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## The EU and North Korea: sanctions alone are not enough

The European Union adopted a new set of economic sanctions against North Korea. Yet, it is unlikely that sanctions will lead to a solution of the current crisis. Follow-up policies regarding the effectiveness of sanctions implementation, de-escalation, and contingency planning are desirable as well.

On 16 October, amidst continuing tensions surrounding North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes, the European Union adopted a new set of [economic sanctions](#) against the country. These sanctions are the strongest so far, including a total ban on any investments in North Korea. The measures aim to cut off Pyongyang's access to foreign currency, which it might use to invest in weapons programmes and luxury goods for its elite. The new EU sanctions are a logical response to North Korea's continuing provocations. However, it is unlikely these sanctions will make Pyongyang changing its course. Previous rounds of sanctions had little effect. Hence, the EU should look ahead, and consider next steps.

### More effective implementation

Adopting sanctions is one thing, implementing them effectively is something else. North Korea has decades of experience in circumventing sanctions. It effectively uses [illicit trade](#) channels, which only incidentally come to light; the recent [media coverage](#) of the seizure of a Cambodian ship loaded with North Korean grenades with an estimated value of 23 million US dollars is just one

example. Moreover, China is often accused of tolerating much illegal trade across its border with North Korea, to prevent its ally from collapse.

To improve the effectiveness of the new sanctions, the EU should continue lobbying other countries, including China, to implement international (especially UN) sanctions more seriously. For instance, countries could strengthen import and export controls and share experiences about the smuggling tricks North Korea is using. Indeed, the EU ministers agreed on 16 October to actively push for a robust implementation of all relevant UN resolutions by all UN member states. How this will work out in practice, remains to be seen. Dealing with the [cybercrimes](#) such as digital bank robbing, by which the North Korean regime is earning foreign currencies, requires a separate approach.

### De-escalation

Another issue where the EU could play a role is de-escalation. The tensions between North Korea and the US have increased seriously over the past few months. Both

sides now threaten to destroy each other. From the North Korean side, such war-mongering rhetoric is nothing new, but a US President threatening to '[totally destroy](#)' another country is highly uncommon.

The frustration of the US Administration is understandable: North Korea is very close to possessing ballistic missiles with nuclear warheads able to target cities in the US. Much has been tried over the past decades to stop this development: diplomacy, sanctions, 'strategic patience', yet without any success. This failure of the international community is mainly due to the lack of good options; as long as North Korea is able to threaten with war and instability in the region, everyone has opted to preserve the status quo.

The current North Korean regime will never give up its nuclear arsenal. It considers nuclear weapons as a necessary deterrent against a hostile outside world, but also as a requirement for domestic policies. By creating enemies abroad, and developing the means to deter them, the regime in Pyongyang is able to maintain the support of the population. The world will have to accept that neither diplomacy nor further isolation of the 'hermit kingdom' will roll back the nuclear weapons status of North Korea. Military action may, but it carries large risks.

Any military action against North Korea will be retaliated – the regime has to if it wants to maintain its credibility at home and abroad. Even a limited attack against military installations could quickly escalate into a broader regional conflict. North Korea cannot yet strike the US mainland, but in particular South Korea – according to Pyongyang a puppet regime of US occupation forces – would be the victim. North Korea often threatens to turn Seoul into a sea of fire within a day, and this is not just bluster: it has so much [artillery](#) and short distance missiles deployed at the border, only 60 kilometres from Seoul, that South Korea's capital (including many of its ten million inhabitants) is at risk. Japan may be a target for North Korean retaliatory attacks as well, and maybe even China if Beijing decides not to support Pyongyang in a conflict. North Korea will never win a war against

the US and its allies, but before it loses it can do inconceivable harm.

The EU could play a more active role in attempts to de-escalate the situation between North Korea and the US. Currently, none of the major players in the Korean crisis takes the EU very seriously. And to be honest, in many European capitals diplomats say they have no role to play in North Korea and that it is up to the US and China to solve the issue. In September, a group of EU member states tried to organize some [formal meetings](#) with North Korean officials in Pyongyang, but North Korea appeared not very interested. In Washington lobbying efforts by (a group of) EU member states to de-escalate the situation may be somewhat more effective. Those that claim the EU has no role to play, should not forget that for the EU there is much at stake in the region. Apart from the European interests in international stability, security and human rights, these are mainly economic ones. Trade with South Korea, Japan and China is [immense](#). In 2016, EU trade with South Korea was worth [86 billion](#) Euros, with Japan [125 billion](#) Euros, and with China [515 billion](#) Euros. From this perspective, a destabilizing conflict in the region could seriously harm the economies of EU member states. EU lobbying in Washington for de-escalating policies should acknowledge that diplomacy may not cause immediate denuclearisation in North Korea. Yet, diplomacy will at least prevent worst-case escalation scenarios with potentially bloody conflict as a result.

## Contingency planning

Last but not least: is the EU prepared for worst-case scenarios? What if, despite Europe's best efforts, the situation escalates into war? The current tense situation and the escalating threats between North Korea and the US are the [perfect recipe](#) for miscommunication, misperception and miscalculation, possibly leading to a conflict that nobody wants. What if the US requests its European allies to contribute militarily to such a conflict? Are there any plans in the EU or in NATO to prepare for such an eventuality? Is there a consensus view? Or will all this be decided outside the

two institutions on an ad hoc basis, to the detriment of the unity in the EU and NATO?

And what role could Europe have in any post-conflict phase? Even though a conflict would most probably lead to the removal of the regime in Pyongyang, this would only be the start of any military operation. Aside from retaliation by the North Korean armed forces that must be expected, a crucial question is: what to do with North Korea after removing the current regime? Previous regime-change operations such as in Iraq and Libya show that without any adequate follow-up policies, it is a recipe for long-term regional chaos and instability. What to do with 25 million brainwashed North Koreans? Breakdown of the centralized food distribution system – very likely in the event of the regime's collapse – may lead to a humanitarian disaster, causing large flows of refugees (mainly to China). Moreover: what will happen with the enormous number of weapons in the country, including its nuclear, chemical and biological arsenals? Contingency scenarios about regime change in North Korea are generally pessimistic; a mission to stabilise the country runs the risk of turning into a bloody guerrilla war against well-armed citizens who have been drilled to see any foreigner as an

enemy, while the country could become an ungoverned territory enabling terrorists, criminals, smugglers and WMD proliferators to hide and operate. Stabilizing the country (and presumably preparing it for [reunification](#) with South Korea) would take enormous amounts of efforts, including humanitarian, political, military and economic. Who is going to pay for and facilitate such efforts? What role sees the EU for itself in such scenarios? Maybe this issue is discussed on working-level in the EU, but in various capitals there seems to be little interest in the topic. Yet, it would be wise to be prepared in advance to deal with potential contingency situations.




## Conclusion

It is worthwhile that the EU managed to get unity among its member states to strengthen its economic sanctions against North Korea. However, it would be a mistake to think the work is done for now. Economic sanctions alone are unlikely to lead to a solution of the current crisis. Follow-up policies regarding the effectiveness of sanctions implementation, de-escalation, and contingency planning are desirable as well.

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