Peace and Reconciliation on the Korean Peninsula

It might not be too much when we say that the Korean Peninsula is the symbol of division in modern history. It has been over seventy years since the armistice ended active hostilities in the Korean War. The border between the North and South remains not just a physical but a psychological barrier. It is marked by distrust, ideological opposition, and deeply rooted trauma.

Hundreds or even thousands of papers have been written about peace and reconciliation on the Korean Peninsula due to its complexity and ongoing political situation. Several summit or state level talks focusing on achieving peace on the Korean Peninsula have been held. This article is not meant to be any sort of academic paper or essay. This article does not offer any new solution for peace in Korean Peninsula, neither does it discuss any theological theories on peace and reconciliation.

What we are trying to present through this article is a timeline of peace (if there was any) and peace effort on the Korean Peninsula. We will do some biblical reflections on peace and reconciliation. But one of the most important parts of this article will be what the readers think and how they feel after recalling what has had happened in the history and how we then 'reconcile' it to His calling to us to be a peace maker and an agent of reconciliation.

Who are the Koreans?

The earliest known Korean state, Gojoseon, is said to have been founded in 2333 BCE by the legendary figure Dangun, symbolizing a shared mythic origin that still resonates in Korean identity today. Over time, Korea evolved through powerful dynasties such as Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla during the Three Kingdoms period (57 BCE–668 CE), which laid the foundations for Korean language, culture, and governance. These kingdoms eventually unified under Silla, and later the Goryeo and Joseon dynasties. Joseon further solidified Korea's centralized statehood, Confucian values, and cultural distinctiveness.[1] The invention of Hangeul, the Korean alphabet, by King Sejong in the 15th century, was a defining moment that reinforced a unique linguistic and national identity.[2]

But though Korean people, both those in the North and the South, think of themselves as one ethnic nation that shared an ethnic identity and history (until 1945, before the division along the 38th parallel), through the years of division, they continue to focus more on their political distinctions. According to research[3] (from ROK's perspective) on textbooks in both Koreas, from 1960-2019, being Korean in the DPRK meant being loyal to Kim's family and devoted to their self-reliance ideology (Juche). For the ROK, being Korean meant holding on to a set of civic values about individual rights, to contrast themselves with their socialist neighbour. While the DPRK takes pride in its claim for being purely ethnic Korean, the ROK embraces its multi- ethnicity.

Division

When World War II ended in1945, Korea was liberated from Japan, but divided at the 38th parallel as the Soviet Union assumed control over the north, while the United States oversaw the south. It was intended as a temporary arrangement to oversee the surrender of Japanese forces and to establish new administrative control. But Cold War tensions between the two superpowers were the first 'step' that

[1] https://www.korea.net/AboutKorea/History/Goryeo-Dynasty
[2] https://www.korea.net/AboutKorea/History/Joseon-Dynasty
[3] https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03050068.2020.1812237?scroll=top&needAccess=true

solidified the permanent division that still exists. In 1948, separate governments emerged: the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the north, and the Republic of Korean (ROK) in the south, each claiming to be the sole legitimate government of the peninsula. This ideological split sowed deep mistrust and became deep-rooted, setting the stage for conflict on the peninsula.

The division was made worse by the Korean War (1950-1953), which dashed hopes for a unified national recovery and caused irreversible effects on Korean psyche and family. Between 1945 and 1950, families were split, economic ties severed, and any chance of collaborative peacebuilding evaporated. The border became a breaking point for hostility, as each side escalated military preparations. This situation not only destabilized regional peace but also invited foreign entanglement, making Korea a frontline in the broader Cold War. The Korean War broke out in 1950, and its legacy continues to hinder reconciliation efforts between the two Koreas to this day.

Peace Talks and Peacebuilding Efforts

Since the 1953 armistice of Korean war and division of the peninsula, the North and the South have been locked in a state of unresolved conflict for more than 70 years. Since 1953, many state level talks to resolve the conflict have been held, but it seems that the conflict persists, if not growing. Below is a list of peace talks, according to Google AI. This timeline highlights significant diplomatic engagements and agreements concerning peace on the Korean Peninsula.

Early Efforts and the Cold War Era

- **July 27, 1953:** The Korean War Armistice Agreement is signed by the United Nations Command (representing the ROK and other UN forces), the Korean People's Army (DPRK), and the Chinese People's Volunteer Army. This agreement stops active fighting but does not formally end the war.
- **April 1954:** The Geneva Conference is held, involving 19 nations, including the U.S., China, the Soviet Union, and both Koreas, to discuss a peaceful settlement of the Korean question. No significant breakthroughs are achieved.
- **July 4, 1972:** The **July 4th South-North Joint Communiqué** is announced. This historic agreement marks the first high-level dialogue between the two Koreas since the division. Both sides agree on principles for peaceful reunification, including independence, and great national unity.
- **September 1990 - December 1992:** High-level talks between the prime ministers of the two Koreas are held intermittently in Pyongyang and Seoul.
- **December 13, 1991:** The **Agreement on Reconciliation, Non-aggression, and Exchanges and Cooperation between the South and the North** (also known as the Inter-Korean Basic Agreement) is signed. This agreement aims to foster reconciliation, non-aggression, and various exchanges. (One very important outcome of this meeting is mutual recognition of the North and South Korean systems.)
- **January 20, 1992:** The **South-North Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula** is signed, where both Koreas agree not to "manufacture, produce, possess, store, deploy or use nuclear weapons."

Post-Cold War and Nuclear Diplomacy

- **October 21, 1994:** The **Agreed Framework** is signed between the United States and the DPRK in Geneva. Under this framework, the DPRK agrees to freeze and eventually dismantle its graphite-moderated reactors and related facilities in exchange for the provision of light-water reactors and heavy fuel oil.

- **April 1996:** U.S. President Bill Clinton and ROK President Kim Young-Sam propose **Four-Party Talks** (involving the U.S., DPRK, ROK, and China) to discuss a permanent peace arrangement on the Korean Peninsula. These talks begin in 1997 but yield limited results.
- **June 13-15, 2000:** The first inter-Korean summit is held in Pyongyang between ROK President Kim Dae-Jung and DPRK leader Kim Jong-Il. This landmark meeting results in the **June 15th North-South Joint Declaration**, which emphasizes independent reunification, humanitarian issues (like family reunions), and economic/cultural cooperation. This period is associated with the ROK's "Sunshine Policy."
- **October 2000:** High-level goodwill visits occur between the U.S. and the DPRK, including DPRK General Jo Myong-Rok's visit to Washington and U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's visit to Pyongyang.
- **August 2003:** The **Six-Party Talks** begin in Beijing, involving China, the DPRK, Russia, the ROK, Japan, and the United States. These multilateral talks aim to find a peaceful resolution to the DPRK nuclear issue.
- **September 19, 2005:** During the Six-Party Talks, a **Joint Statement** is issued where the DPRK commits to abandoning "all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs" and returning to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). In return, other parties offer security assurances and economic cooperation. In December 2008, the Six-Party Talks effectively collapse due to disagreements over verification protocols.
- **October 2-4, 2007:** The second inter-Korean summit takes place in Pyongyang between ROK President Roh Moo-Hyun and DPRK leader Kim Jong-Il. They adopt the **2007 North-South Summit Declaration**, building on the 2000 declaration and discussing further economic cooperation and nuclear issues.

Renewed Diplomacy in the Late 2010s

- **January 2018:** DPRK leader Kim Jong-Un expresses willingness to send a delegation to the PyeongChang Winter Olympics in the ROK, signalling a new period of inter-Korean dialogue.
- **April 27, 2018:** The third **i**nter-Korean summit is held at Panmunjom between ROK President Moon Jae-In and DPRK leader Kim Jong-Un. They sign the **Panmunjom Declaration**, affirming their shared goal of complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and formally ending the Korean War.
- **May 26, 2018:** Kim Jong-Un and Moon Jae-In hold an unannounced **Second Summit in 2018** at Panmunjom.
- **June 12, 2018:** The first-ever **U.S.-DPRK Summit** takes place in Singapore between U.S. President Donald Trump and DPRK leader Kim Jong-Un. They sign a joint statement committing to establishing new U.S.-DPRK relations and working towards the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.
- **September 18-20, 2018:** The third meeting in 2018 is held in Pyongyang between Moon Jae-In and Kim Jong-Un. They sign the **Pyongyang Joint Declaration of September 2018**, agreeing on further steps for denuclearization, inter-Korean cooperation, and a future visit by Kim Jong-Un to Seoul.
- **February 27-28, 2019:** The second **U.S.-DPRK Summit** is held in Hanoi, Vietnam, between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-Un. The summit ends without an agreement.
- **June 30, 2019:** Donald Trump and Kim Jong-Un meet briefly at the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), marking the first time a sitting U.S. president has stepped into the DPRK. ROK President Moon Jae-In joins them for a trilateral meeting.

Up to the present time, three inter-Korean summits have been held. Since the first summit, the ROK has tried to emphasize engagement rather than confrontation, or at least that is how things look. Even the ROK president who was at the first summit in 2000, Kim Dae-Jung, was awarded the Nobel Peace prized in 2000 because of his "Sunshine Policy" that promoted coexistence, trust-building, and mutually beneficial cooperation.[4]

The timeline shows the cyclical nature of peace efforts on the Korean Peninsula, characterized by periods of engagement and breakthroughs, but often followed by renewed tensions. It is because both nations differ in understanding what is denuclearization and reunification as well as how external powers have played an important role in the peninsula until today. Also inside the South itself there differing opinions on reconciliation of the Korean Peninsula.[5]

More Recent Situation

On 16th June 2020, the DPRK destroyed the liaison office near the DMZ, which had provided a direct channel of communication between the two Koreas.[6] In February 2025, the DPRK dismantled the inter-Korean family reunion center at Mt. Kumgang. Despite the efforts in June of 2025of the newly elected ROK president Lee Jae Myung, to restore trust, it seems that the DPRK has dismantled the inter-Korean reunion hotel, from looking at a satellite image.[7] Recently the ROK dismantled the anti-North loudspeakers along the border, but the DPRK did not do likewise, although they do not broadcast anything against the South along the border.[8]

Though the recent situation does not seem very hopeful, all the resources and time and energy spent over the years might be a sign that there is still hope. From the timelines, it is not only the DPRK and the ROK, but also many other nations are working on the issue. This could be a time to pause and think, if you are an ethnic Korean reading this article and even if you are not, as a believer, what do you think of the peacebuilding efforts so far? What do you feel like when you think of all the peacebuilding efforts over the years?

Biblical Reflections on Peace and Reconciliation

Since sin entered into the world, we saw that the peace and harmony among Creator God, human beings and the rest of creation have been destroyed. Since then peace and reconciliation has been a central theme in Biblical theology. But even in Genesis 3, Scripture has alluded that peace and reconciliation will only come through the perfect sacrifice

The concept of peace is central to Biblical theology. Shalom (peace), is not only about peace and reconciliation, but also the presence of justice and flourishing of creation.[9] Without justice, there is no peace and reconciliation. In the Old Testament, the Messiah is called the prince of peace (Is. 9:6-7); and ideal peace and reconciliation of the Creator and creation is portrayed in Isaiah 11:1-9. But possibly the most powerful narrative of reconciliation in the Old Testament is in the story of Joseph, through the 'drama' and 'tragedy' of family separation and division in Israel's family. Through repentance and forgiveness, though, the family was reconciled. Not by forgetting, but forgiving.

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[4] https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2000/dae-jung/facts/

[5] https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2020/05/a-peninsula-of-paradoxes-south-korean-public-opinion-on-unification-and-outside-powers?lang=en

[6] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53061613

[7] https://www.nknews.org/pro/north-korea-dismantles-inter-korean-reunions-hotel-despite-lees-engagement-push/

[8] https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/foreignaffairs/northkorea/20250808/n-korea-installs-more-border-loudspeakers-against-s-korea-between-may-june-jcs

[9] Michael Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 146.

In the New Testament, Jesus said that a peacemaker would be called a child of God (Matt. 5:9). Before Jesus went to the cross, He promised peace to His disciples (Jn 14:27). The God of the Bible is the God of peace (e.g. Heb.13:20); and the focus of peace and reconciliation is on the sacrificial work of Christ (2 Cor. 5:19; Col. 1:20). Through salvation, this peace is available to all through Christ, and it is only through faith in Christ that one can obtain the salvation.

Having faith in Christ means repentance from sin to receive forgiveness from sin. In the parable of the prodigal son, as the son repented and the father forgave him, they are reconciled (Lk. 15:11-32). Therefore, as in Joseph's story, repentance and forgiveness is a main theme in peace and reconciliation. Justice must be done not only through punishment but healing of the scars and restoration of relationships, through the cross of Christ. It is not that the scars will disappear, but the broken relationship is restored and no more bitterness is left (or need be left).

In Scripture and human history, one of the most profound family divisions traces back to Abraham—the patriarch of three major faiths: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. These faiths have a shared heritage and yet are deeply divided, stands as one of the greatest ironies in the world.

Yet, Scripture reveals that the greatest tragedy is not human division, but humanity's separation from God. Through Christ, God has resolved this separation, giving us hope that even the deepest divisions—like those among Abraham's descendants—can one day be healed. We hold the same hope for the Korean Peninsula: that reconciliation will come, not only between North and South, but most importantly, between both and God. How and when this will happen remains unknown. Still, reconciliation must begin—and indeed, has begun—among believers in both regions, for they are united as one body in Christ (Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12).

In the context of the Korean Peninsula, it is not only between the North and the South, but the external powers have to engage in the repentance and forgiveness process. While Christians might not be the majority on the Korean Peninsula, this can be a wake-up call for every believer, not only those in the peninsula, to be a peacemaker. This reminds both Koreas that they have a shared common identity as they share the same history and origin, and also reminds us as believers that we have a new common identity given by Christ. It is not an easy 'task'; and it is not just the task of believers on the peninsula or believers who belong to the external powers playing important roles in the peninsula, e.g. China, US, and Russia, but it is the task for everyone who claims to be God's children.

What Can be Done? Bridging the Divide: Reconciliation on the Korean Peninsula

The material damage and loss of human lives during the war is not something that only affected the past. The intergenerational trauma that passes through the generations affects every aspect of Korean people, not only for those living in Korean peninsula, but even to those who have moved to other countries. The division and memories of war carried by the survivors reverberate to the next generation.[10] The healing cannot be brought about only by political talks or agreements.

In a recent podcast with NK News, Professor Kim Dong-Jin said that the path to reconciliation cannot solely rely on political talks or diplomatic breakthroughs. He said that it must also be anchored in civic and cultural engagement. By studying peace processes in Ireland, Cyprus, and South Africa, he said that lasting reconciliation requires mutual recognition and participation from the community. Building trust at the community level through education, storytelling, and collaborative art can help

[10] https://koreapeacenow.org/watch-intergenerational-trauma-and-the-korean-war-healing-across-generations-with-helena-soholm-joseph-han/

heal divisions. When this is applied to Korea, it means supporting initiatives that encourage empathy, shared experiences, and human connection across the border.[11]

While official talks often hit a wall, people and groups outside of governments can help find common ground. Educators, artists, students, and everyday citizens should work together for reconciliation. To really bring Koreans together, they need to create a new story that is based on shared memories, mutual respect, and a shared idea of how to live together. One thing that should be remembered is the focus on cooperating in the areas where DPRK has reported in their Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), on things of interest for the benefit of the peninsula, such as climate change.[12]

The goal of peace and reconciliation is not only to bring economic prosperity to benefit the DPRK or even the ROK, but it is about 'confessing' the trauma and working together for healing. While some churches might still hold rigid and hostile attitude towards the DPRK, we are called to be peacemakers. The *han* (Korean word for anguish, grief) that is deep inside Korean people can only be redeemed by the cross of Christ. [13]

Even if we are not ethnic Koreans or leaders, we can continue to remember the tragedy as well as remind others or tell others who never hear anything about the tragedy. We should not let the issue be just a chapter in books or a topic of research papers. As most of us are facing the reality of the division among our own family or nation, let us continue to remember the division in the Korean Peninsula. And as we hope for justice, restoration and reconciliation in our own family or nation, we can hope for the same thing for the peninsula.

Prayer points:

- Pray for believers in North and South to remember that they are one body in Christ and they are called to be an agent of reconciliation. Even for all body of believers all over the world, may His love compel us to be a peacemaker wherever we are and continue to pray for His peace on the peninsula.
- Pray for healing of intergenerational trauma among the Korean people. Pray that the Lord of comfort and healing will have mercy and heal the people and the land.
- Pray that the enmity and hostility will be overcome by God's love and that many people will come to know this true love.
- Pray that the story of division will not be forgotten, but that those who are working on peace and reconciliation will not give up, and that His people will not cease to hope and pray for His will be done on the peninsula and in the lives of the Korean people and even in our lives.

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[11] https://www.nknews.org/category/north-korea-news-podcast/latest/dong-jin-kim-what-north-korea-can-learn-from-irelands-peace-process/957281

[12] https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/03/climate-change-path-engagement-north-korea

[13] https://d3hgrlq6yacptf.cloudfront.net/uspg/content/pages/documents/1596113967.pdf