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Waiting with bated breath

When it comes to North Korea, Europe can no longer stand on the side-lines

After a dramatic increase in tension on the Korean peninsula in 2017, this year has seen a welcome détente between South and North Korea.

Following the Winter Olympics which saw athletes from both sides march under one flag, South Korean president Moon Jae In and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un have decided to hold a joint summit in April.

Importantly, Kim has stated potential willingness to discuss giving up nuclear weapons. Pyongyang is also signalling openness to talk with the US and refrain from nuclear and missile tests while doing so.

All of this has implications for European foreign and security policy. North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes continue to present grave dangers to the world, including Europe. The EU and its member states may not be the most influential actors on and around the Korean peninsula, but they have a role to play.

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However, there's one big caveat: we've been down this road before. A 2012 'Leap Day' deal (so called because it was announced on 29 February) saw Pyongyang promise a moratorium on missile launches and nuclear tests, only to renege on it shortly afterwards. Thus expectations should be tempered.

Second, the stakes are high. US policy vis-à-vis North Korea remains 'maximum pressure and engagement', and the Trump administration insists this two-pronged effort is its last diplomatic attempt. If current talks collapse, we revert to maximum pressure with little hope of return

to engagement.

Many in the current US government argue North Korea is not deterrable. Since they won't accept it as a de facto nuclear state, pressure by the US following failed talks would carry a greatly elevated risk of armed conflict, in the range of 20 – 50 per cent according to estimates by former US and South Korean generals, intelligence chiefs, and diplomats. In this eventuality, over 20,000 EU citizens living in South Korea would be exposed to terrible violence.

As there is a gulf between the core interests of Pyongyang and Washington, Europe, which has better ties with both than they do with each other, needs to facilitate diplomacy, even as it prepares for failure. So, what should Europe do?

The first step is an all-hands-on-deck push by Europe (the EU, France, Germany, the UK, Sweden, Switzerland) to provide diplomatic support. There is certainly low-hanging fruit, such as encouraging continued diplomatic momentum through public exhortation of Seoul, Pyongyang, and Washington for efforts to break the 2017 conflict spiral.

Europe's diplomatic pedigree

South Korean foreign minister Kang Kyung Wha will travel to Brussels to attend the EU's Foreign Affairs Council meeting on 19 March. This occasion will give Europe's top diplomats a high profile opportunity to show solidarity with South Korea's diplomatic leadership, receive a briefing on the roadmap going forward, and express their willingness to offer assistance to the process where necessary.

The more ambitious goal of South Korean and US substantive diplomacy on the Korean peninsula will probably be to transform a temporary North Korean nuclear and missile test freeze into a permanent freeze of both programmes. Here the devil is in the negotiated details: what should the precise terminology be? Do all sides understand agreements the same way? What is the sequencing of measures? What happens in the event of a breach?

Considering their central role in precisely these types of issues during the negotiations of the Iran nuclear deal, European diplomats could offer – visibly or secretly – a great deal of advice to Seoul and Washington.

Washington and Pyongyang still have

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programmes, without something in return. In tandem with North Korean action, at some point sanctions would need to be progressively lifted.

Europe has a role to play insofar as the UK and France are United Nations Security Council members who would need to sign off on UNSC resolutions authorising abrogation of international sanctions. Moreover the EU has its own sanctions in force, which would perhaps also need to be curtailed. Beyond sanctions, North Korea may seek economic aid and assistance, to which Europe would be a welcome contributor.

For its part, the Trump administration will demand that testing and programme freezes be verifiable. Verification tasks are highly technical, and European arms control and non-proliferation specialists could be of service in this regard, either actively or as advisors to international inspectors. Finally, all the aforementioned diplomatic steps will fail if they are not backstopped by continuing pressure, which would need to be coordinated with Seoul and Washington.

At the end of the day, Washington and Pyongyang still have opposed interests and objectives when it comes to North Korea's nuclear programme, and a complete lack of trust that would make any agreement fraught. Even if Kim were to offer denuclearisation as a negotiation endpoint, the price for his nuclear weapons could be politically prohibitive: security guarantees, colossally expensive aid, dissolution of the US-South Korea alliance, US nuclear disarmament in East Asia. Moreover, it is hard to devise a credible US security guarantee for Pyongyang, given the inhumane nature of the Kim regime and the US's vast military superiority.&nb

Hope for the best, (plan for the worst)

Since diplomacy could fail, European leaders must also plan for a tense future with nuclear North Korea. To begin with, this means reviewing national defence estimates and postures in light of the new nuclear threat. This also means influencing the US to avoid a preventive attack on North Korea's nuclear facilities.

The quid-pro-quo, however, would have to be that Europe accepted a

meaningful role in US and international community efforts to deter and contain North Korea. The baseline would be the efforts that Europe is already undertaking: international sanctions cooperation, diplomatic efforts vis-à-vis North Korea, working with Japan to pressure Pyongyang on human rights abuses.

Beyond that, Europe would need to engage in additional measures, possibly including secondary sanctions against institutions processing North Korea-related financial transactions, North Korea-related intelligence sharing and surveillance cooperation with the US and its allies, interdicting and sabotaging North Korea's nuclear weapon supply chain, supporting North Korea's ongoing marketisation, information warfare to undermine the Kim regime, cyber-operations against North Korea's nuclear facilities, punishing China for international sanctions non-compliance, participation in a maritime embargo against North Korea, and promising South Korea military support in case of North Korean attack.

Europe is busy with many problems – from Brexit to Russian revisionism – but that cannot excuse inattention to the Korean peninsula. Scepticism is warranted, but the chances of diplomatic success are better now than in 2017. Europe should not miss an opportunity to contribute.



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