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North Korea's Nuclear Challenge: Lessons from the Cold War

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Could Cold War models of confidence building and arms control be a source of ideas for restructuring approaches to engagement in Northeast Asia on containing an eliminating nuclear threats? The European Leadership Network's Ambassador Trezza thinks there are ideas worth exploring. Particularly he argues that the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty between the Soviet Union and the US might offer a model for rebasing a dialogue on security on the Korean Peninsula.

The recent tests of a nuclear device and of more powerful delivery systems by the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK) are a further confirmation of the growing military menace coming from the DPRK and an additional blow to the prospects for a negotiated solution to the DPRK nuclear crisis.

Quoting a spokesman from the South Korean MFA, the Yonhap news agency recently indicated that both Washington and Seoul now agree that dialogue with DPRK is not an effective tool "to denuclearize the communist country." The priority now is "to utilize strong sanctions and pressures to force Pyongyang to give up nuclear weapons." The US Ambassador to the UN, Samantha Power, visited South Korea to discuss ways to tighten UN sanctions which, together with military countermeasures, are now at the top of the two countries' agenda. The option of a US pre-emptive strike was floated at a recent US vice presidential candidates' debate. The fact that both the US and South Korea face presidential elections respectively this year and the next further complicates the situation and makes more remote the prospect that the forum of the "Six Party Talks" among the major players of the Korean crisis will be resumed any time soon.

The European Union (EU) is not a major player in this scenario and yet it cannot be considered as a mere observer. Europeans were the first to open up to the "Hermit Kingdom" in the 17th century: two centuries later the major European powers were the first to establish diplomatic relations with Seoul. Though many European countries were drained by World War II, they nevertheless contributed to the Korean War efforts. Their investment and trade with a country that has become one of the most industrially and technologically advanced in the world are among the highest, and Europe's stake in the stability of the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia more broadly has constantly been growing. In the late nineties the European economy and trade were deeply affected by the financial and economic crisis which hit several Asian countries and in particular Korea (the "Asian financial crisis" also referred to as the "IMF Crisis" especially in South Korea). During the darkest moments of that crisis the principal European capitals offered financial rescue.

The European Union and its member states have also been involved in efforts to solve the drama of the Korean partition. They strongly supported the "Sunshine Policy" of South Korean President Kim Dae Jung vis-à-vis the North and the then promising dialogue between the US and the DPRK. The EU became a shareholder of the KEDO consortium called to implement the 1994 Agreed Framework between Washington and Pyongyang. In coordination with the US and South Korea, Italy took the lead in establishing relations with the DPRK, a measure later adopted by most EU countries.

The chancelleries in both Seoul and Pyongyang very carefully studied the process started in 1975 by the Helsinki Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), leading to the fall of communism, the end of Europe's partition and the reunification of Germany. A rapprochement based on military confidence-building measures, cultural cooperation and people-to-people contacts was the essence of this process. The fact that this process could not prevent the present growing tension in Europe does not diminish its merits as a tool that helped manage transition to a post-Cold

War Europe. Confirming their interest in this European experience, both Japan and South Korea became the first Asian

Partners for Cooperation in what became the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Inspired by the Helsinki process, the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI), launched in 2013 by South Korean President Park Geun-hye, makes Europe a natural partner of this Asian initiative.

The protagonists of the Korean crisis could also find inspiration in Europe's experience with the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. In 1979, to respond to the deployment by the USSR of hundreds of such weapons, NATO adopted a "dual-track decision" which foresaw the deployment of an equivalent number of ballistic and cruise missiles on the soil of five European countries: Belgium, Germany, Italy, Netherlands and United Kingdom) and a parallel negotiation leading to the reduction/elimination of both arsenals. The NATO missile deployment was basically a bargaining chip to initiate the negotiation. The INF was successfully concluded, the whole category of the intermediate range missiles was destroyed, and the INF became like the CSCE, one of the instruments through which the Cold War in Europe was eventually brought to a close.

The features of the INF treaty do not precisely correspond to the present situation on the Korean Peninsula. The INF focused on a single category of missiles with no reference to warheads whereas in the Korean case, missiles, warheads and nuclear production facilities would have to be involved. The analogies mainly rest on the fact that, to respond to the North's emerging nuclear threat, the US and South Korea, as in INF case, are planning the deployment in the South of a more sophisticated and robust US land-based missile defence system, the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD). This plan not only antagonizes the DPRK, it also raises alarm in Moscow and Beijing because it would further strengthen the existing US-led missile defence network in East Asia and might have the capacity to intercept Russian and Chinese missiles. But this deployment could hopefully become a lever for China and Russia to convince Pyongyang to come to terms on its nuclear and ballistic projects and to lay the basis for a serious negotiation. The withdrawal of the THAAD project on one hand, and of the DPRK nuclear and missile program on the other, might become the core of a new bargain.

In view of the present impasse, and of the time which will be necessary for new administrations in Washington and subsequently in Seoul to become operational again, the EU should take the lead and explore the premises for a new negotiating process. The experience acquired by the EU during the past decades in dealing with the Korean issue, and its more recent role as counterpart to Iran in the successful deal to ensure Iran's nuclear program will be exclusively for peaceful purposes are appropriate credentials to facilitate a new initiative.

History rarely repeats itself. What worked for Europe in 1975 and in 1987 might not produce equal results in the East Asian scenario and deploying weapons with the ultimate purpose of their elimination is costly and may sound irrational: but it might actually work.

*Carlo Trezza was Italy's Ambassador to the Republic of Korea. In 2010 he was appointed by Secretary General Ban Ki moon as Chairman of his Advisory Board on Disarmament matters. He also served as Chairman of the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva and more recently of the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR). He coordinates the Italian European Leadership Network group.

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