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The North Korea pivot

With the US and South Korea pursuing diverging strategies, Europe could be faced with a catch-22 situation

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'To jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war,' Winston Churchill famously quipped. As much as anywhere, this dictum holds for the Korean peninsula, a long-standing powder keg of hostility among heavily armed adversaries, including four nuclear weapons states.

In this context, the ongoing diplomacy on the Korean peninsula is a welcome turn from 2017's belligerent threats between the United States and North Korea. There are nonetheless dark clouds around the silver linings, and the outcome of Korean peninsula diplomacy will likely pose some tough choices for Europe in terms of marrying its current East Asian foreign policy to its strategic relationship with the US.

This iteration of Korean diplomacy is a tricky and tenuous one, with the history of inter-Korean and US-North Korea negotiations teaching us that failure is in the cards. History cannot repeat but it does rhyme. The current round of engagement with North Korea shares similarities with the past even as it contains a novelty: the possibility of US-North Korea and inter-Korean negotiations following separate tracks that eventually diverge.

For now they are still parallel but moving at different speeds, as multiple inter-Koreansummits between North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and South Korean president Moon Jae-in have yielded actionable steps with concrete deliverables on political and military confidence-building measures, peace and reconciliation, cultural and sports cooperation, and plans for growing inter-Korean economic projects.

The negotiations aimed at North Korean denuclearisation are at an impasse, however, as the US and North Korea continue to insist on maximally favourable measures and sequencing.

Peace before denuclearisation

The Moon administration has decided that denuclearisation talks are primarily a US affair. Seoul wants to go beyond low-hanging fruit and advance toward deeper and broader engagement with Pyongyang, even with stalled progress on denuclearisation. But there is a very real possibility that South and North Korea come to a point where further progress and economic cooperation will only be meaningful under conditions that would also violate international sanctions.

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It goes without saying that Kim wants sanctions relief as quickly as possible, but what has gone less remarked is how much Moon has staked his presidency on the success of Korean peninsula peace and reconciliation, and thus on economic engagement with Pyongyang. This is intended both for the development of the North and as an investment opportunity for a South otherwise facing long-term economic headwinds: increasing export competition from globalised emerging markets, a fatigued industrial model, and an aging and stagnant population. South Korea, as a result, would be likely to push for lifting United Nations Security Council sanctions prior to substantial North Korean denuclearisation, and thus before the US is prepared and willing to do so.

The current Moon administration came to power in 2017 with the understanding that sanctions and other coercive diplomatic tools were primarily for convincing North Korea to enter into negotiations. Now that this has been achieved, Moon views sanctions as an impediment to South-North peace and reconciliation.

Critical engagement with North Korea?

These increasing fissures between the interests of Washington and Seoul put the international community and especially Europe in a difficult position. It has to choose between South Korea's prioritisation of peninsular peace and reconciliation, and the US's desired path of supporting nuclear non-proliferation in North Korea.

This difficult choice would test Europe's 'critical engagement' policy toward North Korea. In recent years, the European approach has combined humanitarian action in North Korea with condemnation of its

human rights record, Europe-North Korea 'track 1.5' dialogue (talks involving official staff and non-governmental experts), and, perhaps most importantly, active support for international sanctions.

All of this has been accompanied by public diplomatic support for US and South Korean positions towards North Korea. Until now, these have been in lockstep insofar as Seoul has supported coercive, Washington-led measures in order to get Pyongyang to the negotiation table.

Both nuclear non-proliferation and Korean peninsula peace, reconciliation and stability are important for Europe. European leaders have until now not faced a price for their critical engagement policy as there has been no necessity to execute it in light of a choice between competing strategies.

Starkly put, Europe would face the strategic question of whether it should support its transatlantic ally or its deepest and best functioning strategic partner in East Asia.

Seoul argues that South-North peace and reconciliation, including economic cooperation, will lead to North Korea's denuclearisation. There is scepticism about this claim, especially considering that sanctions are one of the few available levers for shaping Pyongyang's choices. Indeed, the Trump administration still insists on Pyongyang's denuclearisation as a prerequisite to a Korean peninsula peace regime and thus wants to keep sanctions in place as leverage to this end. Trump's potential second summit with Kim Jong Un is unlikely to produce a breakthrough.

The EU and its member states will thus likely have to choose which course of action – privileging nuclear non-proliferation or prioritising peace, reconciliation and stability – on the Korean peninsula best fits Europe's interests and values. This is not an abstract choice as the EU would need to decide on concrete changes to current sanctions implementation. As European members of the United Nations Security Council – the body that decides on economic sanctions against North Korea – France and the UK will have an even more crucial role to play in this regard.

The US vs the Asia-Pacific

The emerging divergence of US and South Korean approaches to North Korea calls for more than just a review of Europe's critical engagement policy. Rather, it portends a test of Europe's 'pivot' or 'rebalance' to the Asia-Pacific – that is, Europe's attempt to place greater strategic value on

increasing interaction with Asia-Pacific countries and their regional organisations.

Starkly put, Europe would face the strategic question of whether it should support its transatlantic ally or its deepest and best functioning strategic partner in East Asia. To what extent has the 'pivot' or 'rebalance' matured such that Europe is capable of acting strategically in a way that privileges its East Asian interests over the US?

This is an open question. Clearly the US is still a more important and powerful partner and ally to Europe than South Korea. Yet if Europe undermined Seoul's objectives vis-à-vis Pyongyang, the European pivot would face substantial credibility damage.

Moreover, the Trump administration gives the impression that the US will not remain a rock-solid strategic partner for Europe in years to come. This is partly why a European pivot to the Asia-Pacific was necessary in the first place.

Finally, one must not forget that the US is not the only major power with interests on the Korean peninsula and preferences about the prevailing approach there. China also has a voice, and it clearly supports South-North peace, reconciliation and stability, and loosened international sanctions necessary to that end. Therefore, Europe's choice would not merely be between the US and South Korea. It would be between the US on the one hand and a South Korea-China alignment on the other, an alignment that might just be powerful enough to tip the scales toward East Asia.



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