

This Sunday, pray for the reunification of Korea

National Liberation Day of Korea spurs us to celebrate the past and work for a united future.

by [Jesse Jackson](#) and [Grace Ji-Sun Kim](#)

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Jesse Jackson, Grace Ji-Sun Kim, and others pray for reunification at a vigil held near the Demilitarized Zone between North and South Korea in August of 2018.

North Korea and South Korea share only one holiday: National Liberation Day of Korea, celebrated on August 15. It marks the day in 1945 when Japan declared unconditional surrender and Korea regained independence after 36 years of occupation. The Korean name for the day, *Gwangbokjeol* (to “regain the light”), suggests bright hope emerging from the ashes of colonialism. Its celebration by both North and South evokes shared pain and victory, illustrating how a common hope for freedom can come even from a divided nation.

The division, which was orchestrated by the United States and the Soviet Union, was concretized by the Korean War. By the time an armistice was signed, nearly five million people had died—half of whom were civilians. Because the war ended in a temporary ceasefire, the US still maintains 28,500 troops in South Korea. Nuclear missiles ring the region, remaining an eminent reminder of destruction to the people living there.

Since 1953, Korea has been separated by the Demilitarized Zone established by the armistice. Thousands of families have been kept apart for generations by this division. We believe our Christian calling includes working for reconciliation and the eventual reunification of the Korean Peninsula.

Last year at this time, the two of us led a team to Korea to advocate for reunification. At a prayer vigil held near the Demilitarized Zone, the prayers concluded with these words (spoken in English by Jesse and then in translation by Grace):

It is healing time—a time to turn our pain into power. A power to bring about family reunification. A power to end this decades-long conflict and bring peace to Korea. It's due time to step away from the brink of war and talks of nuclear strikes and seize this opportunity to push for talk of peace.

But the peace process in Korea faces formidable roadblocks. Donald Trump began his relationship with North Korea by promising to unleash “fire and fury,” and although he slowly replaced his unfettered rhetoric with more altruistic speech, none of it holds any ideological significance for him personally. He and North Korean Chairman Kim Jong-un seem to be locked in a match of destructive power unparalleled among international leaders.

Peace is a process, not a single act. Sometimes it is a confused, meandering path that has no semblance of a clear ending and involves sacrifices on both sides. In the case of Korea, a first step is clear: replace the armistice with a formal, lasting peace treaty. This could be the catalyst to a phased approach whereby the US and North Korea take mutual steps to eliminate their nuclear weapons in and around the Korean Peninsula.

Kim Jong-un halted nuclear weapons testing and offered to close the country's nuclear test site. Last summer, North Korea returned 55 boxes of human remains

believed to be US troops killed during the Korean War. Kim pledged that North Korea would never “use nuclear weapons nor transfer nuclear weapons or nuclear technology under any circumstances unless there are nuclear threat and nuclear provocation” against the country.

The [Panmunjom Declaration](#), signed by South Korean President Moon Jae-in and North Korean Chairman Kim Jong-un in 2018, calls for “trilateral meetings involving the two Koreas and the United States, or quadrilateral meetings involving the two Koreas, the United States and China” to complete their unfinished business of “declaring an end to the War, turning the armistice into a peace treaty, and establishing a permanent and solid peace regime.” Many in South Korea, including President Moon, see this as the key to all other issues, including denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, normalization of relations with other nations, and North-South reconciliation.

The current process, however, is being thwarted by hawkish pundits who seek to keep the Cold War hot. Congressional leaders on both sides of the aisle are casting aspersions on the Trump-Kim summits and insisting that North Korean denuclearization must be the first—if not only—objective in any negotiations. The national security adviser, John Bolton, has advocated for pre-emptive strikes in North Korea aimed at regime change. Trump, whose meeting with Kim holds promise, has a propensity for head-spinning reversals of direction.

Further, the US-South Korean joint military exercises scheduled to take place later this month threaten to derail plans for working-level talks between the US and North Korea. Last month, the North Korean Foreign Ministry stated that the country may resume nuclear and long-range missile testing if the United States goes through with the exercise.

Every year on the Sunday before August 15, Christians around the world [pray for Korean reunification](#). This year we will join those voices, remembering the united Korea that was able to decolonize itself from Japan and praying for it to be restored. We'll pray for leaders to have the courage, conviction, and conscience to ignite conversation, lean in, and listen to each other. We'll pray for the will to use all the tools at our disposal: moral persuasion; rational arguments; non-violent direct action and protests; economic, political, and diplomatic leverage; education; and revival of hope among people of the world.

We'll pray using words written jointly by North Koreans and South Koreans and recommended by the [World Council of Churches](#):

Lord, hear the prayers of the beloved Christians throughout the world for peace and prosperity of the Korean Peninsula. May the people of the North and South meet each other with a smile, and may North Korea and the U.S. establish a peace treaty by ending the hostilities. . . . Now in this moment, give us faith with the ability to love.