

Response to “EU: On the Bench in Pyongyang”

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Policy Forum Online 09-019A: March 10th, 2009

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I. Introduction

The following are comments on the essay, "[EU: On the Bench in Pyongyang](#)" by Axel Berkofsky, Adjunct Professor at the University Milan and Advisor on Asian Affairs at the European Policy Centre (EPC) in Brussels, which appeared as Policy Forum Online 09-019A: March 10th, 2009.

This response includes comments by Rudiger Frank, Professor of East Asian Economy and Society and Vice Director of the East Asian Institute at the University of Vienna, Austria.

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. Comments by Rudiger Frank

Relations between the two Koreas are deteriorating, and the Six Party Talks are in jeopardy as North Korea announced plans to launch a rocket. Japan responded strongly, and many Koreans hope once more for an external solution. Some look towards Europe and hope it will join the talks as a formal member. But to which extent would this be realistic? As a European, and as a long-term observer of the situation in Northeast Asia from a Korean perspective, I would be more than happy if the EU joined the Six Party Talks (SPT). But to my deep personal regret, I have to argue that this might be little more than wishful thinking at the moment.

There are rumors that the EU has been asked repeatedly to participate in the SPT but refused. With many "somun" around these days, we should be careful and rather look at some facts to understand why the EU would actually decline such an offer. An obvious point is the 'no say, no pay' principle. Involving the EU means to share power, but who would be ready to do so? And how would the EU use that power? Remembering the EU's position on the "war on terror" is helpful in this respect. The EU is outspokenly critical of illegal actions and human rights abuses, but most of its members are also against the use of force in international relations. North Korea has repeatedly expressed that they want the EU to be in, and so did South Korea. But with little enthusiasm on the side of the two big players, this has so far lead to nothing. The EU did not want to participate without adequate influence, and the major parties were not quite sure whether EU formal participation would help. They are rather grateful that Europe can act as a neutral broker when official talks face difficult times.

Most importantly, however, I would argue that the EU itself is hardly interested in or capable of active involvement in the SPT. It has little to win, a lot to lose, many other pressing issues to solve, and it is facing one of the worst coherence crises in its history.

From far away, the EU looks quite homogeneous; it has a parliament, a flag, an anthem, a statistical office, even a more or less common currency and a capital city. But a closer look reveals that this homogeneity is a myth. Within a few years, the EU has accepted almost twice as many members as it had in 1995, when membership stood at 15. In May 2004, ten states joined at a time. Two more followed in January 2007. These new members were anything but easy partners. Mostly former socialist countries, they had tons of trouble behind and ahead of them, ongoing transitions to democracy and market economy, relative poverty and underdevelopment, migration issues, corruption, organized crime and so forth. Not to mention the administrative rules of the EU. These were designed to carefully balance the interests of major members who had just fought another major war and had difficulties trusting each other. Old rules, new realities: as of January 2007, there are 23 (!) official languages in the EU. The tale of the Tower of Babel comes to mind, and we remember that construction there did not proceed too well.

The EU's Eastern expansion is anything but unanimously popular, although complaints and quarrels vary. They are about money, division of political power, regulations, labor markets. National interests are on the rise in these times of economic crisis. Support for the EU is notoriously low and has recently fallen to dangerous levels. As of March 2009, in Austria only 36% supported the membership of their country in the Union; the average for all member states is a meager 52%. And these are just a few of the internal problems.

Externally, the trouble gets even bigger. The EU grows, and so does NATO. Russia is not happy to see her previous satellite states being absorbed by the former enemy. One does not need to be a

neorealist to understand that such a shake-up of the balance of power will be met with skepticism by Moscow. This is even more so since many former states of the Soviet Union have the one or the other past account to settle. There are large groups of ethnic Russians who ended up living in a foreign country after the Soviet Union's dissolution and now feel discriminated against. They call for support from the motherland. To make matters worse, nobody can tell when and where the expansion will end: even Belarus and Ukraine, both having long borders with Russia, are now listed as possible member states. The military intervention in Georgia was a signal towards European capitals.

The question of Turkey has been discussed very emotionally in Europe. Only a tiny part of Turkey is geographically in Europe, and the country is generally identified as being dominated by Islam. Millions of Turks live as expatriates in the EU, with the level of integration being subject of a heated public debate. Many people ask: where will the EU's expansion stop if we now expand into Asia? The EU has hard economic and security interests in the Middle East, Iraq, and Iran - all of them being political and military minefields.

These interests are combined with a disastrous incapability of the EU to act, especially after the EU Constitution has failed so miserably. The issues of a Core Europe (consisting more or less of the old members) and of a Europe of Two Speeds have been discussed repeatedly. The French successfully pressed for the formation of a Mediterranean Union, and the five Nordic countries have their own alliance, including one non-member (Norway) and only one country with the Euro as its currency (Finland). The much-touted Common Foreign and Security Policy is so far little more than a beautiful concept. To provide just one East Asia related example to illustrate this: the EU itself, the UK, Italy, Germany and most other member states have established diplomatic relations with North Korea; France, a key player in the EU, has not.

More trouble is in stock. Poland agreed with the U.S. to deploy parts of the missile defense shield on its territory. So did the Czechs. The Germans keep more or less quiet but are not amused. Former Chancellor Schröder is the head of a consortium that builds a gas pipeline from Russia through the Baltic Sea to Germany - around Poland. Warsaw is furious, because it will be deprived of the chance to do what Belarus has done three months ago: open and close the valve and make Europeans who depend on Russian natural gas feel the cold. But Poland also has a point. In the past, this nation suffered heavily from being kicked around by its two big neighbors, the last time by Stalin and Hitler. Being a shrimp between whales has never been an exclusive Korean domain. The Poles have many historical reasons not to trust Berlin and Moscow, and the painful process of reconciliation is still ongoing.

The major parties at the Six Party Talks do not want the EU to join as a strong and active player. The whole arrangement is already complicated enough. And the EU does not want to burn its fingers, despite its strong but rather diffuse general interest in denuclearization and human rights. If it were part of the official negotiations, the EU could win little. But it could end up offending at least one, if not both, of its key economic and strategic partners. The EU has made it very clear that it does have a stance on the North Korean issue, and it does act as a mediator. In the end it may be ready to be part of the solution, but it does not want to be involved in the negotiating process at this point in time. The EU has important foreign policy interests that are closer to its territory, such as former Yugoslavia, migration from Northern Africa, the Eastern expansion, Russia, the Middle East, Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran. It does not need another worry.

This is disappointing for many. But hoping for Prince Charming to arrive on his white horse and solve everything is hardly adequate to find a solution. Korea would do better by focusing on its own options and capabilities.

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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