

Discussion of “The EU Stretches its Foreign Policy Wings Over Korea”

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Soyoung Kwon and Glyn Ford (MEP)
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I. Introduction

The following are comments on the essay "The EU Stretches its Foreign Policy Wings Over Korea" by Dr. Soyoung Kwon, post-doctorate fellow at the Asia-Pacific Research Centre of Stanford University, and Glyn Ford, member of the Korean Peninsula Delegation in the European Parliament, which appeared as Policy Forum Online 05-31A: April 12th, 2005.

This report includes comments by Dr. Kay Möller, Senior Research Associate at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs in Berlin, Germany.

II. Comments on Essay by Soyoung Kwon and Glyn Ford (MEP)

1. Comments by Kay Möller

I disagree with the authors on the following points:

(1) There has been no agreement within the North Korean leadership on whether to use the atom bomb primarily as a deterrent or as a means to extract third party concessions. Only in the latter case could one assume that the DPRK would be willing, as a matter of principle, to bargain the weapon away. Making any concessions to Pyongyang before it makes first steps in the direction of a gradual and verifiable disarmament would be a boost to North Korean hardliners and has been opposed not only by the US and Japan, but by South Korea as well.

(2) When most EU member states in 2001 recognized the DPRK while dropping preconditions on human rights, disarmament, and North-South détente, they responded to a call by then RoK-President Kim Dae-Jung made to broaden international support for his "sunshine diplomacy." This refocusing of the European interest away from Pyongyang's WMD activities (that through North Korea's proliferation of missiles threaten EU members more than the American mainland) towards the intra-Korean process of accommodation accounts for the present lack of interest of the six parties, including South Korea, to involve the EU in the six party talks. Mediation proposals discussed under the Swedish presidency have been silently buried since, because of a realization that a successful North-South dialogue requires DPRK movement on the nuclear issue, not the other way around, and that Europe lacks the leverage to promote either. If Pyongyang had wanted to strike a deal with Seoul at Washington's expense, it would already have done so.

(3) World order has not been changing. Since the early 1990s, the EU has fallen behind the US in terms of productivity, per capita income, and public debt and is likely to fall even further behind, with a strong euro damaging exports. China risks further socio-economic disintegration and nationalistic excesses if it does not reform the political system. Non-democratic societies in general will lag behind on technological progress, so that the world rather than restructuring itself along multipolar lines could be divided between a (democratic, market-oriented) zone of peace and a (non-democratic, less market-oriented) zone of turmoil. Fuelling the multipolar dream from DPRK press articles to me appears like a rather bad joke. The world needs a strengthening of international regimes rather a further hollowing-out.

(4) We have seen Europe's "critical engagement" of Iran even prior to the present nuclear negotiations, and the outcome has not been encouraging.

2. Response by Soyoung Kwon and Glyn Ford (MEP)

We are grateful for Kay Moller's comments on our article "the EU stretches its Foreign Policy wings over Korea" as it enables us to clarify some of the issues involved even if they are stretched far beyond the Korean Peninsula into the emerging realms of European Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). With common industrial and social policies, economic and monetary policies, common foreign policy must inevitably follow.

(1) First, let us make it clear that the EU and ourselves want to see a solution to the current crisis and to encourage North Korea to return to the NPT and on the road of global engagement. The EP's proposal is neither a concession to the DPRK nor appeasement of hardliners within the regime. Rather, it's an attempt to engineer a breakthrough in the current crisis by providing a catalyst that may lead to a step-by-step gradual and verifiable disarmament, which almost certainly would freeze the situation where it is rather than have it further deteriorate (the current halt to the Yongbyon plant will not lead to the production of further nuclear weapons; it is estimated that less than four kilograms of plutonium has been produced since the new operations commenced) or would at worst lead to a couple of oil deliveries before it was clear North Korea was not prepared to play ball. It should not be forgotten, however, that Yonbyon was only re-activated when Heavy Fuel Oil supply was cut off at the insistence of the US, accusing North Korea of possessing nuclear weapons, leaving in reality North Korea little choice but to act as it did. We believe that no final decision has been taken by the North Korean leadership as to whether or not it is prepared to negotiate away its nuclear weapons in exchange for security guarantees. North Korea's current economic reform program certainly indicates a willingness to recognize the direction it should move in the new global order. These positive developments can spill over into the security area if North Korea can be convinced that the lesson of the Iraq War is not that one needs WMD to defend against US pre-emptive strikes but that a changing regime can forestall regime change.

(2) We are not suggesting that the EU's role is other than as a facilitator, but North Korea does take the EU seriously as editorials in Rodong Shinmun over the last five years demonstrate. After all, the EU is bigger and richer than the US and a number of EU member states more productive. Certainly the EU will be seen as one of those global powers who will have to contribute to picking up the tab at the end of the negotiations. This is increasingly unlikely to happen if we have no say in choosing the menu. Actually it is not the EU or the US that is threatened by North Korea's missiles rather South Korea and Japan. Why Japan worries about Taepodong development when the Nodong is already deployed makes little sense. The EU's advantage is that we are not South Korea, Japan or the US. Nor have we forgotten Human Rights as our stance in Geneva demonstrates, but any military action on the Korean peninsula, accidental or deliberate, threatens the lives and well being of millions. Coming back from the brink will give space and time to recommence the dialogue on issues of economic and development aid, human rights and even a resolution of the Japanese abduction issue.

(3) The 'changing global order' has become a prominent discourse in the scholarly world and even among experienced policy analysts in the foreign affairs field. We would personally be worried if Dr. Moller, as a senior researcher and an expert in such a well-regarded institute in Germany, has not detected such a bigger picture of today's world. The DPRK's press articles may seem like a bad joke to people who have different views (or narrow perception) of the global order. We would argue that the North Korean leadership has a pressing need to watch out for the changes in the outside world

in order to devise its survival strategies. The studies by one of us over the last twenty five years of the editorial of Rodong Shinmun mentioned above shows North Korea is becoming increasingly sensitive and responsive to the changing international community. We argue that North Korea possessed a clear understanding of the changing world while responding to it with various strategies for regime survival. The North Korean leadership is well aware of the outside world - international news and information flow above the department director level of the cabinet and the Party (read, for example, North Korean Policy Elites by Kongdan Oh Hassig et al. report by the Institute for Defence Analyses, June 2004, pp. I-16 to I-26). The 'multipolar dream' of the DPRK may be ahead of the game, as Dr. Moller pointed out. But, what we want to accentuate is that the rising number of editorials on EU related issues tends to mirror how the DPRK sees the EU and recognizes its growing significance in the world stage. Let alone the North Korea's view, theories of international politics pinpoint the importance of a balance of multi-lateral international order, rather than the existence of one hegemonic power. We do agree that the world needs a strengthening of international regimes - but is the world today actually moving towards that direction? We don't think so.

(4) We would disagree that Europe's critical engagement in Iran has been a failure, rather it has opened up exactly the path to peaceful solution that we would envisage on the Korean Peninsula. Of course it may not work, but who would say it's not worth trying?

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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