

## NORTH KOREA

# The Time for Negotiations With North Korea Is Now

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IDEAS

North Korea is “The longest running failure in the history of American espionage.”

That’s the assessment of Donald P. Gregg, arguably, the man who knows more about **North Korea** than any living American.

Gregg, 89, is a retired State Department and CIA veteran, a North Asia specialist, and a recipient of the National Intelligence Distinguished Service Medal. He says the absence of direct dialogue between the U.S. and North Korea has to change. “We can’t deal with them if we don’t understand them, and we won’t understand them if we aren’t talking to each other,” he says.

Although Gregg’s thinking may be out of sync with much of what’s coming out of the Trump White House and the Congress — both are **pushing for more sanctions** in response to North Korea’s recent ICBM launch and its continued efforts to expand its nuclear arsenal — he has found an ally in South Korea’s new President, **Moon Jae-in**, who called for new talks with North Korea last week.

The two sides haven’t spoken since 2015 and the U.S. has shown little interest in negotiating with North Korea since President George W. Bush branded North Korea, along with Iraq and Iran, the “Axis of Evil” in his 2002 State of the Union speech.

Gregg, who has been to North Korea six times, rejects the prevailing view in Washington that meeting with North Korea rewards bad behavior. Instead, he says talks are necessary to “keep a dangerous situation from becoming worse.” He also opposes sanctions, saying they haven’t worked and they only serve to make North Korea more intransigent.

**Read more:** *[South Korea's President Moon Jae-in: The Negotiator](#)*

In an interview at his Armonk, New York, home, Gregg is quick to acknowledge that dealing with North Korea can be difficult and frustrating. He dismisses the country's bombastic threats to annihilate the U.S., South Korea and other perceived adversaries. "The North Koreans aren't suicidal. They don't want a war," he says. Despite the rhetoric and the propaganda, he says that North Korea's leaders are "thoughtful, well-educated pragmatists."

I first met Don Gregg 43 years ago in Seoul, where he was the Central Intelligence Agency station chief while I was the North Asia bureau chief of the *Wall Street Journal*. The American Embassy was full of savvy Korea hands, including career diplomats Ambassador Phil Habib and political counselor Paul Cleveland. North Korea was a source of tension and so too was South Korea under its authoritarian leader, Park Chung Hee. Gregg, who had come to Korea after nearly a decade with CIA in Japan, was a lousy source, remote and taciturn. But when he spoke, it was clear he had an encyclopedic knowledge of North Asian geopolitics.

Gregg returned to Washington in 1975 where he continued to work for the CIA, until, after 31 years with the agency, he resigned in 1982 to become Vice President George H.W. Bush's National Security Advisor. When Bush became President, he named Gregg Ambassador to South Korea, a position he held for four years.

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Gregg then became Chairman of the Korea Society, a New York-based nonprofit known for its thoughtful essays about the Korean Peninsula, until 2009. During his years as the

Society's head, he went to North Korea five times. He last visited North Korea in 2014 and he remains in touch with North Korean diplomats at the United Nations and elsewhere.

Gregg supports [Moon's overture to North Korea](#), saying it is reminiscent of former South Korean President [Kim Dae Jung's "Sunshine Policy"](#) which led to a softening of relations between the two Koreas. Kim, who was South Korea's President from 1998 through 2003 and who had close ties to Gregg, advocated greater contact with North Korea, coupled with substantial economic investment. He went to Pyongyang, North Korea's capital, in 2000 for a summit meeting with Kim Jong Il, then North Korea's leader (and the father of Kim Jong Un, the country's current leader.) The Sunshine policy remained in effect until 2008 when one of his successors took a harder line against North Korea.

**Read more:** [Five Questions About North Korea's Missile Tests You Were Afraid to Ask](#)

Gregg says that Kim Jong Un, North Korea's current leader, is "smart, tough, and a risk taker" who sees his nuclear arsenal as protection against a U.S. attack. Although he doesn't see North Korea abandoning its nuclear weapons and its missiles, Gregg says that nuclear proliferation is a bigger problem than just North Korea, and that he is personally more worried about [Pakistan's nuclear weapons](#) and war engulfing the Middle East than he is about North Korea.

Gregg also says [the U.S. is naïve](#) in thinking China will try to curb North Korea's militaristic ambitions. "China's bigger concern is a reunited Korea," he says, and it has been consistent in opposing the continued presence of U.S. troops nearby in South Korea. "The Chinese aren't going to carry water for us," he says.

After each of his trips, Gregg says that he wrote or met with White House and State Department officials, urging talks. He says his efforts have been consistently rejected or ignored.

He has also urged negotiation of a peace treaty to replace the Korean Armistice Agreement that ended the Korean War. That agreement was signed by the U.S., China, and North Korea in 1953.

Gregg laments that "it is very hard to find anyone in Washington with experience, knowledge, and an open mind when it comes to dealing with North Korea. Everyone knows malnutrition is a problem, but people are shocked when I tell them Pyongyang is an attractive, functioning city," he says.

There is no guarantee that talks will make a difference. As B.R. Myers has written in a thoughtful book, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves — And Why It Matters*, the north's leaders use “race-based nationalism” to control their people. Myers writes that Pyongyang would appear weak to its own people if it renounced its nuclear ambitions. Myers also writes that South Korea's Sunshine Policy “failed to generate even a modicum of good will from the North.”

Those arguments notwithstanding, it is hard to argue against increasing our diplomatic efforts with North Korea. While U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis may be right in saying we would **win a war with North Korea**, he is also right in saying that any war would be “catastrophic” — to our allies and most probably to ourselves.

President Trump has made contradictory statements about North Korea. Along with his increasingly belligerent threats, Trump, while campaigning for the Presidency and in an interview with Bloomberg News in May, **said** that he would be willing to meet with North Korea's Kim Jong Un, “under the right circumstances.” Those circumstances weren't defined.

Don Gregg is right in thinking talks should begin without preconditions. Now is the time to do so.

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