Can Europe Help Break the North Korea Impasse?

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by Glyn Ford and Soyoung Kwon

PALO ALTO, Calif. -- The European Union is showing a new independent stance on foreign-policy issues as the logic of its industrial and economic integration plays out in the international arena.

Already the EU has taken a distinct and independent approach to both the Israel-Palestinian conflict and the nuclear crisis in Iran. Now it has broken ranks over the Korean Peninsula, fed up and concerned with the failure to resolve the ongoing crisis over North Korea's development of nuclear arms.

Reflecting this new stance, the European Parliament this week passed a comprehensive resolution on the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and nuclear arms in North Korea and Iran:

It urges the resumption of the supply of heavy fuel oil (HFO) to North Korea in exchange for a verified freeze of the Yongbyon heavy-water reactor, which is capable of producing weapons-grade plutonium, to avoid a further deterioration in the situation. At the same time it is calling for the European Council and Commission to offer to pay for these HFO supplies.

It urges the Council of Ministers to reconsider paying 4 million Euros of the suspension costs for KEDO (the Korea Energy Development Organization) to South Korea to ensure the continued existence of an organization that could play a key role in delivering energy supplies during a settlement process.

It demands that the Commission and Council request EU participation in future six-party talks, making it clear that the EU will in the future adopt a "no say, no pay" principle in respect to the Korean Peninsula. Having already placed more than $650 million worth of humanitarian and development aid into the North, it is no longer willing to be seen merely as a cash cow. This view was backed in the debate by the Luxembourg presidency and follows a line initially enunciated by Javier Solana's representatives last month in the Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee.

It urges North Korea to rejoin the NPT, return to the six-party talks and allow the resumption of negotiations.

The EP cannot substantiate U.S. allegations that North Korea has an HEU (highly enriched uranium) program or that North Korea provided HEU to Libya. It has called for its Foreign Affairs Committee to hold a public hearing to evaluate the evidence. "Once bitten, twice shy" is the consequence of U.S. claims that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction.

The world order is changing; the EU -- like China -- is emerging as a significant global power economically with the euro challenging the dollar as the global currency (even prior to the latest enlargement from 15 to 25 member states, the EU's economy was bigger than that of the United States). Speaking at Stanford University earlier this month, former U.S. foreign policy adviser

Zbigniew Brzezinski pointed out that the EU, U.S., China, Japan and India will be the major powers in the new emerging global order. Since the new Asia will have three out of the five major players, he stressed the importance of engaging with it.

How will those already in play respond? Some may claim that statements by North Korea welcoming the EU's involvement and participation are merely polite, inoffensive small talk that cannot be taken seriously. Yet there have been a spate of pro-EU articles appearing in Rodong Sinmun, the daily newspaper of the Central Committee of the Korean Workers Party, since 2001.

Of 128 EU-related articles between 2001 and 2004, a majority praised Europe's independent counter-U.S. stance, emphasized its increasing economic power and influence, and heralded its autonomous regional integration. Rodong Sinmun portrays the EU as the only superpower that can check and balance U.S. hegemony and America's unilateral exercise of military power.

North Korea's perception of the EU is well reflected in articles such as: "EU becomes new challenge to U.S. unilateralism"; "Escalating frictions (disagreements) between Europe and U.S."; "European economy (euro) dominating that of the U.S."; "Europe strongly opposing unilateral power play of U.S.," and so forth.

Concurrently, North Korea has pursued active engagement with the EU by establishing diplomatic relations with 24 of the 25 EU member states (the exception being France). It is not necessary to read between the lines to recognize North Korea's genuine commitment to engagement with the EU based on its perception of the EU's emerging role on the world stage.

The Republic of Korea has publicly welcomed the prospect of EU involvement, while China wishes to go further and engage in bilateral discussions with the EU on its new policy toward the North. Russia will follow the majority. The problem is with Japan and the U.S.

In Japan, opinion is split by hardliners in the Liberal Democratic Party who view problems with North Korea as a convenient excuse to justify the abandonment of the Peace Constitution. They don't want a quick solution until crisis has catalyzed the transformation of Japan into what advocates call a "normal" country.

The U.S. expects an EU financial commitment, but not EU participation. The neocons believe that EU participation would change the balance of forces within the talks inexorably toward critical engagement rather than confrontation.

The question is whether the EU's offer will paint the U.S. into a corner or trigger a breakthrough. Will U.S. fundamentalists outmaneuver the realists who favor a diplomatic rather than military solution? Only time will tell.

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