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70 Years of Ceasefire, Efforts and Challenges for Peace on the Korean Peninsula & East Asia

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On 27 July 1953 – 70 years ago today – the Korean War Armistice Agreement was signed in Panmunjom by senior representatives of the United Nations Command, and military leaders of North Korea (the Korean People's Army) and China (the Chinese People's Volunteer Army). It was an agreement among military commanders for a temporary ceasefire between their forces, not a peace treaty or an agreement for the normalization of relations between governments. Indeed, the explicit purpose of the Armistice Agreement was to "ensure a complete cessation of hostilities and of all acts of armed force in Korea until a final peaceful settlement is achieved." South Korea's President Syngman Rhee opposed peace talks, and the South Korean military authorities did not sign the Armistice Agreement.

Article IV (paragraph 60) of the Armistice Agreement called for a political conference to be held within 3 months of the signing of the agreement in order "to ensure the peaceful settlement of the Korean question." Six months beyond this timeline, in April 1954 a conference was held in Geneva, focusing on two separate conflicts: the conflict in Korea, and the conflict in Indochina. The need for a peace treaty for the Korean peninsula was officially raised at the conference by Chinese Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai, but US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles resisted concrete steps for such a treaty, and the issue has remained pending for 70 years.

The same John Foster Dulles had been a leading figure in the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in the USA (the predecessor of the current National Council of Churches), as well as in the formative discussions prior to the formal establishment of the World Council of Churches in 1948. He was a key proponent of the role of churches in international affairs, during the period leading up to and through the Second World War. He had been strongly opposed to the American atomic attacks on Japan, and in the immediate aftermath of the bombings drafted a public statement that called for international control of nuclear energy under United Nations auspices. However, he subsequently became convinced that the threat of nuclear weapons was necessary to confront and rollback communist expansionism. And it was I believe in part due to his influence that the World Council of Churches expressed support for the UN intervention on the Korean Peninsula in 1950.

But subsequently, WCC has consistently rejected the use of force in the region, and for some 40 years has been actively supporting inter-Korean efforts for the peaceful reunification of the divided Korean people, whose division and suffering has its roots in the geopolitics of the Cold War – in which John Foster Dulles also played a leading role.

It's important to recall that though the 1953 Armistice Agreement explicitly prohibited the introduction of new weapons into Korea by either side, the US unilaterally abrogated this prohibition and in January 1958 deployed nuclear-armed missiles and atomic cannons to South Korea, shortly followed by nuclear-armed cruise missiles with the range to reach China and the Soviet Union. What followed was a long and complex history of distrust and confrontation, punctuated by episodes of attempted rapprochement, undermined by bad faith and deceit on both sides.

Following North Korea's first successful nuclear weapon test in October 2006, the persistent demand has been for the complete, irreversible and verifiable 'denuclearization' of the Korean Peninsula – as a precondition for dialogue, sanctions relief, and peace. Though the period 2017-2019 offered real prospects for steps towards a sustainable peace in the region, these hopes foundered in the gulf between the North Korean expectations of a 'step-by-step' process and incremental sanctions relief, and the Trump Administration's insistence on a once-and-for-all agreement for complete unilateral denuclearization by the North. It was a tragically and unnecessarily missed opportunity for peace in the region.

Meanwhile, from 2013 onwards, the WCC had been working with the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) in a process that sought to create a new treaty for the prohibition and elimination of nuclear weapons in light of their unconscionable humanitarian impacts. In the subsequent discussions in the UN General Assembly, all nuclear-armed or 'nuclear umbrella states' voted against a mandate for negotiating such a treaty, or at best abstained. With one notable exception. On two successive occasions during 2016, one – and only one – nuclear-armed state voted in favour of such a mandate. North Korea. Based upon this mandate – supported by North Korea alone among the nuclear-armed or nuclear umbrella states – the [Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#) was subsequently drafted, negotiated, adopted, opened for signature and ratification, and entered into force on 22 January 2021.

Insufficient attention has been paid to North Korea's role in this context, or to the meaning of its votes in support of this initiative. But I believe that those votes convey a message – that while resisting pressure to disarm unilaterally, North Korea would be open to engagement in a multilateral process for global denuclearization. Sadly, this thesis has not been tested, due to the rejection by the incumbent nuclear powers of any such process that would oblige them to denuclearize too.

Both the geopolitical climate and the COVID-19 pandemic have meant that dialogue and encounter have been rendered impossible during the period since the inconclusive DPRK-US Summit in Hanoi. And now we are, once again, in a new cycle of escalating confrontation and provocation, with all the attendant risks of catastrophic conflict. Such cycles will continue to recur unless new initiatives for peace are pursued with patience and realism. A formal declaration of the end of the Korean War could be a powerful circuit-breaker and catalyst for peace.

The WCC 10th Assembly in 2013 in Busan, South Korea, was obviously a unique opportunity to bring the promotion of peace in the region back into the minds of the worldwide ecumenical movement and onto WCC's agenda with increased strength. But the commitments made in Busan – which provided the foundations for intensified engagement by the WCC for peace on the Korean Peninsula in the intervening years – were renewed at the 11th Assembly, in Karlsruhe, Germany, in September 2022.

A [minute](#) adopted by the Karlsruhe Assembly specifically urged WCC member churches and partners to renew their solidarity and to actively support and accompany the Korean churches in their advocacy for peace, reconciliation and reunification on the Korean Peninsula. The Assembly highlighted the annual [Sunday of Prayer for the Peaceful Reunification on the Korean Peninsula](#), the [Ecumenical Forum for Peace, Reunification and Cooperation on the Korean Peninsula](#) (EFK), and the [Korea Peace Appeal](#) Campaign.

And just last month, the WCC Central Committee adopted a [statement](#) in which it expressed concern about “the accelerating cycle of confrontation and provocation between joint US-Japan-South Korea military exercises, and North Korean missile tests”, and prayed “for peace and dialogue to end this dangerous cycle, and for denuclearization not only of the Korean Peninsula but of the entire world.” The Central Committee observed that “[s]eventy years of suspended state of war is illogical, and a deeply unconstructive context for engaging with current realities on the Korean Peninsula”, and reiterated calls for steps to be taken “to formally acknowledge the end of the Korean War 1950-1953 by replacing the temporary Armistice Agreement with a peace treaty.”

Earlier this week, WCC issued a call to member churches and ecumenical partners who had supported a [joint ecumenical peace message](#) in 2020 marking the 70th anniversary of the start of the Korean War – especially those in countries whose armed forces participated in the Korean War – to renew their appeals for a formal end to the War in this 70th anniversary of the ceasefire established by the 1953 Armistice Agreement.

So I close with this assurance to our sisters and brothers on the Korean Peninsula and the north-east Asian region: the WCC will continue to be by your side in the work for peace in the region, amplifying calls for a peace treaty to replace the 70-year-old temporary Armistice Agreement, and seeking the peaceful reunification of the long-divided Korean people.