

UPF UK: Europe's role in the search for peace on the Korean Peninsula

Robin Marsh
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See below for the full video recording.

On 27 June 2024, UPF UK and UPF Europe and Middle East organised a webinar on the theme "How can the European experience be brought to bear on the search for peace on the Korean peninsula?"



[Mr. Humphrey Hawksley, Author, Commentator and Former BBC Correspondent](#)

The programme was opened by Mr. Humphrey Hawksley, Author, Commentator, and Broadcaster; Longstanding BBC Foreign Correspondent, UK, who introduced a video of excerpts of the previous webinar on a similar theme. ([view here](#))



[Major General \(Ret.\) Mats Engman, Head of the Stockholm Korea Center and Distinguished Military Fellow, Institute for Security and Development Policy, Sweden.](#)

Humphrey Hawksley then introduced Major General (Ret.) Mats Engman, Head of the Stockholm Korea Center and Distinguished Military Fellow, Institute for Security and Development Policy, Sweden. ([Video](#))

Major General Mats Engman expressed pessimism about Europe's opportunities to foster peace on the Korean Peninsula, focusing on trust-building as a path to peace and stability. He shared insights from an exchange program at his institute, which involved North Korean guest researchers visiting Sweden and engaging in joint research with South Korean counterparts. This program, suspended due to the pandemic, showcased the value of long-term engagement for building trust.

Major General Engman also highlighted his experiences with the Military Armistice Commission and the Comprehensive Military Agreement, emphasizing the importance of transparency and risk reduction through measures like disarming soldiers and demining the Joint Security Area. Despite these efforts, trust-building activities involving North Korea have stalled since early 2020.

Looking forward, Major General Engman identified four major factors hindering trust-building:

Geopolitical Shifts: The recent summit between Putin and Kim Jong Un, which included an agreement for "automatic military intervention in times of crisis," complicates regional security dynamics and strains the US-South Korean alliance.



North Korea's Nuclear Advancements: The development of new missiles, mobile launchers, underwater launch capabilities, and improved command and control systems increases the risk of military miscalculations.

North Korea's Hostile Stance: The declaration of South Korea as North Korea's principal enemy and the policy shift away from unification efforts.

Pandemic-Induced Isolation: The pandemic has further isolated North Korea, diminishing the limited external support and direct personal contacts that existed pre-pandemic.



Major General Engman concluded with four main points:

Increased Risk of Incidents: Provocations and military activities in the DMZ have heightened the risk of unintended incidents.

Arms Race: The ongoing regional arms race will likely continue, with North Korea benefiting from Russian technical support.

Dialogue Imbalance: North Korea is not in a hurry to engage in dialogue, and the political cost for Europe to engage has risen.

Europe's Diminished Role: Europe, traditionally a facilitator and moderator, has lost influence in North Korea's foreign policy.

Major General Engman called for a discussion on how Europe can regain influence and reengage with North Korea, despite the current challenges.



Responding to questions from Humphrey Hawksley, Maj. Gen. Engman explained that North Korea's growing independence is due to alliances with Russia, Iran, and others, reducing its reliance on Western support. He highlighted China as the key player influencing North Korea, but geopolitical tensions with the US hinder progress. Engman described a developing security architecture in East Asia, with liberal democracies (US, Australia, Japan, South Korea) on one side and authoritarian regimes (China, Russia, North Korea, Iran) on the other. He emphasised the need for dialogue but doubted North Korea's willingness to engage, particularly on denuclearization. Engman suggested Europe should recognize its stake in Korean security and develop a coordinated US-Europe policy to prevent North Korea from exploiting divisions within Europe.



[Dr. Samir Puri, Associate Fellow, UK in the World Programme, Chatham House, UK](#)

Humphrey Hawksley then introduced Dr. Samir Puri, Associate Fellow, UK in the World Programme, Chatham House, UK, who discussed the evolving geopolitical landscape in East Asia while focusing on the implications for the Korean Peninsula. ([Video](#)) Drawing from his experience, particularly with the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, Dr. Puri examined how geopolitical shifts influence regional stability.

Dr. Puri highlighted the drastic changes over the past two decades, such as the defunct Six-Party Talks that included Russia, which can no longer be revived due to the current Russia-West conflict, especially in light of the Ukraine war. This conflict has profound implications for the Korean Peninsula, as evidenced by the burgeoning North Korea-Russia partnership.

He noted that Western narratives about the Ukraine war are not universally accepted in Asia, where many governments advocate for a negotiated settlement rather than a military solution. This perspective reflected broader regional views on conflict resolution and impacts how countries like Indonesia and India perceive security challenges.

Dr. Puri's main message is that Europe may inadvertently learn from East Asia's approach to managing unresolved geopolitical tensions. East Asian security has historically navigated around unresolved disputes, like those involving North Korea and Taiwan, focusing on conflict management rather than resolution. This contrasts with Europe's current approach to the Ukraine conflict, where a total defeat of Russia seems unlikely.

He suggested that North Korea's enhanced relationship with Russia, potentially involving increased military and diplomatic support, represents a significant shift. This partnership could lead to greater

regional security challenges, especially for Japan and South Korea, given North Korea's advancements in missile technology.

Dr. Puri also pointed out that South Korea's relatively moderate stance on sanctions against Russia might position it as a potential intermediary in future geopolitical alignments. However, the overarching concern is that Europe, traditionally lacking experience with prolonged unresolved conflicts, might have to adapt strategies from East Asia's longstanding conflict management practices.



In conclusion, while North Korea's situation offers lessons for Europe in managing persistent conflicts, the reverse learning is limited. The evolving dynamics, particularly the North Korea-Russia-China nexus, underscore the need for careful diplomatic navigation to avoid exacerbating regional tensions.

In the discussion after Dr Samir Puri's speech, Humphrey Hawksley and Dr Puri, examined the complexities of the geopolitical landscape, particularly focusing on the dynamics between major powers. Dr. Puri highlighted the strategic calculations of countries like Russia and China, emphasizing their long-term, multifaceted alliances. They discussed the implications of these alliances for global stability, noting the potential for friction and conflict. Dr. Puri underscored the importance of understanding these geopolitical intricacies, suggesting that Europe's approach to similar challenges could benefit from East Asia's experience in managing long-standing regional tensions.



In conclusion, the webinar provided a comprehensive analysis of the current geopolitical environment in East Asia and its impact on the Korean Peninsula. The insights from Major General Mats Engman and Dr Samir Puri highlighted the complexities and challenges of fostering peace and stability in the region,

emphasizing the need for innovative approaches and international cooperation.

In the Question and Answer session, ([Video](#)) Humphrey Hawksley and Major General Mats Engman addressed the potential for peace on the Korean Peninsula, noting the historical context and current geopolitical constraints. Maj. Gen. Engman highlighted that while Europe's experience in military risk reduction and confidence-building could offer lessons, these approaches need adaptation to fit the Korean context. He was pessimistic about immediate peace prospects, given North Korea's demands and the lack of willingness from the U.S. to concede on denuclearization.

Maj. Gen. Engman recalled a near-war situation in 2015, emphasizing the importance of having experienced and calm military leaders during crises. He suggested that constant exercises and trust-building between military and political leaders are crucial, a system not as well-developed in authoritarian regimes like Russia and China.

Dr. Samir Puri noted that deeper historical analysis could entrench conflicts rather than resolve them, as seen in how leaders like Xi Jinping and Putin use historical narratives to justify current policies. He echoed Engman's view that North and South Korea have vastly different concepts of unification, complicating any prospects for peace. Dr. Puri also highlighted that the changing global economic landscape, with the rise of countries like India and Indonesia, impacts the effectiveness of sanctions and geopolitical strategies.

Maj. Gen. Engman noted that current direct communication channels between the Koreas are nearly non-existent, with North Korea preferring to deal with the U.S. directly. Both Maj. Gen. Engman and Dr. Puri discussed the limited impact of sanctions and the potential for new alliances, such as North Korea's relations with Russia and China, to provide alternatives to Western influence.

They also addressed the possibility of a people-power revolution in North Korea, with Engman skeptical due to the regime's tight control over information and society. Both concluded pessimistically about the short-term prospects for change in North Korea, underscoring the regime's resilience and the challenging international dynamics.



[Mr. Jacques Marion, Chair, UPF Europe and Middle East, France](#)

In his Closing Remarks, Jacques Marion, Co-chair, UPF Europe and Middle East, France, addressed the complex situation on the Korean Peninsula and Europe's potential role in fostering peace amid current geopolitical tensions. Highlighting the recent summit between Russia and North Korea, he noted the new defense pact between these nations and its implications for Eurasian security, involving China and challenging Europe to coordinate its security strategies.

Reflecting on historical context, Mr. Marion reminded us that the Korean War was the first conflict of the Cold War, involving significant European sacrifices for South Korea's freedom and democracy. With Cold War

tensions resurfacing, the Korean Peninsula's division remains a pressing issue.



27th June 2024 1:00 pm BST / 2:00 pm CET

How can the European experience be brought to bear on the search for peace on the Korean peninsula

Speakers:

- Major General (Ret.) Mats Engman**
Head of the Stockholm Korea Center and Distinguished Military Fellow, Institute for Security and Development Policy
- Samir Puri**
Associate Fellow, Chatham House
- MC: Humphrey Hawksley**
Author, Commentator and former BBC Correspondent

2nd Online Webinar

00:00 | 1:18:04

Despite the current low prospects for peace and reunification, Mr. Marion suggested looking beyond the present conflict towards future possibilities. Earlier this year, Kim Jong Un announced a shift in North Korea's focus away from reunification with South Korea. However, Mr. Marion believed this might be a strategic move to gain support from Russia and improve North Korea's economic position, potentially setting the stage for future negotiations.

Drawing on insights from Dr. Glyn Ford, Mr. Marion highlighted North Korea's acknowledgment of its economic disparity with South Korea and its ambition to close this gap if sanctions were lifted. This perspective suggested Kim Jong Un's long-term goal may still include reunification, contingent on economic growth and development.

Mr. Marion also discussed Russia's development plans for its Far East region, emphasizing the potential economic benefits of a peaceful and unified Korean Peninsula. Despite the current Ukraine conflict, Russia's interest in Northeast Asia's prosperity aligns with supporting Korean reunification.

He concluded by encouraging Europe to look beyond immediate conflicts and invest in future cooperation on the Korean Peninsula. Mr. Marion highlighted the growing cultural connections between Europe and South Korea, driven by the "Korean Wave," and suggested that young Europeans' interest in Korean culture and language could foster peace and reconciliation efforts in the region.