

# Quaker Peace & Legislation Committee



## WATCHING BRIEF 23-5: TOWARDS PEACE FOR KOREA - UPDATE

*As Quakers we seek a world without war. We seek a sustainable and just community. We have a vision of an Australia that upholds human rights and builds peace internationally, with particular focus on our region. In our approach to government, we will promote the importance of dialogue, of listening and of seeking that of God in every person. We aim to work for justice and to take away the occasion for war.*

February 2024

*A lasting peace for the people of the Korean peninsula remains elusive. It is 70 years since the armistice to end the Korean war in 1953 was agreed as a prelude to a longer peace treaty – never concluded. This Brief draws together the background to the current situation, and identifies possible avenues for building peace. It is based partly on a webinar held by the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) held in July 2023, and on statements by global bodies on the way forward.*

### Background

Following about 5000 years in which Korea was attacked many times but survived as Korean kingdoms, the Japanese occupied the peninsula from 1910 to 1945. There was some resistance and the start of an independence movement prior to WW2. After the war, moves for independence and peace were thwarted by Cold War tensions between the USA and Russia, and this led to a break between North and South in 1948 at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. The regime in the North (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea) was communist, and in the South (Republic of Korea) anti-communist. Ongoing tensions led to the outbreak of war in 1950, when the North invaded the South, and the United Nations authorised the US to repel this using mainly US troops plus allies including Australia. When the UN Command pushed the communist forces back beyond the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, China supported the North, and eventually in 1953 an armistice was signed by the military forces.

The years since have seen (a) substantial industrialisation since the early 1960s of the South with aid mainly from the US, (b) isolation of the North by an autocratic regime, dependent on Soviet and Chinese subsidies, which sharply declined at the end of the Cold War; (c) the creation of many US military bases in the South, and the establishment of the recent naval port at Jeju Island; (d) North Korea’s establishment of the fourth largest army in the world, with nuclear, chemical and conventional capacity; (e) the decision by the North to leave the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and develop nuclear weapons and (f) although in 1991 the US withdrew all nuclear weapons from Korea, there have been recent calls in South Korea and

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the US to reintroduce nuclear weapons, and in 2023 a US submarine carrying nuclear weapons was permitted to visit Busan. Occasional thaws in the relationship between North and South (partly depending on who is in power in the South) have been influenced by changes in the role of China, Japan, Russia and the US. As a result, neither side has been willing to re-visit the 1953 agreement with a view to making a permanent peace treaty. The complexity of the situation makes progress very difficult.

The toll upon the Korean people is immense. Apart from the impact on soldiers, the daily lives of civilians have been adversely affected, especially through the separation of families in both North and South. Travel bans limit the connections between people and undermine the trust needed for better relations. Similarly, the opportunity for those outside the peninsula to offer help is restricted.

In November 2023, North Korea's Chairman Kim Jong-un scrapped the the 2018 inter-Korean Comprehensive Military Agreement. At the end of the year, Kim Jong Un remarked that peaceful reunification was impossible, and said the government would make a "decisive policy change" in relations with the "enemy". He also ordered the military to be prepared to pacify and occupy the South in the event of a crisis. At the Supreme People's Assembly on January 15, Kim called for constitutional revisions to refer to South Korea as the "principal enemy." There have already been constitutional provisions passed that call North Korea's nuclearization "irreversible." The 2022 Nuclear Forces Policy Law has seen the adoption of a nuclear first-use doctrine.

South Korea has not abandoned the 2018 agreement, but has recommenced firing artillery and holding drills near the sea and land borders.

## Peace Initiatives

Positive examples have included (a) the Inter-Korean Agreement of Reconciliation in 1991, (b) the gifting of food by the South to the North to ease hunger and poverty in 1998 and 2018, (c) cross-border links among women's groups in 1992 and 2009, (d) UN resolutions supporting peace, and (e) the winter Olympics in 2018 when two Korean athletes marched together under one flag. Koreans were very moved with the hope it is possible to live without war between two countries. Women have continued to be a vital force for change. In 2019, WILPF partnered together with Women Cross DMZ, the Korean Women's Movement for Peace, and the Nobel Women's Initiative to launch [Korea Peace Now! Women Mobilizing to End the War](#). A global campaign to educate, organise, and advocate for a peace agreement to end the Korean War, Korea Peace Now! is a powerful women-led initiative calling on the international community to take meaningful steps toward demilitarisation, denuclearisation, and a future of sustainable peace in Northeast Asia. The campaign's work is focused on creating spaces for dialogue, educating community members and governments about the need for a formal end to the Korean War, and engaging in analysis and lobbying activities in and around the United Nations. Korea Peace Now! is urging people all over the world to sign the [Korea Peace Appeal](#) and demand an end to the Korean War. Learn more and sign the appeal today.

Perhaps the most hopeful official moves came in 2018 when Moon Jae-in was Prime Minister in the South. He had several meetings with Kim Jong-un, and they agreed on the (Panmunjom) [Declaration for Peace, Prosperity and Reconciliation](#) on behalf of both governments, with a commitment to seek denuclearisation of the peninsula. The same year saw a meeting between President Trump (US) and Kim Jong-un (DPRK) which reinforced the desire for a lasting peace. Regrettably, since then the North has retreated from the implementation of the agreements, and the US has refused to drop all sanctions. The advent of a new ROK Prime Minister (Yoon Suk Teo) in May 2022 has led to a more adversarial attitude from the South's government.

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## Influences in 2024

- Third Summit for Democracy in Seoul, March: an international gathering of government, private sector and civil society leaders, first convened by the US in 2021, will emphasise South Korea's aspirations for Asia Pacific
- South Korea National Elections, April, which may lead to factional struggles and even presidential impeachment
- US Presidential election, November: Donald Trump has promised a complete withdrawal of US troops and economic policy changes which could affect South Korea. The prospect of a November win may encourage North Korea to delay negotiations until the result.
- Further development by North Korea of its military spy satellites and nuclear weapons
- Increased Russian-North Korean military cooperation and arms sales and the undermining of UN Sanctions on North Korea
- South Korea's increasing role in the arms trade, and its "nuclear latency" (capacity to build its own nuclear weapons)
- Since 1 January 2024, South Korea's membership of the United Nations Security Council. Japan's membership finishes at the end of 2024, giving the two countries an opportunity to coordinate their Security Council diplomacy

## Quakers and Korea

HAM Seok-heon (1901-1989) was born in what is now North Korea, resisted Japanese imperialism, and became a nationally renowned and courageous advocate for human rights and non-violence. The "Korean Gandhi" proved a prolific writer for peace, community, and inclusion, and in his sixties he joined the Religious Society of Friends.

In the USA, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) has had a program of working for peace and justice in the Koreas since 1953. ~~over many years~~. In 2023 it organised a national mobilisation in Washington to mark the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the armistice. This action included lobbying of Congress to pass a *Peace on the Korean Peninsula Act* and to focus on investing in communities instead of weapons and war. Quakers and others in USA have been lobbying their government to review relations with the DPRK to restore humanitarian access to meet the severe needs caused by poverty and hunger. Pragmatically, this includes working with four cooperative farms in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to raise productivity and implement sustainable agricultural practices.

HAM Seok-heon and LEE Hang-woo (1930c-2020), a Korean-American Quaker together founded the Friends Meeting in Seoul. In 1974 Lee established the "Meeting for Suffering of Koreans" in the US to support South Korean dissidents and political prisoners, and their families. During the 1993 famine in North Korea, he was one of the AFSC delegates to North Korea, supporting agricultural facilities there.

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Australian Quakers initiated a visit to North Korea in 2018 with encouragement from Korean-born Sejin Park from the South Australian Quakers. This enabled contact with cooperative farms supported by American Quakers, and meetings with officials from the Ministry of Agriculture. As a result a Working Group was formed in 2019 to explore further ways to support the people of the North. On returning, the group met with officers of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to share information and express concern for greater efforts to support Korean people. The group was laid down in 2022 but relevant links and reports can be found on the Quakers Australia website – [www.quakersaustralia.info/DPRK](http://www.quakersaustralia.info/DPRK)

In a country with compulsory military service, conscientious objection has been a key issue for Friends in Korea (the Seoul Meeting was recognised in 1964), and Conscientious Objectors had no option but to service or be imprisoned. The Quaker United Nations Office and Friends World Committee on Consultation were among those who campaigned for other options to be offered. This was finally implemented in 2007. QUNO continues to work with ecumenical partners at the United Nations and AFSC to emphasise the need for dialogue and engagement in building sustainable peace for the Korea Peninsula.

## **Australia and Korea**

Australia's formal connection with the peninsula began in 1947 as part of the UN Commissions on Korea, and in the Korean War, in which 17,000 troops served under UN Command. This led to an ongoing arrangement for the recovery of war remains over the years since. Diplomatic relations with the Republic of Korea (ROK) began in 1961, and regular visits and meetings of foreign affairs and defence ministers are held. Australian defence forces maintain a presence in the region under a Security Initiative. In 2021 a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership was signed covering security, economic, innovation/technology, and people-to-people exchange. There is a strong trading, investment and development relationship, and collaboration across the arts, research, education, tourism and entertainment. There is an Australia-Korea Business Council, which held a Parliamentary Forum in March 2023 in Canberra. Several MPs and Senators continue to maintain links see [www.akbc.com.au](http://www.akbc.com.au)

Recognising the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Korean armistice, several forums have taken place in 2023. The Australia-Korea Foundation and the Korea Foundation co-hosted the second Korea Australia Future Forum in Canberra on 11 September, bringing together leaders from across academia, think-tanks and industry. The focus was elevating cooperation on security, cyber, innovation and technology, climate change and gender issues. In his speech to the forum, Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Hon Tim Watts MP mentioned the role of culture and person-to-person engagement as an important part of diplomacy: 'the more we meet each other in person, the more we listen to and understand each other, the more we can achieve together', a key point of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Socio-Cultural Cooperation. This agreement, between the Ministries of foreign affairs of both Australia and the Republic of Korea, includes those Ministries with responsibilities for culture, sports and tourism. Among the new initiatives under the MOU are projects to enhance socio-cultural links through social exchanges including sport, cuisine and women's empowerment'. This MOU and the new initiatives provide opportunities for track two or civil society diplomacy. Twenty-five Australia-Korea Foundation Grant recipients were announced in October 2022. The 2023-24 grant round closed on 22 September, and included cross-cultural collaborations as a key priority. DFAT anticipates an annual grant round which is advertised on the Australia Korea Foundation website and Facebook page. In 2023-24, some \$700,000 was available and grants between \$10,000 and \$50,000 have been awarded.

By contrast, Australia's relations with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) are strained. In 1975 an Australian embassy opened in Pyongyang but closed within a year when problems arose. Further

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abortive attempts were made in 1979 and 1990. Since 2000 the Australian embassy in Seoul has been accredited to North Korea. Australia has in fact been ahead of many other nations in seeking links with the DPRK. Australia has consistently condemned the North's development of nuclear weapons, has supported UN sanctions since 2006, and has on several occasions suspended aid payments. The UN Human Rights Council 2014 report on human rights violations in the North led to recommendations which Australia encourages the DPRK to adopt.

## Recent Moves

The Korean peninsula has become embedded in the dangerous environment of the region, with an arms race involving the US, China, Russia, Japan, and the two Koreas. The expansion of such organisations as RIMPAC, the Five Eyes, AUKUS have generated further efforts by the DPRK to expand its nuclear weapons program, and the attitude of the current ROK government has hardened through more frequent military exercises and weapons tests. Statements by the current ROK Prime Minister and US President indicate that any attack from the North would be met with great force from the South and allies.

The Central Committee of the World Council of Churches issued a statement on 27 June 2023 expressing deep concern at the “accelerating cycle of confrontation and provocation between joint US-Japan-South Korea military exercises and North Korean missile tests”. It offered prayers for peace and dialogue. Meetings about peace and reunification involving North and South Korean Christians have been held for over 40 years, but have been suspended since 2019 because of the deteriorating situation. WCC called for a peace treaty to replace the 1953 armistice, urged member churches to advocate for this, along with relaxation of the maximum sanctions on North Korea, and resumption of people-to-people encounters among Christians on both sides.

The United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, issued a statement on 27 July 2023. He honoured those who perished in the Korean War and shared the grief of countless families separated for so long. He urged the parties to resume regular diplomatic contacts and nurture an environment conducive to dialogue. He re-affirmed the goal of a sustainable peace and complete denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula. He looked forward to the return of the wider international community to Pyongyang (DPRK) following the pandemic to support people. The same day in New York the Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) hosted an ecumenical gathering including UN officials, diplomats, civil society colleagues and members of the Korean community. Candles were lit by representatives of divided families, troop sending nations, and young people – in hope for a peaceful future.

Two recommendations of the 2023 ‘Prospects for Peace for Korea’ webinar hosted by the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom in Australia were: a call for the repositioning of Australia as a global and regional peacemaker, rather than a strategic military power, and that Australia work with other like-minded and differently-minded countries to work for a peacefully ordered world.

## Areas for Action

1. Contact with Politicians. Messages can be sent to individual members of Federal Parliament reminding them of the ongoing suffering of the people of the Peninsula, emphasising the risks of ongoing tensions and the arms race for regional and world peace, urging support for a peace treaty in Korea, and urging that at least 30% of treaty negotiators be women. This could be an opportunity for Australia to show its capacity for peacemaking. Messages along similar lines can go to members of the relevant Parliamentary Committees (eg Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs,

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Defence and Trade; Intelligence and Security Committee). See [www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees](http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees)

2. Contact with Ministers. Questions can be asked of the Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Minister for Defence, and the Prime Minister, emphasising the risks of ongoing tensions and the arms race for regional and world peace, and seeking details about Australia's commitment to peace on the Peninsula, and the steps it is taking to foster dialogue among all parties to the crisis there. Support moves for a peace treaty to end the Korean war. The Panmunjom Declaration of 2018 should be the basis for moves towards re-unification. Greater efforts are needed to ensure adequate foreign food aid gets to the people of the North.

Webinars and Meetings. Join with other civil society groups to sponsor a public meeting or webinar, and seek speakers from academia or from business or government agencies with experience of the Koreas. Invite members of the Korean diaspora if possible. Petitions/Campaigns. Join the various moves outlined in this brief, such as those on the WILPF Peace in the Koreas page <https://www.wilpf.org/focus-countries/korea/><sup>5</sup>. Reaching out to listen to Koreans living in Australia, hear their insights and to build fellowship and understanding. The issues are complex.

**Canberra, January 2024**

## **References**

Women's International League for Peace & Freedom [www.wilpf.org](http://www.wilpf.org)

American Friends Service Committee [www.afsc.org](http://www.afsc.org) and <https://afsc.org/programs/democratic-peoples-republic-korea-north-korea>

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade [www.dfat.org.au](http://www.dfat.org.au)

Quaker United Nations Office [www.quno.org](http://www.quno.org)

Quakers in the World <https://www.quakersintheworld.org/quakers-in-action/241/Quakers-in-Korea>

UN Secretary-General [www.un.org/sg](http://www.un.org/sg)

Australia-Korea Business Council [www.akbc.com.au](http://www.akbc.com.au)

World Council of Churches [www.oikumene.org/news](http://www.oikumene.org/news)

DFAT Australia-Korea Foundation Grants - <https://www.dfat.gov.au/people-to-people/foundations-councils-institutes/australia-korea-foundation/grants>

DFAT Memorandum of Understanding on Socio-Cultural Collaboration  
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