

# **Post Congress Outreach to North Korea: Making EU Global Actor**

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**by Dr. Solomon Passy, in Sofia**

*The author is the former Bulgarian Minister of Foreign Affairs (2001-2005) and Founding President of the Atlantic Club of Bulgaria. He was re-elected as the Club's President in 2009 after 8 years in government, during which time he held office as OSCE Chairman-in-Office (2004), Chairman of the UN Security Council (2002,2003) and Chairman of the Parliament's Foreign/Foreign, Defence and Security Committees (2001, 2005-2009). In this article Dr. Passy explores the scope for the European Union to fulfill its role as a global player on the world stage by playing a leading role in reaching out to North Korea in the interests of international security and the eventual unification of the Korean peninsula.*

The Lisbon Treaty created new institutional arrangements for the European Union, including the establishment of the two new posts of President and High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (in other words a sort of combined EU Foreign and Defence Minister). These measures provide the encouragement and legal authority for Europe to realise its long-term goal of becoming an effective actor on the global stage with regard to foreign and security affairs. An important test of these ambitions will be the extent to which the EU is seen to be involved in global issues as a whole.

Recent developments on the Korean peninsula are a stark reminder that the Korean problem is one of the most visible and long-standing global issues we face – one that involves every other significant actor on the global stage apart from the European Union. The EU is in fact conspicuously absent from the process.

A quick glance at those who are involved makes this abundantly clear. The Six Party Talks bring together the US, Russia, China, Japan and South Korea. Under a UN Security Council Resolution of 1950, the UN and seventeen of its members, including France, the UK, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Greece, Turkey, Canada and Australia are also involved.

To be fair, the EU does provide agricultural assistance to The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), it does seek opportunities to provide development assistance and it has voiced concerns for the human rights situation in DPRK. But while these steps might be appropriate for a humanitarian non-governmental organisation such as the Red Cross, they are hardly sufficient as the platform of an intergovernmental which claims, according to the Lisbon Treaty, to be a genuine political actor on the global stage.

My personal experience with regard to North Korea is best illustrated by my visit to Pyongyang in July--August 2007, one of the most challenging missions I undertook as Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Close relations between Bulgaria and the DPRK go back a long time. Dozens of North Korean diplomats and officials have been educated in Bulgaria and continue to speak fluent Bulgarian. The DPRK Embassy in Sofia is the regional hub of North Korean representation in Europe and covers several other countries, some much larger than Bulgaria. Although bilateral relations are very different from 20 years ago, the DPRK continues to trust and respect Bulgaria. For our part, we continue to offer scholarships to North Korean students.

For these reasons the US requested me to convey a message to the government in Pyongyang, suggesting that if they were to follow the example of Libya and get rid of their nuclear programme, the same advantages would be extended to them as Libya had gained after voluntarily relinquishing its WMD programmes.

The timing, in 2007, was perfect. After almost nine years we had just successfully negotiated the release of the Bulgarian medics held in Libya. Another precedent relating to our role in Libya goes back to 2003 when -- under the Bulgarian Presidency of the UN Security Council -- a formal Presidential Statement was issued on behalf of the UNSC welcoming Libya's decision to abandon its WMD programme. There was therefore a certain logic about asking Bulgaria to be the messenger in the context of North Korea.

My visit to Pyongyang happened to be the first of a high-ranking Bulgarian official since the fall of the communist regime of Todor Zhivkov in 1989. He is still remembered in DPRK as a trusted friend of Kim IL-sung and therefore still commands the respect of many North Koreans. The seemingly irrelevant fact that, by coincidence, I was the one who occupied Zhivkov's former office in the Bulgarian Parliament was, much to my surprise, an essential factor. For the North Koreans, to have inherited the office of Kim IL-sung (who is mummified and on show for visitors to revere in his own former office), was something permissible only to God! This enabled me to build even more upon the relationship that had existed between Kim IL-sung and Todor Zhivkov.

There was another piece of know-how that I had borrowed from my experience with Col. Gaddafi in Libya. As in Tripoli, I had with me my 13 year old son. For him this was a lesson in democracy but it provided me with a valuable certificate of openness, much-needed to break the ice in a highly defensive atmosphere characterised by suspicion and distrust. In the glare of high level politics it is easy to forget the importance of making a connection at the human level.

It seems that the message the Allies were delivering to the North Koreans, courtesy of Bulgaria, did not fall on deaf ears. The rapprochement between the two Koreas began in the fall of 2007 with a historic meeting between the two leaders. Shortly afterwards, the tower of the nuclear reactor at Yongbyong was destroyed. This was politics with big stakes to play for but we may be forgiven for thinking that Bulgaria played a small but essential part.

My visits to both North and South Korea made me realise that there was a huge potential for the European Union to contribute positively to the resolution of this conflict and sixty-year old relic of the Cold War. Accordingly, during the next couple of years I tried to encourage both Javier Solana, the EU's High Representative, and EU Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner, to try to bring about EU engagement with the pacification of Korea and with its ultimate unification as its goal. Maybe my timing was just wrong – it was the eve of European elections and the make-up of the Commission was about to change. For whatever reason, nothing came of these endeavours.

Today, the North Korean issue is once again on the agenda of the UN Security Council. In the same time the DPRK Party Congress paved the way for a new generation of the Kim dynasty to inherit the rule of the country. These provide a new opportunity for the EU to take an active part in supporting the Six Party Talks and the efforts of the UN. Among the 27 members of the EU there are now a number of countries which the DPRK feels it can trust, giving the EU a much better and more compelling chance of influencing Pyongyang than earlier manifestations of the Union.

Moreover there has been a tendency within the DPRK to see the other five participants in the Six Party Talks as part of a conspiracy – or as they put it, “a conspiracy of our neighbours against our sovereignty”. The involvement of a new big broker in the discussions in the form of the EU, which cannot be seen as a hostile neighbour, could have a significant and beneficial fresh impact on progress.

In parenthesis, another crucial role for Europe to the south of DMZ, the Demilitarized Zone, could be performed by the EU members of NATO which may take over the role of some of the 30,000 US troops now deployed in South Korea – but that is something for discussion outside just the EU framework.

Any future EU policy towards North Korea needs to identify the EU's specific, unique contribution with regard to the DPRK. Should it just emulate the positions adopted by the five other parties to the Six Party Talks, or could it add value with a new specifically EU input to them?

One natural solution is for the EU to offer its know-how in order to mitigate if not immediately eliminate the effects of the largest single issue facing the DPRK, namely its self-imposed isolation from the rest of the world. The major cause of this isolation is the extent of the auto-immunity that the government has put in place to prevent information crossing its borders in either direction.

When I compare this situation to my experience of other countries which have become serious causes of concern to the international community from a security point of view – countries such as Afghanistan, Burma, Cambodia, Cuba, Libya, Iran, Iraq and the former Yugoslavia - the DPRK is by far the most isolated and information-deprived nation of them all. Addressing this fundamental weakness lies beyond the mandate of the Six Party Talks and of the UN Security Council Resolution on North Korea. However it does represent at least one significant area

where the EU could play a historic role – and in so doing help to bring closer the eventual goal of unifying the Korean peninsula.

According to the religious calendars of the world, Judaism is in the year 5771, the Chinese in 4647 (or even later), Christianity is in 2010 A.D. and Islam in 1431. The unique North Korean Juche calendar begins with the birth of Kim IL-Sung on April 15, 1912, placing the country in the year 99. But there is good news too, making the ruling party in the DPRK unique – apart from the fact that it is the only party in this country. This is the fact that the Party emblem includes a calligraphy brush, a traditional symbol denoting the world of intellectuals, writers and scientists. It signifies that this is a nation which is intent on ensuring that its future is far better than its past. The North Koreans are more than ready for that and the European Union could be the key that unlocks the future.

In becoming a global actor – which it is inevitably bound to be – the EU cannot simply distance itself from conflicts affecting civilisation of the magnitude of the Korean issue.

According to the Lisbon Treaty the responsibility for assuming the leading role in shaping EU policy in relation to Korea belongs to the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy. However that calls for pioneering decisions and fulfilling that responsibility in terms of formulating policy and negotiating its acceptance exceeds the scope of a single Office.

The European Parliament, the Commission and the Member States need to play their full part in supporting the High Representative in this endeavour. And they need to do so without delay – 60 years of shying away from the problem is enough.