

Transatlantic and Transpacific Alliances: Deterrence and Engagement in the Korean Peninsula

Wednesday 24 October, Brussels

On 24 October 2018, the KF-VUB Korea Chair, Brookings Institution and Asan Institute for Policy Studies jointly organised a conference on ‘Transatlantic and Transpacific Alliances: Deterrence and Engagement in the Korean Peninsula’. The conference was the first of an annual event taking place in Washington, Seoul, and Brussels in turns and hosted by the three organisers.

The conference consisted of two panels with experts from the three think tanks. The purpose of the conference was to address how the transatlantic alliance (NATO) and the transpacific alliances (US – ROK, US – Japan) can help address the traditional and non-traditional security threats the Korean Peninsula is facing. The conference brought together about 50 attendees from EU institutions, the diplomatic community, the private sector, and other Brussels-based think tanks and academic organizations.

Welcoming remarks by Dr. Ramon Pacheco Pardo (KF-VUB Korea Chair at the Institute for European Studies), Dr. Jung H. Pak (SK-Korea Foundation Chair at Brookings Institution), and Dr. Kang Choi (Vice President at Asan Institute for Policy Studies), were followed by an opening address given by South Korean Ambassador HE Hyoung-zhin Kim. Ambassador Kim stressed the importance of the strategic partnership between the EU and the ROK. He outlined the various areas in which both sides cooperate, such as aviation, ICT, transportation, etc. and suggested how the EU’s experience in regional integration can play a role in shaping the future of the Korean Peninsula.

The first panel titled ‘Squaring the deterrence vs engagement puzzle in East Asia and Europe’ was chaired by Dr. Kang Choi. The first speaker, Dr. Tongfi Kim (Senior Researcher of the KF-VUB Korea Chair) provided a comparison of the deterrence and engagement strategies in East Asia and Europe. Similar to Europe, US Allies in East Asia face great powers that are undemocratic (China and Russia) and pose a challenge to the US extended deterrence in the region. Furthermore, US allies in both regions share concerns about the erosion of the US alliances and, more generally, about burden sharing. US allies in Europe and Asia are different in the sense that the NATO alliance provides collective security, while the alliances in East Asia are organized in a hub-and-spokes-system. Furthermore, there is no country in Europe that would pose a security threat to the region to the degree that North Korea does in East Asia. However, this also gives a positive impetus for East Asian states to cooperate in their North Korea policy. China’s challenge against US allies in East Asia is mostly maritime in nature, whereas the Russian threat to European/ NATO allies is one to territorial borders in Europe’s east. Ultimately, the difference between Europe and Asia is that Europeans can balance Russia even without the help of the US, if they work together, while Asian allies cannot balance China without US assistance. Responding to a question on the US’ demand for an increase of 2% in defence spending, Dr. Kim asserted that while many European security experts may not disagree with the American position, the way in which these demands are communicated by the current US administration is certainly not well received. Furthermore, for Europe, it is important that non-security related areas of international cooperation, such as treaties on climate change and multilateral trade agreements, are also considered.

Dr. Beomchul Shin (Director for Security and Unification Affairs at Asan Institute for Policy Studies) elaborated on the US extended deterrence in both regions with a view to nuclear security. While both Europe and East Asia are challenged by adversaries with nuclear capabilities, only Europe possesses a

unique system of sharing tactical nuclear weapons. Dr. Shin pointed out the importance of the US extended deterrence in Asia especially, stating that South Korea should develop its conventional forces and at the same time work closely with the US to maintain the extended deterrence. His concern is that South Korea has not emphasized extended deterrence in light of its current engagement process with North Korea. Should the negotiations fail, it is important to reemphasize the need for the US extended deterrence regime. Dr. Shin expressed concern for the status of the US alliances in view of the America First policy pushed by Trump's administration. Given this, US allies on both continents need to adapt their policies to sustain the alliances. The US' demand for ROK to spend 50% of the expenditure on US troops in South Korea is probably not acceptable for the South Korean government.

Dr. Thomas Wright (Senior Fellow at Brookings Institution) highlighted the importance of both Europe and Asia from Washington DC's strategic perspective. While it is not helpful to ask which alliance is more valuable to the US, transatlantic or transpacific, it is clear that both alliances are more important than the Middle East. In this light, the pivot to Asia was an expression of US foreign policy makers' belief that Europe's position is a strong one and doesn't need as much attention. Dr Wright conceded that no one can know for sure whether the America First policy represents a permanent shift or just an aberration. According to a recent book by Bob Kagan, the shift from the Obama to the Trump Administration reflects a general shift in US foreign policy which will put a bigger share of the burden on the allies. American internationalism was driven by anti-communism, and since the end of the Cold War, there is decreasing support for alliances the way they are now. A lot of the current American foreign policy, however, is tied up with Trump's world view which predominantly cares about direct threats to the US mainland through ICBMs and nuclear weapons. This also explains the prominence of North Korea in Trump's foreign policy.

The second panel titled 'Hybrid Threats: Insights from East Asia and Europe', chaired by Dr. Alexander Mattelaer (Assistant Professor at the Institute for European Studies), was initiated by Dr. Jiyoung Park (Senior Fellow at Asan Institute for Policy Studies). She pointed out that the term "hybrid threats" is not usually used in the East Asian context. In Korea, the subject matter is viewed as one of traditional versus non-traditional security threats. A hybrid threat then combines conventional and non-traditional threats, which may employ various actors and means with a mixture of political, diplomatic, and economic tools to achieve the goal. Of particular interest to South Koreans is the usage of technology, specifically cyber-security attacks in combination with conventional military attacks. The reason for this is that South Korea's neighbours China and the DPRK are highly active in the usage of cyber warfare. South Korea is surrounded by big powers and potential adversaries (China, DPRK) and the readiness to respond to hybrid attacks is in a primitive stage, except for cyber-defence where there are at least some basic capabilities. Dr. Park pointed out that the Cheonan attack was a perfect example of such a hybrid attack. Domestically, fake news and rumours that the Cheonan was not destroyed by North Korea was rampant. The effect was that South Koreans were divided over the issue.

Dr. Jung H. Pak (SK-Korea Foundation Chair at Brookings Institution) asserted that, while the term hybrid threats is indeed not often used in the East Asian context, South Koreans are familiar with the concept as North Korea could write the book on hybrid (or asymmetric) threats. North Korea has used many means short of war or spurred military conflict in an attempt to shape the world to their advantage. North Korean hybrid threats include chemical/biological weapons, cyber activities, and an advanced nuclear weapons program. Dr. Pak noted that hybrid threats are not necessarily only employed in times of tensions but also during times of engagement. The US, for example, stopped talking about human rights over concerns that the North Koreans would discontinue the engagement

process. Another example is when North Korea raised the issue of returning defectors from South Korea. Despite North Korea's size and relative lack of conventional capabilities, they can still shape regional dynamics and influence the conversation through hybrid threats. Dr. Pak stressed the importance of information sharing among allies to combat hybrid threats. The 2+2 dialogue, for instance, talks about cyber as well as non-proliferation issues.

Dr. Bonnie Jenkins (Senior Fellow at Brookings Institution) shifted the focus back to Europe and the West where Russia has used cyber-attacks to affect domestic politics. Other threats which can be perceived in the asymmetric weapons context are sanctions, whose destabilization can be especially large, as well as food security and infectious diseases. Dr. Jenkins conceded that we don't have much information on the extent of the damage caused by these types of threats in North Korea. There is less dialogue about North Korea's non-nuclear arsenal including chemical and biological weapons, of which the former was used in the assassination of Kim Jong-nam. The disjointed dialogue reveals that that approach to the issue of North Korean threats has not been particularly strategic.

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