



President Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un at their historic summit in June

A NEW CHAPTER FOR NORTH KOREA?

The Korean War never officially ended. Now a historic summit meeting is bringing hopes for peace. But can North Korea's brutal young dictator be trusted to give up his nuclear weapons? BY BRYAN BROWN

Just a year ago, the world was bracing for a possible nuclear war between the United States and North Korea. In the summer of 2017, the isolated Communist nation successfully tested ballistic missiles that experts say are capable of reaching many American cities. North Korea's young dictator, Kim Jong Un, threatened to reduce the U.S. to "ashes and darkness." In response, President Trump vowed to unleash "fire and fury like the world has never seen" on North Korea. A nuclear conflict seemed more likely than at any time since the end of the Cold War (1947-91).

Then, on the morning of June 12, 2018, the seemingly unthinkable happened: Bitter enemies put aside their decades-long hostility and recent threats and vowed to work together for peace—at least for the moment. Trump and Kim shook hands at a hotel in Singapore, marking the first time a sitting U.S. president had met with a leader of North Korea. At the conclusion of their historic summit, they signed a joint statement in which Kim committed to "work toward complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula." In return, Trump said he would suspend military exercises with South Korea, which the U.S. has been conducting for more than 40 years.

The statement also said that Trump and Kim would "join their efforts to build a lasting and stable peace regime" on the divided peninsula. If further talks are successful, some experts say, they could eventually lead to the signing of a treaty finally ending the conflict that made their nations enemies: the Korean War (1950-53).

"We're ready to write a new chapter between our nations," Trump told reporters. "Yesterday's conflict does not have to be tomorrow's war."

But critics warned that North Korea has failed many times before to live up to its promises, and it remains to be seen whether anything has really changed.

“What the United States has gained is vague and unverifiable at best,” said Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, a Democrat from New York. “What North Korea has gained, however, is tangible and lasting. By granting a meeting with Chairman Kim, President Trump has granted a brutal and repressive dictatorship the international legitimacy it has long craved.”

North Korea is an authoritarian state where millions of people live in poverty, and anyone who challenges the country’s leaders can be arrested and forced to work in labor camps—or simply be killed. North Korea’s leaders have spent much of the country’s money developing nuclear arms. For decades, U.S. officials have considered an unstable North Korea to be one of America’s gravest threats (see “*Danger Zones*,” p. 13). North Korea has also long threatened neighboring South Korea, one of America’s staunchest allies and a modern democracy with a thriving high-tech economy.

So how did we get here?

North vs. South

The current hostilities date back to World War II (1939-45). Japan had long occupied Korea, brutally repressing its people and even forbidding them from using their language. During the war, the U.S. allied with the Soviet Union



Nearly 6 million
Americans served in
the Korean War.

against Japan. When Japan surrendered in 1945, the Americans and Soviets agreed to temporarily occupy Korea. They divided the peninsula at the 38th line of latitude, or the 38th parallel.

Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, whose country controlled the northern half, and U.S. President Harry Truman initially agreed that a united Korea’s future leaders would be decided by elections. But the Cold War—the long contest for global influence that pitted the U.S. and its democratic allies against Communist nations led by the Soviet Union—was deepening. Stalin soon refused to participate in the Korean elections.

In 1948, a U.S.-backed government became the Republic of Korea—or South Korea. The Soviet-backed North then declared itself the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. Despite the “Democratic” in its name, it was headed by a Communist named Kim Il Sung, a former major in the Soviet army and Kim Jong Un’s grandfather. He quickly gained dictatorial powers.

Then in 1949, Communists under Mao Zedong won a civil war in China and seized control of the Chinese government. The West feared that Communism was spreading. So in June 1950, when North Korea

attacked the South and occupied South Korea’s capital, Seoul, President Truman believed he had to take a stand. He turned for help to the United Nations (U.N.), which authorized its member

states to fight the invaders. (Though 16 countries would eventually send troops, most were South Koreans and Americans.)

North Koreans are taught to fear the U.S.

The 38th Parallel

Early on, the U.N. forces, led by General Douglas MacArthur, seemed poised for victory. After retaking Seoul in September 1950, they began making their way across the 38th parallel and toward North Korea’s border with China.

But in late November of that year, Mao sent some 300,000 Chinese troops to aid North Korea. Outnumbered, the U.N. forces were soon in full retreat, pushed back below the 38th parallel.

With the war at a stalemate, peace talks opened in July 1951. It took two years of slow negotiations for representatives from the U.S., North Korea, and China to finally sign an armistice, leaving the North-South border close to where it had been at the start of the war. The agreement created a 2.5-mile-wide demilitarized zone (DMZ) that would serve as a buffer between the two countries.

But the peace was incomplete. South Korea was unwilling to accept anything less than a unified Korea and refused to



AP IMAGES (KOREAN WAR); JIM MCMAHON (MAP)

Timeline NORTH KOREA



American troops
training in South Korea



1945 Division

After World War II, Korea is divided, with Soviet troops occupying the north and U.S. forces in the south. In 1948, North and South Korea become separate nations.

1950 The Korean War

The Korean War begins when North Korea invades South Korea. American-led U.N. troops defend South Korea; Chinese troops fight alongside North Koreans.

1953 Cease-fire

The war ends in a stalemate, with a cease-fire but no peace treaty. Tens of thousands of U.S. troops (above) remain in South Korea to guard against another possible invasion.

1994 Kim Jong Il

Kim Jong Il (above) becomes North Korea's dictator, taking over after the death of his father, Kim Il Sung. The country remains closed off from most of the world.

sign the armistice. To this day, no formal peace treaty has ever been signed. The war—which left an estimated 5 million dead, including nearly 37,000 American soldiers—has technically never ended.

Today, the Korean Peninsula's DMZ remains one of the most heavily secured borders in the world. Hundreds of thousands of North and South Korean troops stand guard against attack by the other country. The U.S. has also kept about 23,000 troops in South Korea to prevent an attack from the North.

An Authoritarian State

In the years since the war, South Korea has risen from being one of the world's poorest countries to having the 11th-largest economy in the world.

North Korea has remained stuck in time, not far removed from the kind of totalitarian "Big Brother" state depicted in George Orwell's *1984*. Most North Koreans still don't have access to the internet, and the government controls all media outlets. North Korean children are taught to worship the Kims like gods.

A 2014 U.N. report estimated that up to 120,000 political prisoners are held in camps in North Korea. In 2013, Kim even ordered the execution of

his uncle—his second-in-command and mentor—for allegedly plotting to overthrow him.

Kim is now the third generation of despots to rule North Korea, after his father and grandfather. All three Kims have relied on stoking fear of America to keep their people loyal.

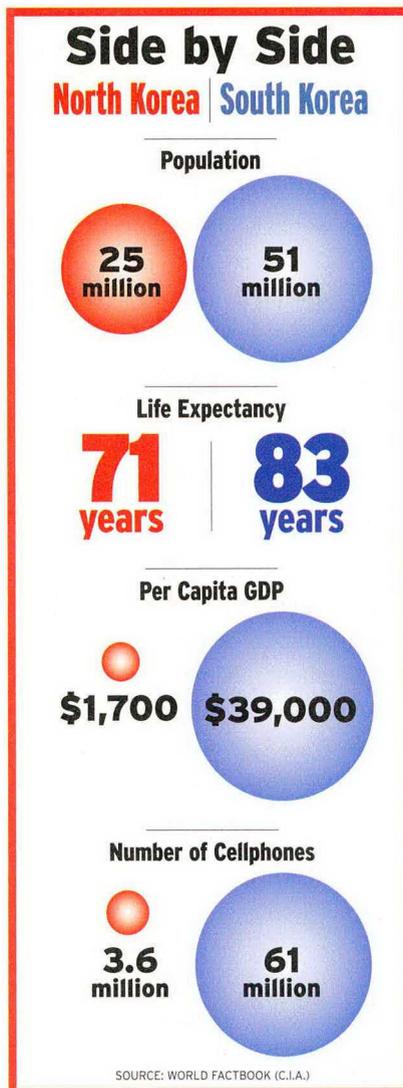
"It's very useful for an authoritarian government to have an outside enemy that they can point to all the time," says Kathryn Weathersby, a history professor at Korea University in Seoul.

A New Beginning?

In the past two decades, the U.S. has tried negotiating with North Korea over its nuclear weapons program and punishing it with tough economic sanctions. Neither approach has worked.

Trump took office in 2017, criticizing his predecessors, Barack Obama, George W. Bush, and Bill Clinton, for failing to contain North Korea, and has vowed to get tough with the Kim regime. Trump and Kim soon began a verbal war of nuclear threats that greatly escalated tensions.

But the Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea, in February of this year brought a thaw. South Korean President Moon Jae-in invited



THREE LIONS/GETTY IMAGES (AMERICAN TROOPS); XINHUA/EVEYNE/REDUX (KIM JONG IL)



1995 Famine

A series of droughts and floods lead to a massive famine that kills more than 1 million North Koreans.



2006 A Nuclear Power

North Korea performs an atomic weapons test, confirming that it has become a nuclear power despite efforts by the U.N. and the U.S. to prevent it.

2011 A New Ruler

After Kim Jong Il's death, his youngest son, Kim Jong Un (above center), takes over. He proves to be as ruthless as his father and grandfather.

2018 Today

President Trump and Kim meet to discuss denuclearization. But it is uncertain whether the historic summit will bear fruit.



North Korean athletes and a delegation of North Korean officials to the Games. That led to a meeting between Moon and Kim in April, during which the North Korean leader broached a meeting with Trump.

The world watched the summit between North Korea and the U.S.

with great expectations and a lot of anxiety. Experts emphasize that anything could happen—or nothing. Some believe that unlike his predecessors, Kim

sincerely wants to make peace with his neighbor and America, build his economy, and usher North Korea into a new age of openness with other nations.

But whether North Korea will actually give up its nuclear weapons, which the regime has long viewed as necessary to its survival, remains to be seen. Trump has indicated that he expects Kim to do so. “There is no longer a Nuclear Threat from North Korea,” he tweeted after the summit.

North Korea has failed to live up to previous agreements.

However, experts point out that the two nations have been down this road before: North Korea made similar agreements to abandon its nuclear weapons program with each of the three previous presidents, only to fail to follow through on them.

“Kim Jong Un has proved to be a pretty ruthless leader in North Korea, and I’m not sure this sort of speed dating of a 45-minute one-on-one meeting . . . would suggest that there’s nothing to be concerned about,” Christopher Hill, chief U.S. negotiator with North Korea in the George W. Bush administration, told reporters.

Many experts say the first step to eliminating the nuclear threat from North Korea is reconciling the two Koreas and finally ending the Korean War, more than six decades after soldiers left the battlefield.

“One way or another, a peace agreement ending the Korean War is most likely a necessary element to any resolution of the North Korean nuclear challenge,” James Dobbins, a former U.S. diplomat, and Jeffrey Hornung, a political scientist, wrote recently in *The New York Times*. “Standing ready to formally end the old war may be the key to getting there without starting a new one.” •

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