The EU’s Role in Korean Peninsula Stability: Secondary But Important

By Mohammad Reza Dehshiri & Hossein Shahmoradi

The multi-year effort to denuclearize North Korea has largely involved the countries that belonged to the Six-Party talks — the US, South and North Korea, China, Russia and Japan. That circle of interlocutors has since been reduced to Pyongyang, Washington and Seoul — with a major side role played by Beijing. The European Union has been far from the center of action. That doesn’t mean the EU doesn’t have an important future role to play in ensuring stability on the Korean Peninsula, write Mohammad Reza Dehshiri and Hossein Shahmoradi.

EU-NORTH KOREA RELATIONS

It could be said that Brussels did not start paying real attention to North Korea until the end of the Cold War. Previously, the agenda of the European Political Co-operation 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 program. But there was no North Korea strategy to speak of and references to the country were minimal.1 The attention paid by the EU to North Korea greatly increased in the late 1980s, partly due to Pyongyang’s request for EU assistance to tackle a famine at the time. In 1994, the EU published its Asian strategy (Towards a New Asia Strategy), which proposed a more active role by the EU in the region. The EU also helped Pyongyang by opening its market to North Korean products and providing technical assistance. Progress was made to the extent that the EU became North Korea’s third-largest trading partner.

But as North Korea started to expand its nuclear program, the country changed from a failed state to a rebellious one in the eyes of Europeans. The EU thus moved to prevent North Korea from becoming a nuclear state by adopting a strategy of punitive action. Initially, security guarantees promised economic co-operation and political recognition to North Korea, but later emphasized the use of economic sanctions, political isolation and reduced access to the resources needed for nuclear-military activities. Another point is that most of the measures taken against North Korea were first exercised by some of the member states of the EU and later became a general policy of Brussels. For example, France and Ireland played an important role in encouraging the EU to increase pressure on North Korea in response to the human rights situation. Consequently, bilateral co-operation was stopped, EU independent sanctions were imposed on North Korea and EU cultural and economic co-operation with North Korea was minimized.

Subsequently, the EU established diplomatic relations with North Korea in May 2001 and most EU member states now have diplomatic relations with Pyongyang. This provides an opportunity to discuss issues of importance to the EU, including non-proliferation and human rights. Despite all the barriers, in the context of the regular political dialogue between Brussels and Pyongyang, a delegation led by Gerhard Sabathil, director for North East Asia and the Pacific in the European External Action Service, visited Pyongyang June 19-24, 2015, and held meetings with North Korean authorities. It was the 14th session of this dialogue since 1998.2 But since 2015, these dialogues have been postponed due to the intensification of North Korean nuclear activities. In this regard, the bilateral relationship has mostly involved tension rather than dialogue and co-operation.

Recently, in response to a statement by envoys from the UK, France and Germany condemn- ing North Korea missile tests, North Korea’s vice minister of foreign affairs, Kim Son Gyun, warned that “there will be no greater mistake if they think that we, the DPRK, will be forced to give up our self-defensive right for ensuring peace, by being weighed down with such irrational documents in all their entirety.” His statement argued North Korea wants “to develop relations with the European countries on good terms,” but only “based on mutual respect for each other’s sovereignty.” He said: “The United Kingdom, France and Germany should get rid of their rigid and prejudiced way of thinking and help to ease tensions and ensure peace on the Korean Peninsula,” adding, “If they are not able to do so, it would be better to keep silent and mind their own turbulent business instead.”
In sum, since the 1990s, the EU’s relations with North Korea have never had much depth and breadth and have experienced many ups and downs. When considering relations between the two sides, a number of key milestones are worth mentioning:

• Setting up the EU’s Asian strategy in 1994, with increased willingness of the EU and its members to engage with North Korea, especially food aid;

• The beginning of formal diplomatic relations between the two sides since 1998;

• The start of regular political dialogues between the two sides from 2015 onwards;

• A decrease in EU cultural and economic co-operation with North Korea;

• The EU imposing independent sanctions against North Korea in 2013;

• Interruption in diplomatic talks between the two sides from 2015 onwards;

• Increased willingness of the EU and its member states to play an active role in North Korea’s nuclear disarmament.

THE DIPLOMATIC SITUATION

The diplomatic situation on the Korean Peninsula has experienced fundamental changes for three major reasons: The rapid development of North Korea’s nuclear program under the leadership of Kim Jong Un; the election of Donald Trump as president of the US; and the election of Moon Jae-in as president of South Korea.

The question is, can the EU and its member states play a considerable role in the stability of the Korean Peninsula in the current situation? The reality is that North Korea has succeeded in expanding its nuclear capability in a short period of time following its byungjin doctrine, which emphasizes the development of the national economy and a parallel increase in the nuclear weapons program. Although development of the national economy remains unfulfilled, the rapid development of nuclear missiles demonstrated Pyongyang’s will for survival. North Korea is now a de facto nuclear power and is not going to completely give up its nuclear weapons any time soon. Pyongyang has publicly and privately asserted as much. The fates of Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi, both of whom lost their power and their lives after discontinuing their programs of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), explain North Korea’s desire for nuclear weapons. The country also has a strong leader in Kim Jong Un, who has consolidated his power. Therefore, the EU has to codify its strategy toward North Korea based on the facts, not mere desires.

The EU has had a policy of critical engagement toward North Korea, which combines pressure through sanctions and other measures while keeping communication and dialogue open. Its goals, aimed at complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization, are to support a lasting reduction of tensions on the Korean Peninsula and in the region, the upholding of the global non-proliferation regime and the improvement of human rights in North Korea.3

Another point is that the EU has serious doubts about the outcome of North Korea’s nuclear disarmament talks. In this regard, the EU has been mostly silent as diplomacy powers ahead. It is true that EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Federica Mogherini, regularly issues statements expressing Europe’s support for a negotiated solution to the nuclear issue. Brussels, however, has not moved beyond these bland declarations to explicitly support a peace declaration to end the Korean War — as well as a peace treaty.4

Also, China is a vital player in efforts to denuclearize North Korea and must be encouraged to play a constructive role. Because of Beijing’s outsized economic relationship with Pyongyang, its co-operation — or lack of co-operation — in sanctions enforcement largely determines the effectiveness of economic pressure. Moreover, the North Korean leadership consults regularly with China and seeks its support in negotiations with Washington, even as it seeks to play Washington and Beijing against one another. China’s ability to shield Pyongyang from economic and political pressure makes Beijing an important factor in efforts to influence North Korea.5 As a result, without the consideration of China’s interests, neither the US nor the EU can act success-fully toward North Korea.

On the Russian side, its leadership understands that it’s the US and North Korea that should strike a deal, because North Korea’s concern about ensuring deterrence against the US threat was the key reason for Pyongyang to develop its nuclear arsenal in the first place. However, Russia would like to have a stake in the peace process on the Korean Peninsula in order to ensure that its interests are taken into consideration and the situation does not deteriorate to the level of military escalation. Even the current phase of talks, with little concrete results, from the Russian perspective is preferable to military conflict.6

Although Russia doesn’t play a decisive role, its behavior does affect general developments in the region. For a long time, Moscow tried to be an independent player on the Peninsula, using its limited resources skilfully. The Kremlin views Kim as a rational actor who is guided by his own definition of his country’s national interests and considerations of regime survival. Ultimately, although they never admit it in public, the Russians do not believe that the “complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization” of North Korea that President Trump’s administration is trying to accomplish is achievable.7

The EU has had a policy of critical engagement toward North Korea, which combines pressure through sanctions and other measures while keeping communication and dialogue open. Also, of the five countries that have a major stake in developments on the Korean Peninsula — the US, China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea — Japan is the only country that has not had substantive diplomatic engagement with North Korea since Pyongyang began its diplomatic initiative in early 2018. While the Japanese foreign minister met with his North Korean counterpart in New York in September 2018, and also briefly made contact with him in Singapore a month before that, those encounters appear not to have produced a breakthrough on bilateral talks. Judging from North Korea’s tone on Japan in its official media, Pyongyang does not...
Should the current diplomatic negotiations fail, the EU’s role in the stability of the Korean Peninsula could be crucial ... it could actively warn about the danger of using armed force in the region.

negotiations. On the US side, it seems the White House may not want the EU to intervene in the process of reducing tensions unless it moves toward a military solution. North Korea is trying to use the EU as a counterweight to the US and thereby mitigate Washington’s stance, but it does not have in mind a key position for the EU. The South Korean administration too seems to be focused on the inter-Korean relationship and its partnership with the US.

Currently, neither the EU nor any of its member states play a proper role on the Korean Peninsula. They did not participate in the Six-Party Talks and play no role in diplomatic talks between Pyongyang and Seoul and between Pyongyang and Washington. Because Europeans now have more important strategic priorities — such as Brexit and diplomatic efforts to preserve the Iranian nuclear deal (JCPOA) — the EU has limited itself to mere verbal support for ongoing negotiations.

A SECONDARY, BUT IMPORTANT, ROLE

Both the European Commission and EU member states have expressed their willingness to participate in talks on reducing tensions on the Korean Peninsula. But it might not be possible until the US, North Korea and South Korea consider a significant role for the EU in the ongoing stakes-in-us-north-korea-talks/

appear ready to engage with Tokyo. Therefore, in such a complex situation, the EU won’t be able to have a significant position on the Korean crisis unless major developments occur or main actors consider the role for the EU that we discuss below.

If the process of a nuclear deal with North Korea goes well, the EU could again embark on an active partnership strategy with North Korea and strengthen its economic and political ties with the country. The EU can also play a role in the agreements that are made to maintain North Korea’s security. If the EU can ensure the stability of the Korean Peninsula could be crucial. A deadlock in negotiations could increase the risk of armed conflict. In this respect, the EU could actively warn about the danger of using armed force in the region. Also, in the case of a US decision to engage in a military attack on North Korea, the EU must address both US officials and the world’s public about the devastating consequences of such a decision. Finally, if the US moves toward a military solution, the EU will be more actively involved in Korean affairs, and will resort to the UN General Assembly and the UN Security Council, if necessary.

The EU’s Asian Strategy of 1994 highlighted the importance of East Asia to European prosperity and security, and Brussels is well aware that the importance of the region has hugely increased over the 25 years since then. Therefore, the EU cannot seek to avoid a Korean crisis. But, considering the influential role of the US, China, Russia and even Japan in the region, the EU cannot play a primary role in Korean affairs. Still, the EU should play a secondary, but significant, role in the process of preventing war and minimizing the risk of nuclear proliferation. The extent to which the EU plays a role in North Korea is largely correlated with the perceptions of North Korean leaders. If Kim Jong Un continues to see the EU as an inefficient actor, whose position without the US is nothing more than a body that issues supportive statements, there will be little opportunity for an effective EU role. As a result, the fate of the Iranian nuclear deal will be a crucial factor in future EU-North Korean relations.

Ultimately, in order to increase its impact on Korean affairs, the following suggestions are worth considering.

First, the EU must strengthen its political ties with North Korea and resume high-level political dialogue with Pyongyang as soon as possible, thereby enhancing mutual trust; this could include establishing EU representation in Pyongyang and a North Korean Embassy in Brussels.

Also, because the European Common Security and Defense Policy aims to strengthen the EU’s external ability to act through the development of civilian and military capabilities in conflict prevention and crisis management, the EU should focus on a single and concentrated policy toward North Korea. This would be a good step in the process of trust-building with North Korean leaders.

From another aspect, while trade policy has been a major instrument of EU soft power, it is increasingly used as an instrument to pursue the EU’s non-trade external policy goals and its civilian values through non-reciprocal trade preferences for developing countries, mostly conditioned on respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Therefore, the EU should strive to encourage further reforms and engagement by North Korea with the international community.

Finally, if the EU wants to have a real stake in the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia, it should strengthen its relations with Russia and China, rather than fully integrating with US positions in East Asian affairs. The EU should continue to oppose any US pre-emptive attack on North Korea and support a gradual and motivational process in negotiations with North Korea.

Mohammad Reza Dehshiri is Associate Professor of International Relations at the School of International Relations in Tehran, which is affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign affairs. E-mail: m.dehshiri@sir.ac.ir

Hossein Shahmoradi is an MA graduate in East Asian Studies at the School of International Relations in Tehran. E-mail: shahmoradi.hossein@gmail.com