

Op-ed

Europe Needs to Update its North Korea Policy

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Despite growing awareness of North Korea's asymmetric capabilities and its strategic alignment with authoritarian powers like Russia, the EU's policy remains outdated and fails to reflect the growing threat.

Europe's approach to North Korea has stagnated into strategic irrelevance. Initiated with optimism in the early 2000s, the EU's policy of 'critical engagement' aimed to reduce tensions, uphold non-proliferation norms, and promote human rights. While the essence of critical engagement remains sound in principle, the policy in its current form is outdated and fails to reflect the developments North Korea has undergone over the past two decades. There is a pressing need for a Critical Engagement 2.0 – an updated strategy that takes into account North Korea's evolving threat posture and its integration into authoritarian networks.

Europe's Approach to North Korea: From Early Engagement to a Peripheral Status

The European Union's (EU) policy toward North Korea is underdeveloped and increasingly disconnected from current realities. This is especially striking when contrasted with the optimistic beginnings of the relationship in the early 1990s. Following the adoption of its first Asia strategy in 1994, the EU pledged to raise its profile in the region, including through active engagement with North Korea. This period saw the establishment of trade relations, humanitarian aid programs, and political and human rights dialogues.

Formal diplomatic ties were established in 2001, and the EU consolidated its approach with the publication of a DPRK Country Strategy Paper for 2001–2004, prioritizing humanitarian aid and sustainable development. The EU was also drawn into security issues on the Korean Peninsula, joining the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organisation (KEDO) in 1997. EU engagement was bolstered by South Korea's Sunshine Policy and optimism stemming from the US–DPRK Agreed Framework.

However, this early momentum soon faded. Relations began to deteriorate in 2003 after the EU sponsored a UN Human Rights Commission resolution criticizing North Korea, prompting Pyongyang to suspend its human rights dialogue. The same year, the EU adopted the European Security Strategy, framing proliferation as ‘potentially the greatest threat to EU security’ and aligning European policy more closely with that of the US, particularly on sanctions. As North Korea’s nuclear ambitions escalated, culminating in its first nuclear test in 2006, EU policy hardened into what became known as ‘critical engagement.’ This approach sought to reduce tensions on the Korean Peninsula, uphold the non-proliferation regime, and promote human rights.

Yet in practice, EU engagement steadily eroded. The collapse of KEDO in 2006, and the EU’s exclusion from the subsequent Six-Party Talks, marked the beginning of Europe’s gradual disengagement. By 2015, political dialogue had ceased altogether, and in recent years, EU involvement has been largely limited to scaled-back humanitarian assistance. Over three decades, Europe’s relationship with North Korea has shifted from promising economic, diplomatic, and humanitarian engagement to near-total irrelevance.

North Korea remains a peripheral concern in Europe’s overall security calculus and rarely accompanied by concrete policy proposals

To be sure, North Korea does feature intermittently in key European strategic documents, such as the 2003 European Security Strategy, the 2016 EU Global Strategy, NATO’s 2022 Strategic Concept, and the UK’s 2023 Integrated Review Refresh, where it is consistently framed as a nuclear and proliferation threat. More recent documents reflect a growing awareness of North Korea’s asymmetric capabilities – particularly in cyber, intelligence, and disinformation – and its strategic alignment with authoritarian powers like Russia. Yet despite these developments, North Korea remains a peripheral concern in Europe’s overall security calculus, often bundled with other so-called ‘pariah states’, and rarely accompanied by concrete policy proposals.

The Need to Rethink Europe’s Policy on North Korea

Under Kim Jong-un, North Korea has dramatically escalated its provocations – not only through missile and nuclear tests, but also via grey-zone tactics. Just this year, North Korea has already conducted multiple missile tests, stolen \$1.5 billion in cryptocurrency, and invested heavily in military capabilities, including a 5,000-ton naval destroyer project.

While large-scale missile tests have momentarily decreased, throughout last year, Pyongyang has intensified covert operations along the inter-Korean border, deploying GPS jamming, noise blasts, and trash-filled balloons. These provocations are part of a broader strategy that includes deepening military ties with Russia, reportedly supplying Moscow with up to 5.8 million rounds of artillery ammunition – potentially 40% of Russia’s total stockpile – since August 2023. This support has helped prolong the war in Ukraine, with direct implications for European security.

North Korea’s destabilizing influence extends beyond Europe’s eastern flank. Weapons linked to Pyongyang have surfaced in the Middle East, further raising concerns about proliferation risks. Meanwhile, Europe is increasingly exposed to North Korea’s sophisticated cyber operations. North Korean operatives posing as freelance IT workers have infiltrated European companies, stealing funds

to finance weapons programs. State-backed groups have carried out cyberattacks targeting critical sectors, including defence, aerospace, and nuclear technology.

The regime's human rights situation remains dire. The 2014 UN Commission of Inquiry concluded that North Korea is responsible for crimes against humanity, including torture, executions, arbitrary detention, and political prison camps. Yet, international efforts to hold Pyongyang accountable have stalled, largely due to obstruction by China and Russia at the UN Security Council.

Russia, in particular, has become a critical lifeline for North Korea, providing food, fuel, military technology, and diplomatic protection. Their partnership was formalized in 2024 with the signing of a Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, which includes mutual defence commitments. Russia's veto of the UN Panel of Experts on North Korean sanctions has further weakened the international sanctions regime. China, while more cautious, continues to shield North Korea diplomatically.

In this environment, North Korea is no longer an isolated rogue state but an active participant in an emerging axis of authoritarian powers – including Russia, China, Iran, and others – seeking to undermine the rules-based international order. For Europe, this new reality demands a fundamental reassessment of its approach to North Korea.

Critical engagement 2.0

A renewed approach to North Korea is needed, based on a comprehensive evaluation of the EU's critical engagement strategy. The new approach must recognize two crucial facts: all three objectives of critical engagement (reducing tensions, preventing non-proliferation, and improving the human rights situation) have been unsuccessful.

The EU should consider releasing Critical Engagement 2.0 in response to changing geopolitical dynamics and North Korea's evolving threat posture. This approach would be based on the following five pillars.

Pillar 1. Deterring DPRK–Russia Military Cooperation

Europe must address the growing relations between North Korea and Russia through robust measures. It should document and expose arms transfers used in Ukraine and apply targeted sanctions to intermediaries and North Korean entities supporting Russian military efforts. Furthermore, the EU should increase intelligence-sharing with NATO and Indo-Pacific partners. Aligning its North Korea policy more closely with its response to Russia's aggression will send a clear signal of Europe's strategic coherence. Focusing on North Korea-Russia relations overcomes a shortcoming of the previous approach which has mostly siloed North Korea from Europe's broader approach to authoritarian alignment. In this way, the policy can allow Europe to treat North Korea as part of a wider authoritarian threat network, reinforcing the need for strategic coherence across regions.

Pillar 2. Reinforcing Non-Proliferation and Denuclearization Norms

Europe should adopt a leadership role in strengthening non-proliferation norms. This includes supporting UN Security Council resolutions and promoting interdiction efforts under the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). EU or NATO should also actively take part in or cooperative with the multilateral sanctions monitoring team, a mechanism established in October 2024 to support the implantation of UN sanctions on North Korea. The EU should also establish a standing EU–South Korea dialogue on non-proliferation to harmonize threat assessments and response strategies.

The EU’s role as a neutral, values-driven actor positions it well to serve as a mediator or convenor in multilateral forums

Pillar 3. Cybersecurity and Sanctions Enforcement

To counter North Korea’s rogue behaviour in cyberspace, Europe must strengthen its cyber resilience and sanctions enforcement. This involves investing in cyber defence capabilities, increasing information sharing through EU institutions and NATO, and targeting front companies and cryptocurrency laundering networks tied to North Korean actors. The use of the EU’s cyber sanctions regime to penalize DPRK-linked cybercriminals should be significantly expanded.

Pillar 4. Advancing Human Rights and Accountability

Europe, as a normative power, has a responsibility to keep human rights at the centre of its North Korea policy. This should include continued support for the UN Special Rapporteur on North Korea, and the strategic use of the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime to target individuals responsible for crimes against humanity. In addition, the EU should amplify North Korean defector voices, support international accountability mechanisms such as the International Criminal Court, and ensure that human rights conditions are included in any future diplomatic engagement.

Pillar 5. Norms-Based Diplomacy

Diplomatic engagement with North Korea remains necessary, but it must be grounded in clearly articulated principles. The EU should not pursue talks for the sake of optics but should instead condition any diplomatic overture on North Korea’s tangible steps toward disarmament, de-escalation, and human rights reform.

The EU’s role as a neutral, values-driven actor positions it well to serve as a mediator or convenor in multilateral forums, provided that basic conditions are met. Engagement through humanitarian or cultural channels may be possible in parallel, but these should not compromise the overall integrity of the policy. Coordination with the US, South Korea, Japan, and other partners is essential to prevent diplomatic fragmentation.

Conclusion

North Korea today presents a vastly different threat landscape than it did when Europe first adopted its policy of critical engagement. Its growing military cooperation with Russia, illicit cyber activities, regional provocations, and deepening role in the global authoritarian network have fundamentally altered the strategic equation. Europe can no longer afford to view North Korea as a peripheral or isolated challenge and it is essential for Europe to update its approach.

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