Between Confrontation and Cooperation

Is there a security role for the European Union on the Korean Peninsula?

Jae-Seung Lee | With the Six-Party Talks at a stalemate, the European Union may need to step in with soft diplomacy. As the security environment on the Korean Peninsula deteriorates, more active engagement from the European Union could contribute to the long-term stability of the peninsula.

The security environment on the Korean Peninsula is once again highly volatile. North Korea conducted an underground nuclear explosion and test-fired a series of missiles in spring 2009 that significantly escalated tension on the peninsula. With a series of confrontational statements and actions directed at the United States, South Korea, and the United Nations, North Korea has toughened its stance regarding its nuclear program and security negotiations. The sinking of a South Korean military vessel, the Cheonan, in March 2010, has further complicated the peaceful resolution of the North Korean crisis.

The prospects for making progress on the North Korean nuclear issue in the Six-Party Talks are not encouraging, at least not in the short run. Understanding the North Korean nuclear stance requires examining a longer time frame to grasp the key trends in inter-Korean relations. The European Union’s security engagement on the peninsula should be reconsidered in this long-term view.

During the past few years, North Korea’s stance on denuclearization has shifted from limited cooperation to confrontation. In Berlin in January 2007, North Korea agreed to the first stage of dismantling its nuclear program and demonstrated a willingness to freeze its nuclear activity. North Korea submitted a “Nuclear Report” in June 2008, and the cooling tower of the Yongbyun nuclear facility was demolished the following day. An agreement was reached to resolve the second phase of the North’s nuclear program in October 2008. The United States announced that it would remove North Korea from the list of states sponsoring terrorism and even disclosed the contents of the U.S.-North Korean agreement on nuclear verification. However, North Korea did not establish a specific plan for the verification of actions promised in the nuclear report and the seemingly
smooth progress of the 2008 agreement came to a halt.

In late 2008, North Korea began to take a more confrontational stance toward the United States and South Korea. After the report of Kim Jong-il's health problems, the voices of hardliners within North Korea grew louder. North Korea launched a long-range rocket despite the concerns of neighboring countries in April 2009. The United Nations regarded it as a violation of Security Council Resolution 1718, which prohibits North Korea from conducting ballistic missile-related activities, and urged North Korea to abide by the resolution. Pyongyang struck back by announcing it would pull out of the talks and restart its nuclear program. North Korea conducted its second nuclear test and launched three ballistic missiles on May 25, 2009. The UN Security Council unanimously condemned North Korea's nuclear test and adopted Resolution 1874 to strengthen sanctions against the North.

The Obama administration took a longer time in developing a comprehensive policy toward North Korea. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that the United States might also use diplomatic means besides the Six-Party Talks. The United States has shown interest in bilateral talks with North Korea while emphasizing the unchangeable principle of denuclearization and the possibility of "smart financial sanctions."

Amid the growing tensions, the South Korean government began to face a more complicated political environment. During the past decade, inter-Korean relations had been led by relatively progressive South Korean administrations. The Sunshine Policy of former President Kim Dae Jung and the Engagement Policy of former President Roh Moo-hyun took a conciliatory approach toward North Korea. The return of a conservative administration in 2008, however, symbolized the dissatisfaction of the public with the progress of inter-Korean relations. In spite of these conciliatory moves and economic aid, North Korea did not stop its nuclear program. Even in the case of economic aid, it was North Korea that dictated the terms of the donation. The principle of reciprocity was largely ignored by North Korea, but this was excused by previous South Korean administrations for reasons of brotherhood and national unity. Many conservative policy makers, as well as the Korean public, saw this phenomenon as unfair, even though they believed in engagement with the North. President Lee Myung-bak has therefore adopted modified rules of engagement with stricter denuclearization verification measures in place. The administration also hoped for a more reciprocal and transparent economic aid relationship. In return for North Korea’s dismantling of its nuclear program, the South Korean government proposed to reward North Korea with aid intended to bring the North’s per capita GDP up to $3000.

However, the shooting of a South Korean tourist in the Mt. Kumgang resort in North Korea in July 2008 froze inter-Korean dialogue and exchanges. The initial confrontation between the two Koreas over this
tourism area has been exacerbated not only by North Korea’s rocket launch and nuclear tests but also by South Korea’s announcement to join the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) that allows interception of ships and aircraft to prevent weapons of mass destruction from being transported to terrorist groups. The sinking of the Cheonan, the South Korean military vessel, and alleged involvement of North Korea, dramatically increased the danger and volatility of the situation.

The deterioration of inter-Korean relations has had a huge political cost for the South Korean government. Stricter criteria for verification and reciprocity did not mean an abandonment of the engagement policy, but methodological differences in pursuing such a policy have led to a standstill. The Kaesong Special Economic Zone (SEZ) is a major dilemma for the South Korean government. Kaesong SEZ, a symbol of inter-Korean economic cooperation, has become a victim of deteriorating inter-Korean relations. Maintaining a strict position toward North Korea may decrease the momentum in inter-Korean economic cooperation achieved by the Kaesong project and endanger the survival of many companies operating in the industrial complex—some have already begun ringing the financial alarm bell.

Understanding the North’s Choices

North Korea could use its nuclear program as a bargaining chip for food, energy, and economic aid. However, it also wants to acquire a security guarantee and military superiority so that it can maintain the stability of its regime while building a “Strong and Prosperous Country,” as it puts it. There are two scenarios that are possible.

In the first scenario, North Korea would give up its nuclear program in exchange for food, energy, and economic aid. It has been suggested that massive economic assistance from other Six-Party Talk members (South Korea, Russia, China, Japan, United States) as well as international financial institutions such as International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank would provide momentum for growth in a nuclear-free North Korea.

In the second scenario, North Korea’s nuclear program is the means to achieve national goals such as building a “Strong and Prosperous Country” and guaranteeing regime survival. Furthermore, nuclear power is the only way to ensure military superiority over South Korea since North Korea could not do so in terms of conventional military capacity. The country’s nuclear program also mobilizes unity in the country and maintains regime stability. By maintaining a tough stance, North Korea tries to maximize its leverage during the transition period before new major negotiations begin with the United States.1 North Korea has learned during the past decade that taking a tougher stance has paid off with increased concessions from its negotiation partners.

The contrast between the two scenarios has been a major reason for the

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failure to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. There was significant difference between what North Korea wanted from its nuclear program (scenario 2) and what other Six-Party Talks members could offer (scenario 1). North Korea has no intention of giving up its nuclear program just for food and economic aid. North Korea is already familiar with economic hardship and may be willing to endure even further economic sanctions for its political goals. Therefore, a re-examination of previous efforts to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue, including the Six-Party Talks, is needed. A new approach necessitates viewing the European Union as a major player in resolving the North Korean issue by shifting North Korea’s preferences to a more realistic scenario.

Rethinking the Six-Party Talks
The Six-Party Talks have been the official multilateral regime to deal with the North Korean nuclear issue since 2003, but they have yet to produce a fundamental solution. In terms of the framework, the Six-Party Talks are the ideal regime to deal with North Korea because all the neighboring countries and the United States sit down together and work on a solution.

However, the participants in the Six-Party Talks have often had different political objectives and interests. The United States, Japan, and South Korea would like to see North Korea comply with the solution along the lines of the first scenario. However, both China and Russia would not easily consent to United States’ pressure on the North Korean regime. In fact, these two countries have recently shown a tendency to resort to traditional balance-of-power tactics on the Korean Peninsula while backing up North Korea in the aftermath of the Cheonan incident. China also wants to maximize its leverage as a de facto mediator of the Six-Party Talks by utilizing its access to the North Korean regime.
As a result, the Six-Party Talks have often faced deadlock because of the different underlying interests of the participating countries. In this structure, the six states focused on “sufficiency” rather than “completeness” in examining and responding to issues. Many times, the Six-Party Talks did not play the role of an “oven” to devise a solution to dismantle North Korea’s nuclear program, but rather played the role of a “refrigerator” that prevented worsening of the problem. The United States has been preoccupied with Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and other parts of the Middle East, and often put the North Korean negotiations in the refrigerator, which resulted in minimal progress. Meanwhile, a majority of North Korean diplomatic messages were directly targeted at the U.S. administration. A more active engagement of the European Union in this stalemate may have the potential to disentangle the puzzle of peace-building on the Korean Peninsula.

The European Union’s Role

Since the mid-1990s, the European Union has increased its political and economic engagement with North Korea. Rapid improvements in E.U.-North Korea relations made in 2000 and 2001 were spurred by a series of political breakthroughs such as the inter-Korean summit and a visit to North Korea by Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson. While official relations reached a stalemate in the post 9/11 security environment and the intensification of North Korea’s nuclear activity, the European Union has been continuously providing assistance to North Korea. The European Union has become one of the largest international donors to North Korea in development and humanitarian aid. As of October 2009, humanitarian assistance provided by the European Commission totaled €380 million, and many European NGOs remain active in North Korea.

The European Union’s foreign policy toward North Korea has proceeded on two tracks. It has employed a firm from humanitarian issues stance regarding in North Korea, the North’s weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and human rights issues, while taking a moderate approach to developmental and humanitarian assistance. The European Union has emphasized that there should be no direct linkage between politics and humanitarian issues. The European Union’s continued provision of humanitarian aid and technical assistance did not signal a softening of its stance on the WMD and nonproliferation issues. The Union denounced the North Korean nuclear program and emphasized the importance of inter-Korean dialogue and Six-Party talks for its continued political and economic support. Regarding the nonproliferation issues, the European Union has maintained an embargo on arms, nuclear and ballistic missile-related materials from North Korea since its adoption of the Common Position of the Council in 2006. In June 2009, the E.U. Heads of Government strongly condemned the

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second nuclear test carried out by North Korea. The following month, the European Union passed an internal regulation that made the sanctions under the resolution directly applicable in the domestic law of all member countries. At the same time, the European Union has been vocal in pointing out the human rights issues in North Korea at the UN General Assembly and the UN Human Rights Council. The European Parliament has adopted several resolutions on North Korean human rights issues since 2003.

The European Union’s security involvement on the Korean Peninsula depends on a series of conditions. First, the European Union’s security role on the Peninsula will be decided by its relative capacity vis-à-vis the United States. Traditionally, the United States has had a huge security stake on the Korean Peninsula and many Asian countries still demonstrate a substantial dependence on the United States for security. Considering the U.S. influence in this region, it would be necessary to find a more productive coordination and division of labor between the European Union and the United States in dealing with North Korea. The European Union’s role on the Korean Peninsula depends also on the type of security agenda being addressed in the region. The European Union has traditionally been interested in the security agenda caused by non-traditional security threats—i.e., failed states, ethnic disputes, mass refugees, organized crime, poverty, environmental destruction, climate change, etc. Even though these non-traditional security issues regarding North Korea have often been overshadowed by the nuclear crises during the past decade, the urgency of addressing these issues has grown rapidly in recent years.

**More Soft Power**

Despite its financial and humanitarian engagement in the North Korean crisis, the European Union has remained relatively marginal to the Korean crisis so far. Europe is currently not involved in the Six-Party Talks, and it does not have a strong defense presence in the region. Instead of being an independent player in the resolution of the security crisis on the Korean Peninsula, the European Union seems to complement efforts made by other actors in the international community and to contribute to the prevention of further conflicts. The European Union’s previous low political profile in the region might, however, be its main asset, since no party would see it as a security threat.³

A primary motivation for the European Union to increase its engagement in North Korea would be to demonstrate its influence on Korean security matters, thereby strengthening its status as a major international security actor. With the establishment of the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) and European External Action Service (EEAS), the European Union renewed its ambition to take a more effective posture regarding international security matters. This institutional development could enable the

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European Union to become an important trend setter for a modern multilateral form of foreign policy in a globalized world.\textsuperscript{4} With its growing momentum, the European Union should become more of a player, rather than merely a payer, in the future security of the Korean Peninsula.\textsuperscript{5}

The European Union should continue to be an important dialogue partner and aid donor to North Korea. North Korea has leveraged its diplomatic relations with the European Union to promote its inclusion in the international community and has also acknowledged the increasing importance of the European Union as a major donor of economic and technical assistance. The European Union, with its long experience in preventive diplomacy, could play a valuable role as a peace-builder at this critical juncture. As the North Korean economy showed an even further downturn after the failure of recent currency reform, the possibility of a contingent humanitarian crisis stemming from economic dysfunction has been increased, making the European Union’s humanitarian presence all the more crucial. At the same time, the continued dialogue process could prevent North Korea’s extreme choice of confrontation. The increased presence of European Union on the Korean Peninsula would provide an important test bed for the its approach of soft and preventive diplomacy, and could enable a more realistic and pragmatic choice for North Korea between the two main scenarios of confrontation and cooperation.

Furthermore, the European Union could also play the crucial role of enforcing international norms on North Korea. This role of norm-enforcer became even more important in the aftermath of the Cheonan incident. The E.U.’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, mentioned that she has taken note with great concern of the results of the investigation of the sinking of the Cheonan and called on all countries concerned to step up efforts to promote lasting peace and security on the Korean Peninsula. Nonetheless, during the process of investigation and the adoption of the UN Security Council Presidential Statement on the Cheonan, China and Russia strongly backed up North Korea mainly for their political interests in maintaining the status quo in this region. While the clock has been turning back to the Cold War confrontations on the Korean Peninsula, the principles and norms of international society are in danger of being ignored. Considering the image of Europe as a “superpower of rules and norms,” a stronger E.U. influence in this volatile region could make a meaningful contribution to global security.


\textsuperscript{5} Axel Berkofsky, “The European Union in North Korea: Player or only Payer?” IPSI Policy Brief 123, 2009.