Planting seeds of peace

U.S. policy toward the Korean Peninsula

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After more than 70 years of separation, reconciliation on the Korean Peninsula might seem impossible, particularly as U.S. foreign policy continues to prioritize military solutions to conflict around the world.

But hope persists as seeds of peace are stubbornly planted and nurtured. Hope sprouted on the Korean Peninsula as recently as 2017–2019, as tensions eased for a time. When reconciliation efforts wither or are trampled, the work of planting peace begins again.

Jesus demonstrated that lasting peace is not achieved through violence or intimidation but by breaking down societal structures that separate. Peace does not come through strengthening the powerful but by giving priority to those most vulnerable and challenging the systems of power that perpetuate their suffering.

As Anabaptists, we seek the wisdom of historic peacemakers, and of peacemakers who are among us today. In MCC, this means working with partners such as the Northeast Asia Reconciliation Initiative, Northeast Asia Regional Peacebuilding Institute and ReconciliAsian, and helping to organize the annual Korea Peace Advocacy Week.

Where might we see tiny cracks for peace to take root today, and how can we encourage those seeds to grow? —*Tammy Alexander*

Ssuk, or Korean mugwort, grows in a greenhouse with plastic sheeting provided by MCC (2017). The herb is a staple ingredient in Korean soups and rice cakes. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) is a highly mountainous country with only about 18% arable land. Greenhouses extend the growing season to assist farmers in producing more food.
MCC photo/Jennifer Deibert

Spring/Summer 2024

The path to peace

by Serim Park, international fellow

The main obstacle to peace on the Korean Peninsula is often seen as the conflict between two Koreas. But is the conflict *only* between North Korea (the Democratic People's Republic of Korea or DPRK) and South Korea (the Republic of Korea or ROK)?

The Korean Peninsula, marked by political tension and division, has been a focus for international attention for decades. Amidst the complex geopolitical landscape, there emerges a need for a powerful force for change and reconciliation.

On July 27, 1953, there was an armistice agreement signed by the U.S., North Korea, and China for a ceasefire in the Korean War, but no formal peace agreement was ever signed, meaning there has been no official end to the war status. After 70 years, the path to peace on the Korean Peninsula is still unclear.

Peace and reconciliation on the Korean Peninsula are essential for several reasons. First, families who have been separated for decades could be reunited, easing the pain and suffering caused by decades of division. Seung Suk Byun, born in 1929, left North Korea around the time of the war but has a daughter who remained. Byun describes a heart-wrenching letter from his daughter where she said, "I'm writing this to my father who I miss even in my dreams." His daughter lamented the existence of the armistice line dividing North and South Korea saying, "Please, armistice line, please leave." (koreanamericanstory.org)

The second reason reconciliation is important is because officially ending the war would bring stability to the region, allowing for demilitarization and denuclearization, and reducing the risk of wider conflict. And, finally, a lasting peace would expand opportunities for humanitarian aid and collaboration in areas such as education.

The current administration in South Korea is taking a hard foreign policy stance against North Korea. South Korea has emphasized a stronger military posture and closer security cooperation with the U.S. and other allies to counter North Korea's nuclear threat. This has included advancing missile defense systems and conducting joint military exercises with the U.S., which had been scaled back in previous years. At the same time officials in North Korea have publicly stated they are abandoning the goal of reconciliation and unification.

Tim Huber, Anabaptist World *associate editor, walks by military fencing along the shore of Gyo-dong Island, South Korea, during an MCC learning tour in June 2023. The tour focused on advocacy and the Korean Peninsula's legacy of war and peace.*
Photo courtesy of Tim Huber/AW

What does the U.S. have to do with peace on the Korean Peninsula?
As a major ally of South Korea, the U.S. plays a crucial role in bringing peace on the Korean Peninsula. The Biden administration has taken part in diplomatic initiatives to discourage the development of nuclear weapons on the peninsula and has stated support for inter-Korean communication. However, the strategy of putting pressure on North Korea through joint U.S.-ROK military drills and U.S. economic sanctions, has exacerbated regional tensions and failed to result in an improved environment for reconciliation.

What can people of faith in the U.S. do?
Reconciliation often starts from small steps, but we must keep intentionally moving forward. Two bills introduced in the U.S. Congress—the Peace on the Korean Peninsula Act and the Divided Families Registration Act—would be a good start. (Read more about both bills on the facing page.)

What small steps can you take?

- Reach out to your members of Congress to urge them to support both bills. Tell them why you believe fostering peace on the Korean Peninsula is important. (Visit **npjm.mcc.org** for current action alerts.)
- Participate in or organize public awareness campaigns and events to highlight the importance of the bills. Use social media or community events to garner wider public support. (Download an advocacy toolkit at **mcc.org/advocacy-toolkit-us**.)
- Join campaigns such as the annual Korea Peace Advocacy Week (**koreapeacenow.org/events**)

In the prophetic words of Martin Luther King Jr., "Peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but a means by which we arrive at that goal." Peace is not only a destination, but also the path we must take to achieve it. ■

A reconciliation-centered foreign policy

Group photo during a field trip to Chinggis Khaan Statue Complex with Northeast Asia Regional Peacebuilding Institute (NARPI) Summer Peacebuilding Institute participants in 2023. MCC and NARPI have partnered together since 2011 to provide training in peacebuilding, conflict transformation, restorative justice and mediation through events such as the summer peacebuilding institutes. Photo courtesy of NARPI

by Zachary Murray, legislative associate

International politics is often framed as adversarial and competitive, dividing countries into allies and enemies, partners and competitors. What would it look like if U.S. policymakers viewed reconciliation, rather than division, as a central ethos in foreign policy?

On the Korean Peninsula, as well as in the larger Asia-Pacific region, the integration of strategic and economic goals widens the gap between partners and adversaries, making dialogue with North Korea difficult for either the U.S. or South Korea.

Three specific policy proposals could help to transform U.S. engagement on the Korean Peninsula, and in the wider Asia Pacific region.

Expanding sanctions exemptions. Recent changes to the implementation of U.S. sanctions toward North Korea should allow for greater ease for organizations, such as MCC, to engage with partners in North Korea. However, the list of approved humanitarian goods and activities should be expanded further. This would include increased people-to-people engagement which helps to shift attitudes of both North Koreans and U.S. citizens toward one another.

Ending the Korean War. In 1953, the U.S., North Korea, and China declared a ceasefire in the Korean War but, after more than 70 years, there has never been a formal peace treaty. Formally ending the status of war on the Korean Peninsula is a precondition to significant engagement. The Peace on the Korean Peninsula Act (H.R. 1369) calls for a formal agreement to end the Korean War and, recognizing the need to keep diplomatic channels open between the U.S. and North Korea, would establish liaison offices in both capital cities. Entering official peace treaty talks could deescalate tensions on the Peninsula and lead to more opportunities to reunite families and build bridges for greater peace.

Reuniting families. The Divided Families Registration Act (S.3876/H.R.7152) would expand opportunities for Korean Americans to reunite with family members in North Korea. This legislation would provide the U.S. Department of State with tools to facilitate reunions. Additionally, and more importantly, the bill provides a framework for dialogue between the U.S. and North Korea to implement the reunification process. ■

MCC on the Korean Peninsula

MCC operated in South Korea from 1951 to 1971 and returned in 2014. In North Korea, MCC began providing humanitarian assistance in 1995. This gives MCC decades of experience on both sides of the divide, supporting Koreans pursuing peace and creating space for engagement between Koreans and people in the U.S./Canada.

Since 2009, MCC has partnered with the Northeast Asia Regional Peacebuilding Institute to offer training in nonviolence, mutual cooperation and lasting peace. MCC also works regionally with churches, creating spaces for dialogue and cooperation across denominational and geographical boundaries, and with the Northeast Asia Reconciliation Initiative (since 2014).

A Korean boy (name unknown) with his MCC Christmas bundle in 1958. Korea received 4,002 of the 28,478 Christmas bundles distributed by MCC in 1958. MCC photo

Worship resources

Poem for reflection

Peace
Sara Teasdale (1884–1933)

Peace flows into me
  As the tide to the pool by the shore;
  It is mine forevermore,
It will not ebb like the sea.

I am the pool of blue
  That worships the vivid sky;
  My hopes were heaven-high,
They are all fulfilled in you.

I am the pool of gold
  When sunset burns and dies—
  You are my deepening skies;
Give me your stars to hold.

Downloaded from https://www.poetry.com/poem/34546/peace

Scripture reading

Romans 5:10–11

Sermon ideas

Reflect on how, in situations like the long divide of the Korean Peninsula, our hope in Christ can sustain us and motivate us to work for peace. Think of ways we can embody God's kingdom values by serving as peace ambassadors.

Consider Martin Luther King Jr.'s February 1967 speech, "The Casualties of the War in Vietnam" (shorturl.at/nosJX) and the legacy of U.S. involvement in armed conflict:

> "The past is prophetic in that it asserts loudly that wars are poor chisels for carving out peaceful tomorrows. One day we must come to see that peace is not merely a distant goal that we seek, but a means by which we arrive at that goal. We must pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means. How much longer must we play at deadly war games before we heed the plaintive pleas of the unnumbered dead and maimed of past wars?
>
> "Those of us who love peace must organize as effectively as the war hawks. As they spread the propaganda of war we must spread the propaganda of peace."

Prayer

God of peace, guide our hands to make tools for peace instead of weapons of war. Let us learn war no more. Guide our hearts to break down walls of division, not with pressure, sanctions and threats, but with love, humility and understanding. God, in solidarity with our siblings in Korea, help us to make a way where there is no way. Amen.

From Presbyterian Mission, Presbyterian Church U.S.A., presbyterianmission.org/story/june-25-2022

Songs

HWB	623 When love is found
VT	211 Hope is a candle

HWB = *Hymnal: A Worship Book*
VT = *Voices Together hymnal*

A photo wall of MCC's history in Korea at the MCC Northeast Asia office in Chuncheon, South Korea. MCC photo/Yujin Kim

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President Joseph Biden
The White House
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whitehouse.gov/contact

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- Follow us on **X/Twitter** at twitter.com/mccwashington.
- Download your **advocacy toolkit** at mcc.org/advocacy-toolkit-us

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All biblical quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

Facts & figures: Korean Peninsula

Participants of MCC's Korea Peninsula Legacy of War Learning Tour in 2023 walk a trail near the 38th parallel. Photo courtesy of Tim Huber/AW

70+

Years of division and unresolved war between North and South Korea

1945 Korean Peninsula divided
1950 Korean War began
1953 Armistice agreement signed (not a peace agreement)

7+

Years of travel ban for most U.S. citizens

2017 Ban on U.S. passports for travel to North Korea (very limited exceptions)
2020 North Korea closed its borders to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (still closed as of March 2024)

2.5 miles WIDTH OF DEMILITARIZED ZONE (DMZ) BETWEEN NORTH AND SOUTH KOREA

Below: South Korea's Cemetery for North Korean and Chinese Soldiers, known informally as the "enemy cemetery" (2023). Photo courtesy of Hwan Cheol Yoon *Right: Ssuk, or Korean mugwort, grow in a greenhouse in North Korea with plastic sheeting provided by MCC (2017).* MCC photo/Jennifer Deibert

28,000
Number of U.S. military personnel in South Korea (2023)

39,300
Persons living in South Korea separated from family members in North Korea (Jan. 2024)
(By some estimates, about 100,000 Korean Americans have relatives in North Korea)

Mennonite Central Committee

Sources: Associated Press, Foreign Policy Magazine, National Committee on North Korea, Statista, U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Department of State, Voice of America

Policy Principles

U.S. policy on the Korean Peninsula should . . .

Support a peace treaty

In 1953, the U.S., North Korea, and China declared a ceasefire in the Korean War but, after more than 70 years, there has never been a formal peace treaty. **The Peace on the Korean Peninsula Act (H.R. 1369) would work toward an official end to the war.** The "forever war" status leads to increased militarism in the region, risks a wider military conflict, and stifles opportunities for humanitarian assistance.

Prioritize diplomacy and dialogue

While there have been attempts to engage North Korea in multi-party talks over the years, the government of DPRK has stated it is willing to engage with the U.S. directly. However, since 2019 these efforts have stalled. **The U.S. government should continue to pursue respectful dialogue, particularly on humanitarian assistance, people-to-people exchanges, and divided families, laying the groundwork for dialogue** around more contentious issues—such as denuclearization—down the road.

Encourage exchanges

The U.S. should **utilize current State Department exchange programs and allow private organizations to facilitate academic, artistic, educational and cultural exchanges.** The U.S. has an extensive history of using such exchanges to lay the groundwork for larger diplomatic breakthroughs in countries during times of hostility. Examples include the former USSR, China, and Vietnam. This crucial component is missing from current U.S.-DPRK policy.

Reunite families

The Korean War not only divided the peninsula geographically but also separated families. While recognizing recent efforts to help reunite families, more needs to be done. **The Divided Families Registration Act (H.R. 7152/S. 3876) would enhance these efforts.** Further, the State Department should engage in diplomacy with DPRK to open more avenues for North Koreans, South Koreans, and Korean Americans to reunite with their loved ones.

Evaluate sanctions

Consider the negative impacts of broad-based U.S. economic sanctions on ordinary people in North Korea and on global financial systems. When sanctions are used, ensure they are narrow, targeted, and have appropriate humanitarian exemptions. Evaluate whether the use of sanctions is achieving the desired policy goals.

Resources for learning more

MCC Peace & Justice Journal, Fall/Winter 2023: First be reconciled: U.S. policy on sanctions
washingtonmemo.org/newsletter

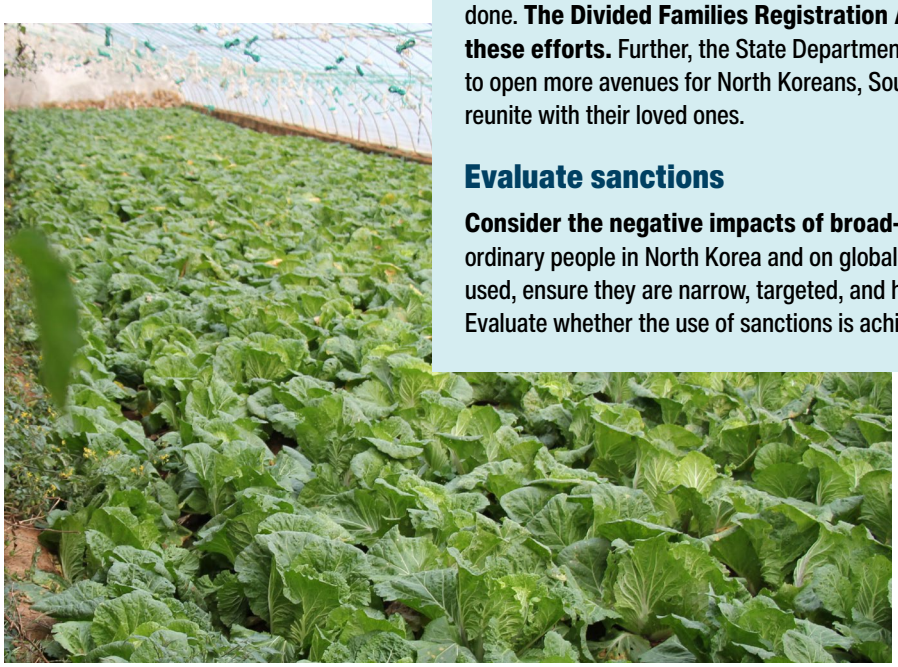
Belonging in peace by Yujin Kim (article)
mcc.org/our-stories/belonging-peace

ReconciliAsian
reconciliasian.org

Women Cross DMZ
womencrossdmz.org

American Friends Service Committee
afsc.org/program/north-korea

Letters to My Hometown project
koreanamericanstory.org/letters-to-my-hometown



Cabbages grow in a greenhouse in North Korea with plastic sheeting provided by MCC (2017).
MCC photo/Jennifer Deibert

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