What Role Can Europe Play in Easing Conflict in Asia?

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The EU appears to be stepping up engagement on the South China Sea and other issues, and has a lot to offer, not least the normative values it has.

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Beijing is trying to define the ideological division between China and the US, putting pressure on other countries to take sides.

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Europe’s stake in the Korean Peninsula may not be obvious. But in aid, trade, sanctions and nuclear expertise, it brings a lot to the table.
In Focus: What Role Can Europe Play in Easing Conflict in Asia?

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Europe Has a Lot to Offer On the Korean Peninsula

By Ramon Pacheco Pardo

At first blush, Europe’s stake in the Korean Peninsula may not seem obvious. But from aid to trade, support for sanctions and expertise on denuclearization, the EU brings a lot to the table.

Indeed, European support for an eventual deal on denuclearization might prove crucial, writes Ramon Pacheco Pardo, because North Korea sees the EU as a more “neutral” player than the US, South Korea and Japan. Europe should be welcomed to the peace process.

WHAT ROLE CAN Europe play in establishing a permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula? More than 65 years after the end of the Korean War, the Korean Peninsula remains divided. Following the heightened tensions in 2017, diplomacy thankfully took hold in 2018. The pace of negotiations might have slowed down — even temporarily stalled — after the failed Hanoi summit in February between US President Donald Trump and North Korea’s Chairman Kim Jong Un. But negotiations and engagement are the only realistic path toward permanent peace. This is why Europe finds itself in a position to contribute to a brighter future for the Korean Peninsula.

Europe played a supporting role while the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), a product of negotiations over North Korea’s nuclear program in the 1990s, was functioning. The EU issued its first Asia strategy in 1994 and joined the executive board of KEDO three years later — one of only four members along with the United States, South Korea and Japan. Brussels, however, felt sidelined from the decision-making process. This included the eventual decision to shut down the organization after the collapse of the joint framework agreement. To this day, European policy-makers feel that Europe was basically treated as a cash cow, providing funding for KEDO while getting little, if anything, in return.

Worse was to come for Europe though. Above all, the EU was excluded from the Six-Party talks. Regardless, Brussels maintained an official dialogue with Pyongyang until 2015. Furthermore, seven EU member states including Germany,
Sweden and the United Kingdom opened or kept their embassies in Pyongyang throughout the 2000s. Also, countries such as France and Sweden were among the largest aid donors to North Korea. But none of that mattered. By the time US President Barack Obama left office, Europe had essentially become a non-player in the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue.

After Trump came to power in early 2017 and then South Korean President Moon Jae-in a few months later, things began to change. In 2017, Trump implemented a “maximum pressure” campaign on North Korea. He sought to enlist European countries as part of it. They obliged. Not only did the EU support new UN Security Council sanctions on North Korea, it went beyond them as part of its autonomous sanctions regime. As of 2019, Brussels has a sanctions regime in place as stringent as Washington’s. Trade between the EU and North Korea has become almost negligible. European aid has also decreased.1

Moon, however, brought with him a North Korea policy favoring diplomacy and engagement. His charm offensive started to bear fruit when Kim dispatched a sports team and, crucially, a political delegation to the PyeongChang Winter Olympic Games in 2018. Trump also shifted US policy toward negotiations shortly after the games. Both Seoul and Washington sought European support for their engagement strategies. In particular, they wanted to sound out the EU on its potential contribution to a diplomatic solution to the North Korean nuclear crisis. For all the talk about economic and political interests that the US, China and Russia have on the Korean Peninsula. Furthermore, all EU member states except for France and Estonia maintain diplomatic relations with North Korea. And EU member states such as Sweden, Finland or Austria have hosted dialogues involving North Korean officials. In other words, Europe is less of a “threat” than the US, China and Russia from the perspective of Pyongyang. The Kim regime could find a denuclearization deal with the Trump administration more palatable if Europe supports its implementation.

But they are also aware that the EU can play both “bad cop” and, especially, “good cop” roles to provide Brussels with a seat at the table.

**THE EU PLAYS TOUGH ON SANCTIONS**

Europe is one of the most important economic actors in the world. For all the talk about economic stagnation, the size of its market, the investment by its companies and the amount of aid that the EU and its member states provide every year confer Brussels with formidable economic power. Absent a European army, sanctions — or the threat of them — have become one of the EU’s main foreign policy tools. Myanmar, Sudan or Venezuela can attest to the willingness with which Brussels applies economic pressure. North Korea too.

EU sanctions restrict almost any form of economic links with North Korea save for humanitarian activities. There is a consensus among all EU member states that sanctions are necessary to deal with Pyongyang. From a European perspective, sanctions send a signal to North Korea that development of its nuclear and missile programs is unacceptable. Importantly, sanctions on North Korea also serve to prevent yet another diplomatic spat with the Trump administration. Tensions over trade, the Iranian nuclear deal or how to deal with Cuba are more than enough.

Do EU sanctions on North Korea matter? Simply put, yes. European countries might not have been among North Korea’s top trade or investment partners by the time the current round of sanctions started to be implemented. But Europe’s role could become crucial if the North Korean economy opens up. Ask China or Vietnam. Or even South Korea and Japan. Europe is among the top four trading partners for all these countries. It could well be the same for North Korea. In short, the Kim regime would want the EU to remove sanctions to receive investment in sectors as varied as, say, mining, infrastructure or textiles. Pyongyang would also want to export to the European market.

Brussels could therefore dangle the carrot of sanctions relief in front of Pyongyang to help direct it toward denuclearization. Indeed, this is the message that Moon brought to Europe during last October’s EU-South Korea summit and European tour. This helped continue to shift the conversation in Europe toward a step-by-step approach in which reciprocal moves toward denuclearization and sanctions relief would go hand-in-hand. This is a position that many EU member states have supported for some time in any case. Privately, the Trump administration has been sounding out the EU on this possibility following the Singapore summit between the US president and Kim.

**DENUCLEARIZATION:**

**IN SEARCH OF EXPERTS**

It is not unthinkable that Trump will sign a deal with Kim. After all, his three predecessors reached agreements with Pyongyang. And if he does not, one of his successors will. The agreement should include North Korea’s commitment to denuclearize. Regardless of how specific the agreement might be, any denuclearization process will take years to be fully implemented. Crucially, denuclearization will require a level of technical expertise and experience that few countries have.

France, the UK or even Spain and Sweden have the necessary expertise to support the denuclearization of North Korea. Washington, understandably, would like to take a leading role in the dismantlement of Pyongyang’s nuclear materials and their transportation for safe storage elsewhere. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) would also play an important role, especially when it comes to verification. China and Russia — let’s not forget, nuclear powers — might also be involved if the US and North Korea agree.

If past deals with Libya and Iran serve as any guide, however, it is more likely that European countries will provide technical expertise. The UK provided support to the US in the dismantle and transportation of Libya’s nuclear materials. British and French experts also participated in the implementation of the Iranian nuclear deal. It should not be forgotten that both the UK and France have been reducing their nuclear arsenals for decades. Even though the specifications of the North Korean program certainly are different, few can match the practical experience that British and French experts have. This is an asset that London and Paris can bring to the table.

There is also a political point. We should not exaggerate the degree to which the Kim regime trusts Europe or considers it a “neutral” actor. But it cannot be denied that the EU lacks the geopolitical interests that the US, China and Russia have on the Korean Peninsula. Sweden and the United Kingdom opened or kept their embassies in Pyongyang throughout the 2000s. Also, countries such as France and Sweden were among the largest aid donors to North Korea. But none of that mattered. By the time US President Barack Obama left office, Europe had essentially become a non-player in the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue.

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Europe, therefore, has become a player in Korean Peninsula affairs for the first time since the second North Korean nuclear crisis began in 2002. European policy-makers understand that the main actors are the two Koreas, the US and, arguably, China. They also know that Japan and Russia have more at stake than Brussels does.

Europe supports its implementation. CARROTS AND MORE CARROTS

Inter-Korean reconciliation and North Korean denuclearization — if the latter is an option at all — will require inducements to Pyongyang. The Kim regime will not significantly improve relations with Seoul, take clear steps toward denuclearization and open up dramatically unless it can clearly see the rewards for following this path. The EU can — and should — be part of any
The EU itself is the ultimate model. In the 1950s, countries that had fought two wars in a span of two decades — most notably Germany and France — launched a coal and steel community culminating in a common market established in 1957 and eventually the EU. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, countries in the Eastern European bloc that for decades had nominally been enemies of Western Europe joined the EU. Despite recent suggestions otherwise, support for the EU as of 2019 is at a 30-year high. War between EU member states is unthinkable. The Koreas should aim to achieve the same.

The Helsinki Process launched in the 1970s also offers a model that the Koreas could look to. The process brought European political leaders in the Western and Soviet blocs together. Crucially, it also put civil society movements on both sides in contact with each other. In other words, exchanges were institutionalized in a way that served to ease tensions. The process survived until the collapse of communism in Europe. Importantly, it had its ups and downs. It was not a linear process of ever-increasing co-operation. Likewise, inter-Korean co-operation is unlikely to be a linear process.

Another reconciliation model of interest to the Koreas is the case of divided European countries. Germany is usually presented as an example for the Korean Peninsula. This makes sense, since it was divided by the Cold War and eventually reunified. But reunification took place after the end of communist rule in Eastern Europe and de facto absorption by West Germany. Successive South Korean governments have made clear that they do not seek the collapse of the Kim regime. So, the applicability of the German example has its limits.

Ireland might be a better model, considering the current realities on the Korean Peninsula. Northern Ireland was in a de facto state of civil war for decades, with pro-Irish reunification and pro-British factions confronting each other. In the 1990s, the governments of Ireland and the UK and the opposing Northern Irish sides sat down for negotiations. The Good Friday Agreement signed in 1998 helped put an end to hostilities and de facto established the principle of peaceful co-existence on the island of Ireland. The parallels with the case of the two Koreas is not perfect, but it shows that a willingness to compromise can help put an end to seemingly intractable conflicts.

Ultimately, the Koreas will decide on their own model of reconciliation. They should also decide the extent to which they would like the EU to be involved in Korean Peninsula affairs — even though realistically the US will also have an important say, especially when it comes to denuclearization. In any case, the EU stands ready to contribute to a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. It should be invited to play a supporting role.