

Europe's World

Peace, Security & Defence


What's wrong with the EU policy towards North Korea and how to fix it

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The 2020 Munich Security Conference (MSC) remained largely mum on the situation on the Korean Peninsula. Such silence however is not the result of North and South Korean participants having withdrawn from a night-owl session, the former out of fear of contracting the novel coronavirus and the latter due to actual health issues. The MSC's muteness over North Korea reflects a broader – quiet – stance of the

The EU and, primarily, its member states think that North Korea is too far away and would rather prioritise urgent crises that are closer to home. Moreover, it is one of very few items the ‘westless’ West still agrees upon and the North Koreans want to negotiate directly with the Americans anyway. Yet all these three premises are wide off the mark and only lead to the EU’s self-inflicted helplessness in the area where Brussels could take a clear course of action with a potential for success.

So, what’s wrong with the EU’s approach to North Korea and how can it be fixed?

First, the North Korean issue could very quickly become another theatre for the US-China power competition once the gap between the US and Chinese (and Russian) positions widens. Europe will be asked to get on the US bandwagon. As with the 5G debate, to pre-empt such a binary choice, Brussels must chart its own Korean Peninsula strategy – and the moment to do so is now. The DPRK might be geographically distant from Europe, but the geopolitical repercussions of neglecting it are not.

“ A complete change of the paradigm between parties formerly at war should not be an alien concept to the EU

Second, the current US President has one policy towards

negotiations since Hanoi failed not because Donald Trump got played by Kim Jong Un, but rather the other way around – the US President played the North Korean leader.

Instead of following through on his initial promise of trading off the nuclear arsenal for a transformed relationship with the US, American negotiators have merely offered the same old US policy of insisting on denuclearisation first, before considering further steps. Yet in contrast to other regions – whether by design or coincidence – Trump’s early instinct to totally reconfigure relations on the Korean Peninsula was in fact correct.

At this point in time, however, Trump has lost interest in North Korea. This has left a wide-open space – to his underlings, but also to the other actors. Now is therefore the best moment for the EU to capitalise on this vacuum and provide its own pitch. If Brussels’ motivation for an active Korea policy is to prevent another schism between the US President and the EU, implementing the original Trump proposal would put Brussels on the same page as Trump.

A complete change of the paradigm between parties formerly at war should not be an alien concept to the EU: after all, this is how European integration started. Instead of the Schuman Plan, the Europeans should come up with a ‘Borrell Plan’. In such a proposal, denuclearisation should not be the final goal, but a milestone towards a new arrangement on the peninsula between the DPRK and the US (with other actors). In other words, however life-

the illness.

“ A promising EU initiative would also please South Korean President Moon

Germany could play a distinct role in such an EU-led undertaking, not only due to its special history – similarly to Central and Eastern European countries – but also because of its upcoming EU Presidency which is supposed to be focused on Asia. Instead of being fixated solely on China, Germany’s foreign ministry could support Brussels in drafting a new strategy for the Korean Peninsula. Such a constructive approach would also be better aligned with the legacy of Willy Brandt, SPD’s grandee and chancellor, than the hard-line attitude towards the DPRK which is currently undertaken by Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, a fellow Social Democrat.

Third, should Brussels – together with Berlin – come up with an independent blueprint for the Korean Peninsula that would be seen as neutral and objective by Pyongyang, there is no doubt that the DPRK negotiators would be thrilled. They may prefer speaking directly with Washington, but if the Americans are not willing to listen, there is no point for them coming back to a negotiating table. If this table moves to Brussels, the North Korean diplomats would surely be willing to fly over.

closer links with his neighbour if there is no progress by the US negotiators. In 2020, the year which not only commemorates 70 years since the breakout of the Korean War, but also celebrates 10 years since concluding the EU-ROK strategic partnership, a new EU strategic plan for peace on the Korean Peninsula would be an appropriate gift for the 10th anniversary of the Brussels-Seoul alliance, particularly with preparations for this year's EU-Korea summit already under way.

The MSC's report only mentions North Korea three times, including in reference to the International Crisis Group's ten conflicts to watch in 2020. To prevent such a conflict from happening, the EU should pay attention to the Korean Peninsula not only because the current relative stability could mean a calm before the storm, but because this moment might be the EU's best chance to jump in.

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