

The EU and North Korea: Engaging Kim Effectively

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*Dr Ramon Pacheco Pardo*¹

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This paper expresses the view of the author(s) and not the European Institute for Asian Studies

¹ Dr Ramon Pacheco Pardo is a Senior Lecturer in International Relations and King's College London and Co-Director of the London Asia Pacific Centre for Social Science

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Effective engagement should be based on reciprocity from North Korea, but also in understanding Pyongyang's goals better. It should not be considered a reward for bad behaviour. Rather, it should be approached as a means to protect the interests of the international community and the EU itself. Sanctions and international isolation have not worked as expected. New sanctions adopted on April 29 to follow the 'Iranian model' consistent on targeting the government's economic resources related to nuclear proliferation might be more effective. Nevertheless, to support peace and stability in the Korean Peninsula and at the global level, modifying Brussels' approach towards engagement with Pyongyang could yield the desired effect.

North Korea's Arguments

At the risk of oversimplifying, North Korean behaviour is based on four arguments. To begin with, Pyongyang is developing a nuclear deterrent to protect itself from American and South Korean aggression and in the absence of dialogue. As for proliferation, it is necessary to raise hard cash amidst ongoing economic problems. Regarding the human rights situation, it is a by-product of North Korea remaining technically at war and having to protect itself against internal enemies. Finally, economic reform is designed to improve the existing socialist system.

Regardless of one's views about these arguments, effective engagement would require using them as a starting point. They are not new. If nothing else, North Korea has consistently presented these arguments in its official media and in meetings with foreign interlocutors. We should therefore assume that Pyongyang holds them true.

Yet, these arguments point out at one of the key driving forces behind North Korea's behaviour: a feeling of isolation. Pyongyang believes that it is both alone – with no real friends since the collapse of communism – and misunderstood – by Westerners and neighbours alike. Effective engagement on the part of the EU should aim at highlighting that the door for integration in the international community is open. After all, this has been the EU's approach towards China, Vietnam and, more recently, Myanmar.

Economic Engagement with North Korea

Pyongyang's disruptive behaviour over the past few years has not stopped Brussels from implementing actions to engage with the Kim regime. Under the belief that isolation will not serve to address the concerns of the international community, the EU has

implemented a policy described as 'critical engagement'. This policy mixes carrots and sticks. The former include several economic and political mechanisms designed to achieve Europe's goals. A modified version of these mechanisms holds the potential to influence North Korea's behaviour.

EU Engagement with North Korea

Type	Mechanism
Economic	Aid and assistance
	EU-funded development projects
Political	Political dialogue
	Education and research programmes

Aid and assistance should continue to be strictly linked to humanitarian and emergency goals. Yet, there could be scope to expand these goals. It is no exaggeration to say that North Korea suffers from a chronic humanitarian disaster. Malnourishment and health problems are common outside the capital. Thus, the EU could decide to expand the definition of the 'most vulnerable' who are the main beneficiaries of its largesse. This could include North Koreans who can feed their families but struggle to do so on a regular basis. Meanwhile, areas such as improved agricultural production and adequate housing could become EU objectives under its humanitarian and emergency policy. North Korea has deficiencies in both of them. A modified aid and assistance policy along these lines would be useful to provide indirect support to the EU's human rights policy, since a healthier and less deprived North Korean population should be less vulnerable to state-sanctioned violations. Such a policy would also be helpful in supporting the country's development by allowing the population to focus on the future rather than on the immediate need of securing food.

Similarly, the scope of EU-funded development projects has the potential to be increased to cover new areas that Pyongyang is seeking to reform. Avoiding sectors linked to the development of nuclear and missile technology should remain a top priority. But the Kim regime is trying to improve its infrastructure and develop its tourism and gaming industries, as well as its financial sector. North Korea has also become part of the international garment industry. And it has long sought to modernise its mining sector. These and other examples show that the North Korean economy has the potential to become bigger and more diversified. The EU could decide to make use of its development projects to cover a wider variety of sectors. Developing them would reduce the need for North Korea to use proliferation to boost government revenues. Furthermore, Brussels could possibly reach different groups within North Korea's society. Indirectly, this could help to improve the human rights situation in a similar way to the aid and assistance policy.

Political Engagement with North Korea

Turning our attention to political engagement, the current dialogue should not disappear. The EU should insist that a regular political dialogue is not optional. Even when other actors such as the Obama administration are reluctant to engage in talks with Pyongyang, Brussels would be better served by keeping its own. This would help to give the EU a distinct profile, while also allowing Brussels to act as an intermediary for third parties. A regular political dialogue would allow for discussion of the human rights

situation in North Korea – the human rights dialogue has been suspended since 2013. Potentially, the existing dialogue could also be presented as a goodwill mechanism to discuss North Korean concerns, including sanctions and development.

Education and research is the engagement mechanism with greater long-term potential. North Koreans find it difficult to access training opportunities overseas due to the country's poor relations with most countries. Possibilities include the implementation of an education strategy to increase the skills of North Koreans. From business to technical and scientific skills, the North Korean population needs training in modern practices. This is essential if the country is to follow in the development path of China or Vietnam. Also, a population with better skills and in contact with foreign experts should be less vulnerable to human rights violations. For example, labour rights could be part of EU-funded education programmes. And economic empowerment tends to reduce political vulnerability. The incentives fuelling nuclear and WMD proliferation could potentially also be reduced if the brightest North Koreans have a wider range of career options.

Modifying the EU's engagement approach in the ways described should serve to show the Kim regime that it is not isolated. Its arguments would be addressed with concrete actions. And these actions might be better suited to improving the human rights situation in North Korea and reduce the alleged need for proliferation than current policies are.

