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SOUTH KOREA'S PURSUIT OF CLOSER TIES: THE IMPORTANCE OF EU ENGAGEMENT ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA

**WRITTEN BY: FEDERICO CAFARELLA
AND RAPHAËL DEGRAEVE**



WRITTEN BY

FEDERICO CAFARELLA AND
RAPHAËL DEGRAEVE

EDITED BY

STEF CLEMENT

SUPERVISED BY

PAUL DYBJER

Introduction

The relationship between the European Union (EU) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, commonly known as North Korea) has mostly been characterised by tension, limited engagement and strained diplomatic ties. Although the DPRK has embassies in most European countries, the relationship remains largely formal and marked by infrequent high-level interactions (EEAS, 2022). The EU has consistently condemned the DPRK's unlawful weapons programmes and called for the complete denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula in line with the international community's stance (Council of the European Union, 2023). Direct diplomatic engagement between the EU and the DPRK has been limited and there have been few substantial efforts to improve relations or foster dialogue.

In contrast, the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) has established closer ties and engaged extensively with EU members (Reuters, 2023). The country expanded trade and diplomatic relations with various EU member states, promoting economic cooperation, cultural exchanges and political dialogue. While the DPRK's isolation and provocative actions hinder its relations with the EU, the ROK's active engagement and alignment with EU principles foster a more constructive and multifaceted partnership (Gracianteparaluceta, 2023). South Korean President Yoon Suk-Yeol's participation in the 2023 NATO summit in Lithuania showcases this proactive role (Reuters, 2023). President Yoon is looking for the EU's support in enhancing international security cooperation in response to growing threats from North Korea and tensions related to China. While pressure on the ROK to provide weapons to Ukraine persists, Yoon's administration remains cautious given Russia's influence over the DPRK, with Pyongyang recently affirming its support for Moscow, both logistically and politically (Shin, 2023).

EU and NATO's cooperation with South Korea

On 22 May 2023, President of the European Council Charles Michel, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen and South Korean President Yoon Suk-Yeol issued a joint statement in Seoul, reaffirming their commitment to the complete denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula (European Commission, 2023). They called upon all United Nations (UN) members, particularly those of the Security Council, to respond firmly and collectively to the DPRK's unlawful weapons programmes and implement the Security Council resolutions. The importance of keeping the path to dialogue open was stressed, and the DPRK was urged to immediately cease all actions that heightened military tensions and return to the negotiation table for denuclearisation talks (Reuters, 2023). To this end, the ROK under President Yoon has been actively seeking to strengthen its ties with the EU and NATO to address the security challenges the DPRK poses. Furthermore, Yoon attended the 2022 NATO summit to bolster cooperation in various areas, including security, supply chains, and the ROK's role in the Ukrainian conflict (Kim, 2023).

The focus of the ROK's engagement with NATO aims to address the DPRK's illegal nuclear activities in a unified manner, as well as to support peace restoration efforts in Ukraine through aid packages and assistance in post-war reconstruction. While speculations on potential weapon deliveries to Ukraine surfaced, Yoon's administration has exercised caution over concerns about Russian influence over the DPRK. The upcoming visit to Poland seeks to strengthen economic and strategic ties, including arms trade and nuclear energy cooperation, leveraging the country's reputation for defence exports. This visit also demonstrates support for neighbouring Ukraine and other countries facing similar challenges. The ROK's pursuit of closer ties with the EU and NATO underscores its commitment to addressing the DPRK's issues and contributing to regional and global security (Dana & Kim, 2023).

A new president

The election of Yoon Suk-Yeol brought a turnaround in the ROK's policy towards its neighbour. Few relevant policies were proposed in the election in which President Yoon came to power. However, as regards defence policy, he advocated for a 'first strike policy' against the DPRK in case of an imminent threat (The Economist, 2022). The new government broke with its liberal predecessor's approach to managing tensions with the DPRK, stepping away from the dialogue-focused 'reconciliation' and 'reunification' strategy under the previous President Moon Jae-in (Seibt, 2023). Yoon's National Security Strategy is more hawkish, displaying the DPRK as the 'main enemy' (Seibt, 2023).

The escalation of tensions between the two countries is also related to the latest military developments in the DPRK's arsenal. North Korean President Kim Jong-un is finalising the construction of short-range hypersonic weapons capable of evading the ROK's air defence systems. Additionally, it seems that they have perfected solid-fuel intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) capable of faster launches, reducing the capabilities of interceptions.

Moreover, President Kim for the first time agreed to alternative non-deterrence use of nuclear weapons, hinting at the development of small-yield devices and opening to tactical uses of nuclear capabilities (Isozaki, 2022). In response, President Yoon has ramped up cooperation with the U.S., holding its largest joint exercise in five years in concomitance with the 70th anniversary of the establishment of the military alliance. The drills consisted of live fire exercises aimed at 'annihilating' President Kim's army in case of an attack (Madhani, 2023).

Overall, the ROK and the U.S. have cultivated a strong relationship, with President Yoon completing his second state visit during Biden's administration. Nevertheless, views on the ROK's nuclear reaction capabilities are not aligned between the two partners regarding Seoul's potential response and their nuclear reaction capabilities in case of an attack from the DPRK. Yoon has recently advocated for domestic nuclear capabilities to counter the rising nuclear arsenal of Pyongyang. Many South Koreans are concerned that the U.S. may not be committed to Seoul's defence at any cost when the DPRK's missiles increasingly threaten to hit American territory. Moreover, the possibility of an administration change in 2025 increases this fear (The Economist, 2022).

Domestic support for increased nuclear capabilities remains high, so President Yoon's once-unimaginable rhetoric is one he can afford. Raising the stakes on the matter is also useful for exerting pressure on China. The prospect of additional nuclear weapons placed on its border is not in Beijing's interest, especially if they are of American origin. Nevertheless, Yoon faces constraints in implementing reforms as his party has a parliamentary minority, at least until the general elections in April 2024 (Madhani, 2023).

During the current confrontational phase with the DPRK, the ROK is primarily working with the United States. However, the ROK would highly value additional engagement from other international partners, such as the European Union, to address the situation. Brussels and Seoul share a common concern regarding deteriorating US-China relations, which is considered to be of fundamental importance for stability in the region. Moon Jae-in, Yoon's predecessor, appointed a special envoy to the EU for the first time. Since then, Seoul has had special regard for its relationship with the EU (F.R.S., 2022).

An area in which significant improvement could be made is the EU's approach towards the peninsula, with member states currently taking different positions on the DPRK. Similarly to the ROK's envoy to the Union, the EU could, for instance, send a special envoy to the Korean Peninsula in order to plan a coherent strategy for the region and increase cooperation with the actors (F.R.S., 2022). Lastly, it is worth noting the improvement in relations between the ROK and Japan following a series of meetings between their respective leaders, Yoon and Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. This comes after a yearlong dispute over unresolved wartime reparations and trade conflicts. With Beijing becoming increasingly assertive, political alignment between Seoul and Tokyo allows for a much-needed thaw in relations between the two regional powers, to the delight of the United States, which seeks to step up the three-way partnership between the states (The Associated Press, 2023).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the relationship between the European Union and the DPRK remains strained, characterised by limited engagement and tension. While the EU condemns the DPRK's unlawful weapons programmes and advocates denuclearisation, direct diplomatic engagement has been minimal. Conversely, the Republic of Korea (ROK) under President Yoon Suk-Yeol has pursued closer ties with the EU and actively engaged with its member states. Yoon's administration has sought to strengthen security alliances and cooperation, particularly with NATO, to address the challenges concerning the DPRK. The ROK's proactive engagement with the EU underscores its commitment to regional and global security. Additionally, improved relations between the ROK and Japan contribute to a three-way partnership with the United States.

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