

Europe's Options on the Sidelines of the North Korea Crisis

By Janka Oertel

Summary: The latest developments in the North Korean nuclear crisis have stoked fears in Europe about a potential military escalation. There is a great degree of international consensus about the growing threat Kim Jong-un's regime poses. By putting all options — including military options — on the table, the Trump administration has raised the stakes of the conflict for European allies. President Trump's rhetoric has affected the political debate, especially in Germany, which is headed for a national election in September.

Despite transatlantic dissonance on other issues, the imminence of the North Korean threat to global security calls for a proactive and unified response. While a U.S. military strike remains very unlikely, Europe has serious contributions to make and levers to use to support a diplomatic solution. Transatlantic interest on a peaceful transformation of the crisis is closely aligned. The seriousness of the conflict warrants level-headed diplomacy — on both sides of the Atlantic.

For a moment, we seemed to be at the brink of nuclear escalation of the long simmering North Korea conflict. It is hard to say whether the “fire and fury” rhetoric from U.S. President Trump impressed North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un. It did, however, terrify Europeans.

For decades, as Henry Kissinger put it in the *Wall Street Journal*, “the international community has combined condemnation with procrastination” when it comes to North Korea.¹ The conflict is named among the top threats to international security, at least since the regime had conducted the first nuclear test in 2006. But from a European point of view, the conflict has always been far away, and many other crises have seemed much more imminent and daunting. This has changed. The last few weeks have demonstrated how immediate the risk of a military escalation with North Korea could become and how unpredictable the U.S. government currently is to European allies. But rather than allowing the conflict to drive a wedge in the transatlantic alliance, the recent developments call for more, not less transatlantic cooperation. Europe can make a meaningful contribution in various areas to support a peaceful transformation of the North Korea crisis.

The United States government has been consistent in its strong preference for a diplomatic solution to the conflict; previous Republican and Democratic

¹ Henry A. Kissinger, “How to Resolve the North Korea Crisis,” *Wall Street Journal*, August 11, 2017.



administrations have employed different variations of a carrot and stick policy. The effect has so far been limited. Since President Trump took office, he has been confronted with a significant increase in the North Korean regime's (successful) missile testing. The latest of which demonstrated North Korea's ability to launch an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of reaching U.S. territory. Combined with progress on miniaturized nuclear warheads, this has raised the threat level for the United States. 75 percent of Americans now view North Korea as a critical threat to the United States; 40 percent are in favor of targeted airstrikes against Pyongyang's nuclear facilities.²

In response to the recent dynamic, President Trump has underlined that all options — including military — are on the table. While the U.S. administration is strongly in favor of a diplomatic solution and a preventive strike on Pyongyang is still very unlikely, President Trump's remarks have rattled the policy community, especially in Germany and have impacted discussions about defense policy in the German national election campaign.³

German Debate

German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel from the Social Democratic Party was remarkably outspoken in assessing the developments as a global crisis with significant impact on Europe. Openly criticizing President Trump, he warned of a potential nuclear war and underlined the impact of the current development on the non-proliferation regime in particular, and the erosion of the international legal order in general.⁴ Chancellor Angela Merkel, the Christian Democratic front runner, has displayed her usual rhetorical reticence, urging all parties to the conflict to refrain from escalatory language while adhering to the standard European line that there is no military solution to the conflict.

In the German pre-election debate, the Kim versus Trump episode has renewed discussion of whether it is a good idea to double down on military spending, a policy that chancellor Merkel has recommitted to

after Trump called on Europe to pay more for its own defense. The Social Democrats argue that it would be unwise to bow to the requests of a U.S. president who might hit the red button on North Korea in a fit of pique.

European Options

Europe remains dependent on transatlantic security cooperation and U.S. security guarantees for the foreseeable future. But the recent escalation in the North Korean nuclear crisis serves as a reminder of why a joint European stance and a distinguishable European voice in international affairs are worth investing in.

Even if they lack decisive power on the North Korea issue, European governments have many good reasons to engage, such as the safeguarding of the international legal order and the threat posed by North Korean cyber-crime. If these dangers seem too abstract to pursue a robust containment and

deterrence strategy, there are the troubling consequences of Pyongyang's potential nuclear proliferation to non-state actors and rogue regimes. And if yet more convincing is needed, the economic dimension should serve as an indicator of why stability in Northeast Asia



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matters to Europe. The United States and China are the EU's largest trading partners. Russia, Japan, and South Korea follow closely among the top ten. The total volume of EU trade with the countries directly involved in a North Korean crisis equals more than 1,500 billion euro — or roughly 45 percent — of the EU's overall international trade. Any disruption of trade flows would have a devastating impact on European prosperity. Financial markets would immediately react; production chains would be broken in pieces.

² "Poll: North Korea Seen as Top Threat to the United States," The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, August 7, 2017.

³ Germany is scheduled to hold national elections on 24 September 2017.

⁴ German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel, "Weapons Do Not Create Security," August 16, 2017.

There is international consensus that the situation in North Korea is a threat to international security; it is one of the few items on the agenda of a highly polarized Security Council, where tangible results in the form of unanimous sanctions could be achieved. But there is significant disagreement among the members of the international community on how to dissolve tensions. Europe is interested in a diplomatic solution. In light of the current escalation, what meaningful contributions can Europe make to international efforts to transform the North Korea conflict considering its limited presence in the arena?

Support South Korea

A joint statement of all 28 EU heads of state and government condemning any form of further escalation and calling for a diplomatic initiative would be a helpful start. It is a mainly symbolic gesture, but one that provides prominent public and welcome support to the South Korean government in its current efforts to tone down escalatory rhetoric and open a path to talks.

Implement Sanctions

All European member states need to comprehensively implement existing UN sanctions. On an EU level the frameworks for implementation have been set. Members need to act upon the provisions and track violations. North Korean diplomats have been involved in illicit activities to generate income for the regime around the world.⁵ This has included, for example, a network of North Korean intelligence agents operating from Paris and Rome, engaged in money laundering and the purchase of military assets for Pyongyang.⁶ North Korea has also continued to make use of its embassies around Europe to illegally obtain foreign currency by leasing parts of its embassy property to private parties.⁷

Germany, too, has been struggling to fully conform with UN sanctions in this regard. An often cited example is a hostel on North Korean embassy property the North

Korean government rented out to a German investor, which has generated almost 40,000 euro of income each month for Pyongyang. Berlin has committed to ending this economic activity earlier this year, but the process is not simple.⁸ Responsibilities derived from the sanctions regime must align with German legal provisions protecting a commercial tenant. Additionally, any harsh move against the North Korean Embassy in Berlin could incite retaliation. Kim could, for instance, expel German diplomats from the embassy in Pyongyang, which serves as an important diplomatic and political link to North Korea. For those convinced that societal and political change in North Korea is possible, a direct connection to the country is vital. In some European capitals, however, it is not diplomatic considerations or legal processes that stall the translation of the sanctions regime into action, but a lack of commitment. While maximum efforts, and perhaps some creativity, should be employed to maintain links and connections, absolute implementation of sanctions is a necessity and must happen immediately.

Use Diplomatic Influence

Europe has been involved on the Korean peninsula since the Korean War. More than 18,000 soldiers from Europe fought alongside U.S. and South Korean troops.⁹ Sweden and Switzerland continue to supervise the armistice negotiated in 1953. The Swedish government has traditionally been strongly engaged on the North Korea issue. The United States makes use of the Swedish embassy, which officially carries out consular and other diplomatic work on behalf of Washington. But the ties go beyond Sweden. The EU formally established diplomatic relations with North Korea in 2001. Since then, more than a dozen political dialogues have occurred — with a delegation of the European External Action Service travelling to Pyongyang as recently as 2015. Dialogue has traditionally focused on the human rights situation. Since the North Korean famine in the 1990s, the EU has provided more than 130 million euro in humanitarian assistance to North Korea and has been willing to support emergency relief efforts on a regular

5 Panel of Experts Report UN Doc. S/2017/150 of 27 February 2017 "Diplomats, missions and trade representatives of the Democratic Peoples' Republic of Korea systematically play key roles in prohibited sales, procurement, finance and logistics."

6 Di Piero Messina, "Spie Coreane, Missione Roma," La Repubblica, February, 21, 2017.

7 Yonhap, "Poland Calls on N. Korean Embassy to Stop Rental Business," Korean Herald, July 7, 2017.

8 Alison Smale, "That Popular Hostel in Berlin? It's North Korean, and It's Closing," New York Times, May 10, 2017.

9 Belgium, France, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, United Kingdom – Source: <http://www.usfk.mil/About/United-Nations-Command/>.

basis.¹⁰ Diplomatic influence in humanitarian and human rights questions is one of Europe's core strengths and levers.

Establish Position on Military Maneuvers

China and Russia have again jointly proposed a freeze of United States and South Korea military maneuvers in exchange for a North Korean freeze on nuclear and missile testing ("freeze for freeze"). The idea has found prominent supporters in Europe as well. Wolfgang Ischinger, former ambassador of Germany to the United States and an influential voice in the German foreign policy community, suggested that the EU would do itself and the world a favor if it were to jointly express its support for "freeze for freeze" as a first step.¹¹ But "freeze for freeze" is too simplistic. The United States and the Republic of Korea carry out regular maneuvers with international participation, including from Europe, and in accordance with the Armistice Agreement of 1953. This year, Denmark, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom are taking part in the exercise, albeit with very modest contributions.¹² Despite the fact that the large scale annual maneuvers anger the leadership in Pyongyang, these activities cannot be equated with the illegal missile testing of the North Korean regime, which is what the Russian-Chinese proposal essentially does. But there is still room to find agreement. It is possible to talk about scale, postpone maneuvers, or even suspend them for a clearly defined amount of time to prepare the ground for "talks about talks." It is also thinkable that certain elements that are deemed critical for combat readiness between the U.S. and Korean Forces could be carried out in other — less controversial — locations. European allies could use diplomatic channels to quietly advocate a down-scaling of maneuvers to invigorate talks. There is also room to agree on joint monitoring of what is left behind by military exercises: additional U.S. troops on the Korean peninsula would increase the current tension. The EU could, for example, assist in guaranteeing the supervision of a full return to the *status quo ante* after the end of a maneuver.

¹⁰ "ECHO Factsheet – North Korea (DPRK)," European Commission, May 2017.

¹¹ Interview with Wolfgang Ischinger, North Korean Conflict, Deutschland Funk, August 14, 2017, http://www.deutschlandfunk.de/nordkorea-konflikt-ohne-militaerischen-druck-wird-es-nicht.694.de.html?dram:article_id=393409.

¹² Exercise Ulchi Freedom Guardian 2017, Release No: NR-296-17, U.S. Department of Defense, August 18, 2017.; Two Danish air force officers, and roughly 30 British servicemen and women.

Invest in Defense Cooperation

European countries do not have the means to offer significant military contributions in the region. However, existing defense cooperation between South Korea and European member states could be increased, tailored to the needs of the

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South Korean government in order to be most effective. German submarines and cruise missiles, for example, already support South Korea's deterrent capabilities. Paris and Seoul reinstated bilateral defense talks earlier this year. A strong deterrence has so far prevented Pyongyang from attacks on the South. Supporting the newly elected South Korean government, which is an outspoken proponent of a diplomatic solution, with credible defense can contribute to stability on the peninsula.

Address the Cyber Threat

While less obviously connected to recent escalations, the cyber threat should not be ignored. Pyongyang's sophisticated hacker squads have already identified Europe as prime mark for cyber-crime. Last year attempts to manipulate computers to steal money from bank customers in Poland were traced to North Korea, for example.¹³ Close transatlantic cooperation is necessary to address this new threat, political disagreements between Washington and Europe should not hamper coordination on the working level between security agencies.

¹³ Paul Mozur and Chloe Sang-Hun, "North Korea's Rising Ambition Seen in Bid to Breach Global Banks," The New York Times, March 25, 2017.

Assess Lessons from Iran Negotiations

Despite the significant differences between the two cases, all lessons learned from the Iran negotiations should be re-evaluated and tested for their applicability on the Korean peninsula. Defending the Iran agreement, also against pressure from the United States, supports the European narrative that a diplomatic solution can lead to a sustainable and mutually acceptable result. A disbanding of the agreement would be just another reason for Pyongyang to mistrust political processes. Creative diplomatic initiatives can be discussed. One option would be to work more closely on positive scenarios and financial incentives for Pyongyang: investments for a freeze of nuclear and missile testing, financial guarantees, and increased humanitarian assistance. Europe should be straightforward in its willingness to financially support agreements reached. Albeit being a very long-term scenario, even a very limited opening up of the country would be economically beneficial to the entire region, with China, Russia, and South Korea benefiting most. A positive development does not seem very likely right now. However, as with Iran, the economic prospects of a North Korea integrated in the global economy are significant: North Korea is strategically located for the integration of North East Asia and possesses a relative wealth in natural resources.

Invest in Transatlantic Dialogue

President Trump has irritated policymakers around the world, including his major European allies. His inflammatory and seemingly impulsive rhetoric casts doubt over everything that used to be taken for granted. But European policymakers should not allow rhetoric to affect reasonable policy choices. Europe can and should work closely with the U.S. administration toward a diplomatic solution. It makes sense for Europe to invest in dialogue on all levels on the issue to support those that are committed to preventing military escalation.

North Korea is not an issue on which to score campaign points on either side of the Atlantic. Instead it calls for unrelenting level-headed diplomacy. The imminence of North Korea's nuclear threat warrants close transatlantic cooperation, even if coordination proves more challenging than in the past.

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