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Dan Leaf and Christine Ahn: The next president must defuse the Korean crisis to avoid nuclear catastrophe



This undated photo provided on Sept. 13, 2024, by the North Korean government shows its leader Kim Jong Un, center, on an inspection visit at what the government said is an institute of nuclear weapons and a facility for nuclear materials at an undisclosed location in North Korea. Independent journalists were not given access to cover the event. (Korean Central News Agency)



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Hubris is, by definition, dangerous. Today, we face three examples of risky self-confidence on the increasingly unstable Korean Peninsula with catastrophic nuclear consequences.

In [a blunt signal](#) to adversaries in September, North Korea released rare photos of Kim Jong Un inspecting a previously undisclosed nuclear enrichment facility, highlighting Kim's directive to "exponentially increase" the country's nuclear weapons. This month, Kim repeated [an explicit threat](#) to use nuclear weapons in the event of conflict on the Korean Peninsula. Such a conflict seems even more probable as [South Korea's spy chief warns](#) that North Korea may conduct a nuclear test around the U.S. election, North Korea [accuses](#) South Korea of flying drones over Pyongyang and the Kim government [blows up roads](#) connecting the two Koreas.

But Kim isn't the only one showing risky self-assurance. So have Vice President Kamala Harris and former President Donald Trump in response to one of the most urgent and consequential foreign policy perils facing our nation: the rising threat of nuclear war on the Korean Peninsula. With 28,500 U.S. troops in South Korea, an accidental or intentional confrontation on the Korean Peninsula threatens to drag the United States into a nuclear conflict. It is of vital U.S. interest to promote a peaceful resolution to the Korean crisis, yet neither presidential candidate is providing off-ramps to war.

"I will not cozy up to tyrants and dictators like Kim Jong Un," Harris declared in her Democratic National Convention speech. Trump countered that "getting along" with the North Korean leader is a "good thing." But rhetoric aside, neither candidate nor their respective party platforms present a strategy for reducing the all-too realistic threat of war with North Korea, demonstrating a hubris American voters should not tolerate.

As a [warrior](#) and a [peace activist](#), we are united in demanding the next president — Harris or Trump — take this existential threat seriously, as tensions are now at their worst in Korea. Otherwise, we fear that the United States would be embroiled in a conflict in Korea that would trigger World War III.

Since the 2019 Hanoi talks collapsed, the situation on the Korean Peninsula has become more dangerous than ever. The U.S. has tried to wish away the threat but has failed to deter provocations, dissuade nuclear ambitions or do anything about the humanitarian crisis in North Korea. In the last two years, North Korea has [tested](#) nearly 100 missiles, including five capable of striking the U.S. homeland. Meanwhile, we have lost all official avenues for engagement — or crisis management — with Pyongyang.

Inter-Korean relations have also reached a postwar nadir, with Seoul and Pyongyang declaring each other the chief "enemy." In the past year, Kim signed a mutual defense treaty with Russian President Vladimir Putin, urged his military to plan to "conquer" South Korea and rejected peaceful unification very publicly. South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol responded with his own hard-line vision of regime change and absorbing North Korea. [Seventy percent](#) of South Koreans now want their own nuclear weapons.

The United States must signal a new path before something inevitably breaks in Korea. The next president must place Korea higher on their foreign policy priorities before it rises to the top due to a catastrophic crisis with nuclear consequences.

Naysayers will argue that the United States has tried for 30 years to contain North Korea's nuclear ambitions and improve the country's human rights, but that the Kim regime will not cooperate. Yet both Democratic and Republican administrations have proved that [engagement works](#) to de-escalate tensions and scale back North Korea's nuclear arsenal.

We recommend two concrete steps the next president can unilaterally take without lengthy negotiations with North Korea to set the conditions for a lasting peace: Prepare for peace and rebuild people-to-people ties.

First, the next president should formally begin the process of resolving the fundamental issue, the enduring technical state of war since the 1953 Armistice, which paused but did not end the Korean War. Seventy-one years later, we need a peace agreement.

A formal agreement might sound legalistic, but it holds game-changing potentials. This is because U.S. goals of advancing North Korean human rights and denuclearization ultimately require diplomatic engagement with the Kim government, but that diplomacy is nonexistent after Trump disgraced Kim by walking away from talks and President Joe Biden pushed Kim into Putin's corner through an "all-stick-no-carrot" approach. We need a fundamental reset to get out of the current impasse, and steps toward a formal peace agreement could very well provide that needed jolt.

The next president should embark on the formal resolution of the Korean War with personnel and funding. We must do the long-overdue work of ending America's oldest war by transitioning armistice legacy entities, clarifying U.S. treaty obligations, and establishing truth and reconciliation efforts.

Second, the next administration must eliminate [the U.S. ban on travel to North Korea](#). This exceptional prohibition is in contravention to U.S. sanctions policy and contrary to national interests. The State Department cites the risk of wrongful detention — possible but highly unlikely — as the reason for the ban, even though thousands of Americans have traveled without incident. Last year, after Army Pvt. Travis King illegally entered the country, North Korea immediately released him. This draconian ban impedes humanitarian efforts, prevents 100,000 Korean Americans from seeing their family and cuts off the only current avenue for people-to-people contact essential to peacemaking.

The next administration must abandon the [failed "more of the same" approach](#) to the deteriorating situation in Korea. The hubris in refusing to change course in the face of mounting evidence will continue the suffering of ordinary North Koreans and likely drag the United States into nuclear war. The American public deserves and should demand realistic and actionable plans from the next president on this most dangerous national security matter.

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