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North Korea

IN FOCUS

Towards a More Effective EU Policy

September
2018

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Summary

The EU has an important role to play in the management of the threat posed by North Korea. Indeed, Brussels already has a policy of ‘critical engagement’ towards Pyongyang which combines diplomatic and economic carrots with a number of sticks. This policy, however, is in need of an update to attend to two recent developments on the Korean Peninsula: North Korea’s status as a de facto nuclear power and the flurry of engagement and diplomacy involving North Korea—including top-level meetings with the US, South Korea and China. In this context, the EU should support its partners, South Korea and the US, as they launch a process that could lead to sustainable engagement with North Korea, denuclearisation, and, as a result, a more stable Korean Peninsula. Working with its partners, Europe should creatively use its power of engagement and cooperation to change behaviour. This will enhance the position of the EU as a constructive actor in Asian affairs, support efforts by the US and South Korea to engage North Korea and, ultimately, offer a better opportunity for the EU to achieve its goals.

Keywords EU – North Korea – South Korea – US – Nuclear – Critical engagement



Introduction

The EU has an important role to play in the management of the threat from North Korea's nuclear and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programmes. Brussels should also have a keen interest in getting involved in the easing of tensions on the Korean Peninsula and in North-East Asia more broadly, for their repercussions reach all the way to Europe. Furthermore, South Korea and Japan, the EU's close strategic partners, are the most under threat from a possible North Korean attack. In other words, the EU cannot afford not to engage in the resolution of the North Korean nuclear and WMD issue.

North Korea is now a *de facto* nuclear power and is not going to completely give up its nuclear weapons at any time soon. Pyongyang has publicly and privately asserted as much. The fates of Saddam Hussein and, especially, Muammar Gaddafi—who lost both their power and their lives after discontinuing their WMD programmes—explain North Korea's desire for nuclear weapons. The country also has a strong leader in Kim Jong-un, who has consolidated his power. So regime change, openly discussed when Kim took office from his father in December 2011, is highly unlikely at any time soon.

These two premises should form the basis for an effective North Korea policy for the EU. Whilst Brussels' 'critical engagement' approach is a good starting point for the EU's handling of relations with the Asian country,¹ it is to a large extent based on the premise of North Korean denuclearisation.² While this should remain a long-term goal, it is time for the EU and other powers such as the US to acknowledge that this is not realistic in the short term. Brussels should thus support its partners as they deal with North Korea as it is, since both South Korea and the US have launched their own engagement processes to persuade North Korea to denuclearise. Indeed, this is the approach taken by US President Donald Trump and South Korean President Moon Jae-in.

¹ In practice, the EU's 'critical engagement' policy involves the use of the carrot of diplomatic and economic engagement—including aid—together with the sticks of sanctions, the denunciation of human rights violations and other measures that put pressure on Kim Jong-un's regime.

² European External Action Service, 'DPRK and the EU', last updated 26 June 2016, accessed at https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/4186/dprk-and-eu_en on 15 February 2018.



This paper argues that the EU should develop a more creative and realistic approach to North Korea. Whilst Brussels should under all circumstances consult and coordinate with friends and allies—especially South Korea and the US—it should also consider its own strengths. These lie in the example that it sets in relation to the power of engagement and cooperation to bring about a change in behaviour and an easing in tensions. Without needing to modify its ultimate goals, by updating its approach the EU could help the international community to better deal with North Korea.

This paper is structured as follows. In the next section it will explain the threat that North Korea poses to the EU and why, therefore, Brussels should take the Asian country seriously. It then summarises the history of the EU’s policy towards North Korea, with particular emphasis on its latest iteration in the form of ‘critical engagement’. Afterwards, it outlines the current geopolitical context that the EU should consider when revising and updating its North Korea policy. It then provides recommendations on how the EU could proceed. A conclusion briefly summarises the argument.

North Korea’s threat to the EU

North Korea is a threat to the EU, both directly and indirectly. It is true that Pyongyang does not pose a direct military threat to Europe. North Korea’s missile programme might be able to reach anywhere on the continent and beyond, but there is no indication that the regime of Kim Jong-un has any intention of launching a military strike on Europe. In fact, Pyongyang’s nuclear and WMD programmes are primarily a security and deterrence measure against a potential attack from the US. They also serve to bolster the position of Kim Jong-un domestically.³ Indeed, possession of nuclear weapons can be conceived as part of North Korea’s identity.

In contrast, South Korea and Japan are directly threatened by North Korea’s weapons. Were the Kim Jong-un regime to use its nuclear and WMD capabilities in response to an American strike or severe domestic

³ A. Fifield, ‘For Kim Jong Un, Nuclear Weapons Are a Security Blanket. And He Wants to Keep It’, *Washington Post*, 5 September 2017.



turmoil, Europe would in all likelihood not be a target. Seoul, Tokyo and the US bases in both South Korea and Japan would. In other words, the EU's closest Asian allies have good reason to worry about North Korea's programmes. This is important enough for the EU to treat North Korea's direct military threat with the seriousness it deserves. This does not even take into account the fact that tens of thousands of EU citizens are living in or visiting South Korea and Japan on any given day.

Equally relevant is the fact that North Korea poses a direct non-traditional security threat to the EU. To begin with, no EU member state is safe from cyberwarfare. The threat from a potential cyber-attack by the army of North Korean hackers working for the regime cannot be underestimated. North Korea has been accused of stealing military contingency plans, robbing bank accounts, gaining access to industrial control systems and a myriad of other cybercrimes.⁴ Stopping these attacks is very complicated. For example, South Korea has its own cyber-army focused on preventing North Korean cyber-attacks and yet its cryptocurrency exchanges have had the equivalent of millions of euros stolen from them.⁵ European governments and companies have been targeted, and there is no reason to think that these attacks will cease any time soon, especially when Pyongyang is looking for new sources of revenue.

In addition, North Korea is a well-known counterfeiter. Currency, cigarettes, pharmaceuticals and a host of other counterfeit products have been finding their way from North Korea to the rest of the world for decades. Pyongyang is widely acknowledged to produce some of the best counterfeits of US dollars in the world.⁶ It would not be surprising if the regime is also involved in counterfeiting euros, since the eurozone currency is the second most widely used worldwide—however, it should be noted that there is no proof that this is the case. Since North Korea's counterfeiting is state-led and fake goods are carried not only by ordinary North Koreans but also by its diplomats and other government officials, this can be considered to be a direct threat to the EU emanating from the Kim Jong-un regime itself. It is not merely a relatively unimportant activity conducted by a few North Korean criminal gangs.

⁴ F. J. Cilluffo and S. L. Cardash, 'Parsing the North Korean Cyber Threat', *The Diplomat*, 18 October 2017.

⁵ M. Kim and S. Kim, 'North Korea Stealing Cryptocurrency in South Korea, Says NIS', *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 6 February 2018.

⁶ V. Cha, *The Impossible State: North Korea, Past and Future* (London: Vintage, 2013).



Furthermore, North Korea is also involved in drug trafficking. The country's government has engaged in this activity for decades, generating hundreds of millions of euros in revenue every year. For a long time, opium was the main addictive substance trafficked from North Korea. In recent years, however, the more lucrative crystal meth has become widely produced and exported from the country.⁷ It is almost impossible to be completely certain that drugs produced in North Korea have found their way to the EU. Yet, it is acknowledged that countries and regions as far away as the US and Western Africa are being affected by North Korean drug trafficking. In addition, both North Korean front companies operating around the world and the country's diplomats have been accused of being involved in drug trafficking operations. Other countries such as China also have problems that stem from the North Korean drug trade.⁸ Therefore, it can be said that it is very likely that some EU member states have been affected by this problem.

Pyongyang's nuclear and WMD programmes also pose an indirect security threat to the EU. Most importantly, North Korea is a well-known proliferator of nuclear know-how and technology, missiles and chemical weapons, among other military equipment. And the Middle East is the top destination for these and other materials. The links between the Asian country and its Middle Eastern counterparts date back to the Cold War. Iran, Syria, Libya, Egypt and Yemen have bought weapons from North Korea.⁹ In spite of several rounds of UN sanctions beginning in July 2006, Pyongyang continues to sell its technology and weapons to countries in the region. According to a UN report, North Korean shipments to the Syrian agency in charge of Damascus' chemical weapons programme—in contravention of UN resolutions—were intercepted as recently as 2017.¹⁰ Considering the volatility of the region and its proximity to Europe, proliferation from North Korea to the Middle East should cause alarm in the EU.

North Korean proliferation to the Middle East has another important ramification that should be of concern to the EU. Namely, there is always the chance that North Korean weapons might fall into the hands of terrorist

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ I. Stone Fish, 'Inside North Korea's Crystal Meth Trade', *Foreign Policy*, 21 November 2013.

⁹ A. Berger, 'Target Markets: North Korea's Military Customers in the Sanctions Era', Whitehall Papers 84 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).

¹⁰ M. Nichols, 'North Korea Shipments to Syria Chemical Arms Agency Intercepted: U.N. Report', *Reuters*, 21 August 2017.



groups. While there is no suggestion that a Middle Eastern state might be about to launch a strike on an EU member state, the possibility that a terrorist group might get hold of a 'dirty bomb' and use it in a European city is a real worry.¹¹ Battle-hardened fighters leaving Syria, Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries have come into Europe and committed terrorist attacks. Their willingness to take European lives is clear. It is reasonable to think that they would be ready to smuggle a dirty bomb into Europe and use it.

The example that North Korea sets to other would-be nuclear powers is also an indirect threat to the EU. The country's development of its nuclear weapons programme shows the failure of the nuclear non-proliferation regime in preventing the acquisition of nuclear technology by a determined government. Indeed, North Korea's nuclear programme initially received help from the Soviet Union and China in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as substantial help over the decades from the A. Q. Khan network operating from Pakistan.¹² Moreover, Pyongyang's nuclear programme also demonstrates that a comprehensive sanctions regime, such as that applied to North Korea for over a decade now, cannot prevent the development of a nuclear weapons programme. In other words, would-be nuclear powers cannot be deterred by international agreements. For the EU, this has negative implications in terms of upholding international agreements, but also insofar as there is no guarantee that a determined Middle Eastern state will not take the nuclear route.

The EU's North Korea policy: a brief history

Brussels did not start to pay real attention to North Korea until the end of the Cold War. Previously, the agenda of the European Political Cooperation had only discussed North Korea in the context of Europe's provision of support to South Korea as a fellow non-communist state or with passing reference to Pyongyang's nuclear programme. But there was

¹¹ European Parliament, *CBRN Terrorism: Threats and the EU Response*, PE 545.724, Brussels, January 2015.

¹² J. D. Pollack, *North Korea, Nuclear Weapons and International Security* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).



no North Korea strategy to speak of and references to the Asian country were minimal.¹³

The situation changed with the first North Korean nuclear crisis of 1993–4. The European Commission's *Towards a New Asia Strategy* was published in July 1994,¹⁴ three months before the US and North Korea signed the Agreed Framework that put an end to the first nuclear crisis.¹⁵ Thus what was then seen as a solution to the North Korean nuclear issue coincided with an EU strategy calling for greater engagement in Asia in general and in the security issues afflicting the continent in particular. Indeed, the North Korean nuclear conundrum was specifically mentioned in the Commission's 1994 strategy.

One of the key pillars of the Agreed Framework was the provision of two light-water reactors to North Korea for electricity generation. In return, North Korea agreed to dismantle its nuclear reactors. The Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organisation (KEDO) was established in March 1995 to build the reactors and provide heavy fuel oil to North Korea. The EU joined KEDO in September 1997, becoming one of only four executive board members along with the US, South Korea and Japan.¹⁶ In short, only three years after launching its strategy document, the EU was directly involved in solving the North Korean nuclear issue through engagement.

In the meantime, the EU and most EU member states established diplomatic relations with Pyongyang throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s. This took place in the context of a rapprochement in inter-Korean relations, which was the result of the first-ever inter-Korean summit, held between South Korean President Kim Dae-jung and North Korean leader Kim Jong-il in June 2000. Normalisation also took place as the US administration of President Bill Clinton pondered the establishment of diplomatic relations between Washington and Pyongyang.¹⁷ Once more, the EU and most of its member states were part of a broader move to engage North Korea, in this case, through diplomatic relations.

¹³ See issues of the European Political Cooperation Documentation Bulletin, accessed at <https://publications.europa.eu/en/web/general-publications/publications> on 11 July 2018.

¹⁴ Commission of the European Communities, *Towards a New Asia Strategy*, COM (94) 314 final, Brussels, 13 July 1994.

¹⁵ *US-DPRK Agreed Framework*, Geneva, 21 October 1994.

¹⁶ KEDO, *About Us: Our History*, accessed at http://www.kedo.org/au_history.asp on 15 February 2018.

¹⁷ R. Pacheco Pardo, *North Korea–US Relations Under Kim Jong Il: The Quest for Normalization?* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).



The failure of KEDO and the termination of the light-water reactor project in May 2006 made many Europeans wary of participating in any similar initiative that might be set up in the future. EU institutions and member states alike felt that the EU had simply been asked to put money into the project without having a meaningful voice. Most notably, Brussels was excluded from the rounds of the Six-Party Talks set up to solve the second North Korean nuclear crisis, which were first held in August 2003.¹⁸ Brussels was supportive of the Six-Party Talks, but it is fair to say that by the time the EU institutions and member states had reached a consensus to reset Brussels' North Korea policy, the EU was an afterthought in the minds of those most closely involved in solving the nuclear crisis.

The EU's 'critical engagement' policy

The EU's 'critical engagement' policy thus came about following EU engagement experience with North Korea, but also as Pyongyang was making progress with its nuclear programme. The policy's main goal is the easing of tensions on the Korean Peninsula through the denuclearisation of North Korea. Its other two goals are to uphold the nuclear non-proliferation regime and to improve the North Korean government's respect for human rights.¹⁹ The policy has three components: sanctions, humanitarian aid provision and dialogue.

The EU and its member states have supported the implementation of the current UN Security Council sanctions on Pyongyang since they were first imposed in 2006 following a round of North Korean missile tests. On top of them, the EU has its own autonomous sanctions.²⁰ Previously, Brussels and its member states had also joined the Proliferation Security Initiative set up by the administration of US President George W. Bush in May 2003. The initiative seeks to stop the trafficking of WMD, their

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ European External Action Service, *DPRK and the EU*.

²⁰ For a summary of UN Security Council sanctions on North Korea, see UN Security Council, 'Resolutions', accessed at <https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1718/resolutions> on 15 February 2018. For a summary of EU sanctions, see European Council, 'EU Restrictive Measures Against North Korea', last updated 20 April 2018, accessed at <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/history-north-korea/> on 15 February 2018.



delivery systems and related materials,²¹ often by forceful means. The navies of at least four EU member states—France, Germany, Spain and the UK—have engaged in the interdiction of North Korea’s WMD.²²

Participation in the regime of international sanctions on North Korea as well as the Proliferation Security Initiative is of importance to the EU. It sends Pyongyang the message that the development of its nuclear and missile programmes and the proliferation of WMD have a cost. Participation in the sanctions regime also sends a message to South Korea, the US and other powers in North-East Asia: the EU is willing to use its resources to support a key component of one of the international community’s preferred ways to deal with North Korea. The EU also gains credibility in its foreign policy by supporting the sanctions regime, since one of its key components is support for international institutions and the UN.

The EU is one of the few members of the international community that maintain provision of humanitarian aid as one of their tools to deal with North Korea. Other countries, including the US, have withdrawn aid or gradually reduced it as the Kim Jong-un regime has moved forward with its nuclear programme.²³ Brussels, in contrast, has been providing aid without any major interruption since 1995. EU aid concentrates on the provision of food assistance, the improvement of health services, and access to clean water and sanitation. Aid programmes are implemented through European organisations or UN bodies such as the Food and Agriculture Organisation.²⁴

Aid provision is welcomed by North Korea. Both privately and in public, the North Korean government has thanked the EU for its aid.²⁵ Aid provision thus creates goodwill towards the EU from the Kim Jong-un regime. More importantly, as aid workers and diplomats posted to the country can attest, humanitarian aid helps those most in need: the

²¹ US Department of State, ‘Proliferation Security Initiative’, accessed at <https://www.state.gov/t/isn/c10390.htm> on 15 February 2018.

²² R. Pacheco Pardo, *The EU and North Korea: Stopping Bombs, Encouraging Shops*, Elcano Royal Institute, Analyses Series, ARI 32/2014, 26 June 2014.

²³ M. E. Manyin and M. B. D. Nikitin, *Foreign Assistance to North Korea*, Congressional Research Service, Washington, DC, 2 April 2014.

²⁴ European Commission, ‘European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations: North Korea (DPRK)’, last updated 19 April 2018, accessed at https://ec.europa.eu/echo/where/asia-and-pacific/north-korea_en on 15 February 2018.

²⁵ F. Ojardias and M. Pullen, ‘Food from the Enemy: The Representation of Western Humanitarian Aid in the North Korean Media 1990–2010’, *The Journal of Northeast Asian History* 14/1, 109–49.



poorer North Koreans often living in the countryside who are in real need of access to food and other basics. These are the people most suffering from Pyongyang's policies, which have made North Korea the poorest country in North-East Asia while some of its neighbours are amongst the most developed in the world.

Engagement with North Korea remains central to EU policy. Beginning in 1998, the EU has held 14 sessions of political dialogue with Pyongyang. The dialogue serves as a venue for the European External Action Service and other Brussels officials to discuss the three aforementioned goals directly with their North Korean counterparts.²⁶ While it is true that no new round of talks has been held since June 2015, the dialogue has not been cancelled either. The breakdown of the Six-Party Talks in 2008 prevented regular diplomatic engagement with North Korea until earlier this year. This has, of course, now changed as Presidents Moon, Xi Jinping and Trump, in this order, have met North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in recent months.

Dialogue with Pyongyang, which, at the time of writing, continues through track-2 channels and multilateral track-1.5 dialogues,²⁷ provides the EU with two essential benefits. To begin with, it gives Brussels credibility as a player in Korean Peninsula affairs. The EU has its own independent window into North Korea. This is further reinforced by the presence of seven EU member state embassies in Pyongyang: those of Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Poland, Romania, Sweden and the UK. In addition, the dialogue serves as a way for the EU to transmit its views on the situation in the Korean Peninsula and on Pyongyang's behaviour directly and without intermediaries. For the Kim Jong-un regime, the dialogue serves to show that it is not isolated.²⁸ The EU benefits from this dialogue. Without it, Brussels would not be able to communicate its concerns directly to Pyongyang and would become dependent on the mediation of third countries to understand the situation on the Korean Peninsula. In addition, such a situation would embolden those in the North Korean government who feel isolated and would prefer a confrontational approach.

²⁶ European External Action Service, 'EU-DPRK Political Dialogue—14th session', Press Release, 25 June 2016, accessed at https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/6336/node/6336_ko on 15 February 2018.

²⁷ Track-1.5 diplomacy involves meetings between officials and other actors to solve a conflict. Track-2 diplomacy involves meetings between various actors to build relations and discuss potential solutions to a conflict.

²⁸ Pacheco Pardo, *North Korea—US Relations Under Kim Jong Il*.



The EU's North Korea policy in context

The situation regarding the Korean Peninsula, North-East Asia in general and the US evolved significantly throughout 2017, and it has continued to do so in the first half of 2018. North Korea has shown itself to be a de facto nuclear power and in possession of missiles which can reach the US and Europe. In May of this year, the people of South Korea elected the liberal and pro-engagement Moon Jae-in for a 5-year presidential term, putting an end to 10 years of conservative rule. US citizens elected President Trump, a Republican maverick, who took office in January 2017 and should remain in power for at least four years. China's 19th Communist Party Congress confirmed President Xi in power for a further five years in October. Japan re-elected Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, also in October, consolidating his power in a position he has held since 2012. The EU's 'critical engagement' policy is operating in this context and should be reformed accordingly.

North Korea's status as a de facto nuclear power means that the international community cannot consider regime change by external intervention. That boat has sailed. If and when change comes, it will be the result of internal developments, like those that have already forced the regime to accept economic reform.²⁹ The Kim Jong-un regime has the ultimate deterrent to prevent a military attack that would lead to its removal from power. Most experts on Korean Peninsula affairs considered such a removal unrealistic even before the confirmation of the development of nuclear weapons, for North Korea already has formidable conventional capabilities that could reach South Korea and Japan.³⁰ The nuclear programme has also served to consolidate Kim Jong-un domestically. Still a very young leader, there were doubts about his ability to navigate North Korean politics when he took over from his father Kim Jong-il in December 2011.³¹ There are no such doubts now.

²⁹ A. Fifield, 'A New Film Captures North Korea's "Bold and Audacious" Millennials', *Washington Post*, 15 December 2017.

³⁰ D. Sevastopoulo, 'Trump and North Korea: The Perils of a Pre-Emptive Strike', *Financial Times*, 9 January 2018.

³¹ T. O'Connor, 'Kim Jong Un Is Becoming North Korea's Most Powerful Leader, and He's Not Old Enough to be U.S. President', *Newsweek*, 8 January 2018.



Concurrently, however, North Korea continues the reform and marketisation of its economy. Since July 2002 the North Korean government has implemented economic reforms which have significantly reduced the role of the state in the economy. These reforms followed on from a grass-roots movement towards marketisation that took hold after the famine that afflicted the country in the mid-1990s.³² In other words, marketisation has been led by the North Korean population, with the government acknowledging the changes to the country's economy with its reforms. Indeed, the 'Jangmadan generation', born from the 1990s onwards—that is, North Koreans who grew up following the collapse of the centralised distribution system and in a de facto market economy—knows no other economic model, and does not expect the government to provide jobs or food—but also expects it not to close the markets operating openly throughout the country.³³ Therefore, the marketisation of the economy is a process that would be very difficult to reverse. If Pyongyang decisively starts opening itself up to the world and international trade it could set North Korea on the path first taken by China and Vietnam in the 1980s.

South Korea's President Moon Jae-in has reopened an era of engagement and potential cooperation on the Korean Peninsula. Taking the cue from his liberal predecessors Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, President Moon has terminated the 10 years of more limited engagement under his conservative predecessors Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye.³⁴ The initial success of his pro-engagement stance, including the visit by Kim Jong-un's sister Kim Yo-jong to South Korea during the Pyeongchang Winter Olympic Games—the first member of the Kim bloodline ever to do so—and the subsequent organisation of the first two inter-Korean summits since 2007 means that we can expect Seoul to continue its pro-engagement stance during most, if not all of Moon's presidency.³⁵ Certainly, South Korea will also impose (some) international sanctions on North Korea. But these are a means of bringing North Korea to the negotiating table. With Seoul again in the driving seat of inter-Korean relations, engagement is the policy of choice.

³² A. Lankov, *The Real North Korea: Life and Politics in the Failed Stalinist Utopia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

³³ A. Fifield, 'A New Film Captures North Korea's "Bold and Audacious" Millennials.'

³⁴ Moon J., speech at the Korber Foundation, Berlin, 6 July 2017.

³⁵ R. Pacheco Pardo, 'From Pyeongchang to Pyongyang', KF-VUB Korea Chair Policy Brief, February 2018.



Improving inter-Korean ties, however, should not mean neglecting other important debates going on in South Korea regarding relations with the country's northern neighbour. Many South Koreans remain suspicious of Kim Jong-un's intentions, and want any possible rapprochement to proceed cautiously.³⁶ Furthermore, there is an open debate in South Korea regarding the possibility of the country acquiring its own nuclear capabilities, which it could do in a matter of months.³⁷ With conservative parties remaining a diminished but still active force in South Korean politics and Pyongyang's unpredictability, the nuclearisation debate will not cease. At the very least, strengthening the country's military capabilities as a deterrent is part of South Korean policy.

The US has tightened sanctions on North Korea over the years. This process accelerated during President Trump's first year in office, which coincided with a period of increasing missile and nuclear tests in North Korea.³⁸ Both the US bilateral sanctions and Washington-led UN Security Council regime of sanctions against Pyongyang are now the most stringent since at least the end of the Cold War. They are unlikely to be significantly relaxed in the near future. On the contrary, the Trump administration has put North Korea back on the list of state sponsors of terrorism, reversing a delisting that dates back to the George W. Bush presidency.³⁹ The Trump administration has even tabled the idea of giving the country a 'bloody nose' or carrying out a limited strike on North Korea's missile or nuclear facilities.⁴⁰ A limited strike has long been one of the policy options considered by subsequent US governments, but the Trump administration has been the first to openly discuss this option over a period of several months.

At the same time, the Trump administration has always made it clear that it is open to dialogue with North Korea. President Trump thus recently held the first-ever summit between a sitting US president and the leader of North Korea. Vice-President Mike Pence had even gone as far as stating that Washington would consider a dialogue with Pyongyang without

³⁶ R. Pacheco Pardo, 'Moon's PyeongChang Propaganda Coup', *The Diplomat*, 15 February 2018.

³⁷ D. E. Sanger, Choe S. and M. Rich, 'North Korea Rouses Neighbours to Reconsider Nuclear Weapons', *New York Times*, 28 October 2017.

³⁸ CSIS, 'Missiles of North Korea', accessed at <https://missilethreat.csis.org/country/dprk/> on 15 February 2018.

³⁹ J. Mason and D. Brunnstrom, 'Trump Declares North Korea State Sponsor of Terrorism, Triggers Sanctions', *Reuters*, 20 November 2017.

⁴⁰ V. Cha, 'Giving North Korea a "Bloody Nose" Carries a Huge Risk to Americans', *Washington Post*, 30 January 2018.



preconditions.⁴¹ On this last point, the Trump administration has sent conflicting messages. The meeting between President Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un was based on the condition that Pyongyang put denuclearisation on the table. However, the joint declaration coming out of the summit was vague in this respect, but also stated that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo would continue negotiations with North Korea.⁴² Either way, Washington maintains that pressure is a means to an end: to bring the Kim Jong-un regime to the negotiating table to achieve denuclearisation through peaceful means.

China has long been a proponent of dialogue with North Korea. From a Beijing perspective, dialogue between the US and North Korea and between both Koreas is the only possible way to deal with the Korean Peninsula tensions. China has also suggested that there should be multilateral dialogue in the style of the Six-Party Talks to engage North Korea, as this would allow Washington and Seoul—as well as other actors with influence in Korean Peninsula affairs—to have meaningful talks with the Kim Jong-un regime.⁴³ Beijing is also acutely aware that it has no influence over Pyongyang. This lack of influence dates to at least 1992, when Beijing normalised relations with Seoul.⁴⁴ This helps to explain why North Korea has pursued its nuclear programme regardless of Chinese opposition. Under President Xi, there has been an evident breakdown in Sino-North Korean relations. This has only started to change in recent weeks, with President Xi receiving Kim Jong-un twice following the latter's first summit with President Moon and the announcement of a summit with President Trump. Nevertheless, Chinese academics and think tanks have been allowed to openly discuss Beijing's North Korea policy—including the idea of ceasing all support to Pyongyang.⁴⁵

Japan has taken a hard-line stance on North Korea under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Tokyo has been a staunch supporter of the tightening of sanctions on Pyongyang. The Abe administration has also initiated an open debate about the need for Japan to strengthen its military forces to respond to the North Korean threat, including by reforming the Japanese constitution to essentially loosen constraints on their deployment.

⁴¹ Pacheco Pardo, 'Moon's PyeongChang Propaganda Coup'.

⁴² M. Landler, 'The Trump-Kim Summit Was Unprecedented, But the Statement Was Vague', *New York Times*, 12 June 2018.

⁴³ C. Gao, 'China: Korean Peninsula Crisis Is Not Our Responsibility', 12 July 2017.

⁴⁴ Pacheco Pardo, *North Korea–US Relations Under Kim Jong Il*.

⁴⁵ C. Clover, 'China Gives Academics Free Rein to Debate North Korea', *Financial Times*, 30 January 2018.



There is even a debate in Japan regarding the possibility of acquiring nuclear weapons as a deterrent against the North Korean threat, even if this remains a minority view.⁴⁶ From a Japanese perspective, pressure through a range of means is the main and almost exclusive way to deal with North Korea. Indeed, Prime Minister Abe has expressed his support for the US–South Korea joint military drills held annually to prepare for a possible conflict with North Korea.⁴⁷ However, Tokyo is also openly mulling over the idea of its own summit with Pyongyang, especially following the two inter-Korean summits and the US–North Korea summit.

Towards a more effective policy

Considering the above, what could the EU do to develop a more effective policy towards North Korea? Brussels' 'critical engagement' approach might not be in need of a complete overhaul, but at the very least it ought to be updated to reflect the new North-East Asian environment. A revised policy should also take into account the strengths of the EU and what it can bring to the table. The EU might not be as central to Korean Peninsula affairs as the US, China or the two Koreas themselves, but it is an important international actor with a range of foreign policy tools at its disposal.

In order to develop a more effective North Korea policy, the EU also has to consider what it wants to achieve, and how to achieve it. Easing tensions on the Korean Peninsula, upholding the non-proliferation regime and ensuring that the Kim Jong-un regime respects the human rights of the North Korean population are of course all important and should continue to be EU goals. That is why, at a time when the West's approach to North Korea is in flux, the EU should support its partners as they launch an engagement process with North Korea that is partly based on a recognition that the policy of isolating North Korea has not led to the desired effect and needs to be replaced by a new approach.

In addition, Brussels also needs to consider where its greatest strengths lie. The EU is considered to be an example of how engagement and

⁴⁶ Sanger, Choe and Rich, 'North Korea Rouses Neighbours'.

⁴⁷ Pacheco Pardo, 'Moon's PyeongChang's Propaganda Coup'.



cooperation can reduce tensions and lead to collaboration. In addition, the EU possesses considerable soft power which allows it to bring others to the negotiating table and be seen as a credible mediator among different views.

A revised and more effective policy towards North Korea should involve:

1. *Coordination with and support for South Korea and, if possible, other allies.* President Moon Jae-in has repositioned Seoul at the centre of inter-Korean relations. He is pursuing a pro-engagement policy which, if history serves as a guide, is the best means to reduce tensions in the Korean Peninsula. The EU, as it has done in other cases, for instance the Iranian nuclear situation, should provide diplomatic support for engagement—as indeed it is currently doing. Diplomatic support for South Korea’s policy also serves to strengthen relations with an important strategic partner, with potential benefits in other areas. As the US gives engagement a try as well and Japan considers doing so too, the EU should also support them.
2. *Facilitation or mediation between North Korea and the international community.* The EU maintains track-1.5 and track-2 channels of communication with North Korea, and its political dialogue technically has not been discontinued. Brussels is thus in a position to facilitate meetings and dialogue between the different parties with a stake in the North Korean nuclear issue, including the US—as some member states have been doing in recent months. Facilitation would be especially necessary if there were to be a breakdown in inter-Korean or US–North Korean rapprochement. If the EU becomes a regular facilitator of dialogue with North Korea, Brussels could even consider the possibility of upgrading its role to that of mediator, as it has done in other instances, such as in Iran or in Mindanao in the Philippines.
3. *Sharing information on and experience in engaging with North Korea.* With a track record of engagement with Pyongyang, including aid provision and, until relatively recently, political dialogue, Brussels is in a position to disseminate information and discuss how to effectively engage with North Korea. Of particular interest is the EU’s ongoing experience with humanitarian aid, since any sustained reduction in tensions on the Korean Peninsula will probably initially result in an



increase in aid to North Korea. In this respect, the EU's technical expertise is of great value.

4. *Official economic, political and educational engagement.* The EU should argue with its partners such as South Korea and the US for a gradual removal of sanctions aimed at halting North Korea's trade in legitimate goods if there is a formal commitment to denuclearisation, for the resumption of political dialogue, and for official support for or even provision of educational activities for the North Korean population. This should be done in return for and in parallel with positive gestures from Pyongyang, such as maintaining its moratorium on missile and nuclear tests, cooperating with the International Atomic Energy Agency, allowing international organisations to operate freely throughout the country and so on. In other words, the EU should support its partners if and when they launch an 'engagement offensive' aimed at helping North Korea to continue its transition to a market economy as and when it takes positive steps. This would make it even more difficult for the Kim Jong-un regime to halt economic reforms. It would also open up multiple channels of engagement with a wide range of North Korean actors and institutions, further eroding the possibility of a reversal in the slow but continuous opening-up process taking place in North Korea. With the recent US–North Korea summit and the continuation of working-level talks between Washington and Pyongyang, the chances of a strategic shift towards sustainable engagement have rapidly increased.
5. *Support for private engagement initiatives.* Educational and training institutions, non-governmental organisations, companies and other private actors from within and outside the EU continue to deal with North Korea. They provide much-needed aid, education and technical expertise in areas such as business or food-production modernisation, and, in general, a range of engagement opportunities. Brussels should be supportive of these initiatives. If possible, this should include funding. But even if this proves politically impossible, the EU should offer diplomatic or at least moral support to engagement activities provided by private actors that help ordinary North Koreans or expose Pyongyang to the outside world. This could be done in parallel to discussions about and monitoring of the human rights situation of North Korean citizens, and should be accompanied by



measures to ensure that Pyongyang officials are not the only ones to benefit from it.

6. *Participation in and support for multilateral dialogue.* It is likely that multilateral dialogue on the North Korean nuclear issue and/or other matters such as a peace regime in the Korean Peninsula will resume at some point. The Koreans, the US and China will be part of it. Japan and Russia may well participate too, if only because they were involved in the Six-Party Talks. The EU should strive to get a seat at the table, preferably as a fully fledged participant, but if not, at least as an observer. Even if Brussels is not invited to be part of a multilateral dialogue to discuss Korean Peninsula affairs, it should provide its diplomatic support. The EU has a history of supporting engagement initiatives in the region, most recently the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative. This led to the EU being offered a seat at the table when this initiative was replaced by the Northeast Asia Plus Community of Responsibility. Given the EU's support for multilateralism more generally, a favourable disposition towards multilateral dialogue on the Korean Peninsula would be welcome.
7. *Continuation of meetings by the European Parliament.* The European Parliament has held behind-closed-doors meetings with high-ranked North Korean officials on several occasions, including over the past three years. These talks provide the international community in general and the EU in particular with another channel of communication with the Kim Jong-un regime. This channel remains open even if the EU's official dialogue with North Korea is suspended or interrupted—as has been the case since 2015. It is thus a valuable tool, keeping a diplomatic window open when others are closed—as could happen if inter-Korean rapprochement and US–North Korea negotiations turn out to be less than positive.



Conclusion

A more creative EU policy towards the North Korean nuclear conundrum is necessary for Brussels to be seen as a credible actor in Korean Peninsula affairs. The EU should develop a policy conducive to achieving its goals with regard to North Korea: a stable Korean Peninsula; the upholding of the WMD regime, with denuclearisation as a long-term goal; and respect for human rights. To this end, Brussels should enact a set of policies in coordination with friends and allies.

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Brussels, BE - 1000

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Editor: Niklas Nováky, Research Officer, Martens Centre

External editing: Communicative English bvba

Typesetting: Victoria Agency

This publication receives funding from the European Parliament.
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