



# DPRK: it takes more than two to talk

by Miruna Bouros

Last week saw the holding of the 7th Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) in Pyongyang – the first of its kind since 1980. Central to the four-day proceedings was the validation of Kim Jong Un as the country's new leader, as well as the apparent restoration of the WPK apparatus as a key entity in state affairs. On this occasion, Kim was also designated chairman of the WPK. Addressing the delegates on the second day of the Congress, he reaffirmed the state's intent to develop and maintain a nuclear arsenal but vowed that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) would not use the weapons unless it was attacked by another nuclear-weapons state.

In addition, guided by the policy of *byungjin* ('parallel development'), the North Korean leader also announced a five-year plan for economic development. While most of this was expected, it remains to be seen to what extent the plans will be implemented given the DPRK's increasing isolation and the extensive sanctions regime put in place by the international community.

In the current circumstances, it seems unlikely that negotiations on the nuclear issue can be restarted in the near future. The DPRK's 4th nuclear test held back in January and the various ballistic missile tests which followed until the very eve of the WPK Congress sought to underline the regime's determination to go through with its plans to acquire full nuclear capability. For now, only a thorough implementation of international sanctions might convince Pyongyang to change course.

## More sanctions, same result?

Adopted in March this year, UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2270 mandates inspections of cargo originating from, or transiting through, the DPRK and a ban on imports of certain natural resources including coal, iron, gold, and rare earth minerals, while allowing some exceptions for trade pursued 'for livelihood purposes'. These are by far the most comprehensive measures adopted to date against the DPRK, aimed at restricting the state's ability to pursue its nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles programmes by limiting its access to financial resources and encouraging a return to talks.

In addition, several actors including the US and South Korea, as well as the EU, have also adopted supplementary bilateral restrictions targeting the DPRK's access to foreign currency. South Korea has ended inter-Korean cooperation at the Kaesong industrial complex, where 55,000 North Korean workers were employed by South Korean firms. The US has also toughened its own trade and financial sanctions, enabling secondary application against the DPRK's trading partners if they do not abide by the restrictions mandated by the Security Council. It is, however, highly possible that the regime will continue to extract the necessary funds for its nuclear agenda by putting additional pressure on the North Korean people.

The success of these latest sanctions will likely depend on their thorough implementation by all

states, and especially by China, the DPRK's main trading partner, which in the past has maintained a cautious approach towards its neighbour and ally. Speaking at the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), a regional diplomatic forum held on 28 April in Beijing, Chinese President Xi Jinping offered his personal assurance that China will fully comply with UNSCR 2270 and also noted that China "will absolutely not permit war or chaos on the Korean peninsula". He restated China's support for a diplomatic solution and called for a timely resumption of the Six Party Talks.

Between tougher sanctions and calls for renewed negotiations, China will likely try to avoid destabilising North Korea by inflicting extensive damage to its already weak economy out of concern for the consequences of a humanitarian crisis unfolding on its doorstep. It remains to be seen how far Chinese influence can – and will – be used to respond to North Korea's provocations.

### What chance for dialogue?

The original Six Party Talks brought together the two Koreas, the US, China, Japan and Russia to address nuclear non-proliferation and the denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula. First convened by Beijing in 2003, they were eventually abandoned after North Korea left the format in April 2009. An early breakthrough in the form of the September 2005 Joint Statement was never implemented. Moreover, the leadership transition which followed Kim Jong Il's death in 2011 saw renewed emphasis being put on possessing nuclear weapons, to the point where the state's constitution was revised in 2012 to describe the country as 'nuclear-armed nation'. Since then, military activity and tests in this field have been pursued at an accelerated pace.

The international community is united in condemning Pyongyang's provocations. While there is consensus that a resolution of the nuclear issue can only come through a concerted diplomatic effort and all parties should strive towards the establishment of a sustainable peace regime on the Korean peninsula, the US and South Korea in particular ask that the DPRK take credible and verifiable steps towards denuclearisation prior to the resumption of talks in order to prove its commitment to the process. North Korea and China, on the other hand, would rather move forward with no preconditions. The diplomatic track thus currently remains blocked.

With this in mind, there may be a role which the EU can play to address this stalemate. It could use

its relations with the various stakeholders, and especially the DPRK and China to encourage the re-establishment of a credible dialogue. While in the past the EU has been less active in the Asian theatre, the creation of the EEAS along with policy measures aimed at expanding Brussels' global presence have seen South Korea, China and Japan become the EU's strategic partners.

In this context, and given the successful resolution of the Iran case not long ago with Europe in a lead role, it may be possible for the Union to assist its partners in North-East Asia in laying the groundwork for a new round of talks, either by encouraging China to exert more pressure on the DPRK so it agrees to negotiate, or by communicating directly with Pyongyang.

### What role for Europe?

While it did not participate in the initial Six Party Talks, Europe has remained dedicated to the goal of denuclearisation and peace on the Korean peninsula, and has therefore maintained a policy of 'critical engagement' through regular political dialogue with Pyongyang, in parallel to the application of sanctions. The 14th session of this official dialogue was held in June last year in the DPRK. A dialogue on human rights issues was also attempted from 2001 but later stalled. Contact with North Korea is also maintained through the European Parliament's Delegation to the Korean Peninsula, which holds regular inter-parliamentary meetings with its counterparts in both South Korea and the DPRK, as well as through one of the seven embassies of EU member states currently operating there.

Despite these frequent contacts, however, European representatives have so far not had much success in encouraging a change of policy or a resumption of negotiations within the DPRK. Even so, their ability to reach out to the reclusive regime through this stable diplomatic connection at a time when inter-Korean and US-DPRK dialogues are at their lowest point in decades might provide a much-needed basis for renewed multilateral dialogue in the long run. While in the immediate future sanctions are likely to take precedence over dialogue, Europe's diplomats may yet get the chance to contribute to a much sought after breakthrough.

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