

Time for the EU to Rethink 'Critical Engagement'

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by Ramon Pacheco Pardo

A new Commission headed by Ursula von der Leyen will soon take office, including new High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell. This will reshape the upper echelons of the European External Action Service. Meanwhile, a new European Parliament was voted in last May. The renewal of three of the EU's key institutions and bodies, coupled with a trend towards greater Europeanisation of the bloc's foreign policy, offers a unique opportunity to rethink some aspects of its external affairs. This includes Brussels' policy towards North Korea.

By now, it is clear that the EU's 'critical engagement' policy towards North Korea has not worked. Its three key aims are to uphold the nuclear non-proliferation regime, bring peace and stability to the Korean Peninsula, and improve the human rights situation in North Korea. None of them is any closer than when the policy was first launched. The EU's prioritisation of the critical component of its policy in recent years in the form of implementation of UN Security Council sanctions and, most notably, the development of its own autonomous sanctions regime may have even proved counterproductive. They play into Pyongyang's narrative of 'hostility' from the international community. Furthermore, the emphasis on the critical component is ill-suited to the new scenario in which diplomacy and engagement de facto dominate Korean Peninsula security affairs. It sits uncomfortably with the current approach by EU strategic partners South Korea and the United States.

The EU needs to come up with a credible engagement policy that would make achievement of its three goals

EU's 'critical engagement' policy towards North Korea needs to make way for a credible engagement policy suited to strategic partners South Korea's and the US' current approach. To move towards its key aims, the EU should continue to implement engagement activities, such as North Korea - United States dialogue facilitation by Sweden. It can restore suspended activities such as educational and cultural exchanges, and make bold moves such as supporting private sector engagement with Pyongyang. It can further raise its profile in Korean Peninsula and Asian security affairs by appointing an advisory committee and even a special envoy for Korean Peninsula security. The renewal of three of the EU's key institutions and bodies, coupled with a trend towards greater Europeanisation of the bloc's foreign policy, offers a unique opportunity to rethink Brussels' policy towards North Korea.

a more realistic prospect, support the policies of key partners, and raise its profile in Korean Peninsula and Asian security affairs. Realistically, sanctions implementation will continue for the foreseeable future. It is also sensible to assume that denuclearisation, if possible at all, will not happen any time soon. But this does not imply that the new EU leadership should continue to refrain from engagement. At the very least, engagement would make it easier to achieve progress on the two other goals.

The starting point is the simplest. The EU should continue to implement the engagement activities it is

currently pursuing. These include North Korea-United States dialogue facilitation by Sweden, Finland and other member states active in this area; the provision of food, medical and other aid to vulnerable North Koreans; diplomatic and political exchanges through EU member state embassies in Pyongyang and North Korea's embassies across the EU; and EU-North Korea inter-parliamentary meetings. These types of engagement provide a basic degree of interaction with North Korea, which is useful to dispel the notion that Brussels is bent on isolating Pyongyang.

There is, however, potential for the EU to increase the number of engagement channels and activities. The most logical first step would be to restore pre-existing activities currently suspended. Most notably, it would be to the benefit of the EU to resume the political dialogue last held in 2015. This would allow the External Action Service to discuss issues of concern to the EU and get information about the latest developments in the Korean Peninsula directly from Pyongyang, rather than having to go through third parties. In addition, EU member states should support, if not actively encourage, educational and cultural exchanges. These have been severely affected by the tightening of sanctions, which has made many member states reluctant to issue visas to North Koreans, even if not working on Pyongyang's nuclear and missile activities. People-to-people exchanges helped to bring reconciliation to Europe and could also support inter-Korean reconciliation. These exchanges would further delegitimise Pyongyang's claims of isolation by the international community.

Brussels also has the potential to be bold and implement policies that would make it a more active player in Korean Peninsula affairs. These policies would have the added benefit of enhancing the EU's Asia security cooperation strategy, approved in May 2018, and which calls for Europe to become more involved in the region's security affairs. To begin with, the EU could support private sector engagement with Pyongyang. The current, comprehensive sanctions regime prevents almost all trade and investment

in North Korea. If and when sanctions relief comes, however, there will be European firms that want to invest in the country – as was the case, for example, with Myanmar. The EU and member states can support the private sector's preparedness for the time when sanctions start to be removed by promoting dialogues, exchanges and better knowledge about the current state of the North Korean economy.

The EU could also raise its profile in Korean Peninsula security affairs and support diplomacy by appointing an advisory committee to support, discuss and even rethink EU policy towards North Korea. Brussels could even take a step further and consider the appointment of a special envoy for Korean Peninsula security. This idea has been discussed and rejected by some member states in the past; it could be resurrected, however, considering that the EU currently has seven representatives to different parts of the world with unresolved conflicts. If member states again reject this possibility, the advisory committee could fulfil a similar role. A committee or an individual representing the EU's North Korea policy would give it visibility and clearly indicate that solving Pyongyang's nuclear issue is a priority for the EU. Oftentimes, the perception is that this is not the case.

In addition, the EU should also call for the multilateralisation of the North Korea denuclearisation process. Certainly, denuclearisation discussions and a potential agreement are the remit of the United States and North Korea. Likewise, inter-Korean reconciliation is an issue for the two Koreas to agree upon. But there will come a time when a denuclearisation agreement will have to be implemented and the international community will be asked to provide economic incentives to North Korea in exchange. Member states such as France and the United Kingdom can provide their technical expertise in the dismantlement, transportation and disposal of nuclear materials. Meanwhile, the EU and several member states can provide funding and technical expertise to support North Korea's economic modernisation.

But the EU has to knock on the door to get a seat at the table, instead of waiting to be invited. This should start even before an agreement is reached.

A rethink of the EU's critical engagement policy towards North Korea seems overdue. Brussels

might be a secondary actor in Korean Peninsula affairs. But it is an important global actor with an interest in becoming more involved in Asian security affairs. A more active role in Korean Peninsula affairs would be the right policy to support this ambition and the policy of key partners in the region.

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