

Towards Reunification or Confrontation: Assessing recent developments on the Korean Peninsula

Thursday 18 October, Madrid

Elcano Royal Institute, in joint cooperation with KF-VUB Korea Chair, hosted the roundtable 'Towards Reunification or Confrontation: Assessing recent developments on the Korean Peninsula' on October 18th.

The two-hour discussion featured two Europe-based experts; Mario Esteban, Senior Researcher at Elcano Royal Institute, and Ramon Pacheco Pardo, KF-VUB Chair at the Institute for European Studies (VUB). The panel was further completed by Andrea Berger, Senior Research Associate at James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, and Seukhoon Paul Choi, Strategist at ROK-US Combined Forces Command. Charles Powell, Director of Elcano Royal Institute moderated the discussion.

Andrea Berger discussed how denuclearisation negotiations between US and North Korea have developed over the last months. It is clear that North Korea maintains an active nuclear programme despite dialogue efforts. Though it has stated to be open to denuclearisation, it is in such terms that require a fundamental change in its security environment. Kim Jong-un has stated that "no one or nothing can reverse" the country's nuclear progress, and evidence suggests that they are still building up their arsenal. The current US administration's position towards North Korea's denuclearisation has become more pragmatic. Where it initially hoped for complete denuclearisation, it is now satisfied with obtaining phased concessions. Their main approach to obtaining these is a combination of pressure mainly through sanctions and dialogue. Kim Jong-un has used public gestures and media to legitimate his policies, especially through his meetings with state leaders from around the world. He has also managed to change the narrative on him in Western newspapers. A durable set of agreements in the medium term will be better in the long term than a quick, ambitious agreement that can be easily reversed. A multilateral approach will be crucial in obtaining this.

Ramon Pacheco Pardo shared South Korean views on denuclearisation negotiations, stating that their priority is reconciliation between the two Koreas. President Moon is carefully navigating the current climate of sanctions, and steering ahead with numerous cultural and sportive exchanges with North Korea. Kim Jong-un's economic policies lay out benefits not only for the North but also the South. This makes it easier for President Moon to legitimize his diplomatic efforts in the North. It is necessary for both Koreas to sign a peace treaty, ideally with US involvement. President Trump's initial threatening approach towards the North made it clear to South Koreans that escalations were a real possibility. It was a push for conservatives

to seek out a peace treaty. A large majority – 70 to 80 percent - of the population is in favour of peace which gives President Moon a credible mandate to continue pursuing more diplomatic exchanges. The fact that his parents were North Korean refugees is an additional motivating force towards his peace-seeking efforts. South Korea is patient in the denuclearisation negotiations and prepared to go step-by-step, with the support of and concessions by the international community.

Seukhoon Paul Choi focused on the theme of change and continuity in the denuclearisation efforts. There has been a lot of inaccurate information given by the media on this topic. The US-ROK alliance is not fraying and is, in fact, focused on supporting ongoing diplomatic initiatives. Military-to-military cooperation is ongoing and US adoption of its responsibility to defend South Korea remains unchanged. After the Singapore Summit, Trump stated that the North Korean threat no longer exists. While it is clear that there has been no change in nuclear capabilities, the North Korean intent to denuclearise reduces the threat. To support this intent, the militaries are pursuing confidence-building measures. The greatest danger on the Korean Peninsula has always been misperceptions which could escalate into conflict of war. The recently issued comprehensive military agreement outlines steps that both militaries will try to take to reduce the probability of such misperceptions. For example, the two militaries and UN command have agreed to conduct demining activities. They are trying to demonstrate good will to encourage diplomacy between both sides. The role of the media is crucial in these times when perception and intent are so important. Journalists need to describe situations objectively, rather than seeking to make headlines. Any gaps between reality and media portrayal may hinder progress.

Mario Esteban focused on the role the European Union can play in denuclearisation discussions and in the peace-making process. The EU's official policy towards North Korea has been one of critical engagement. It has suspended any kind of dialogue with North Korea in 2015 and put in place sanctions more severe than the UN's. While the EU's position is in line with the US approach of pressuring North Korea to denuclearise, it runs adversely to South Korea's diplomatic efforts in peace-making. This makes it difficult to harmonise the process of denuclearisation and reconciliation. The EU is not a primary actor in either process but it could at the least facilitate a summit. By even settling a delegation in Pyongyang, it could show even more commitment to opening political dialogue again. It could also be an overseeing party of any agreement reached between the US and both Koreas, and could create incentives for North Korean concessions in the form of humanitarian aid. The EU's most important role may be in the case that agreements fail. In the tense situation which would ensue, the EU could try to hedge risks.

To the question of the extent of China's influence in these negotiations, Andrea Berger responded that North Korea at the very least keeps China in the loop. It briefs China on every significant bilateral meeting that happens with South Korea and the US. China has also been influential in restraining North Korean provocative military behaviour. For example, the military parade in September displayed no nuclear systems, probably due to Chinese presence and influence. However, it is clear that China's influence has its limitations. China does not believe that economic pressure in North Korea will ever lead to change in North Korean behaviour. Along with Russia and North Korea, it is pressuring for a change in the UN sanctions regime.