong direction".

Washington's absolutism is not the solution. Veteran British journalist [Simon Jenkins](#) wrote that the most effective sanction on North Korea is the "sanction of prosperity". Thomas Friedman in the *New York Times* was to similar effect [when he stated](#) the United States should "offer to recognise the legitimacy of the North Korean regime ... open an embassy in Pyongyang ... engage in trade and aid ..." Other scholars agree. If that occurred, denuclearisation may be the outcome, but it is delusional to think that denuclearisation can or must be a precondition to effective negotiations. James Clapper, a former US director of national intelligence, has said repeatedly that the notion of getting North Korea to give up its nuclear capability is a "lost cause" and a "non-starter". Washington should live with it, be content with containment and deterrence, and consider withdrawing its military forces from the Korean peninsula.

*This an edited extract from Korea – Where the American Century Began by Michael Pembroke, out this month from Hardie Grant Books.*



The cover of *Korea – Where the American Century Began* by Michael Pembroke. Supplied