

**In the Shadow of the Six Parties:
Europe and the non-proliferation process in North Korea**

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AICGS Advisor, January 10, 2008

Speaking of the European Union as an international actor dealing with North Korea (the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, DPRK) often raises eyebrows. Since the outbreak of the second nuclear crisis in October 2002, Brussels has played virtually no significant role in the international efforts to convince Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear weapons program. To be sure, Europe has regarded Kim Jong-Il's nuclear ambitions as a serious threat to regional and international peace and stability and, for various political, economic, and non-proliferation reasons, supported the goal of a Korean peninsula free of nuclear weapons.¹ Some policymakers may have envisioned North Korea as another "test case" for a new independent EU foreign and non-proliferation policy as delineated in the 2003 European Security Strategy. In reality, Brussels has sat on the sideline of events as an "onlooker." Supporting a diplomatic solution in the multilateral framework of the Six Party Talks,² the Europeans put their faith in the protagonists' efforts to break the nuclear impasse. For EU officials, this was a clear precondition for a more active European engagement policy toward the Korean peninsula—as was being pursued in the 1990s—to be reinvigorated.³

But the diplomatic parameters have changed recently. In February 2007, the long and protracted nuclear dispute culminated in the signing of an agreement that froze the nuclear facilities at Yongbyon, a significant first step towards implementing North Korea's denuclearization. A follow-up agreement in early October 2007 laid out conditions for the facilities' disassembly, which was subsequently implemented. Although the EU expressly welcomed the diplomatic breakthrough, it has not yet relinquished its "wait-and-see" approach, apart from European delegations visiting Pyongyang for "consultations."

Indeed, Europe's inclination to stand back and let the dust settle while the six parties are slowly moving forward in the implementation process makes sense in many ways. First, the prospects for the DPRK's denuclearization are not yet clear; the potential political and technical obstacles

¹ See the most recent account of European Korea policy by Maria Castillo Fernandez, "Korean Security Dilemmas: European Union Policies," *Reconstituting Korean Security: A Policy Primer*, Hazel Smith, ed. (Tokyo et. al.: United Nations University Press: 2007) 213-229.

² Members of the Six Party Talks held since 2003 are the United States, the two Koreas, China, Japan, and Russia.

³ Hans-Joachim Schmidt provides a detailed analysis on the EU's role up until the end of 2006, *Peace on the Korean Peninsula: What Can the EU Contribute to the Six-Party Process?*, Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, Report No. 75 (2006), available at <http://www.hsfk.de/downloads/prif75.pdf>.

are complex and manifold. In the short run, Pyongyang's declaration of all nuclear facilities (due by the end of this year) will mainly determine whether the parties proceed with the next implementation phase of nuclear dismantlement planned for 2008.⁴ In the long run, no one knows whether Kim Jong-Il will ever be willing to give up his nuclear *weapons* option completely. Second, the nuclear dispute is regional in nature and incorporates a strong bilateral U.S.-DPRK component. Consequently, it primarily demands a solution within the confines of the Six Party framework. European efforts in dealing with the DPRK's nuclear ambitions have always been and will remain marginal and complementary to the policy of the regional powers and, particularly, the United States. Third, the most pressing proliferation concern for European policymakers is the Iranian nuclear program. When United Nations Security Council resolutions 1696 and 1718 condemned North Korea's missile and nuclear tests in July and October 2006, the EU supported these sanctions against the background of gaining leverage over Washington's position in the diplomacy process with Iran. There is no doubt that transatlantic non-proliferation policy will continue to focus on the containment of Tehran's nuclear efforts.

Recognizing these "realities," however, should not inhibit contemplation about the implications of the promising developments in recent international efforts toward North Korea *for European policy*. What are the prospects for the EU and/or its member states to engage more actively with the DPRK? This is still a hypothetical question; however, it is fair to assume that if the implementation process makes further headway, then there will be opportunities for Europe to become more active than it is currently.

Most obviously, the EU could cautiously seek to revitalize direct economic, political, and cultural relations with the DPRK. The modernization of North Korea's economy, its political integration into the international community, and the improvement of its human rights situation are all of outspoken European interest. If North Korea shows earnest commitment to these long-term endeavors, both the EU and individual countries with relevant resources and experience in coping with transitional periods could make considerable beneficial contributions.⁵

Clearly, dealing with North Korea involves a much broader process not confined to the nuclear issue. For now, however, moving on in the non-proliferation process is not only the priority of the United States but should also be in the realistic interest of the EU. As much as nuclear concerns

⁴ By mid-December, there were signs of disagreements between the U.S. and North Korea over the latter's alleged uranium enrichment activities and to what extent they should be mentioned in the declaration list. See Frank Ching, "Six-party talks at a critical stage," *The China Post*, 12 December 2007.

⁵ Since the 1990s, Brussels has established diplomatic relations with the North and provided humanitarian, economic, and technical assistance. For a detailed account on these programs see Alex Berkofsky, *EU's Policy Toward the DPRK – Engagement or Standstill?* European Institute for Asian Studies, Brussels, BP 03/01 (August 2003), available at <http://www.eias.org/publications/briefing/2003/eudprkstandstill.pdf>.

on the Korean peninsula have generally undermined “soft” policy approaches in the past, the success of current economic and political integration measures depend primarily on the progress in current implementation steps, and eventual complete denuclearization of North Korea. Can Europe help this process to be continued and accomplished? Assuming that ongoing efforts can be sustained, several American non-proliferation experts are already considering the next steps in “denuclearizing” the North. Most of them identify areas in which the Europeans could and should play their role and possibly even “carve out an edge” in a modest but meaningful way.⁶

Energy Compensations and KEDO Revival?

If any prediction can be made with near to 100 percent certainty, it is Pyongyang’s demand for light water reactors (LWR) in exchange for comprehensive nuclear dismantlement. To date, the Bush administration outright rejects the DPRK’s demand and cannot be expected to change its stance on this “dead issue.” Disregarding how these contrary positions on the “appropriate time” for LWR deliveries will eventually play out, i.e., after the tenure of the current U.S. administration, any long-term solution to the nuclear dispute will likely include some sort of nuclear energy assistance to North Korea. In this case, the six parties would have to decide about the specifics of these provisions, particularly about who is going to pay for it.⁷

In search of an organizational framework, policy-planners in Washington may consider reaching out to the Europeans as potential partners with some previous experience. In the 1990s, the EU became an executive board member of the Korean Energy and Development Organization (KEDO), designed to implement the 1994 U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework by providing annual heavy fuel oil shipments and two LWRs. Most experts contend that U.S. policymakers will remember the EU’s “positive and useful” role in KEDO. Back then, they presented EU participation both domestically and internationally as favorable for sharing the financial burden and, even more importantly, for giving the project more political weight and support.⁸ One of the lessons learned from KEDO is that such an organization can produce important positive externalities, representing a “vehicle to engage the European Union on the Korean peninsula and demonstrating that multilateralism could work in Northeast Asia.”⁹

⁶ It should be noted that some analysts outright reject the notion of a European role beyond diffident financial contributions. Some others emphasize the prospects for European support in the renewal of U.S.-led pressure policy toward Pyongyang if the diplomatic process breaks down. They point out that, in this case, obtaining the EU’s support for UN authorized sanctions on the regime, as happened in 2006, would be of significant interest to the U.S.

⁷ The February 2007 agreement in figure IV leaves the “detailed modalities” of future energy supplies explicitly open. This may also refer to the inclusion of donors and contributors other than the six party nations. The agreement can be found at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2007/february/80479.htm>.

⁸ Given its rather modest financial contribution (€125 million until 2001; 2 percent of the total costs), the EU’s participation in KEDO was primarily of political significance, demonstrating wide international support for the project. See Schmidt, pp. 6-8.

⁹ The Stanley Foundation, *What Did We Learn From KEDO? Policy Dialogue Brief*, November 2006, citation p. 1, available at <http://www.stanleyfoundation.org/publications/pdb/KEDO07pdb.pdf>.

Certainly, several obstacles exist that may forestall European participation in a multilateral consortium. For instance, thought has been given to establishing an organization that reflects the member states' composition in the Six Party talks. European participation may also be undercut by the desire of the six parties "to keep things simple." Former U.S. negotiation delegates recall Asian reservations towards EU KEDO membership during the 1990s and that "it wasn't easy to get the Europeans on board." Nonetheless, a European role in the revival of KEDO is less likely to be a point of contention among the six parties, should Washington insist on it and if Pyongyang (for tangible economic benefits) endorses it.

Whether LWR or other (conventional) energy assistance will ever be delivered by the international community remains an open question. What is clear is the fact that North Korea has long faced serious energy problems and that it continues to lack the funds to undertake large infrastructure projects. As in the 1990s, European financial support, expertise, and technological resources could certainly be considered to become integrated into a larger multilateral energy assistance program dealing with long-term challenges, such as upgrading the electric grid, creating energy efficiency and sufficiency, and building related human capacities.

Dealing With Nuclear Infrastructure and Scientists

How could North Korea be assisted in safeguarding, dismantling, and possibly eliminating its nuclear program? What will happen to the nuclear infrastructure and workforce once the regime in Pyongyang has made the decision to move toward complete denuclearization? How will the "endgame" be implemented? Nonproliferation specialists are beginning to consider the possible application of the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) measures—as carried out in the former Soviet Union (FSU) countries—to the case of North Korea. Although it is still too early to know the exact nature of such costly and time-consuming programs, a first exchange of American and North Korean views on CTR took place in October 2007. This reveals an unprecedented level of interest on the side of the DPRK.¹⁰

According to a 2005 report published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, "CTR would help ensure that North Korea remains free of WMD over the long-term, not only through cooperative elimination efforts, but by redirecting the underlying infrastructure, such as facilities and scientists, away from military uses."¹¹ Given experience in various CTR activities in the framework of the G8 Global Partnership, the EU could conceivably contribute to similar measures in the DPRK that are "pragmatic, real, and innovative." Thinking creatively about how the lessons

¹⁰ "Removing the Nuclear Threat in North Korea," *New York Times*, Editorial Board, 16 November 2007, available at <http://theboard.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/11/16/removing-the-nuclear-threat-in-north-korea/>

¹¹ Joel S. Wit, Jon Wolfsthal, Choong-suk Oh, *The Six Party Talks and Beyond: Cooperative Threat Reduction and North Korea*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 2005, p. II, available at http://www.csis.org/media/isis/pubs/051216_ctr.pdf.

learned in other countries—such as Russia, the Ukraine, or Albania—might be translated or replicated to a very different context is a challenging exercise. The U.S. does not have the exclusive franchise of good ideas about North Korea, as Senator Richard Lugar once remarked.

In practical terms, North Korea is “the FSU in a microcosm” and there are a wide range of potential CTR related activities—some of which may provide opportunities for European involvement. It is less conceivable that the North Koreans and the other key players would allow an external actor, like the EU, to play a major role in the process of dismantling the facilities or safeguarding and controlling sensitive nuclear material. Nevertheless, the EU or some of its individual member states with relevant expertise and technologies—such as France, Germany, Sweden, or Great Britain—could contribute in other important ways, such as “environmental clean-ups” dealing with low-level nuclear waste.

The list of potential challenges in dealing with the nuclear infrastructure in the DPRK, however, is not limited to the dismantlement of the Yongbyon complex. One possible measure that could be initiated sooner rather than later with European support is the retraining of the estimated 5,000 North Korean nuclear scientists in non-weapons related work.¹² The model of multilateral international science and technology centers similar to those established in Russia and the Ukraine in the early 1990s (with the EU as a founding member) could serve as a political and financial framework. The aim of such a program would be to coordinate efforts of governments, international organizations, and private sector industries to redirect scientists, engineers, and technicians to more peaceful applications of their knowledge.¹³

Two more aspects of CTR in North Korea are worth pointing out, since they may have implications for European engagement. First, there is a tendency among U.S. experts to advocate CTR in North Korea to begin sooner rather than later, meaning *before* foreign inspection teams get their hands on the plutonium. Gaining access to such clandestine nuclear sites and getting in contact with the scientists as much as possible would significantly reduce uncertainty and enhance transparency. In fact, CTR would be an important part in verifying whether North Korea is actually making good on its disarmament and non-proliferation pledges such as not to transfer nuclear material, technologies, or know-how to other countries.¹⁴ Second, an important precondition for the North’s acceptance of CTR measures is for the DPRK to perceive them as flexible, non-adversarial “partnerships” rather than an imposition of non-proliferation policies. A lot

¹² Similar to the 1990s, however, the North Koreans are likely to put forward their demand for LWR with the rather hapless justification that their nuclear scientists would be deprived of their indigenous facilities and must therefore be compensated by new and better nuclear facilities they can work on.

¹³ Another institutional framework to reduce the capacity of the DPRK’s nuclear weapons complex and their employees may be seen in the *Nuclear Cities Initiative* (NCI), a non-proliferation cooperation program between the U.S. and Russia.

¹⁴ Sharon Squassoni, “Partial Progress,” *The Guardian* (online), 9 October 2007, available at http://commentisfree.guardian.co.uk/sharon_squassoni/2007/10/north_korea_nuclear_agreement.html.

of trust-building will be required in order to convince the North Koreans that it is in their ultimate interest to forego the nuclear weapons option. The European lack of a “historical baggage” without central strategic interests on the Korean peninsula may be seen as a positive condition for a constructive EU role. If Pyongyang concludes that European contributions will not only be trustworthy but also be tangible and beneficial for the DPRK’s political and economic demands, then opportunities for engagement may open up.

Considering the various contributions Europe could make to the non-proliferation process, the crucial question remains, to what extent is the EU itself actually willing to contribute? First, in terms of the scope of European assistance, it probably depends substantially on whether the key members of the six party process, most notably the United States, engage the Europeans before specific non-proliferation initiatives are concluded. Rather than requesting money or capabilities on an ad-hoc basis, financial as well as political commitment of the EU or its individual member states could be increased if some institutional setting of non-proliferation efforts existed in which to operate, such as CTR programs. As yet, however, the six parties are occupied with very difficult obstacles in the current implementation process rather than the question about the future role of the European Union.

Second, and finally, the European Union and its member states themselves will ultimately have to decide whether to step out of the dark and display an interest in contributing to the ongoing non-proliferation process. Presently, there is no clearly discernible thing as a European policy toward North Korea as it had developed since the late 1990s. This is also due to the lack of a political mandate for the EU to act. Surprisingly, not even a public or academic debate has been forthcoming about what the newly found diplomatic momentum in the six party process could mean for European foreign and security policy (not only in terms of non-proliferation but also development assistance, human rights dialogue, and other areas in which EU member states have demonstrated strong interests). As this essay attempts to show, this is despite the fact that there *are* possible options to become involved, provided that the main parties will proceed in the negotiation and disarmament process. If the EU has an interest in averting its role as a “payer” rather than a non-proliferation “player,” but instead holding some sort of political stake in dealing with North Korea, it makes sense to be aware of the European potential for modest but meaningful and substantial non-proliferation contributions before being approached by the protagonists with mere financial “requests.” Showing commitment while pursuing close coordination with the six parties, mainly the United States, are important conditions for Europe to be re-engaged in the future.