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How to avoid the repetition of history: the case of North Korea

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To most European audiences, the issue of the North Korean nuclear programme and its intercontinental ballistic missile development is a neglected topic that is not frequently covered by the international news unless there has been a severe provocation. Most often, North Korea is seen as a country with a young, ruthless leader, and a people who show cult-like support to its regime.

The history of denuclearisation on the Korean peninsula has been short yet rocky. From the early 1990s, when the two Koreas agreed on the idea of their denuclearisation, to the North's first nuclear test in 2006, and subsequent sanctions by the United Nations, and of course, the historical summits between Chairman Kim and US President Trump - North Korea has been showing the world that they want one thing and one thing only: security.

I believe that history so far can offer some lessons about denuclearisation on the Korean peninsula. Rephrasing this, it raises the question of "how do we lead the hermit kingdom to the international stage?" As the Chair of the Foreign Affairs and Unification Committee at the South Korean National Assembly, I would like to share some insight into the matter.

It is important to realise that North Korea argues that it is developing its nuclear programme to safeguard its security rather than actively attack its opponents. Its nuclear programme would pose a significant threat to stability in the East Asian region, especially if it were to be combined with Chinese or Russian programmes. Currently, the North tests its missiles, and every test performed adds to tensions within the region and stakeholders in the area, such as the United States and the European Union.

The key to calm, and eventually, peace and prosperity in the region is successful engagement with the North. Former President Trump attempted this already during the US-DPRK summits, but ultimately these broke down as they failed to communicate detailed guidelines for denuclearisation. Since then, efforts to engage with the country have been close to non-existent.

Meanwhile, the international sanctions regime against the DPRK continues. However, so far, these sanctions have

hurt the country's people the most. The purpose of the sanctions was to target Pyongyang's nuclear programme. On the contrary, due to the sanctions, Pyongyang has channelled its scarce resources to fund its regime and military. There has been a severe side effect caused by the international sanctions; hampered inflow of food, aid, and medicine into the country. Rather than stopping the regime's pursuit of nuclear power, it is hurting North Korea's people. This has further been exacerbated by the halt of border trade with China due to COVID-19.

I want to underline the current food crisis in North Korea. The ordinary people in North Korea are suffering from malnutrition, and they are on the verge of a food crisis as Covid-19 halts the World Food Programme's humanitarian aid program in the North. You might ask, "why are you not urging regime change?" The world leaders only focus on regime change, which makes Pyongyang feel even more insecure. Hence they are developing the means to protect themselves. Furthermore, they are increasingly turning into a hermit kingdom, isolating themselves from the outside --in this globalised world with an intertwined worldwide economy, the North cannot survive as an isolated country.

I believe it is South Korea's duty to help North Korea's people so that they will not die because of hunger. The humanitarian aid programme will help improve North Koreans' livelihood, and I believe it will lead to change in the country. Contrary to popular belief, North Korea is a Confucian society where people prioritise taking care of their families and seeing the regime as their own family. However, unlike violent radical extremist groups in the other parts of the world, they would not give up their lives for their religious beliefs or god even. In this Confucian society, the ordinary people of North Korea want to live

independently and improve their livelihood like any other people in the world.

North Korea's Confucian belief explains why they are developing their nuclear weapons programme. Although it has made the region unstable, North Korea's thirst for security shows that they do not want to become a subordinate country to China nor Russia. This gives the international community a chance to bring North Korea as a sovereign nation into the world. We already witnessed similar developments in the 1970s, from the Vietnam War to the rapprochement between the United States and Vietnam. Much like the history of Vietnam, North Korea can be another 'Vietnam', helping check China's rise and keeping the balance of power in the region.

I want to ask for Europe's support to engage with North Korea so that the regime will openly accept international help for its people. Suppose we earn the North Korean people's hearts and minds through our coordinated approach. In that case, I believe there would be a window for the international community to make a positive impact on North Korea, not to mention denuclearisation. So far, the DPRK has always responded clearly when the US has publicly initiated contact through diplomatic channels, supported by gestures of goodwill to show sincerity. Therefore, I strongly recommend opening a diplomatic channel with the North's regime to discuss stepping-stones for a better future, such as a possible peace deal or an official declaration to end the Korean War with conditions for Pyongyang to accept international humanitarian aid to help its people.

As long as North Korea remains the hermit kingdom that it is right now, it will likely remain an unresolved issue in the region. There have been efforts by the South Korean government to encourage interaction with North Korea. From former President Kim Dae Jung's sunshine policy to the current President Moon Jae In's endeavour, the South has been pushing humanitarian assistance to help North Korean people whilst promoting diplomacy to achieve permanent peace on the Korean peninsula. However, the South alone cannot accomplish this goal. When former President Trump engaged with the DPRK, it gave the nation legitimacy and put it on the world theatre as a proper country. I believe that it is time for our European audience to start acknowledging that the DPRK is a legitimate player in the world arena, with which diplomatic and economic channels should be opened, with a view to seeking a future-oriented solution to this unresolved issue.

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Both Koreas are still technically at war and under Armistice status since 1953. DPRK's quest for security and survival through a nuclear program is dating back to the Korean War, when NK territory was under the threat of the use of Nukes, but never allowed by US President Truman. Any plan for a peaceful future in the Region will have to clear mistrust in that field and to guarantee security for All " A. Nass, Korea and N.E. Asia expert (Defense and Diplomacy, History and Strategy, Business Development).

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