



The European Union and Security Cooperation: Bringing Northeast Asia into Focus

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The geopolitics and economics of Northeast Asia are very much part of a dangerous world. Geographical distance does not protect or shield the European Union because the global economy is heavily dependent on this region. The juxtaposition of national interests on the Korean Peninsula among the United States, China, Japan and Russia leave no doubt that peace and security is an essential element of the EU's relations with these powers.

The prosperity South Korea enjoys compared to many parts of the world often camouflages the fact that it is situated in a rough neighborhood. The potential for an explosion or implosion of North Korea cannot be completely ruled out. While Pyongyang insists that its nuclear and missile capabilities are for deterrence, increased confidence that it cannot be attacked by the US could tempt it into aggressive actions towards South Korea or the proliferation of WMD in attempts to procure foreign currency. Moreover, the Korean Peninsula lies at a juncture of major powers with different values and approaches to the international system. Competition between China and the US may be escalating to the level of a “new cold war”¹. On top of this, South Korea's historical disagreements with Japan strain what should be a natural system of alliances bringing together the US, Japan, India, Australia and New Zealand to deal with an increasingly assertive China concerning Hong Kong, Taiwan and the East and South China Seas.

¹ Gideon Rachman (2020). A new cold war: Trump, Xi and the escalating US-China confrontation, Financial Times, 5 October 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/7b809c6a-f733-46f5-a312-9152aed28172>

The North Korea challenge

While many have gotten used to seven decades of brinkmanship, the country has now reached a stage where it may have the capacity to launch a nuclear armed Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile capable of hitting anywhere in Europe, North America or Australia. The 10 October 2020 parade commemorating the foundation of the Workers Party of Korea also sought to demonstrate a significant improvement in conventional warfare assets. This is not to mention the country's equally menacing cyber-attack capability and stocks of chemical and biological weapons that are not only for deterrence—recall the assassination of Kim Jong-un's half-brother at Kuala Lumpur International Airport in 2017.

We know in hindsight that we may well have got closer to a military confrontation during the “fire and fury” days of 2017 than many realized when unknown new factors – including President Trump – entered the equation. Despite three meetings between Trump and Kim, negotiations remain stuck over the perennial problem of how to sequence actions towards denuclearization and a (gradual) lifting of sanctions. Of course, it is wishful thinking that North Korea, as it exists in its current form, would ever engage in complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization. Kim Jong-un has made clear that nuclear weapons are not only a matter of national pride, but essential to regime survival, and in his argument, the prevention of war. “Irreversible” would mean a sudden disappearance of the scientists working for decades on the project and their accumulated know-how.

Just as in the children's story of the Emperor's New Clothes when nobody dare say the obvious, the international community's objective, whether it likes it or not, should be to limit the growth of North Korea's nuclear and missile capacity. This equates to a *de facto* focus on arms control and ensuring that Pyongyang never sees a reason to use or aid the further proliferation of nuclear weapons. Maintaining a constructive ambiguity may be useful: non-recognition as a nuclear state (unlike Pakistan and India, whose example weighs in negatively) may help to avoid a nuclear arms race. The North could go down the path of gradual denuclearization once the incentives are attractive enough, but achieving denuclearization up front, followed by normalization of relations with the US and the world is an unattainable goal.

Alternatively, the international community could set the goal of addressing the situation through an overall package that would include an end-of-war declaration, peace treaty, diplomatic relations, negotiating processes, the lifting of sanctions according to benchmarks reached and eventually the securing of nuclear arms under the auspices and control of an international body.

While difficult to imagine, this appears a preferable and attainable aspiration compared to the decades of stalemate which have worked exclusively in the interest of North Korea. The major problem remains that over the last decades North Korea successfully concealed its grand strategy of what it wants to achieve, in case that there is one, or has masterfully induced permanent guessing of what it could be – an element of insecurity and ambiguity which underpins the North Korean negotiating position.

The EU must be a player

The security of Asia and Europe are intertwined as confirmed by the 2016 Global Strategy² and reiterated in the 2018 policy paper Enhanced Security Cooperation in and with Asia.³ The EU had settled for a policy of “*critical engagement*”⁴ with North Korea which needs to be revisited in light of the following developments: While all are talking or try to talk to the North (US, Chinese, Russian presidents to name just a few) the EU let the mid-senior level Political Dialogue between officials fade away after 2015.⁵ Given the flurry of summits and engagement in 2018, the EU *de facto* side-lined itself. This is neither in line with the professed interest to be a global player and to contribute to peace and prosperity through conflict prevention and resolution, nor with trying to wield power and influence in using the language of power (J. Borrell⁶) which needs follow-up by actions demonstrating this power.

Redressing the situation will require a high-level political process at the ministerial level as the working level has not been able to move during the last five years. Having a clear EU position is also necessary to avoid seeing the EU get caught between the US and China. The non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction is not the prerogative of any two Member States. It is a common EU policy goal in the context of the threat that North Korea poses as well as the way it undermines principles of peaceful international relations and the rule of law. The non-accreditation of an EU ambassador to Pyongyang is an obstacle to engagement and should be solved quickly to allow

² European Union, Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe, A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy, June 2016, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf

³ Council of the European Union, Enhanced EU Security Cooperation in and with Asia - Council conclusions, 28 May 2018, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/35456/st09265-re01-en18.pdf>

⁴ European Union External Action, DPRK and the EU, 26 June 2016, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/4186/DPRK%20and%20the%20EU

⁵ European Union External Actions, EU-DPRK Political Dialogue – 14th Session, 25 June 2015, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/6336/node/6336_ko

⁶ European Parliament, Hearing with High Representative/Vice President-designate Josep Borrell, 7 October 2019. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20190926IPR62260/hearing-with-high-representative-vice-president-designate-josep-borrell>

normal diplomatic engagement. This would allow the EU to talk not only about but with North Korea. Opening and widening channels of communication are not a reward for anybody but a necessary condition for diplomacy to work effectively.

Need for international cooperation

Based on the consensus reflected in the 2016 EU Global Strategy that the security and prosperity of Asia and Europe depend on each other and on the recognition that the Korean Peninsula is one of the hot spots of international politics, the EU as an aspiring global player needs a strategic approach that includes the necessary level of political attention and human and material resources.

The interest of the EU's citizens and economy are clear: the EU would be directly affected by a major crisis on the Korean Peninsula. South Korea is the EU's eighth largest trading partner⁷, with particular importance in information technology and more recently the health sector; the EU is the fourth largest export market and one of the largest foreign investors in South Korea. On the meta-level, the effectiveness of the multilateral system with the UN at its center is at stake when it comes to sanctions, human rights and dispute management.

The EU's comprehensive approach to foreign and security policy

In order to address the situation in North Korea the EU needs to draw on its comprehensive approach to security and make good use of its toolbox as there is need to:

- manage a crisis;⁸
- prevent a crisis from escalating;
- provide humanitarian assistance to vulnerable communities;
- mitigate a public health situation made worse by COVID-19 despite denials;
- work towards arms reduction and denuclearization;
- deal with flagrant violations of human rights; and
- facilitate an environment conducive to negotiations through trust and confidence building measures.

⁷ European Commission, Countries and regions: South Korea, April 2020, <https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/south-korea/>

⁸ European Union External Action, Crisis management and Response, 15 June 2019, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/412/crisis-management-and-response_en

If there ever are significant changes in the situation and the major parties begin to move towards a settlement of some kind such as an end of war declaration or peace treaty, there will be a demand to look at lessons from the EU in stabilizing post-conflict situations and guiding countries into participation in the international community and global economy. The example of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) project in the 1990s testifies to the importance of the EU being part of any such process and not simply a financial contributor⁹. Therefore, timely preparations are needed to develop a road map including contingency planning for positive and negative scenarios that will allow the EU to be part of the (pre-) negotiating process.

The EU's policy toolbox

The EU is rather scrupulous in supporting the effective implementation of international sanctions, which are in addition to autonomous ones through demarches and technical support, and in issuing statements to make clear what is expected of the DPRK – all necessary and useful policy instruments. The latest round of such demarches was completed in October 2020.

However, I agree with many analysts¹⁰ that if the EU is to pursue its interests in East Asia, like the other major players, it must be in a position to utilize the following specific instruments of engagement in relation to North Korea:

- increasing contacts with the DPRK Embassy in Berlin that is responsible for EU affairs;
- making better use of the six embassies of Member States in Pyongyang, once the full diplomatic presence in the North Korean capital is restored post-COVID;
- re-starting the EU-DPRK Political Dialogue and using it for functional approaches based on common interest, like engaging in a human rights dialogue based on human security;
- nominating a non-resident EU Ambassador to the DPRK;
- eventually nominating a Special Representative; and

⁹ Michael Reiterer. “The EU’s engagement in the Asia-Pacific region”. Marchi, Ludovica (ed.) *The European Union and Myanmar: Interactions via ASEAN*. Routledge, 2019; p. 10.

¹⁰ Ramon Pacheco Pardo, et al, It’s Time for the European Union to Talk to North Korea, 38 North, 2 March 2020, <https://www.38north.org/2020/03/eu030220/>; Mason Richey, et al, “Strategic Implications of a Nuclear North Korea: Europe’s Dual Role in Diplomacy and Deterrence,” *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* Vol. 32, No. 2, June 2020, pp 231 – 252; Tereza Novotna, What Can a New “Geopolitical” EU Do about North Korea?, 38 North, 6 February 2020, <https://www.38north.org/2020/02/tnovotna020620/>; Ramon Pacheco Pardo, The EU is irrelevant in the Korean Peninsula, right? Wrong, EUROACTIV, 1 February 2018, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/european-external-action-service/opinion/thurs-the-eu-is-irrelevant-in-the-korean-peninsula-right-wrong/>; Mario Esteban, The EU’s role in stabilising the Korean Peninsula, Real Instituto Elcano Working Paper, January 2019, <http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/wcm/connect/49ffc71b-569c-4c88-bcab-b9bffc485716/WP1-2018-Esteban-EU-role-stabilising-Korean-Peninsula.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=49ffc71b-569c-4c88-bcab-b9bffc485716%20>

- promoting and participating in relevant Track 1.5 events.

With international partners, the EU should consider:

- offering the experience gained in difficult negotiations in Europe,
- following up on the offer to share more closely experiences from the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) negotiating process and sharing the advantages of multilateralism.

Promoting the multilateral rules-based system and the rule of law¹¹ is an essential ingredient for providing security on the Korean Peninsula. Frankly, this has thus far been in short supply.

There has to be confidence that an agreement reached by diplomatic means will be effectively implemented and guaranteed, otherwise no party and especially North Korea will have any incentive to sign a treaty. Providing such an environment through active crisis management could be an essential contribution by the EU which has higher credibility in this area than any other player, not least because of its unwavering support despite fierce US resistance for the Iran agreement which it helped to negotiate in the first place. Monitoring of any agreement reached, especially regarding denuclearization could be an appreciated contribution by the EU, including providing verification inspectors in support of IAEA. In a negative scenario, the tightening of the EU's own autonomous sanctions must be part of the planning. At the same time, consideration should be given to a loosening of sanctions in a positive scenario, in line with critical engagement and a balanced and effective carrot and stick approach. Furthermore, at this stage, the Korean Peninsula would blend well into the Connectivity of the Eurasian continent, as advocated by the EU-Connectivity Strategy¹² and the Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM).¹³

On all these instruments, the EU could deliver if it is united. Without unity in foreign policy, attention will be needed not to raise false expectations or to try and punch beyond its weight, which would lead to a loss of credibility. A policy paper under the guidance of the EEAS outlining a fresh start for the EU to assist the deblocking of the current situation presented at a convenient venue for

¹¹ Council of the European Union, Council conclusions-EU action to strengthen rules-based multilateralism, 17 June 2019, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39791/st10341-en19.pdf>

¹² European Commission, Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the European Investment Bank: Connecting Europe and Asia - Building blocks for an EU Strategy, 19 September 2018, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/joint_communication_-_connecting_europe_and_asia_-_building_blocks_for_an_eu_strategy_2018-09-19.pdf This Communication builds on the EU's experience of enhancing connections among Member States and with and in other regions. The sustainable, comprehensive and rules-based connectivity distinguishes it from the BRI and aims at connecting the Eurasian continent in offering Connectivity partnerships (first concluded with Japan in 2019).

¹³ European Commission, European Commission: ASEM Sustainable Connectivity Portal, <https://composite-indicators.jrc.ec.europa.eu/asem-sustainable-connectivity/>

interested parties would facilitate engagement and provide transparency. Last but not least, in order to walk the talk, sufficient means (personnel, funds) would be required to implement a work program.

Seoul needs to contribute

The Moon Jae-in Administration has a very strong focus on North Korea. This reminds me of my first meeting with a Korean President, Kim Dae-jung, at the 2000 ASEM Summit when it was known that he was about to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for having solved the North Korean issue...

While the Moon Administration's focus on inter-Korean dialogue and cooperation brought success in 2018, the problems since testify to the need for a wider South Korean focus on strengthening the international rule of law-based system on which any ultimate settlement will depend. Seoul needs to stand up and be heard in defending universal values. This often leads to uncomfortable situations and reactions that go against commercial and even short-term security interests: one can never always please Washington, Beijing and Moscow at the same time, however important their positions on the DPRK might be. When necessary, South Korea must be prepared to use instruments, including commercial sanctions to support international efforts to promote global values and rights. The EU and its Member States and other middle powers¹⁴ such as Australia, New Zealand, Norway and Canada often find themselves falling into the bad books of important and powerful partners while defending the global commons. But that does not stop them from speaking up. They realize that the defense of the rules-based system as a whole is the basis for promoting their interests.

South Korea currently has many areas in which it could step up its contribution to the multilateral system. The example it has set in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, the potential it has to (yet to be proved) to be a leader in promoting a green economic recovery, its strengths in the digital economy and the soft power it gains from the popularity of its cultural products around the world are key building blocks for expanding this role.

Ultimately, a stronger international system of multilateralism and rule of law will serve to support Seoul in its engagement with the four major powers in pursuing peace on the Korean Peninsula. It will also be the necessary framework for accommodating China's security interests.

¹⁴ Leif-Eric Easley, Shaping South Korea's middle-power future, East Asia Forum, 27 May 2020, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/05/27/shaping-south-koreas-middle-power-future/>

Conclusion

In many of these areas, the European Union is a natural and congenial partner for South Korea. This is evident when looking back on 57 years of diplomatic relations and a decade of EU-Korea Strategic Partnership¹⁵ being commemorated in 2020. Walking the talk of the policy of Enhanced Security Cooperation in and with Asia and translating the “language of power” into action means that there must be a focus¹⁶ on Northeast Asia if the EU is serious about becoming a Global Player. This is an ample groundwork to build upon. ■

¹⁵ For the EU, a Strategic Partnership is not just an honorary title but a recognition that a partner has the means and the will to work with the EU in addressing issues of global significance. In Asia, the EU has only four strategic partners; namely with Korea, India, China and Japan. Strategic partners cooperate in the interest of defending the global commons, based on shared interests not only bilaterally; Michael Reiterer, The 10th Anniversary of the EU-Korea Strategic Partnership, Institute for European Studies Policy Brief, July 2020, https://www.korea-chair.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/KFVUB_Policy-Brief-2020-09.pdf

¹⁶ Mason Richey, et al, A pivotal shift: Europe’s strategic partnerships and rebalance to East Asia. *Political Science*, 2019, DOI 10.1080/00323187.2019.1640070

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