

Policy Forum 03-24A: A Multilateral Scenario For Korea; The Role Of The European Union

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A Multilateral Scenario For Korea; The Role Of The European Union

By Markku Heiskanen

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I. Introduction

Markku Heiskanen is a Visiting Senior Fellow at the Nordic Institute of Asia Studies in Copenhagen. Heiskanen asserts that the European Union will undoubtedly produce an official response to the proposed ideas for a multilateral scenario on the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia, including the conference idea proposed by the European Parliament. If such a conference were successfully organized, it may be the first step on the way to a larger and deeper multilateral process on the Korean Peninsula, and in Northeast Asia, with the eventual participation of the European Union.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Essay by Markku Heiskanen

1. Introduction

The newly published authoritative report of the Task Force on U.S. Korea Policy "Turning Point in Korea" (Nautilus Special Report March 3, 2003) focuses briefly on a multilateral scenario to reinforce U.S. - North Korean relations, or to serve as an alternative if bilateral dialogue founders.

The report suggests that "a seven-nation conference should be convened in Brussels with the European Union as host, on the topic of 'Security and Economic Development in Korea' with the participation of the European Union as the host of the conference, plus the United States, South Korea, North Korea, China, Russia and Japan.

The report refers to the decision of the European Parliament on January 29, 2003 to call on the European Commission to convene "in the late spring or early summer seven-nation talks about the situation in the Korean peninsula, focusing on economic, security and nuclear disarmament issues".

The report argues that the European Union would be an acceptable host to all parties concerned, including North Korea. The report also says, "North Korea would be likely to join in such a conference only if it is preceded or accompanied by bilateral dialogue with the United States".

In my Nautilus Special Report of May 1, 2001, "The Role of the EU in Northeast Asia", I highlighted the main conclusions of the report "Perspectives for Multilateral Support to Security and Cooperation in Northeast Asia; The Role of the European Union", produced by the Policy Planning and Analysis Working Group (COPLA) of the European Union in November 1999.

As the then Chairman of COPLA, I would like to introduce a few points to the present discussion on the multilateral scenario in Korea, and in Northeast Asia, including the eventual role of the European Union.

2. Rationales for a multilateral framework and the role of

the European Union

The COPLA report noted that the main instruments of the European Union to contribute to the solution of international and regional problems is its economic wealth, and its politically "neutral" position in the eyes of parties to conflicts, including North Korea in the case of Northeast Asia. Conflict prevention is one of the main goals of Union policy.

The report also noted that Northeast Asia, as a sub-region of Eurasia, connected with the now enlarging EU and Europe at large by the huge "Eurasian Land Bridge", has throughout history been a natural partner for Europe in Eurasia.

It is interesting to recall that Imperial Russia extended between 1809-1867 from the Aland Islands in the proximity of the Swedish east coast across to Alaska in North America.

The Trans-Siberian railway was constructed 100 years ago, and it seems now to have been revived as one of the main arteries between Northeast Asia and Europe.

Alongside these historical and geo-economic perspectives there seems indeed to be a rationale for having a multilateral forum to handle Korean and Northeast Asian peace and prosperity issues together with the participation of the European Union.

3. High politics, low politics

The U.S. Task Force report defines as the main goals of the proposed conference on "Security and Economic Development in Korea": to give the United States a face-saving way to resume bilateral negotiations with North Korea to give international status to any bilateral US-North Korean agreements to draw North Korea into denuclearization commitments made to the participating states as a group to provide security guarantees to North Korea by the other participating states to plan economic aid initiatives by the other participating states that would make the benefits of denuclearization greater in North Korea eyes than the risks.

The Task Force suggests that working groups on economic and security issues could meet in advance to develop specific proposals for consideration at the conference, such as natural gas pipelines and other energy projects urgently desired by North Korea.

At the moment, it seems unlikely that the EU could play any major role in the ongoing "high politics" game on the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula.

On the other hand, the EU might have an active, relevant and constructive role in the "low politics", primarily the economic - particularly energy development - issues.

The Task Force is certainly right in assuming that the EU, and Brussels, as host for a suggested multilateral forum, is acceptable, perhaps even welcome, to North Korea too.

In spite of the growing tensions due to the nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula, many promising inter-Korean cooperation projects continue on a "business as usual" basis, including the recently opened traffic routes and tourism across the DMZ.

North Koreans have recently participated actively in high-level NGO-based economic forums together with their southern relatives, their U.S. adversaries, their Northeast Asian neighbors and Europeans. Examples of this participation are the Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue organized by

the University of California and the Russian Academy of Science in Moscow in October 2002, as well as a Eurasian Railways Symposium in Helsinki in April 2002, organized by the Finland - Northeast Asia Trade Association.

These events have shown that North Korea is able and willing to participate as an equal in such informal multilateral forums, also with the United States.

4. Conclusions

The European Union will undoubtedly produce an official response to the proposed ideas for a multilateral scenario on the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia, including the conference idea proposed by the Task Force, and by the European Parliament.

To convene such an ambitious conference would not be an easy undertaking. The Task Force suggests that working groups on economic and security issues, in that order, could meet to develop specific proposals.

This might be the first step on the way to a larger and deeper multilateral process on the Korean Peninsula, and in Northeast Asia, with the eventual participation of the European Union. It might also be sensible to invite Mongolia to take part.

The new South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun stated in his inaugural speech that "renowned international scholars have long predicted that the 21st century would be the Age of Northeast Asia, and their predictions are coming true."

For decades much work has been done to create a basis for the "Age of Northeast Asia" including peace arrangements on the Korean Peninsula and cooperation with Europe.

This work should now be continued on the basis of high common denominators and small steps, from low politics to the ultimate goals of high politics.

The European Union could be a constructive facilitator and participant in this overall process.

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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