

## UPF-United Kingdom: Could a European Approach Reconcile the Koreas?

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**London, United Kingdom** – Expert analysts offered their perspectives on the question, "How can the European experience be brought to bear on the search for peace on the Korean peninsula?" during a webinar on June 27, 2024. The program, organized by UPF-UK and UPF Europe and Middle East, highlighted different viewpoints between East and West.



**Mr. Humphrey Hawksley**, author, commentator, broadcaster and longstanding BBC foreign correspondent, served as moderator. He first introduced **Major General (Ret.) Mats Engman**, head of the Stockholm Korea Center and distinguished military fellow at the Institute for Security and Development Policy, Sweden.



Maj. Gen. Engman 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. However, he said that trust-building activities involving North Korea have stalled since early 2020, and that Europe, traditionally a facilitator and moderator, has lost influence in North Korea's foreign policy, especially in light of closer cooperation between Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean President Kim Jong Un.



The major general further explained that North Korea's growing alliances with Russia, Iran, and others have reduced its reliance on Western support. He highlighted China as a key player, saying that geopolitical tensions with the United States have hindered efforts to work with Beijing. He described a developing security architecture in East Asia, with liberal democracies (United States, Australia, Japan, South Korea) on one side and authoritarian regimes (China, Russia, North Korea, Iran) on the other.

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



Mr. Hawksley then introduced **Dr. Samir Puri**, associate fellow in the World Program at Chatham House, United Kingdom. Drawing on his experience with the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, Dr. Puri examined how geopolitical shifts influence regional stability.

Dr. Puri highlighted that the Ukraine war 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 reflects broader regional views on conflict resolution, he said, and impacts how countries like Indonesia and India perceive security challenges.

Dr. Puri explained that 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.

In the discussion that followed, Mr. Hawksley and Maj. Gen. Engman noted the historical context and current geopolitical constraints that impact prospects for peace on the Korean Peninsula. The major general said 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 U.S. willingness to concede on denuclearization.

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

Both speakers mentioned 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, though neither one is optimistic about short-term prospects for change, given the regime's tight control over information and society.



In his closing remarks, **Mr. Jacques Marion**, co-chair of UPF-EUME, noted the new defense pact between Russia and North Korea and its implications for Eurasian security, involving China and challenging Europe to coordinate its security strategies. Mr. Marion suggested looking beyond the present conflict toward 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 British academic and politician 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.