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Running Head Right-hand: Europe and Inter-Korean relations

Running Head Left-hand: Antonio Fiori and Marco Milani

# 31

## Europe and Inter-Korean relations

**Antonio Fiori and Marco Milani**

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### Introduction

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Over the last decades, the East Asia region has become an increasingly important area for the foreign policy of European countries and of the European Union (EU) as a whole, both from an economic and a security perspective. In this context, the involvement of European countries and of the EU in the Korean Peninsula has grown significantly in recent years, especially after the end of the Cold War. While during the years of bipolar confrontation, both North and South Korea were considered rather marginal actors from a global perspective, more recently, the two countries have acquired a growing importance, albeit for very different reasons, at the international level and thus also for the EU's foreign policy and strategy. The EU Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy launched in 2016 clearly summarizes this twofold role with two explicit references to Korea: the first stating that the EU "will expand our partnerships, including on security, with . . . the Republic of Korea," and the second one, a few lines afterwards, saying, "We will promote non-proliferation in the Korean Peninsula."<sup>1</sup> These two brief references clearly express the main interests of the EU towards Korea: improving cooperation and collaboration with South Korea, considered a like-minded partner, while limiting the risks represented by the North Korean nuclear program and possible nuclear proliferation.

Thanks to its astounding economic and technological development, together with a political and social process that led to the democratization of the country in 1987, South Korea has become not only a key actor in East Asia with a global outlook but also an increasingly important partner for Europe, especially for economic and trade exchanges. Relations between South Korea and Europe, with recognized common values and shared interests, have flourished in this context: In addition to the very positive and productive interactions with member states, the EU and South Korea upgraded their relation to a strategic partnership in 2010; signed a Free Trade Agreement that became effective in 2011; and have agreed on other key documents covering the three pillars of security, politics and economics, such as a Framework Agreement and a Crisis Management Participation Agreement.<sup>2</sup> South Korea has thus become a key partner for the EU in its strategy toward Asia. At the same time, the focus of EU's involvement with North Korea has been increasingly limited to countering the development of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles, in line with United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions, while the approach of political-diplomatic engagement and provision of humanitarian aid and assistance have substantially decreased in recent years.

Against this backdrop, the EU and its member states in recent years have faced the task of managing their involvement in one of the key issues regarding the Korean Peninsula: the development of inter-Korean relations. Since the armistice in 1953, the two countries have gone through different phases in their mutual relationship and through different levels of hostility, coexistence and cooperation. While the relatively rigid balance of power of the Cold War limited the possibilities for inter-Korean relations, the post-Cold War world opened up a new series of opportunities for the development of relations on the Korean Peninsula. In the same period, the EU was starting to create a new common and proactive role as a foreign policy actor after the establishment of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) with the Maastricht Treaty in 1992.

Europe's approach to inter-Korean relations since the second half of the 1990s has gone through two major phases. With the development of positive relations between the two Koreas—

and also between North Korea and the United States—that characterized the late 1990s and the first years of the 2000s, the EU and its member states pursued a general improvement of relations with North Korea and a broad support for inter-Korean reconciliation, as demonstrated by the explicit reference “to support the inter-Korean reconciliation process” in the EC-Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) Country Strategy Paper 2001–2004 of the European Commission.<sup>3</sup> However, with the deterioration of the regional and international situation for North Korea and the gradual abandonment of engagement, Europe’s approach rapidly switched to a more punitive line. From that moment onward, inter-Korean relations have seldom resurfaced as a key issue for Europe and have been mentioned in official EU documents only in relation to the risks posed by North Korea to regional peace and stability, such as in the case of the 2012 Guidelines on the EU’s Foreign and Security Policy in East Asia.<sup>4</sup> This shift was in line with the broader approach to North Korea by the international community, led by the United States, based on sanctions and isolation.

These developments highlight the fact that Europe never really showed an independent and proactive approach toward inter-Korean relations—and toward North Korea more in general—while largely following the indications of the international community and the leadership of the United States. This chapter analyses the development of European involvement in inter-Korean relations, with a specific emphasis on the agency of Europe—EU institutions and member states—in inter-Korean relations or the lack thereof. In order to appreciate the close connection between Europe’s approach and the regional and international environment toward inter-Korean relations, the chapter starts with the analysis of the period, towards the end of the 1990s, in which engagement and cooperation between the two Koreas became the official policy of the South Korean government, the so-called Sunshine Policy. In this very conducive environment, the EU and its member states were able to put in place an approach based on engagement, cooperation and assistance with Pyongyang. The second part of the chapter focuses on the different approach to inter-Korean relations put in place by conservative governments in South Korea, starting from 2008, and on the deterioration of the international environment that

led to a complete breakdown of negotiations with the international community regarding the nuclear program. These developments also had strong repercussions on the European approach toward North Korea and inter-Korean relations, with the EU and most member states substantially scaling down their involvement.

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## Inter-Korean relations during the sunshine policy

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In 1997, with Kim Dae-jung's election, inter-Korean relations entered a new era. Since the inception of his presidential mandate, in fact, Kim made it clear that his policy towards Pyongyang would be very different from those of his conservative predecessors, whose aim was essentially overpowering or absorbing North Korea. According to the newly elected president, the top priority of his administration would be to create a basis for reconciliation and cooperation in spite of Pyongyang's bellicose attitude. The approach was also quite ambitious in that it implied a complete deconstruction of the image that South Koreans had of the North, which was essentially considered an enemy, due to the lack of knowledge and almost complete absence of communication between the two countries. The Sunshine Policy, as this approach was dubbed after a famous Aesop's fable which inspired Kim Dae-jung to assume that "sunshine" was more effective than "strong wind" to convince the North to come out of isolation and renounce to its assertive posture, was based on three guiding principles: no toleration of North Korean armed provocations, no South Korean efforts to undermine or absorb the North and active attempts on the South Korean side to promote reconciliation and cooperation between the two countries. 5

These principles were necessary to communicate that Seoul, although maintaining a strong deterrent posture to respond to eventual North Korean provocations, would not seek to provoke the regime's collapse.

Alongside these principles, the policy relied on two other fundamental components. The first one was the separation of politics and economics, which basically meant fostering economic relations with the North without linking them to Pyongyang's good behaviour in other areas. Past

governments' rigid linkage between politics and economics—meaning that any sort of provocation by the North had deep repercussions in the economic sphere as well—had contributed to a deadlock between the two countries; the Sunshine Policy demonstrated a great degree of flexibility by emphasizing economic interactions—pivotal in creating a more peaceful and collaborative atmosphere—while limiting the government's role primarily to matters of humanitarian and other official assistance.<sup>6</sup> The second core concept was based on the so-defined “flexible reciprocity,” or “give first and take later,” through which the South allowed the North to reciprocate Seoul's measures at some point in the future. This principle would regulate government-to-government economic cooperation, for example, in building infrastructures, while humanitarian assistance would not need any negotiation between the two parts.<sup>7</sup>

The “operational” side of the Sunshine Policy was represented by five sets of activities, from the resurrection of suspended talks to the expansion of economic exchanges between Seoul and Pyongyang. This last activity, in particular, was of the extreme importance for the achievement of the Sunshine Policy's objectives and, although expanded economic cooperation was intended as mutually beneficial, the Kim administration decided to focus initially on accomplishments more important to the North, given Seoul's significance in the economic sphere and the necessity to reassure Pyongyang of the absence of hidden motives. The main examples of this cooperation—that should have favoured the creation of a “South-North economic community”—were projects like the establishment of the industrial complex in the Kaesong area, the reconnection of the Seoul-Sinuiju railway, and the development of the tourist area at Mount Kumgang. Despite the fact that some of these initiatives were completed by the following administration, they represented a clear effort in the trust-building process between the two countries.

The Sunshine Policy's greatest achievement was represented by the summit that took place in Pyongyang in mid-June 2000. Beyond its symbolic importance, the summit's meaningfulness was represented by the Joint Declaration, signed by the leaders of the two countries, who agreed to continue cooperating on a wide array of subjects.<sup>8</sup> In the following

months, in fact, a number of dialogues were held, even though this did not necessarily translate to any considerable progress in inter-Korean relations. The initial overlapping of Kim's presidency in South Korea with Clinton's second term in office in the United States was a positive coincidence. After having taken into consideration the possibility to intervene militarily against Pyongyang during the first nuclear crisis, which was diplomatically solved with the 1994 Agreed Framework, Clinton showed his support towards Kim Dae-jung's ideas, which could contribute to the revitalization of inter-Korean dialogue and, in the end, to decrease confrontation on the Korean Peninsula. This situation substantially contributed to the constructive developments on the Korean Peninsula and to the encouraging attitude of numerous international actors towards North Korea in the early 2000s.

However, when George W. Bush came to power in 2001, the situation changed almost immediately. Starting at the beginning of his first term, the new American president doubted the Sunshine Policy could really convince the North Korean regime to substantially modify its posture and definitively renounce to nuclear proliferation, missile development and support for international terrorism.<sup>9</sup> In response to these assertions, Pyongyang replied it would not surrender to American pressure and started to harshly criticize the South as well, affirming that Seoul's cooperation with the United States represented an impediment to its national autonomy and to the possibility of revamping relations with the North. Relations between Pyongyang and Seoul entered a phase of stalemate, as demonstrated by the cancellation of the fifth North-South cabinet-level meeting and Kim Jong Il's refusal to take into consideration the possibility of making a visit to Seoul. Things eventually got even worse when Bush, during his State of the Union Address on January 29, 2002, only four months after the September 11 attacks, categorized North Korea as a member of the "axis of evil" together with Iraq and Iran.<sup>10</sup>

The recognition, in October 2002, that North Korea had never abandoned the ambition to become a fully nuclear country—pursuing the capacity to produce highly enriched uranium—and, in so doing, contravening the 1994 Agreed Framework, compromised the efficaciousness of the Sunshine Policy and undermined its credibility. The hard line adopted by the United States,



however, was not entirely appreciated in South Korea, where a part of the public opinion considered it responsible for the discontinuation of the positive process that had been established on the Korean Peninsula and an impediment to reconciliation.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, however, another sector of public opinion strongly criticized the government for its supposed weakness, depicting the Sunshine Policy as a strategy of appeasement and totally ineffective in stopping Pyongyang's nuclear development.

After Kim Dae-jung, another progressive candidate, Roh Moo-hyun, conquered the Blue House against all odds and was sworn in as president in February 2003. Roh immediately made it clear that he would not rectify his predecessor's position towards the North: the Sunshine Policy was renamed the Peace and Prosperity Policy, but the ultimate goal remained that of restoring good relations between the two countries and improving economic cooperation. As a matter of fact, with the implementation of the new policy, bilateral aid and humanitarian assistance from the South to the North substantially increased, as well as investments in the Kaesong Industrial Complex (KIC).<sup>12</sup> The outbreak of the second nuclear crisis, however, made inter-Korean relations more complicated. On top of that, Roh experienced difficulties in interacting with Washington, since it appeared evident that his positions were not supported by the Bush administration, which pressed for South Korea to adopt a firmer stance on North Korea's denuclearization. This brought Roh to claim that the relationship between South Korea, Japan and the United States had ceased to have any positive impact on inter-Korean relations and that it was important for South Korea to establish an independent foreign policy from the United States.<sup>13</sup> Soon after North Korea's first nuclear test, in October 2006, the South Korean government decided to temporarily suspend fertilizer and food shipments, although investments in the KIC continued. In October 2007, also due to the progress made with the Six Party Talks—a series of multilateral negotiations initiated in 2003 and aimed at dismantling North Korea's nuclear program—and to the unwavering commitment of Roh Moo-hyun to reconciliation and peace on the Korean Peninsula, a second inter-Korean summit was held in Pyongyang between the South Korean president and the North Korean leader, Kim Jong Il. The summit, which was

likely also held as a desperate move by Roh in order to influence the political field in favour of the progressive camp in view of coming presidential elections, ended with the signature by the two leaders of an eight-point agreement, which focused on the creation of a permanent peace between the two countries and on further cooperation.

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## The phase of Europe's engagement toward the Korean Peninsula

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Starting from the 1990s, the EU revised its strategy toward Northeast Asia, a region that had long been considered a remote periphery for the core interests of Europe but was rapidly becoming a new strategic area. In 1994, the EU Commission prepared a report entitled “Towards a New Asia Strategy,”<sup>14</sup> followed in 2001 by “Europe and Asia: Framework for an Enhanced Partnership,”<sup>15</sup> highlighting the importance of enhancing Europe's political and economic presence in the region. For what concerned the Korean Peninsula, the positive conditions created by the negotiated solution for the first nuclear crisis and the launch of the Sunshine Policy led several European countries and the EU to start a process of engagement with North Korea and of support for inter-Korean relations and reconciliation. The combination of these two factors—the improved willingness of the EU to play a role in the region and the positive environment surrounding North Korea and inter-Korean relations—led to a first phase characterized by a relevant engagement of Europe on the Korean Peninsula.

The involvement of Europe in inter-Korean relations started at the end of the 1990s, when the EU became an important actor in the multilateral effort to stabilize the situation on the Korean Peninsula. The first practical steps implemented by the EU focused on actively supporting the Agreed Framework of 1994 and encouraging the inclusion of North Korea in the international community, as prescribed by one of the key pillars of Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy. In 1997, the EU, through the European Atomic Energy Community (EAEC), decided to get directly involved in the process of stabilization of the Korean Peninsula when it joined the

executive board of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), a multilateral organization that had been created in order to implement some key provisions of the Agreed Framework, in addition to the United States, South Korea and Japan.<sup>16</sup> Despite the fact that the agreement was a bilateral accord between North Korea and the United States, other relevant actors decided to support the initiative with direct participation.

The main task of KEDO was to build two light-water reactor nuclear plants in North Korea in order to alleviate the chronic shortages of energy in the country while keeping the nuclear development of the country under strict control. The EU agreed to donate US\$15 million per year, later increased to US\$20 million. The total contribution of the EU to the organization reached more than US\$120 million, according to the last annual report published by the organization in 2005.<sup>17</sup> Europe's participation in KEDO fulfilled two important goals of the EU's new international role as a civilian power seeking international security and peace: helping stabilize the situation on the Korean Peninsula and stopping nuclear proliferation. From this perspective, the involvement of the EU in Korea was perfectly aligned with the image, the identity and the role that the Union had been trying to build and promote since the launch of the CFSP.

The second action implemented by Europe in the same period was related to the integration of North Korea within the international community. After the launch of the Sunshine Policy, the EU proved a supportive partner for the Kim Dae-jung administration, especially through diplomatic support. High-level political dialogue between the EU and North Korea started in December 1998, and in the same month, a delegation of the European Parliament visited Pyongyang. In the following four years, diplomacy between Europe and North Korea substantially took off, with three more high-level rounds of political dialogue—in November 1999, November 2000 and October 2001—and three more visits of parliamentary delegations—in January 1999, November 2000 and February 2001.<sup>18</sup> This diplomatic engagement was also reflected in official documents stressing the importance of inter-Korean cooperation and reconciliation, such as the European Commission memo on the relations with South Korea of

March 2001, which included a full section on “Support to inter-Korean reconciliation process,”<sup>19</sup> or the EU Commission report of 2001, which directly mentioned the Sunshine Policy and the European support for inter-Korean dialogue.<sup>20</sup> The historic inter-Korean summit of June 2000 and the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Kim Dae-jung in December of the same year certainly helped in pushing international actors towards support for inter-Korean relations.

But the most relevant actions undertaken by the EU and most of its member states in order to socialize North Korea in the international community were represented by diplomatic normalization. Before the end of the 1990s, only a few EU countries maintained official diplomatic relations with Pyongyang, mostly Western European countries that had maintained a more neutral stance during the Cold War years, such as Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Austria and Portugal.<sup>21</sup> With this new interest in diplomatic engagement toward North Korea, several EU countries decided to normalize relations with Pyongyang in the early 2000s, showing a high degree of efficacy in coordinating their strategies. Italy became the first country of the G-7 to open diplomatic relations with North Korea in January 2000. Contacts between the two countries were already in place through the North Korean delegation to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Rome, and in September 1999, the two Ministries of Foreign Affairs officially agreed to open diplomatic relations during the annual meeting of the UN General Assembly.<sup>22</sup> In March 2000, Lamberto Dini, the Italian minister of foreign affairs, travelled to North Korea, and in September, Paek Nam Sun reciprocated the visit. During these meetings, the two countries also signed cooperation agreements and a Memorandum of Understanding on development cooperation which included the opening of an Italian cooperation office in Pyongyang in April 2001.<sup>23</sup>

Following the example of Italian diplomacy, a delegation of high-level EU officials travelled to Pyongyang in May 2001, including Swedish Prime Minister and President of the Council of the EU Göran Persson, EU Commissioner for External Relations Chris Patten and High Representative for the CFSP Javier Solana. During the visit, the EU delegation met Kim Jong Il and other high officials, with whom they discussed a range of issues, including trade,

human rights and non-proliferation, obtaining a promise from the North Korean leadership to extend a moratorium on missile testing until 2003. It is important to note that the EU delegation's visit and the diplomatic recognition of North Korea strongly coincided with the position of newly elected American president Bush, who had already declared himself in favour of the construction of a missile defence system that would protect the United States from attacks by "rogue states." After the visit, the EU Commission decided to open diplomatic relations with North Korea on 14 May 2001.<sup>24</sup> In the same months, almost all EU member states decided to do the same, with the exception of France and Estonia (the latter joined the EU in 2004).<sup>25</sup> The level of diplomatic engagement reached by Europe with North Korea in just a few years represented a remarkable achievement and a very important push for the effort put in place by South Korea to integrate Pyongyang into the international community and build international support around inter-Korean cooperation.

Trade represented a further aspect in which the EU pursued positive relations with North Korea, expanding economic cooperation and offering favourable access to the European market by relaxing regulations and restrictions for specific North Korean products to enter the EU market; for example, non-textile products were not subject to any restrictions, while the quota for textile imports was increased by 60% in 2001.<sup>26</sup> In order to support the process of inter-Korean cooperation and the integration of North Korea into the international system, the EU also intended to provide training in several aspects for North Korean workers and officers to reinforce human resources in the country in fields such as trade and finance—to facilitate economic integration with the rest of the world—but also development of natural resources, transport and infrastructure.<sup>27</sup> A further relevant aspect of EU's involvement in the Korean Peninsula in this phase was represented by humanitarian aid and assistance toward North Korea; although not specifically connected to the development of inter-Korean relations, this aspect greatly helped in promoting the EU's engagement in Korea and creating a favourable international environment for North Korea. In 1996, the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) opened a branch in Pyongyang with the purpose of providing humanitarian assistance, mostly to cope with

healthcare and nutrition problems, which were widespread in the aftermath of the great famine. The amount increased significantly over the following years, also leading to high-level negotiations and the signing of Letters of Understanding between the two parties for the management of EU-funded projects. In 2001, the amount of aid provided reached EUR 244 million.<sup>28</sup> Following a similar approach to the Sunshine Policy, the EU decided to keep humanitarian assistance separated from security concerns—mainly the North Korea nuclear program—resulting in one of the more persistent donors of humanitarian assistance to North Korea. When the second nuclear crisis broke out in 2002, the EU kept providing aid for that year and the following, becoming the last international actor to provide assistance unconditionally.<sup>29</sup>

In this phase, EU diplomacy demonstrated a certain degree of independence from the major policy direction that the United States was pursuing towards North Korea in the early 2000s, a trait that would be very hard to find in the following period. When Washington decided to toughen its position towards Pyongyang with the second nuclear crisis between 2002 and 2003, the EU at first remained committed to a more conciliatory approach and to diplomatic engagement. In December 2003, for example, an EU delegation, organized and led by the Italian government, which had the rotating presidency of the Council at that time, travelled to Pyongyang, symbolically crossing the land border between the two Koreas in Panmunjom. During the visit, EU envoys met with several high-level officials and discussed several issues, including the nuclear program.<sup>30</sup> Despite these initial diplomatic efforts, the role of EU as a neutral mediator quickly vanished, as the institution and its member states started to follow the more stringent line of the United States and were marginalized with their non-inclusion in the Six Party Talks. Some sporadic diplomatic initiatives remained, such as in the case of shuttle diplomacy between Washington, Seoul and Pyongyang by Italian Vice-Minister Margherita Boniver in 2005 or the track-two initiatives of the Landau Network–Centro Volta, which included representatives from all the members of the Six Party Talks at its annual meeting in Como (Italy), including vice-ministers from both North and South Korea.<sup>31</sup> However, despite the positive results obtained in this first phase, the proactive role in supporting inter-Korean

relations and possibly mediating in security crises that had been envisioned in the previous years did not materialize, and Europe's main actors proved strongly influenced by the political leadership of the United States in dealing with the Korean Peninsula and inter-Korean relations.

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## The conservative turn and the end of cooperation

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The end of Roh Moo-hyun's term coincided with the termination of the "progressive decade" in South Korea. The new president, Lee Myung-bak, was elected primarily due to concerns about the economic performance of the country rather than his opposition to the Sunshine Policy. Nonetheless, since the very beginning of his term, Lee clarified that although under his two predecessors Seoul had provided over US\$3 billion in aid to Pyongyang, this had not translated into either the suspension of the development of the nuclear program or the improvement of human rights conditions in North Korea.<sup>32</sup> Implicitly, then, the Sunshine Policy had failed in attaining any major result and had not been able to modify North Korea's belligerent attitude; therefore, the new administration tried to apply pragmatism to inter-Korean relations and build productive relations with Pyongyang by setting realistic goals and adopting workable means. The practical strategy of Lee administration's North Korea policy, dubbed Mutual Benefits and Common Prosperity, was represented by the so-called "Vision 3000 through Denuclearization and Openness," whose main goal was to pursue inter-Korean cooperation under the condition of North Korea accepting to dismantle its nuclear arsenal.<sup>33</sup> The approach was aimed, on the one hand, at making North Korea realize all the benefits it could gain by deciding to denuclearize and, on the other, at showing all the evident limitations it would encounter by keeping its nuclear program. Pragmatically, in case North Korea accepted denuclearization, South Korea and the international community would offer assistance with the aim of raising its per capita income to US\$3,000—the level required for North Korea to maintain an independent economy and enhance the people's livelihood—within ten years. In addition, the full implementation of the strategy would lead to the expansion of exchanges, raising the quality of life for the North Korean people

and bridging the economic gap between the two countries: the final outcome would be the creation of an inter-Korean economic community, paving the way to national unification. Unlike the Sunshine Policy, the Lee administration's initiative strongly linked inter-Korean relations, aid and cooperation to denuclearization.<sup>34</sup>

The Lee administration's vision was immediately met with North Korea's vehement opposition, and the situation between the two Koreas became again very tense, as demonstrated by a series of events that brought the Korean Peninsula to the edge of conflict. In late 2008, a South Korean tourist at Mount Kumgang—who had crossed the border, according to North Korean soldiers—was shot dead; since South Korean authorities were denied the possibility to investigate the incident, the Lee administration decided to suspend all tours to one of the most important symbols of reconciliation created by the Sunshine Policy. Despite the worsening atmosphere, however, the KIC was not closed, due to the fact that it represented “one conduit to keep that window of dialogue open.”<sup>35</sup> On May 25, 2009, North Korea conducted its second nuclear test, immediately followed by UN Security Council imposition of new sanctions against Pyongyang. Despite North Korea's pugnacious attitude, Lee Myung-bak reiterated his administration's approach by introducing the New Peace Initiative for the Korean Peninsula and Grand Bargain strategies: even though North Korea's denuclearization remained the prerequisite for any development, Lee proposed more stringent cooperation between the two countries and stronger international assistance to the North through the Six Party Talks, which at that point were virtually dead.<sup>36</sup> North Korea, however, steadily refused, reconfirming that it would discuss the nuclear issue only with the United States.

Bilateral relations dramatically worsened again in March 2010, when the South Korean vessel *Cheonan* sank in the proximity of Baengnyeong island, south of the Northern Limit Line (NLL), killing 46 sailors. Despite having always denied any involvement, North Korea was held responsible for the sinking, presumably provoked by a torpedo, by the Joint Investigation Group (JIG), an international team of experts that was established in the wake of the incident. The *Cheonan* sinking prompted President Lee to issue the “May 24 measures,” a set of unilateral



sanctions against Pyongyang that suspended almost all forms of exchanges between the two Koreas, including economic cooperation and trade outside of the KIC.<sup>37</sup> A few months later, in November, shortly after Kim Jong Un had been introduced as the successor to his father, North Korea fired scores of artillery shells at Yeonpyeong island, killing two soldiers and two civilians. The two dramatic events of 2010 highly affected inter-Korean relations, with the result that for the rest of Lee Myung-bak's presidency, they remained very tense. North Korea, in fact, refused to apologize, as requested by the South Korean president as a precondition for the restoration of bilateral dialogue.<sup>38</sup> On top of that, in April 2012, when Pyongyang launched a satellite using ballistic missile technology, the South Korean administration harshly condemned it, and North Korea started a personal propagandistic campaign against Lee, indicating the end of any possible communication for the rest of his term.<sup>39</sup>

Although Park Geun-hye's election, in December 2012, ensured the continuity of the conservative rule, the new president made it immediately clear that with regard to North Korea, she would not follow in the footsteps of the "constructive engagement" advocated by progressive presidents or her predecessor's pressuring strategy based on the prerequisite of denuclearization. The main assumption of President Park's "middle-way" approach was the necessity to enact confidence-building measures in order to build trust, as was made clear in the article published in *Foreign Affairs* magazine, where the term *Trustpolitik* was used for the first time.<sup>40</sup> Apart from clarifying that provocations from the North not only would not be tolerated but would also ignite a strong response from the South, Park elucidated that *Trustpolitik* was to be understood as an incremental process in the construction of a relationship that could lead to confidence and cooperation. The goal was to be attained through the implementation of different measures: provision of humanitarian assistance to the North, enhancement of economic cooperation and creation of new trade and investment opportunities. From the very beginning, however, the Park administration's good intentions were frustrated by North Korea's attitude: after having conducted its third nuclear test, in February 2013, Pyongyang professed the Armistice Agreement nullified and declared a "state of war" with South Korea; in addition, North Korea

withdrew its workers from the KIC, leading the South to withdraw its personnel in turn.<sup>41</sup> Over the following months, tension decreased, and the two Koreas reopened bilateral communication on important issues such as family reunions, the reopening of the KIC and the possible resurrection of Mount Kumgang resort project.

In early 2014, Park Geun-hye tried to revitalize her inter-Korean policy, emphasizing the importance of building the foundations for a peaceful unification of the Korean Peninsula, and, at the end of March, in a speech at the Dresden University of Technology, she clarified that barriers such as military confrontation, mutual distrust, social and cultural differences and the rupture of diplomatic relations between the North and the international community should be dismantled in order to open up a new future for the two Koreas.<sup>42</sup> These barriers could be dismantled by enhancing cooperation and exchanges between the two Koreas. North Korea reacted negatively, maintaining that Park's proposed unification was nothing less than a paradigm of the "West *absorbing* the East," and disparaged the proposal.<sup>43</sup> Between 2015 and 2016, tension started to rise again, particularly due to Pyongyang's fourth nuclear test—in February 2016—and to the subsequent unilateral decision by the South Korean government to immediately close the KIC and tighten sanctions on North Korea. In March, the adoption by the South Korean National Assembly of the North Korean Human Rights Act, which had been pending for 11 years due to the concern that it would damage inter-Korean relations, further exacerbated relations on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>44</sup> Over the following months, relations on the Korean Peninsula continued to deteriorate, mainly because of North Korea's nuclear and missile activism, and inter-Korean relations were almost completely shut down. Although *Trustpolitik* was aimed at restoring cooperation on the Korean Peninsula, Park Geun-hye's administration was not able to take the initiative and promote the development of inter-Korean relations in the sense of building mutual trust, in particular after Pyongyang third nuclear test. The usual framework of highs and lows, crisis and rapprochement thus remained a constant feature of her presidency until the escalation of tension that started in early 2016. This situation proved favourable for North Korea, which in this way was able to "buy" valuable time on issues of fundamental importance.

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## Europe's disengagement and alignment with international sanctions

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The outbreak of the second nuclear crisis between 2002 and 2003 and the deterioration of relations between the two Koreas certainly represented a key moment for Europe's role on the Korean Peninsula and its support for inter-Korean relations. In an initial phase, the EU approach was to pursue a diplomatic way out of the stalemate, in line with the "softer" approach advocated by the South Korean administration until 2007, with its priority on inter-Korean cooperation and dialogue, as demonstrated by Solana's statement in February 2003 during his visit to South Korea.<sup>45</sup> These preliminary efforts, however, did not bring practical results and led to a marginalization of Europe in the issue. If during the first nuclear crisis Europe was able to actively participate in one of the main institutions designed to solve the issue—KEDO—in this case, its involvement was much more limited. The EU and its member states started to follow the decisions that were made by the international community regarding North Korea, in particular the approach based on international sanctions that became the main instrument after North Korea tested its first nuclear weapon in October 2006, with the adoption of the UNSC resolution 1718. As a further demonstration of this, the European Council decided to impose its own sanctions against Pyongyang after the resolution of the Security Council, a trend that would also continue with all the following UNSC resolutions.<sup>46</sup> Trade and economic exchange were dramatically restricted after this, also for the effect of increasingly harsh international sanctions, while humanitarian aid, albeit still in place in some forms, was also reconsidered and re-organized, and since 2008, it has been conveyed mostly through the World Food Program and EuropeAid.<sup>47</sup>

At the same time, human rights issues became much more important in the relations between Europe and North Korea: the EU started to present resolutions to denounce violations by the North Korean regime at the UN Human Rights Commission in 2003 and in the following years also to the UN General Assembly and the UN Human Rights Council, resulting in a deterioration of political relations between the two.<sup>48</sup> This change in Europe's approach toward

North Korea certainly came as a response to Pyongyang nuclear activism; however, it can also be interpreted as a move aimed at supporting some key aspects of the EU's CFSP, such as preventing nuclear proliferation and the spread of weapons of mass destruction and protecting human rights. These were key features of the identity of the EU as a foreign policy actor that Brussels was trying to promote during the 2000s. The net result of these dynamics was a strong deterioration of relations between Europe and North Korea, with the nuclear program as the main priority to address, while inter-Korean relations basically neglected.

The deterioration of relations between the two Koreas that started with the election of Lee Myung-bak in 2007 further lowered the importance of inter-Korean relations in the list of priorities of the international community—and the EU—on the Korean Peninsula. After the election of Park Geun-hye in 2012, the launch of inter-Korean and regional initiatives by the new South Korean government, such as *Trustpolitik* and the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI), found public support in the EU, a goal whose attainment Park had intensely worked for.<sup>49</sup> However, due to Pyongyang's renewed provocative behaviour and the limited effectiveness of these initiatives, inter-Korean relations did not significantly improve during this period. Accordingly, the European approach to the Korean Peninsula did not substantially change compared to the previous years, with a strong focus on the international sanctions regime against North Korea's nuclear and missile programs and condemnation of human rights violations. The change in Europe's approach to inter-Korean relations clearly signalled the fact that the issue did not represent a strategic priority for the European Union: when regional and international conditions were ripe for engagement, dialogue and cooperation, Brussels and several member states actively contributed to the support of the process of reconciliation; however, when the second nuclear crisis alienated the support of an important part of the international community for engaging North Korea, and when the election of a conservative president in the South reversed the policy of dialogue and cooperation, the EU decided to pull back and align with the dominant approach guided by the United States. This behaviour demonstrated the lack of an independent European strategy towards inter-Korean relations.

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## **Conclusions: what role for Europe in inter-Korean relations?**

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Traditionally, the EU has fostered a very intimate relationship with South Korea, which is the only country in the world with three agreements covering economics (the Free Trade Agreement signed in 2010 was the first Europe ratified with an Asian country), politics and security in effect as of 2020. The EU's attitude toward North Korea, on the other hand, has been less coherent and deeply affected, in particular after the end of Roh Moo-hyun's term, by the posture adopted by Seoul and Washington. Critical Engagement, as the EU strategy is widely known, forecasts the use of both incentives and pressure in order to reduce tensions on the Korean Peninsula, eliminate the nuclear threat and improve human rights conditions in the North: a wide spectrum of actions have been adopted to this end—with scant results—since the mid-1990s.

As has been shown, in fact, during much of the “progressive decade” in South Korea—marked by the implementation of the Sunshine Policy, which prompted a favourable cooperative international atmosphere—the EU actively engaged North Korea by providing food and technical assistance, becoming a member of KEDO's executive board and opening diplomatic and economic relations. Being aware of its own characteristics, the EU focused its attention on non-security issues, with particular attention to the possible liberalization of the North's economy, leaving those incumbencies to the United States. North Korea looked with extreme interest at the involvement of the EU, both because of the assistance it could guarantee and as a potential mediator to improve relations with Washington. Soon after the June 2000 inter-Korean summit, several European countries set up ties with Pyongyang, normalizing relations and in some cases establishing resident embassies. In sum, the EU benefitted from the implementation of the Sunshine Policy and supported it—even though it meant running the risk of creating friction with the United States.

However, the outbreak of the second nuclear crisis—along with the confrontational attitude adopted by the Bush administration in the United States—pushed the EU to embrace a

more conditional strategy. Initially, it was marked by firm condemnation of North Korea's nuclear weapons but also the propensity to keep the door open to dialogue and economic incentives; subsequently, it adopted a more rigid stance signalled by the decision to withdraw its support toward North Korea, except for emergency assistance, and to fully support the sanctions implemented by the UN. Europe's "active pressure"<sup>50</sup> position thus has become quite similar to the American approach, prioritizing North Korea's dismantlement of its nuclear weapons program over any progress in reconciliation on the Korean Peninsula. It is evident, however, that the EU's approach has not only frequently been dependent on political choices imposed by other actors—condemning itself to extreme marginalization—but it has also failed to achieve its main objectives, such as to reduce tension between Seoul and Pyongyang, create the terrain for denuclearization or improve the human rights situation.

In the last few years, with the rapid development of North Korea's nuclear and missile programs under the leadership of Kim Jong Un; the election of Donald Trump in the United States; and the efforts toward reconciliation of the new South Korean administration headed by another progressive president, Moon Jae-in, the role of the EU in inter-Korean relations has become quite marginal, raising doubts about the possibility that it can play a considerable role in the current situation. Notwithstanding the willingness and availability of the European Commission and several EU member states to participate in talks aimed at reducing tensions on the Korean Peninsula, this eventuality is rather implausible, given that—apart from mere declaration of intents—Europe is not included in any diplomatic negotiation between the parties.

This, of course, does not mean there cannot be any room to manoeuvre for the EU on the Korean Peninsula. On the contrary, Europe could be very important, for example, given its expertise—of the EU and some of its member states, such as Sweden—as mediator and facilitator: a role it could play between North Korea and the United States or the international community in case of future negotiations. Given that the North Korean regime is evidently frightened by the fact that any agreement or decision can be reversed by a change in the leadership's counterpart, counting on the EU as a guarantor would be relevant for Pyongyang.

On the other hand, if tension rises, the EU can give an important contribution by reminding all the parties of the dramatic consequences a military solution might have. Another interesting possibility would be revamping economic cooperation between the EU and North Korea, above all in terms of infrastructure development in North Korea. Europe could also more directly support South Korea's efforts to increase inter-Korean economic cooperation, for example, indicating its willingness to support and even participate in joint economic projects, similar to the Kaesong Industrial Complex.

The EU needs to rebuild its image in the eyes of the North Korean leadership, which currently considers it nothing more than a marginal actor aligned with the sanction-oriented approach of the United States and most of the international community. An example of this is the reply given by Kim Son Gyong—North Korean vice-minister for European affairs—to Virginia Battu-Henriksson—EU spokeswoman for foreign affairs and security policy—who declared that Pyongyang's decision to demolish the inter-Korean liaison office increased tensions on the Korean Peninsula and was “unacceptable”; Kim steadily replied:

It is only deplorable that the EU, being ignorant of the fundamental reasons behind the current breakdown of the inter-Korean relations, is reeling off only unreasonable and trite remarks such as “building trust” and “lasting peace” on the Korean Peninsula. **51**

Behind the obvious rhetoric, the statement reveals that the North Korean leadership considers the EU not fully aware of the relational difficulties on the Korean Peninsula and limited to issuing predictable and obvious statements.

A good starting point for the EU to regain a relevant position and increase its impact on Korean affairs would be resuming high-level political dialogue with Pyongyang in order to enhance mutual trust; this message could be reinforced by the eventual establishment of EU representation in North Korea. The EU has the potential to and should play a different and more active role in inter-Korean relations, trying to restore a fruitful dialogue with Pyongyang, without

completely subordinating it to progress on denuclearization, and supporting, both from diplomatic and practical perspectives, cooperation initiatives put in place by the South Korean government.

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