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Master's Thesis of International Area Studies

**How Covid-19 affected the EU's
foreign policy towards the DPRK**

**A study of the EU's critical engagement policy from
2020-2023**

**COVID-19 가 유럽연합의 대북 정책에 미친 영향
- 2020~2023 년 유럽연합의 비판적 관여 정책에
대한 연구**

August 2023

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How Covid-19 affected the EU's foreign policy towards the DPRK

**– A study of the EU's critical engagement policy
from 2020-2023 –**

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**Submitting a master's thesis of
International Area Studies**

August 2023

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to European diplomats and NGOs leaving the DPRK, which further isolated itself by strict lockdowns and rejections of aid offers. Scholars have intensely studied the EU's pre-covid approach to North Korea, called critical engagement. However, with the Covid pandemic adding a new complex layer to DPRK-EU relations, scholars have yet to uncover the impact the pandemic has had on the EU's critical engagement strategy in the North of the Korean peninsula. The purpose is to figure out challenges and opportunities and derive policy recommendations for the next steps after the end of the pandemic, when European NGO workers and diplomats will be allowed back into the DPRK. This research uses data from in-depth expert interviews and from qualitative analysis of documents such as news reports and scholarly papers. Findings have shown that a consensus among the experts to shift the focus of EU from sanctions back to more engagement. Moreover, while the effect of the pandemic hindered European humanitarian aid to the DPRK, this research illustrated that there are also new opportunities opening from it. The EU can take this as a chance to revise their critical engagement policy towards the DPRK and develop a coordinated plan for taking up diplomatic dialogue and humanitarian aid again. Furthermore, reasons for North Korea's isolation got explored, and have shown that while fear of contracting Covid played an important role, political calculation was also part of it.

Keyword: EU-DPRK relations, Covid-19, International Relations, Sanctions, Humanitarian aid, North Korea

Student Number: 2021-21479

Abbreviations

| | |
|-------|--|
| COVAX | COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access |
| DKOR | European Parliament's Delegation for Relations with the Korean Peninsula |
| DPRK | Democratic People's Republic of Korea |
| EEAS | European External Action Service |
| EU | European Union |
| KEDO | Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization |
| KCNA | Korean Central News Agency |
| NTI | Nuclear Threat Initiative |
| OECD | Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| PRC | People's Republic of China |
| ROK | Republic of Korea |
| SPT | Six Party Talks |
| UNSC | United Nations Security Council |
| US | United States of America |
| WHO | World Health Organization |

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Note on terminology

This paper occasionally refers to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea simply as North Korea. Even though the DPRK is not officially recognized by every country, this research will refer to it as a country or state. The People's Republic of China will be referred to as simply China. Additionally, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially refers to the latest pandemic as COVID-19 and SARS-CoV-2, with COVID-19 being the short version of "coronavirus disease 2019." This paper sticks with the issued names of the WHO, but for easier reading will also refer to COVID-19 simply as the pandemic or Covid-19 for easier reading.

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Chapter I. Introduction

1. Background

Between the end of 2020 to the beginning of 2021, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) saw a mass exodus of foreigners, mainly diplomats and aid workers, leaving the country. This was due to the strict quarantine measures the North Korean government issued, as these restrictions impeded efficient working methods, such as going to the countryside to monitor projects and receive money and machinery from foreign countries, and eventually the closure of the NK borders. After an initial declaration of zero covid cases, in May 2022 the country admitted to a covid outbreak and declared a national emergency. North Korean leader Kim Jong- Un has described the spread of COVID-19 in his country as "a great turmoil in our country since its foundation" (KCNA 2022), but at the same time rejected vaccine offers from other countries. During the pandemic developing countries have been especially vulnerable and been crucially in need for international assistance. In this regard, the case of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is especially of great interest, for this country has a history of denying international support critical for food insecurity, access to health services and clean water. Accordingly, this has also happened during the pandemic when assistance was especially needed in the health sector. While there was an initial hope within the international community that the Covid-19 vaccines could possibly create new possibilities for interaction and might accelerate the process of building a dialogue through providing critical humanitarian aid, as the DPRK refused offers of international assistance, vaccination as a tool to engage North Korea so far has not been proven successful. Therefore, it is crucial to gain insight into the country to understand possible reasons why North Korea rejected the help offers and to understand the country's overall attitude in the matter of the pandemic and humanitarian assistance. One way to gain insight is to access records of foreigners that were living in North Korea during the

pandemic, especially aid workers and diplomats. While main actors involved in the peace process on the Korean peninsula do not have own embassies and extremely limited nationals in the country, reports of countries with closer relationships to the DPRK, such as the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC) and Russia, reflect similar political ideology, twist the narrative, and have a more ambiguous stance. European records from inside the DPRK deliver a more unfiltered picture, which is valuable to US partners for example.

Furthermore, the Korean peninsula is a region with an enormous degree of dynamics, given the issue of rapprochement between the two Koreas as well as the unresolved matter of a peace treaty and nuclear proliferation. The happenings on the Korean peninsula are far from being solely a Korean problem; the country's continuous progress on nuclear programs and missile testing pose threats to the international community. "In the past it was enough for a nation to look after itself. Today it is no longer sufficient" is a quote by the European diplomat Robert Cooper (2003), who was a member of the committee that drafted the proposals for the European External Actions Service (EEAS). This quote describes why there is a need for the EU and member countries to actively participate in shaping international relations also on the behalf of other countries. This political stance is the basis of the EU's foreign action and is crucial to understand the topic of this thesis. In a statement in 2017 in response to nuclear testing carried out by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), the High Representative of the European Union Federica Mogherini stated that the testing is "a grave threat to regional and international security and a major challenge to the global non-proliferation regime" (Mogherini 2017). In addition to the threat the missile testing poses to the international community, human rights are violated in North Korea, creating a need for humanitarian aid from abroad. Therefore, while the DRPK might be geographically distant from Europe, its geopolitical impact is not. Interests of the EU and fields where the EU has a potential to play a more active role include the promotion of peace and democracy, as well as the expertise in denuclearization. The EU was a party in negotiations about proliferation with Iran, along with single EU member states.

Additionally, the EU as an external actor has less interests at stake than other countries that are more involved, such as the members of the Six Party Talks (SPT). Therefore, the EU presents the potential to unlock new approaches not explored yet. This makes it imperative to analyze the EU's policy towards North Korea given the changed global situation under Covid-19, as well as point out future challenges and provide policy recommendations. How the EU and European countries can take a more active role in the Northeast Asia peace process has been subject to scholarly research for many years. However, Covid-19 added a new layer of complexity, so the effect the pandemic had and will have in the future for EU engagement with North Korea is yet to be analyzed. Therefore, EU engagement from 2020 will be reviewed considering the new perspective the pandemic created and pointing out challenges but also new potentials for navigating the DPRK crisis.

2. Purpose of Research

The purpose of this research is to examine the EU's recent security strategies and engagement in the peace process in the Korean peninsula during the Covid-19 era, as well as to examine through first-hand experiences by foreign nationals that resided in North Korea prior, what happened within the country when the pandemic started, which is where this paper claims relevance. While EU engagement has been subject to scholarly debates before, the impact of the pandemic on EU-DPRK relations has yet to be studied. Additionally, this research reviews the influence of EU Member States in the development of European DPRK policy and explores the potential roles of the EU in DPRK relations from the newly emerged angle of the pandemic and its impact. Through in-depth interviews with experts, this study further provides meaningful insights into the country and substantiates this novel research. This research is a valuable addition to EU-DPRK research, as previous scholarly debates did not investigate the effects of Covid-19 on EU-DPRK relations yet. This study will examine new challenges and chances for EU

engagement. This is of great significance as North Korea's nuclear weapons depict a security concern that is not limited to the East Asian region but has a global scope, and uncontrolled spread of Covid-19 in the DPRK depicts a global security risk as it can lead to mutations. North Korea might also deepen its ties with China or Russia requesting aid from them, which in the light of current missile testing might be worrisome. The EU emerging as an actor with a more comprehensive Northeast Asia strategy holds the potential to open new opportunities to initiate and shape a dialogue with the DPRK.

3. Research Questions

This paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. Why did North Korea deny critical international aid and what happened inside North Korea during the pandemic?
2. How did the Covid pandemic affect the EU's critical engagement policy towards North Korea?
3. Can critical engagement be continued to engage North Korea, how should it be altered to adapt to the post-pandemic situation?

4. Hypotheses and Outline

In accordance with the research questions, these are the hypotheses: Firstly, Covid-19 as a global event and North Korea closing its borders influenced EU policy towards the country; secondly, the new factor of the pandemic outbreak creates new opportunities for the EU in its engagement with North Korea. The research question presented in this thesis ("How Covid-19 affected the EU's foreign policy towards the DPRK?") is answered by verifying these two hypotheses. To address and answer this question, this paper's outline is as followed: after explaining the framework and methodology of this paper, a closer look is taken into the relationship between the DPRK and EU and EU member states. Chapter 3 provides a brief historic overview over diplomatic relations between the DPRK

and EU member states as well as showcasing why EU is interested in playing a role in the Northeast Asian peace process. Policy tools of the EU to meet these interests as well as the results so far of EU engagement with the DPRK as examined. The influence of Covid-19 and developments following the pandemic outbreak 2020 are analyzed in chapter four. Firstly, the global impact of Covid-19 on international relations as well as the DPRK's reaction to the pandemic outbreak are described, followed by an evaluation of the EU policy towards the DPRK in 4.3. In this section, vaccination policies, sanctions, and proliferation, as well as humanitarian aid are closely looked into. After that, the EU's critical engagement strategy is studied from the perspective of the pandemic, and challenges as well as opportunities the pandemic brought for EU engagement with North Korea are discussed. Policy recommendations will be derived from the previous discussion. Lastly, the results of the evaluations are summarized in chapter five, where the thesis gets concluded.

Chapter II: Conceptual Framework

1. Literature Review

The ideas of the argument presented in this thesis can be largely divided into two relevant parts: 1) EU foreign and security policy towards North Korea as well as the one of the EU member states, and 2) impact of Covid-19 on North Korea and its international relations, as well as sanctions and humanitarian aid. This paper reviews academic literature related to these two parts.

1-1. EU Foreign and Security Policy towards North Korea and EU Members

Overall, EU engagement with North Korea has been widely discussed over the past years. In his article "No effort without reason" published in 2002, Frank noticed that the EU and its members presented important trading partners to the DRPK, with Germany being the

biggest trading partner from the then 15 EU member states. The EU paid about 280 million Euro in donor assistance between 1995 and 2000, which is slightly less than the 379 million US\$ South Korea paid as assistance to the North. Frank concludes that no actor pays money for projects they are not interested in, and therefore derives from these datasets that the EU showcased interest in getting involved with the DPRK (Frank 2022: 104). Seliger puts forward a similar argument in his works before 2010. He oversaw the EU-DPRK Trade Capacity Project from 2006 to 2009, which sought to make North Korea understand that economic opening does not require a regime change. This capacity-building project by the EU showcases again an interest in North Korean economics and the desire to partake in finding a solution to the politically and economically isolated country. In his essay “The EU and North Korea – more than funding the bill?” from 2008, he argues that while the EU does not have a direct interest in North Korea itself, it does in a peaceful development of the world and has a huge potential to support peace initiatives (Seliger 2008: 79), as the EU has experience in setting up multilateral systems for security, and therefore might provide additional incentives for the North to discontinue its nuclear program (2008: 94). However, in recent years more critical voices towards the EU-DPRK relations emerged and call for a change in policy. Novotna and Ford (2019) blame the strategy to focus too little on engagement and too much on sanctions and suggest that the EU should increase engagement and get more involved with the Korean North. Dehshiri and Shahmoradi have a similar argument, as presented in their article “The EU’s Role in Korean Peninsula Stability: Secondary But Important” from 2019. The two authors do not think that the EU can or would want to take a leading role in international politics towards North Korea. But they express the possibility of the EU to encourage reforms for North Korea and engage further into trust building, which can be important supporting roles in international policies towards the DRPK. In contrast, a stronger role of the EU in DPRK affairs was the goal of The EU High Representative from 2014 to 2019 Federica Mogherini. She voiced at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in 2019 that the EU “can help shape a strong monitoring and

verification system in North Korea” (Mogherini 2019). She therefore suggested that the EU takes the role of a security partner. This role is backed up by the normative nature of European security policy, which seeks to deal with conflicts through dialogue and integration. Furthermore, the EU states on its website that building the EU to be an Asia – Pacific security actor are its major objectives in Asia (European Union External Action: 2016). In its implementation plan on security and defense, the EU declares itself to be a global security provider and that it therefore had the obligation to address conflicts and instability in other regions through preventive action (Council of the European Union 2016: 11). The EU’s approach towards North Korea is called critical engagement and can best be described as a carrot and stick approach and seeks to convince North Korea of the benefits of international cooperation and the rule of law.

1-2. Impact of Covid-19 on EU - North Korea Relations

As the Covid pandemic presents a very recent event, starting in 2020 and is not yet overcome, which makes it challenging finding adequate academic literature about it. However, there are few scholars have researched the impact of Covid-19 on international relations. Overall, there seems to be consensus that the pandemic had impacted international relations. Yang (2020) remarks that non-traditional security issues will further increase significantly, which could sustainably change global politics and security strategies and drives up international cooperation for specific issues. In contrast, Biscop thinks that the pandemic will not challenge the balance of power in the international arena, but thinks that the EU is in a position to instrumentalize Covid-19 to positively impact international politics and their own position, as “this could be a chance to try and strengthen global governance in areas such as health, and to organize the EU’s interdependence with China and others on a more rational basis” (Biscop 2020:3). Drezner even argues that the pandemic will not have any long-term effects on international politics in his 2020 article “The Song Remains the Same: International Relations After COVID-19”. In his point of view, the pandemic will not be seen as a

transformative changing point in a few decades from now on. Kim and Kim explore the impact of Covid on the DRPK in their 2022 paper “Global health diplomacy and North Korea in the COVID-19 era”. The authors observe that “the withdrawal of all international humanitarian workers from North Korea due to the extreme COVID-19 quarantine measures taken by Pyongyang, as well as the international sanctions in response to its pursuit of nuclear and missile technologies, demonstrate that health aid to the country requires diplomatic actions beyond humanitarian appeals by UN and NGO agencies” (Kim and Kim 2022: 931). With the EU also involved in international sanctions against the DPRK regime and European NGOs having residence offices in North Korea, European countries have the means to participate in shaping DPRK relations and international policy.

1-3. Critical engagement

Critical engagement is mentioned as the official EU policy towards the DPRK not only on the EU’s website, but also in academic studies about the relationship between the EU and the DPRK. The policy strategy was launched in 2003, as a result of North Korea admitting running a secret highly enriched uranium program. Pardo (2021) also names three more factors of why the EU chose critical engagement as a strategy towards North Korea. With the first reason being the nuclear program, the second reason the author names is the more assertive approach of the Bush administration in the US towards North Korea in 2001. Another reason the authors identifies is the termination of Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) by the Bush government in 2003, a direct result of the discovery of the nuclear program run by the DPRK. Lastly, North Korea focused more on extending and developing its nuclear program than pushing forward economic reforms, which is another reason for the EU to adopt the critical engagement policy. The goal of critical engagement is described on the European Union External Action website as “Its goals are to support a lasting diminution of tensions on the Korean peninsula and in the region, to uphold the international non-proliferation regime and to

improve the situation of human rights in the DPRK.” (EEAS 2022). Bondaz (2020a) describes critical engagement in his article “From critical engagement to credible commitment: a renewed EU strategy for the North Korean proliferation crisis” published by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) as a carrot and stick approach, mixing rewards with punishment. He further calls the strategy a failure, as the DPRK has continued its nuclear program and did not improve the human rights situation. The author further thinks that the diplomatic influence of the EU has declined, another reason why he considers critical engagement unsuccessful. Bondaz further quotes Professor Ko Sangtu, who classified the strategy of critical engagement as “active pressure” from 2013 onwards, as then the sanctions increased. Instead, the EU’s North Korea policy is described by the author as passive and reactive. The former active political approach, that was part of critical engagement by providing incentives and rewards for cooperation, used to consist of active diplomatic efforts, aid donations, being a trade partner and providing energy assistance to North Korea through KEDO. However, since 2013, the author states that these incentives were no longer given, marking a shift towards being more critical and less engaged. Alexandrova explores in her essay “The European Union’s Policy Toward North Korea: Abandoning Engagement” published in 2019 the shift from the EU’s engagement until 2003 to adopting critical engagement. Bilateral dialogue stalled, and donations were no longer accepted by the DPRK, and economic exchange started to decrease. The author thinks that critical engagement prevented the EU from playing an important role on the Korean peninsula, and that diplomatic achievements got lost due to the increased critical aspect in the strategy. Alexandrova thinks that despite the name being critical engagement, from 2003 onwards the EU abandoned its engagement with North Korea. However, she also states that becoming increasingly critical after North Korea intensifying the nuclear program and not improving their human rights situation, is the only good option the EU has had.

2. Definitions

This study is hypothesizing that the pandemic had an impact on the relationship between the EU and the DPRK and can create new challenges and opportunities. In the light of this, defining the EU as an actor. In this paper, the EU as an actor represents the EU institutions that is concerned the most with EU foreign policy and security. Generally, when this research refers to the EU, mostly the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the European Commission, which uses the Common Foreign Policy and Security Policy of the EU (CFSP) as determined by the European Council is meant. Additionally, the High Representative for the CFSP is important, as official statements and interviews reveal the EU's foreign policy strategy and approaches as well. This is as these are the organs dealing with foreign policy and setting the agenda for foreign policy within the Union. The EU Parliament conducts DKOR, the delegation for relations with the Korean Peninsula which also includes the DPRK. The EU in this context is to be understood as a supranational institution, however, in relevant fields the individual accounts and relations with the DRPK of the member states are also taken into account. An intergovernmental perspective is used to explain the attitudes and opinions of the members states, as they play a part in how the common foreign policy is formulated. The Council of Ministers which represents the interests of member states, takes the lead in formulating the foreign policy which then is implemented by the European commission. Therefore, member states can influence the implementation of the EU's external policy in line with their own national interests. Thus, individual member states interests will also be considered when relevant in this paper. Another crucial term that needs to be conceptualize is critical engagement. Critical engagement is the EU's foreign policy approach to North Korea in the early 2000s, and consists of three main pillars, which are political dialogue, humanitarian assistance, and sanctions. It can be best described as a carrot and stick approach, mixing aid and dialogues with sanctions.

3. Research Methodology

Given the fact that this study is qualitative in nature, the methods to be employed will be a document analysis and in-depth expert interviews. This paper seeks to take a deductive approach to discuss what strategy and how the EU implements it in North Korea as well as how humanitarian responses were impacted by the pandemic. The timeframe to analyze the EU's strategy and impact is between 2017 and 2022 and was chosen as an example to gain insight into the pre- and mid- Covid-19 situation and to ensure the most recent developments are included in this research. A qualitative content analysis will be employed to verify the hypotheses and answer the research questions. For this method, relevant data is collected and analyzed in document analysis and expert interviews.

To further explore EU policy towards the DPRK, it is helpful to examine ideas promoted in speeches or policy and strategy papers from EU officials as well as inquire into reports from relevant conferences and meetings. Policy reports, speeches by politicians or government officials, and status reports from the EU-DRPK political dialogue and high-level exchanges constitute important primary sources. Latest updates, news, and state press releases are also crucial for a detailed investigation. News and reports will be extracted from both local and international news agencies. Primary sources from North Korea are incredibly hard to access, which is why information on what happened inside the country after the outbreak of covid-19 is covered by the interviews conducted with experts. Government documents and speeches are to some extent accessible through KCNA (Korean Central News Agency) Watch and NK News. Additionally, information concerning the Covid situation in North Korea were of broad interest to US and EU media and have been regularly reported on.

3-1. Qualitative Analysis

One method to be employed will be a document analysis. This study is based on the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact, so a retrospective approach will be used for the start

of the pandemic and its visible impact before 2023, and future impacts will be based on the interviewees opinions as well as outlooks and predictions given in research papers and other document sources. Primary data will be extracted from EU and DPRK governmental speeches are used as well as secondary data including journals, articles, and books derived from research institutions and news agencies with a relevant focus. Government white papers and political status reports from the Workers Party of Korea (WPK) constitute important primary sources of the discourse on North Korean strategies and policies during the pandemic. Opinions and political strategies can be indicated by government leaders' expressions, events, and official policies. The intensity of diplomatic relations, opinions about sanctions, participation in humanitarian aid and donor payments, as well as economic linkages indicate the intensity of relations between EU member states, the EU and the DPRK and can reveal information on how these got affected by Covid-19 and what the political agenda with the DPRK will be in the future. Special attention will be given to the DKOR archive where minutes of meeting between DKOR MEPs and EEAS officials can be accessed, as well as reports of delegation visits to the DPRK. This can also help to understand the North Korean view on foreign political matters. In addition, data provided by the European Commission, more specifically the European Emergency Disaster Response Information System (EDRIS), will be analyzed to determine humanitarian aid flow into North Korea from the EU Commission and from various European countries individually. The EU Aid Explorer provides data of aid contributions by EU member states, based on the European Commission data and data from other donor countries according to the IATI, secondly the aid data of the European Commission combined with other EU donor data reported to the OECD, and third data from the EU Trust Fund.

3-2. Expert in-depth Interviews

Given that this study seeks to include recent events such as the covid pandemic, it is necessary to broaden the methodological scope and in addition to the primary literature

resources, conduct in depth expert interviews for another primary source as well. In this research, the interviews are semi-structured, as this allows to ask the same major questions to all interviewees, but also leaves room to alter specific questions and make them more appropriate depending on the individual experiences and fields of expertise. Personalizing questions are valuable to extract the most data for this specific research topic, and open questions are necessary to do justice to the subject matter. A variety of virtual meetings on zoom, personal meetings, and e-mail interviews were conducted depending on the availability of the interviewee. The following table provides an overview over the experts that were interviewed, their profession, exact date of the interview and the chosen method.

| INTERVIEWEE | ROLE | METHOD | DATE |
|----------------------|---|---|---|
| Thomas Schaefer | Former Ambassador for Germany in the DPRK from 2007 – 2010 and from 2013 – 2018. Author of “From Kim Jong Il to Kim Jong Un: How the Hardliners Prevailed: On the Political History of North Korea (2007 - 2020)” | E-Mail and personal communication via Zoom Call | 24 th March and 5 th April 2023 |
| Dr. Gerhard Sabathil | 2008 – 2015 Director in the EU Commission and the European External Action Service for East Asia and the Pacific. 2015 – 2017 ambassador of the EU in South Korea | Personal communication via WhatsApp Call | 20 th March 2023 |
| Dr. Bernhard Seliger | Resident Representative of Hanns Seidel Foundation in Seoul since 2002 | Meeting in Person | 30 th March 2023 |
| Dr. Tereza Novotna | Fellow at the Korea-Europe Center at Free University Berlin; research about the EU’s foreign | Meeting in Person | 24 th March 2023 |

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| | policy towards North Korea crisis and in Northeast Asia; 2017-2018 Korea Foundation Visiting Professor at the EU Center at Seoul National University | | |
| Dr. Andreas Oswald | 2019-2021 country director for the DRPK of Welthungerhilfe | Personal communication via Zoom Call | 29 th March 2023 |
| Prof. Jiyoung Kim | Professor at the National Institute for Unification Education in the Ministry of Unification | E-Mail | 22 nd March 2023 |
| Prof. Ruediger Frank | Professor at the Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Vienna | E-Mail | 22 nd March 2023 |
| Kyudong Kim and Jong Do Sohn | Program officer and Director-General of Korean Sharing Movement | Meeting in Person | 2 nd December 2022 |

The main questions asked are:

Q1: Why do you think the pandemic failed to facilitate dialogue-building despite North Korea needing vital humanitarian assistance?

Q2: Did the EU sanctions and humanitarian aid approach to North Korea change significantly after the start of the pandemic?

Q3: Are there differences in sanctions and humanitarian aid from EU countries/ ROK and the US?

Q4: Do you think that the EU should develop its own North Korean strategy and emerge as its own actor to help facilitate dialogue, for example as a mediator?

Q5: What challenges and opportunities arise specifically for the EU's policy towards North Korea since COVID-19?

Q6: What are your impressions of the overall attitude of the DPRK towards foreign aid?

Depending on the method of the interview and the expertise and availability of the interviewee, adjustments were made, and questions adjusted. This is documented in the attachments.

4. Scope and Limitation

This study is limited to the investigation of EU and EU member states policy towards the DPRK, with a focus on recent developments that have been influenced by the pandemic. The impact of Covid on as well as the general relation of the US and ROK with North Korea is not researched in this paper. Therefore, further research is necessary to investigate the effect of Covid-19 on US and DPRK relations as well as on ROK and DPRK relations. Moreover, this research relies on official statements, press releases or speeches issued by states or international institutions to extract information about recent developments and the current policy strategy of the EU towards the DPRK. However, findings derived from this are rather indicators for a certain policy course or stance than a fact that this policy will be implemented. Data problems might occur in researching data provided by the DPRK, for almost no data is provided in this case or the liability of this data is questionable. The North Korean news outlet KCNA, which is used as a resource for data about North Korea in this research, is state-run and controlled. In the freedom of press index of Reporters without Borders, KCNA as the only official state media of North Korea ranked 180th out of 180 (Reporters without Borders 2023). Despite it being carefully calibrated by the Worker's Party of Korea and the North Korean government, KCNA depicts an important source with information about North Korean propaganda and ways of thinking. Furthermore, as this research discusses most recent events, future developments on the Korean peninsula and EU policy towards it, and the relation between EU and DPRK will either further prove the argument of this paper or weaken it. Therefore, more research on this topic in the future is necessary.

Chapter III. DPRK - EU Relations

1. Historic Overview

Eastern European countries and East Germany rendered significant support to North Korea during and after the Korean War, including, for example, the reconstruction of the destroyed city of Hamhùng by Eastern Germany between 1955 and 1962. Considering the Eastern Enlargement of the EU in 2004, the past ties between these eastern European countries and the DPRK have the potential to positively shape future EU-DPRK relations to a certain degree (Frank 2002: 90). The EU provides humanitarian aid to the DPRK since the floods in 1995 and the subsequent North Korean appeal for international support. So far, the EU provided more than €135.7 million in humanitarian aid funding and supported over 130 projects (EU Commission 2019). The aid includes improving health services, food assistance and access to clean water and sanitation. In the EU's "Towards a new Asia strategy" from 1994, it is stated that the non – proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, e.g. nuclear weapons, depicts an important element of the CFSP and also offers the opportunity to initiate or continue dialogue on this topic with Asian countries (Commission of the European Communities 1994:11). Since then, the EU supported projects aiming at alleviating the humanitarian situation in North Korea and provided economical guidance and assistance to help Pyongyang built an infrastructure as the foundation for future growth. In 1997, through Euratom, the EU joined KEDO as a member of the executive board. KEDO was established in 1995, with South Korea, Japan, and the USA as its original members. The organization was designed to support the goals of the 1994 Agreed Framework between the US and the DPRK, which included the dismantling of North Korea's nuclear program. Until 2002, the EU's contribution to KEDO amounted to 15 million Euro annually, mainly for fuel oil, and additional bilateral contributions from EU member states (EU 2002: 14). In 2006, the Executive Board of KEDO decided to terminate the LWR project, as the DPRK continuously failed to

perform the steps required in the KEDO-DPRK Supply Agreement for the provision of the LWR project. Although KEDO was demised, with its participation in the organization the EU showed its commitment to further stability and peace in the region through non-military means through critical engagement. Critical engagement is the current EU policy towards North Korea and depicts a carrot and stick approach of incentives and pressure. While after its inception in 1995 the policy supported a more active approach, with Pyongyang's admitting of running a nuclear weapons program in 2002, the EU changed the direction of its policy towards North Korea to be more passive and took a more critical stance. According to the EEAS website, the policy aims "to support a lasting diminution of tensions on the Korean peninsula and in the region, to uphold the international non-proliferation regime and to improve the situation of human rights in the DPRK" (EEAS). The EU committed in its CFSP in 2003 to support the US in addressing global security matters and, with the intensification nuclear activities in North Korea, the EU condemned Pyongyang's provocations for example with imposing sanctions. Sanctions are the central branch of the EU's critical engagement, or restrictive measures in official EU nomenclature. While sanctions are part of the EU foreign policy toolkit since the 1980s, the EU did not impose sanction to the DPRK until 2006, which marks the year of the first nuclear test. In terms of the recent events of the pandemic, the EU was part of the COVAX campaign that also offered AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccines to North Korea, however, Pyongyang rejected the offer due to concerns about side effects (as quoted in Cha 2021) While the DPRK was happy to start political dialogue as it meant some degree of international recognition, generally, the government views any cooperation with foreign countries as a threat to the regime's stability (Schaefer e-mail communication 24th March 2023).

2. Diplomatic Relations with the EU

Diplomatic relations between the DPRK and the EU do not exist, one reason for this is that not all EU members acknowledge that the DPRK is a proper state. Hence the EU cannot establish an embassy in North Korea the way they could in South Korea, however, multiple EU member states maintained diplomatic relationships with Pyongyang pre-covid (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Poland, Romania, and Sweden). Sweden is the EU member with the first established diplomatic relations, being the first Western nation represented in the DPRK from 1975. Since then, the Swedish embassy also serves as a representative for the US as well. While the EU does not have an official embassy in the DPRK, similar to the US having the Swedish embassy as their representation in North Korea, the EU's Food Security Office serves as the unofficial EU embassy (Seliger, personal communication 30th March 2023). In addition to the members state's embassies, the EU actively pursued political dialogues with North Korea. In 1998, the first high level talks were held, and the EU Parliament visited Pyongyang. Regular political discourses were organized since, 14 sessions in total, and the most recent political dialogue with the DPRK with the EU was conducted in 2015 with a visit of EU officials to Pyongyang. The session in 2015 was the last one held of the EU-DPRK official dialogue. In this dialogue, non-proliferation, regional stability and security, and the respect of human rights were discussed as interests of the EU in the DPRK. In the official statement, the EEAS writes: "The political dialogue is an integral part of the EU's policy of critical engagement towards the DPRK which aims at contributing to achieve peace and stability on the Korean peninsula, upholding the international non-proliferation regime and improving the respect of human rights. The EEAS delegation urged the DPRK to re-engage in meaningful terms with the international community on all issues of concern and expressed the EU's interest to further develop bilateral relations if substantial progress on those issues is achieved" (EEAS 2015).

Additionally, delegation visits even took place after the last high-level dialogue in 2015. The European Parliament also conducts DKOR, the delegation for relations with the Korean Peninsula, which depicts a channel through which the EU was and still is actively and constructively engaging the DPRK. The EU parliament is the only institution that is visiting North Korea, which marks the importance of parliamentary diplomacy (Mandl 2021). Diplomatic relations came to an end through the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, which caused western diplomats in the DPRK to leave the country. In 2021, a small delegation of DPRK diplomats from the embassy in Berlin was about to visit the EU parliament in Brussels, however, they cancelled their visit without any further explanation (O'Carroll 2021). Despite being unsuccessful, this showcases that the EU and DPRK are both open to diplomatic dialogue, and that the EU parliament is ready to engage again.

3. Interests of the EU in North Korea

3-1. Denuclearization

The EU follows own interest in the Korean Peninsula. One of the major interests is denuclearization. Since the introduction of the CFSP in 1992, the EU has been committed to the reduction and destruction of nuclear weapons globally. It declared that the non – proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, e.g., nuclear weapons, depicts an important element of the CFSP and also offers the opportunity to initiate or continue dialogue on this topic with Asian countries (Commission of the European Communities 1994: 11). In the case of North Korea, the EU's interest in the nuclear issue dates to 1994, when its “Towards a New Asia Strategy” was adopted. Since then, it has continually identified Pyongyang's nuclear weapons aspirations as a serious threat to regional stability (Lee 2017: 5). In more recent years, the High Representative was eager to highlight that the EU brought the breakthrough in the negotiations with Iran's nuclear deal (Millard and Yi 2017: 267). This example showcases that the EU strives to take a significant role in

international negotiations and seeks to position itself as a mediator in international conflicts. European officials played an important role in implementing the agreements and proving more international legitimacy as well as trust into the US during negotiations with Iran (Pardo 2019). The EU achieved credibility in denuclearization, stemming from its constructive role in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPA) with Iran even after the US withdrew from it. In this case, the EU took a role of facilitator and guarantee, and Mandl (2021) believes that the EU again can take on this role with the DPRK. Due to less interests at stake in comparison to the US, this underlines the EU's credibility. Additionally, North Korean nuclear armed intercontinental missiles have reached the capacity to not only hit US territory, but Europe as well. Therefore, EU engagement into denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, especially sharing their experience from bargaining with Iran, can be a vital step. The EU High Representative from 2014 to 2019 Federica Mogherini voiced at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in 2019 that the EU "can help shape a strong monitoring and verification" (Mogherini 2019) system in North Korea. She therefore suggested that the EU takes the role of a security partner. Lukas Mandl, the chair of DKOR, stated in his Keynote Speech at Open Nuclear Network's First Annual Engagement Network Retreat in January 2021 that the "North Korea is not just a threat to South Korea, which 70 years after the outbreak of the Korean War is technically still at war with the North, but despite the geographical distance also to the European Union." He continued that an escalation of tensions on the Korean Peninsula would also affect Europe. This would not only bring economic consequences as South Korea the EU's eighth largest trading partner and the EU's fourth largest export market but would also lead to security issues in Europe such as cyber-attacks, potential usage of chemical and biological weapons, and most crucially the DPRK's capability to launch a ballistic missile. Furthermore, the nuclear weapons of North Korea depict a security risk for the EU as North Korea might sell weapons of mass destructions to volatile countries, which in turn could threaten EU territory with it (Mandl 2021). The EEAS and the

Commission have requested North Korea numerous times to start denuclearization and to comply with UNSC resolutions (EEAS 2018, 2022a)

3-2. Promoting Democratic Values

The EU is a principled organization, which was founded on shared values and norms. The principles are mirrored in European policies and actively promoted in external relations. This is also the case with regard to the European foreign and security policy in East Asia. Fundamental European norms and values form the basis of European interest and are key to how global challenges are stipulated (Weissmann 2013: 7). One of the main interests of the EU therefore is to globally promote democratic values and a rule-based international order. This becomes evident in the adoption of “Conclusions on Democracy Support in European external relations” in 2009 by the Council of the EU. It states that support for democracy, good governance and human rights present an essential interest of the EU. Promoting these values and principles was put as an objective on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as well (Lerch 2019). The EU also has the potential to make contributions in the economic exchange, which can also serve to export democratic and liberal ideas, and support people-to-people exchanges as well as academic exchanges.

3-3. Geopolitics

The normative nature of European security policy seeks to deal with conflicts through dialogue and integration. The EU states on its website that managing the relationship with an increasingly assertive China and building the EU to be an Asia – Pacific security actor are its major objectives in Asia (European Union External Action: 2016). In its implementation plan on security and defense, the EU declares itself to be a global security provider and that it therefore had the obligation to address conflicts and instability in other regions through preventive action (Council of the European Union 2016: 11). Hence, it is also in the EU’s interest to contribute to the safeguarding of regional peace and

security in East Asia (Weissmann 2013: 3). In the geopolitical context, it is crucial to have more involvement from countries that push for democratization and liberal values, as China and Russia have been getting closer to the DPRK. The US accused China and Russia even of blocking UNSC sanctions on North Korea for its intercontinental missile launches (Lederer 2023). Moreover, China has already drafted a new UNSC resolution, demanding to lift sanctions against North Korea and to revive the Six Party Talks. The EU is not included in the SPT, and if the EU wants to make a difference in East Asia, it “is time to come up with a new approach towards serious and sustained engagement” (Novotna 2020) and to use less pressure towards North Korea. Whether the DPRK holds dialogues with the US and South Korea or leans more towards supporting China and Russia impacts the East Asian balance of power, which will also influence the international order. This is due to the fact that China has the ability to challenge US hegemony in East Asia. Therefore, to validate a rules-based international system and spread democratic and liberal values, it is crucial for US partners to engage with North Korea.

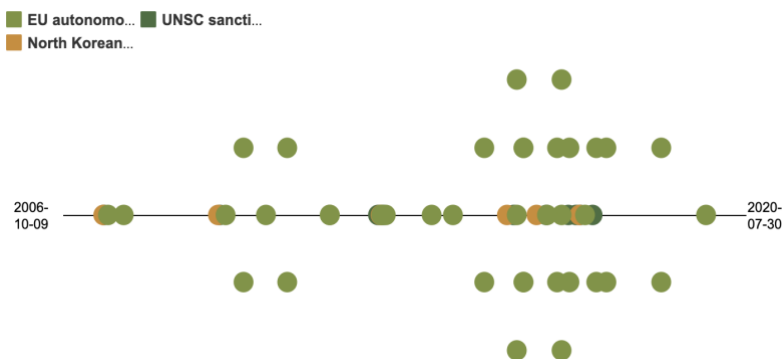
4. Policy Tools

4-1. Sanctions

As the North Korean nuclear crisis began to constitute a threat to regional security, the EU sought to address the issue within the context of regional cooperation and trust-building (Lee 2017: 2). The EU supported the international community in condemning North Korea’s actions. For example, it backed UN resolutions, which were adopted in response to Pyongyang’s continuity in the development of nuclear weapons and participated in international impositions of economic and political sanctions as well. Sanctions as political pressure tool against North Korea were first employed in 2006 and have been in place and expanded since. Through the participation in UN-led restrictive measures, the EU makes clear that the DPRK’s brinkmanship is not accepted by the

international community and does not correspond to international standards. It aims at making Pyongyang understand that the only way to extricate the country from the current international isolations and restrictive measures is to restart the multilateral dialogue (Lee 2017: 7). Sanctions depict the main tool of the EU’s critical engagement policy together with political dialogue and humanitarian aid. The goal of the sanctions is to achieve the “complete, verifiable and irreversible’ dismantling of the DPRK’s nuclear and ballistic missile program, in order to make a peaceful solution to the conflict in the Korean Peninsula attainable” (Council of the European Union, 2017). In addition to addressing the nuclear and ballistic missile program, EU sanctions also aim at improving the human rights situation and preventing cyber-attacks. Additionally, to UN sanctions the EU implemented numerous autonomous sanctions, as can be seen in **figure 1**. There, UNSC sanctions are listed together with North Korean missile testing and EU autonomous sanctions. It is clearly visible, that the EU implemented numerous sanctions autonomously from the UNSC.

Figure 1: Timeline of the main UNSC sanctions and autonomous EU sanctions on the DPRK 2006 - 2020



Light green: Eu autonomous sanctions

Dark green: UNSC sanctions

Yellow: North Korean nuclear testing

Source: Brockmann 2020

The EU autonomous sanctions are envisioned to be paired with humanitarian assistance. They mostly are targeted to reduce the DPRK's nuclear program activities and freeze assets and ban visas for persons and entities involved in the North Korean nuclear program (Council of the European Union 2020). Even research programs and educational exchanges are restricted by sanctions, as they could contribute to learning about nuclear development. The EU's implementation of the UN sanctions regime against the DPRK, together with its demonstrated willingness to go beyond them and imposing own autonomous sanctions, showcases the EU pursuing an own strategy. However, some experts such as Novotna (2020b), and Seliger (personal communication 30th March 2023) argue that the focus of the EU shifted too much to sanctions, away from engagement.

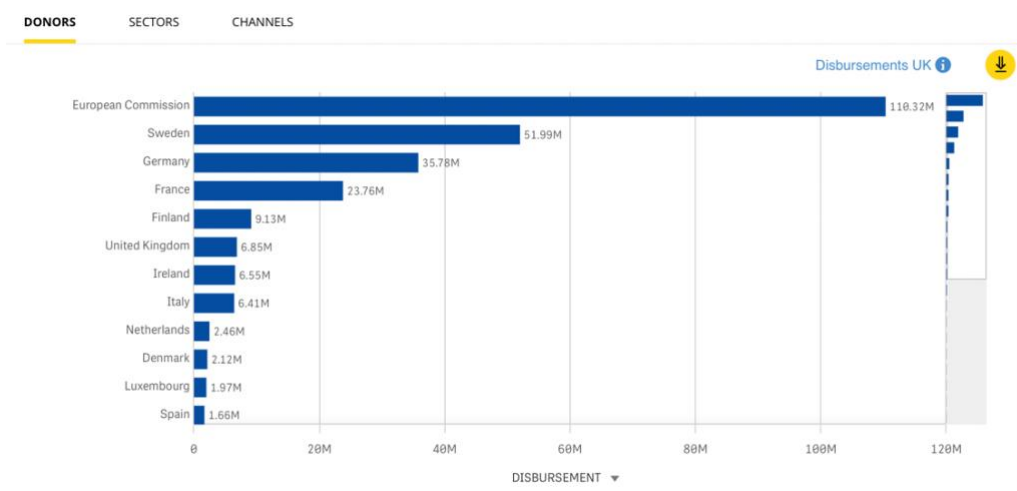
4-2. Humanitarian Aid

The DPRK is affected by natural disasters regularly, such as summer droughts, floods and storms which negatively impact crops and agriculture. According to the Asian Disaster Reduction Center, four out of ten North Koreans were impacted by stormy weather in 2019 (Kim 2021), and was the country worst hit by typhoons in Asia. Over the span of the previous two and a half decades, the DPRK was hit by major floods every year except for 2001, 2008, 2009 and 2017 (Song and Habib 2020). Humanitarian aid from the EU to the DPRK started in 1995, when severe floods hit the country. While since then, especially after North Korea admitted running a nuclear program, other actors such as the US have withdrawn or reduced their humanitarian aid, the EU has provided aid without any major interruption. However, one can identify changes in the sum of aid donations with the EU adopting its critical engagement towards North Korea in 2003. While aid from EU members and EU institutions combined were between 25 and 30 Million Euro until 2011, there is trend in decreasing aid in the years afterwards. While in 2015, the EU provided 18.4 Million Euro in aid, a all time low was reached in 2022 with 360.000 Euro.

The EU is the biggest donor institution to North Korea. Implemented aid totaled €344 million over the past decade. Aid is mostly centered around food aid, health services

as well as clean water access. In general, the aid programs were carried out by resident Europeans in Pyongyang outside of the UN framework. This illustrates that in the case of humanitarian aid, the EU is an own actor with a own policy and does not simply follow the UN or other states. Additionally, the four NGOs in the DPRK are European (two from France, one German and one Irish organization). French commitment to improve the human rights situation is especially important as France has a permanent seat in the UNSC. Therefore, French involvement in North Korea allows the EU to partake in UNSC decisions about North Korea through their member state France. However, the opinions about how to approach North Korea are quite different in different member states, which affects the level of involvement and commitment to contribute to the peace process on the Korean peninsula, as well as the scope of humanitarian aid. France has a pro-sanctions opinion, while German and Sweden represent a more engagement-oriented opinion. From the EU member states, Sweden contributes the most to aid going to the DPRK, followed by Germany and France, as can be seen in **figure 2**. The EU commission has spent the more on donations to North Korea than the individual member states. The pandemic made the DPRK implement strict lockdown and quarantine rules, which hindered NGOs to work efficiently. Therefore, and due to concerns about the North Korean health system, western NGO workers left the DPRK in 2021. However, local staff members are still in their job positions and receive their monthly payments, so that humanitarian aid can be immediately continued after the lockdown and quarantine measures are lifted. This showcases the commitment of the European NGOs and readiness to help improve the humanitarian situation in North Korea.

Figure 2: Total amount of financial aid by European countries to the DPRK



Source: EU Aid Explorer

5. Result of EU Engagement with DPRK

The results of the critical engagement of the EU with the DPRK are mixed. Firstly, the critical engagement shifted its focus over the past decades. One can divide the EU involvement into three distinct phases: active engagement from 1995-2002, followed by critical engagement from 2002-13 and active pressure since 2013-14 (Ko 2017). This shows the flexibility of EU engagement, and the ability to adapt the policy to different political circumstances to either increase incentives through humanitarian aid, dialogue, or economic cooperation) or apply more pressure through sanctions. Where the strategy succeeded was in the establishment of political dialogue, however, this stopped after 2015. Despite that the critical engagement strategy failed to meet most of its goals. One can also argue that the strategy failed its goal so far of lasting reduction of tension on the Korean peninsula through denuclearizing North Korea. In contrast to this, after close to a quarter century of this policy, the DPRK intensified its missile testing, which reached its height in 2022 with more than 40 successfully tested missiles. This is almost two times as many tests as in the previous record holding year of 2019 with 26 tests conducted (Nuclear Threat Initiative 2022). Therefore, as for the goal of denuclearizing, the EU failed it's to

meet its goal. Another declared goal of critical engagement, to achieve easing tensions, can also be seen as failed. Tensions on the Korean peninsula in the light of the latest missile tests, cannot be said to have decreased. The non-proliferation regime noticeable weakened the human rights situation (Ballbach 2019). Additionally, critical engagement consists of the threefold way of sanctions, dialogue, and humanitarian aid. However, since 2016 there were mostly sanctions and no substantial engagement anymore. The focus on restrictive measures and halt of political dialogue led to the diminishing of the EU's role in North Korea, according to Ballbach (2019) even bordering irrelevancy. In addition, it is important to note that changes in EU policy can also be triggered by particular member states (Sangtu Ko 2008) Many EU members engaged with North Korea or had their own policies in place before the EU did; some EU member states, for example Sweden and Italy, established their diplomatic relations with the DPRK before the EU did, and Finland and the Netherland made financial contributions to KEDO before the EU made a decision to do so. The EU was only proactive when it came to humanitarian aid to the DPRK and encouraged it members to support humanitarian assistance in North Korea too (Esteban 2019). Thus, when discussing a new approach, it is important not only to think of the EU as one actor, but also consider the opinions and ideas of the individual member states and redefine the role of the EU in DPRK affairs. Prior to becoming the European Ambassador in South Korea, Sabathil was the Director in the EU Commission and the European External Action Service in Brussels until 2015, most recently in the position of Director for North East Asia and the Pacific in the European External Action Service. He shares his experience when it comes to discussions about North Korea with the different EU member states: "We tried to get that going now and then, but also failed because our member states were not all willing and there were endless arguments about how far we should even get involved with North Korea" (Sabathil personal communication 20th March 2023). He also added that there were often discussions about unimportant things taking away time and energy to work on a collective strategy, for example when the members debated for several hours whether to follow an

invitation of North Korea to attend celebrations of their national holiday. When the consensus was reached of not to attend, some EU member states attended nonetheless, arguing they did not go as guests but to monitor the events in Pyongyang. EU engagement with North Korea therefore depends on the willingness of the member states to cooperate with each other and the ability to coordinate the debate and opinions.

Chapter IV. Influence of Covid & post 2020

Developments

1. Global impact of Covid-19

Covid-19 was declared a pandemic by the WHO on the 11th of March. Initial pandemic preventions resulted in lockdowns and isolation, even leading to a global lockdown. This had severe effects on food chain security and economics, as well as on politics and international cooperation. The economic shocks are evident in the restriction of international trade and investment activities, while lockdowns challenged international cooperation, which affected social and security issues (Qin Yaqing 2020: 15). In that sense, the pandemic further deteriorated global trends of populism and nationalism. A posterchild of this trend prior to the Covid pandemic is Trump's America First policy, which resulted in the US withdrawing from international organizations and distrust in the international community. This policy further intensified due to Covid-19, and other countries started a similar political approach of lockdown. Covid-19 as a nontraditional security threat illustrated how a crisis reinforced the priority of the sovereignty of states and neglects international organizations. Rebuilding cooperation requires time and institutional reforms. However, the pandemic created new opportunities as well. Methods of interactions between states and even diplomacy changed. For example, international meetings were facilitated by digitalizing them. In the case of developing countries, such as the DPRK, Bontan et al (2020) argued that especially developing nations were

negatively affected by the pandemic, both economically and socially. While Kamali-Chirani and Khalid (2020) view the pandemic as a status quo changing event that challenges global economy, multilateralism and sees a rise in Chinese soft power, Drezner (2020) acknowledges short term challenges but suggests that COVID-19 will not have transformative effects on world politics. It is important to note that the pandemic is still ongoing as of May 2023. Therefore, the severity of impact on international relations might need to be reassessed in future research.

2. DPRK Reaction to Covid-19

The DPRK responded to the pandemic with increased border controls and lockdowns. Dr Oswald said that when the pandemic started, all foreigner in the country, even if they haven't left North Korea in a long time, had to quarantine for two weeks. This was also true for nationals that work with foreigners (Oswald personal communication 30th March 2023). This strict measure indicates fear of the North Korean government of an outbreak of the pandemic in the country. Professor Kim from the ministry of reunification also believes that the fear of contracting Covid was a major factor in North Korea's rejection of foreign aid (e-mail communication 22nd March 2023). As North Korea acted quickly with numerous measurements and lockdown, Novotna (personal communication 24th March 2023) is sure that North Korea received an early warning from China about the virus. Additionally, the DPRK has restricted or halted most diplomatic contact abroad. NK News (O'Carroll 2021) reported that an expected high-profile visit by the North Korean vice foreign minister Kim Son Kyong to the Munich Security Conference and to Brussels in February 2020 got canceled, allegedly due to concerns about Covid. Initially, the North Korean government declared having zero Covid-19 cases however, in May 2022 Kim Jong Un admitted a massive Covid outbreak in his country (KCNA 2022). In August 2022, just three months after North Korea confirmed its first Covid, Kim declared victory over Covid. (Shin 2022). However, it is questionable how reliable these data are,

as North Korea did not have testing kits for Covid-19 and no trained personal, as Schaefer points out in personal communication. Another matter that fits the explanation of the North Korean government fearing Covid-19 could be transmitted by nationals being in contact with foreigners, is the establishment of restricted buffer zones at the border with China and the warning to shoot people without a warning that attempted to cross North Korea into China or the other way round. (Weiser 2021). While Oswald thinks the fear of the Covid – 19 virus was justified, other experts believe these measures were exaggerated and an excuse to close the border and further isolate. Schaefer for example, who studied power struggles within the workers party, believes that the strict covid measures were a policy enforced by the hardliners in the government. He observed different political camps within the workers party and thinks that while Kim Jong-Un presents the imagery of the North Korean government as the dictator, he does not have the power to make decision on his own but that behind the scenes other Kim family members influence the decision making. Sharing his experience during his extended stay in North Korea, Schaefer (e-mail communication on March 24th 2023) said that he could observe differing opinions in the leadership about which foreign countries to cooperate with, and that preventing infiltration of foreign ideas into the country had always higher priority than humanitarian or economic issues. Schaefer sees his position confirmed as this is not the first time a pandemic is used to justify a further isolation. The idea is to scare off foreigners and basically drive them out of the country. He said that he knows this pattern well, as in 2015, North Korea had largely closed its borders citing the Ebola epidemic as the reason - even though there was no known case of Ebola in either Russia or China, the only two countries through which people can even get to North Korea (Schaefer personal communication 5th April 2023). Sabathil recalls being the only EU official visiting North Korea in 2015 until today, and views Covid-19 as yet another reason for North Korea to boycott a dialogue (Sabathil personal communication 2023). However, Oswald (personal communication 20th March 2023) accounts that no foreigner was told to leave; instead, the quarantine measure became too much and prevented effectively working

there. With foreigners being restricted from executing their work properly, there was no reason to stay so they left voluntarily. While it is impossible to know the exact motive behind the strict Covid-19 measures, one does not exclude the other. The North Korean government could have implemented the measures with the intention of making foreign workers leave, but at the same time could have had a real fear of the pandemic. After all this time, in contrast to Ebola in 2015, China as the country North Korea entertains the highest trade with additionally has high legal and illegal border traffic, was the starting point of the pandemic breakout.

3. EU Policy towards DPRK

3-1. Vaccination Offers

The EU participated in the COVAX vaccination offers, together with the WHO and other private partners. COVAX was an initiative to distribute Covid-19 vaccines globally and with equal access. In 2021, COVAX first assigned two million doses of AstraZeneca to North Korea, and later that year an additional 4.7 Million, which means that in total 6.83 million doses of vaccines against the Corona virus were planned to be sent to the DPRK. However, the recipient country rejected vaccine offers from COVAX and other aid offers multiple times. Not only COVAX vaccines got refused, but three million doses of the Chinese made vaccine Sinovac as well (Kim 2021). However, there is a chance that Chinese vaccines got into North Korea unofficially, as Kim (e-mail communication 22nd March 2023) revealed that even though the border between China and the DPRK was officially closed due to Covid-19, China still supported North Korea with materials and food supplies, which is one reason why the North Korean government rejected aid offers from the EU and South Korea. Seliger (personal communication 30th March 2023) explains that this is not a phenomenon that only occurred in North Korea. He pointed out COVAX offers to Congo got equally rejected. The official reason was concerns about side effects with AstraZeneca. “They [North Korea] are not the only ones. They also went

to the Congo, in an airplane, had to turn around again with all the vaccines, because they also said, allegedly there were side effects.” (Personal communication 30th March 2023). He further continued about North Korea “And then they said, they want to have mRNA active ingredients, but they just can't. Technically that's not possible.” Here, Seliger refers to the cooling chain, which is very crucial for mRNA vaccines. For North Korea, however, the risk of them being unable to keep the cooling chain uninterrupted was too high, which is why they got offered AstraZeneca vaccines, which do not require being cooled at all times. Novotna explains: “I think that was the problem, that we never discussed about how to deliver the vaccine and how to distribute. And I think what the North Koreans would have liked was that they basically just bring these packages, dump them at the border. They would keep them in quarantine for some time and then they would distribute them. And I think this was basically unacceptable, because international aid needs to be secured and approved where it gets distributed” (personal communication 24th March 2023). This would have included people from foreign countries to monitor the correct and fair usage of the vaccine, which the North Korean government did not want. She adds another layer to the argument of fearing Covid, which is that AstraZeneca got banned from usage in most European countries due to concerns about side effects. While one could argue that a vaccine with a small chance of side effects is better than no vaccine at all, Novotna acknowledges that the DPRK might have been hurt in its pride when it got offered leftover vaccines that western countries did no longer want to use. “One possible scenario could be the DPRK inflating the number of Covid cases on purpose to receive the, in their eyes, much better mRNA vaccine (Novotna, personal communication 24th March 2023). The last scenario Novotna can think of as an explanation for the vaccine rejection is rooted in the DPRK’s increased cyber-attacks. “Or, it could be that they actually managed to develop their own vaccine, I have heard rumors that it could be possible. In that case, my expectation would be that they probably managed to just hack and get some information on how to produce the vaccine. I think people really underestimate their hacking skills or the way they get information. Nobody

has evidence what happened in there, but it's an interesting perspective.” Furthermore, Oswald (personal communication 29th March 2023) suggests pride as another factor, to show their strength and independence to the global community and their own population, as well as fear of political instrumentalization by South Korea or the US.

3-2. Sanctions

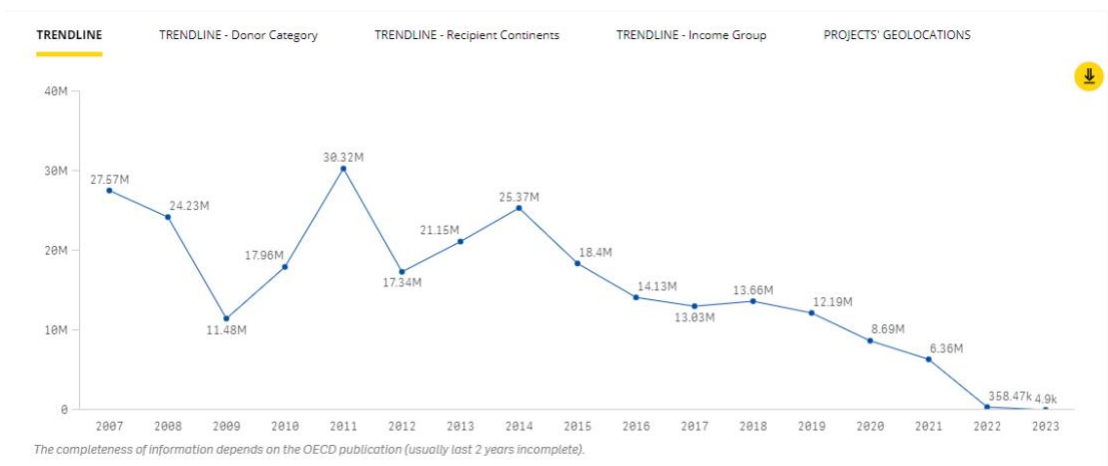
During the pandemic, the sanctions regime against North Korea of the UN and the EU further expanded. New sanctions were imposed on North Korea three times since the pandemic started by the EU. In 2020 the EU confirmed autonomous sanctions for a year and listed 57 individuals and nine entities as being subject to sanctions due to contributions to the DPRK’s nuclear-related programs. This set of sanctions was confirmed for another year in 2021, and in 2022 eight new individuals and four institutions were added to the list (European Council 2022b). Therefore, the EU’s sanctions towards North Korea did not change significantly in the light of the pandemic. Oswald revealed how sanctions affect humanitarian work in the DPRK: “It was also difficult before Covid started. You cannot have a bank account there, you need to get money from neighboring countries. If you want to get machines, you need to write a request to the sanctions committee, and they have to approve it” (personal communication 29th March 2023). However, he noted that due to the Covid pandemic, it became virtually impossible to get the requests approved due to the strict Covid measures. The lack of agricultural support through European NGOs and the UN for the past three years had severe consequences. In combination with bad weather conditions and the restrictive Covid-19 measures imposed by the North Korean government, the sanctions regimes against North Korea have resulted in food shortages, with the south Korean ministry for unification suggesting it could result in the worst famine since 1995 (The Korea Times 2023). While lifting sanctions certainly would help to relieve the situation, sanctions cannot be lifted if the condition of denuclearizing is not met. The DPRK’s missile testing has significantly increased during the pandemic, making easing of sanctions unlikely.

3-3. Humanitarian Aid

Pre-Covid, the 5 EU member states have maintained NGOs working in the DPRK: Welthungerhilfe from Germany, CESVI from Italy, Concern from Ireland, and Triangle Generation Humanitaire and Premiere Urgence from France. These five international NGOs were the only ones with resident status in the DPRK, and they are all from Europe. This illustrates the importance of EU commitment to North Korea regarding humanitarian aid. With the outbreak of the pandemic, the staff on site in North Korea left, together with all the UN staff members as well. In this regard, Seliger (personal communication 30th March 2023) notes: “So, first of all, very clear. The pandemic has, of course, completely worsened the relationship between the EU members and North Korea and even deteriorated it to the point where people are talking about breaking off relations in most cases.” When asked how the pandemic has affected the humanitarian aid by the EU member’s NGOs, he shared his insights: “We could no longer travel, a travel ban was imposed not only for foreigners but even Koreans could not travel anymore. You had to get a permission first and these were very hard to get after the pandemic started. We could no longer travel to our project areas, which is of course bad, which then brought the work virtually to a standstill. And what was even worse was that the borders were closed, so no more goods came into the country.” Therefore, from his account Covid-19 severely affected the humanitarian aid. The financial aid the EU is providing to the DPRK is twofold: one part is from the EU institutions, another from the member states individually. Sweden, Germany, and France are the top three donors to the DPRK. The amount of financial aid from donor countries and institutions has been rapidly declining since the pandemic started, as can be seen in **figure 3**. This is not only a trend in EU donations, however, and can be observed in UN donation data as well (United Nations in DPR Korea 2023). The decline in aid can be explained through the continuation and intensifying of the nuclear program, as well as concerns if the financial aid is properly used for the projects and goals it is assigned to. Sabathil (personal communication 20th

March 2023) explained that for the EU, North Korea is not of high priority, and that the “only motivation to do something there is the humanitarian side. The hope that anything political could come out of it is minimal, so you have to assess the resources and ask what is the point? What? Why should we get involved there? There are very few member states represented there, and not even at ambassador level in part. At the time, the German ambassador was also limited in every respect in wanting to do something, which then of course also reflects on the motivation. However, Seliger argues that European countries are being dishonest with their political stances towards North Korea. “In Africa there are many dictatorships and countries where one would actually have to say, that is money thrown out, we are wasting our money here. But they keep it up for humanitarian reasons, while in North Korea they do not” (personal communication 30th of March 2023).

Figure 3: Trends in EU and OECD donations to the DPRK



Source: EU Aid Explorer

3-4. Comparison to US and ROK

The US and ROK are two of the more involved actors in North Korean affairs. The US and ROK governments offered North Korea vaccines under the condition of starting negotiations about their nuclear program, however, Kim (e-mail communication 22nd March 2023) explained that “North Korea has quite a bit of distrust in the US and South

Korean governments since the Hanoi summit in 2019". Because of this, North Korea focused on its nuclear program and self-sufficient economic development. North Korea has generally a more positive view towards the EU, continues Kim. While maintaining criticism of North Korea's political system or political human rights situation, assistance to North Korea is promoted through dialogue with North Korea rather than sanctions or conditions. This is different from the US, who attaches conditions such as denuclearization to enter into dialogue with the DPRK. Sohn and Kim (personal communication 2nd December 2022) noted that additionally, the EU is not quite as involved into DPRK affairs as South Korea or the US, which makes them a good facilitator of creating dialogue between the West and North Korea. In terms of support, Sabathil (personal communication 20th March 2023) shared that the US did not encourage the EU or its member states to be an actor in North Korean non-proliferation, and even requested the EU to discontinue with talks in Pyongyang. Additionally, there are communication channels between the US and ROK and North Korea, but the EU embassies and the European NGOs deliver their own reports and assessments of the situation within the DPRK. South Korea and the US as the military partner of the ROK, are considered enemies, but the EU is not. In fact, Kim (e-mail communication 20th March 2023) recalls some EU member states, such as Germany, having had a good relationship with the DPRK in the past.

4. Critical Engagement under Covid – 19

The EU did not formulate a new strategy for North Korea within the past decade, and this applies for Covid - 19 as well. Thus, the approach of critical engagement stayed the same. Nonetheless, the situation of the pandemic created a new situation, and the circumstances critical engagement was applied to changed. Frank (e-mail communication 22nd March 2023) noted that while there has always been a need for the humanitarian part of critical engagement, with the pandemic, the need to take the risks associated with accepting aid

from the West has diminished. The reason is rooted a general global effect of the pandemic: the return of Cold War camp logic, which means that North Korea receives more politically motivated support from China and Russia. This makes the DPRK again “part of a team, not a lone wolf anymore” (Frank e-mail communication 22nd March 2023) Due to the pandemic North Korea turned to Russia and China, making it difficult for the EU to re-establish dialogue again. Therefore, the pillar of dialogue of the critical engagement strategy completely collapsed. There have been no EU-DPRK dialogue meetings anymore, no DKOR meetings with North Korean officials, and all EU diplomats left the country, as well as all foreign aid workers of NGOs in the country. For the second pillar, humanitarian aid, the previous assessment of aid during the pandemic revealed that humanitarian work on the same level as pre Covid was not possible anymore, and humanitarian aid projects came to a halt. Financial aid to support humanitarian projects consequently also decreased. For the third pillar of sanctions, Covid-19 did neither positively nor negatively affect them, however, the sanctions regime already in place together with the pandemic measures, led to disaster in North Korea and severe food shortages. In conclusion, the pandemic did have effects on the critical engagement strategy and made a proper implementation of it impossible. However, projects that were part of the critical engagement strategy were not abandoned when the personal left the country but paused until they can be picked up again (Seliger, personal communication). On their Website, the EU states that it stands ready to enter North Korea as soon as the North Korean government reopens the border to staff and humanitarian supplies (European Commission 2023). Despite the difficulties and hardships with the critical engagement strategy during the pandemic, this is the only strategy the EU can do (Seliger personal communication 30th March 2023). The alternative would be either critical or either engagement, which according to Schaefer both has been proven not to work with North Korea. Thus, the policy of critical engagement remains the best approach to North Korea. However, the implementation strategy and motivation of the EU member states are crucial factors that need to be revised. In this regard, the Covid-19

pandemic and the subsequent leaving of European diplomats from Pyongyang are a chance to reorganize a common policy. Seliger (personal communication 30th March 2023) stated that “What would be good is if the EU would use this phase now and say, we'll do a coordinated return.” For this, he suggested a stakeholder conference with EU member states, the NGOs involved in the DPRK as well as international donors. Such a conference could provide a platform to discuss the conditions that have to be before returning to North Korea. A return will be difficult though, as the embassy buildings do not get well maintained after the diplomats and foreign staff members left the country. Moreover, diplomats have to follow a protocol, commanding them to destroy all of the documents and equipment when leaving a country, such as computer for example. In addition, the pipelines in the European countries' embassy buildings are old and are unlikely to have survived the cold winters. Therefore, Covid-19 measures could have produced massive damage on the buildings, and since there is no equipment left at all, rebuilding the diplomatic relations will take longer time than before Covid-19. For the EU strategy of critical engagement, this results in longer time period without proper engagement with North Korea through the EU member states embassies.

5. Challenges and Future Opportunities

From all the experts' interviews, everyone agreed that while the pandemic brought new challenges for the EU to deal with the DPRK, the best thing is to utilize the changed situation for a restart and redefine the goals and strategies. Frank identified the process-oriented character of critical engagement as the most problematic (E-Mail communication). “Developing a strategy and conducting a dialogue for its own sake - that will certainly please many stakeholders, including experts. It will bring them money, attention and confirmation of their *raison d'être*. It will not solve the problems in and around Korea” (Frank e-mail communication 22nd March 2023). The EU and other stakeholders on the Korean Peninsula should instead focus on the results of their politics.

Moreover, the EU and its member states need to be aware that they might need to accept compromises, the same way it does with its China and Russia policy, because “compromised and a bit of engagement is still better than no engagement” (Seliger personal communication 30th March 2023). When asked about engagement and the implementation of projects in his own eight-year experience in the DPRK, Schaefer (personal communication 5th April 2023) remembered that the impact of many international projects in North Korea remains limited, because the political conditions in North Korea for project work are so bad that they hardly result in a success. This issue continues to be a challenge after Covid-19 has ended. A challenge to be solved is not only the coordination within the EU and between the member states, but also between the EU and other actors involved with the DPRK. Sabathil: “EU diplomatic activities have also been hampered by South Korea, hampered by the Americans, and still hampered by ourselves in different ways” (personal communication 20th March 2023). This illustrates that a communication strategy with other stakeholders is of high importance. Another challenge according to Schaefer (e-mail communication 24th March 2023) depict the differences of opinion within the North Korean leadership. He argues that discrepancies are notable in nuclear policy, budget and economy, and relations with South Korea, and cites the military opposition to the Kaesong Industrial Zone as an example, as this zone was a project developed and implemented by Kim Jong Il. The lockdown of North Korea during Covid-19 was again a hardliner position that has prevailed. In order to improve the critical engagement strategy, in his opinion it is important to obtain a better understanding of the power structures within the political elite and leadership of the DPRK. A great opportunity therefore are the European member states embassies, as this gives EU members the chance to continuously engage with North Korean officials and to get a feeling for the decision-making process. This can greatly contribute to the international knowledge about the country, especially given that important actors involved with the DPRK such as South Korea or the US do not have diplomatic relations with North Korea.

Despite the challenges, there are opportunities that the pandemic brought as well. Mandl suggests using the pandemic as a trigger for new EU commitment and argues that the EU should consider establishing an EU representation in Pyongyang, as well as North Korean embassy in Brussels (Mandl 2021). Novotna is in favour of deepening diplomatic relations, too, and adds that if the EU wants to contribute to the peace process in Northeast Asia, it needs to engage more on the diplomatic level (personal communication 24th March 2023). “Not having an embassy in Brussels is a hit to the [the DPRK’s] political and diplomatic prestige” (Pacheco as quoted in O`Carroll 2020). Thus, the EU could benefit from gaining more trust from the DPRK by allowing a DPRK embassy in Brussels, and by having an own embassy in return in North Korea, could also gain more information about the political and humanitarian situation there. This position is further backed by Schaefer who noticed that “in Pyongyang, you can also influence things as a foreigner. But that only works if you earn respect” (as quoted in Geiger 2021). Seliger adds that an EU embassy holds a better positions to further cooperate close with the UN in North Korea, and that it would gain more political power through an embassy, in contrast to few member states having a diplomatic mission in Pyongyang on their own (personal communication 30th March 2003). This requires the EU countries to coordinate their North Korea strategy together, and since western diplomats and NGO workers left because of the pandemic, the Covid-19 pandemic holds the potential for EU members to rethink the strategy and coordinate a comeback to Pyongyang together.

6. Policy Recommendations and Outlook

The EU and its member states can use the lack of dialogue and difficulties to assist with humanitarian aid to North Korea created by Covid-19 as a prompt to coordinate their policy strategy of critical engagement anew. The experts interviewed agreed all in that the EU policy mix between sanctions and humanitarian aid and dialogue is good, however the three components need to be more balanced. The first recommendation therefore is to

recalibrate critical engagement back to favor more engagement over sanctions. This is useful to gain trust back from the DPRK and thus create better circumstances to meaningful contribute to work towards peace and unification on the Korean peninsula. Mandl (2021) too, suggests focusing more on engagement while keeping the sanctions in place. When coordinating a return together, the EU and its members need to address under which conditions they want to return, and issues that were restricted by the pandemic need to be discussed. One example could be the issue of needing to go to China to get money, which became impossible due to the quarantine measures imposed by China and North Korea. One example therefore is to think about how to create a banking system or found even a special bank, to be able to legally carry out transactions within the DPRK.

Secondly, the member states should send back their diplomats and NGO workers to Pyongyang as soon as possible, and when planning to go back should take a coordinated approach instead of each member state coming back at different times. This is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, because the EU is stronger when acting coordinated and with closer relation to the UN (Sohn and Kim personal communication 2nd December 2022). And secondly, because isolating North Korea is not a good approach, as confirmed by Seliger, Sabathil, Novotna, and Oswald in personal communication. It could bring the state closer to China and Russia, which would hurt the West's efforts in bringing North and South Korea together and opening up the North.

However, as a third recommendation, the EU needs to be stricter. The DPRK does not adhere to the several articles of the Vienna convention on Diplomatic Relations, which entered into force in April 1964 and is a multilateral treaty on the right of diplomats to privileges and immunities for the efficient conduct of their diplomatic missions. North Korea acceded to the convention in October 1980, however, violates the convention regularly. For example, article 26 grants freedom of movement to diplomats, but in North Korea even diplomats are restricted from moving to areas outside of Pyongyang. The situation worsened under Covid-19, as the DPRK government further

restricted the movement of foreign diplomats through quarantine measures. With Western diplomats leaving North Korea because their working methods were too severely restricted by the Covid-19 measures taken by the North Korean government, Seliger (personal communication 30th March 2023) suggests the EU members should have done the same: “Our diplomats had to leave because you did not comply to the Vienna convention, so DPRK diplomats have to leave too. That would have really hurt them.” Schaefer points out violations of the convention as well in his book “From Kim Jong Il to Kim Jong Un: How the Hardliners Prevailed: On the Political History of North Korea (2007 - 2020)” where he recalls multiple occasions where his family members were taken to prison for a few hours occasionally for no apparent reason. Political recognition is important for North Korea and pointing out misbehavior of the DPRK in this regard and imposing consequences because of it would show North Korea that the EU and its members are partners to be taken seriously.

Overall, the outlook on DPRK-EU relations is mixed. While Covid-19 put the relationship on hold, it can serve as a starting point to bring positive change. In the future, one important factor to engage again with North Korea for the EU is the opening of the borders. While it is not known yet when the pandemic will be declared as being over by North Korea, observers saw that the DPRK started opening up to China again (Siqi 2023). While the WHO declared an end to COVID-19 as a global health emergency, North Korea has still stricter border controls in place. As explored in this research, when the DPRK allows foreigners back without quarantine measures, Oswald expects it will take some time to reach the working level of pre-covid again (personal communication 29th March 2023). Even if the borders are re-opened, shipping and imports by car have resumed at different paces, and the price for things imported skyrocketed. His opinion is that if North Korea opened the borders in May 2023, it would take until the beginning of next year to resume the project work on a level similar to before Covid-19 started. When North Korea will be opening the border again is still unclear, but Oswald considers the

ongoing food shortages, which might result in severe famine in North Korea, as the main motivation for the DPRK to allow NGOs and foreigners back into the country.

Chapter V. Conclusion

This study showed that the Covid-19 pandemic impacted the EU-DPRK relations, as the strict counter measurements by the DPRK prevented opportunities for dialogue, isolated North Korea further, had European diplomats and NGO workers leave the DPRK, and made it extremely difficult to support the people in North Korea with humanitarian aid. However, it also offered new opportunities, such as providing a fresh start when the EU diplomats and NGOs return, so that the EU has the chance to coordinate the return and approach together with the member states and the UN. The hypothesis stated that Covid-19 did impact the relation between the EU and North Korea and opened a new window of opportunity for future interaction and for a new approach by the EU and its member states for their Northeast Asian policy strategy. To develop this argument, a document analysis as well as expert interviews were conducted, and the EU's policy and humanitarian aid towards North Korea up until recent was analyzed. Additionally, the Covid-19 situation in North Korea was constructed by interviewing experts. The research revealed that the DPRK denied international aid for various reasons, most prominently due to fear of foreigners bringing Covid into the country, due to concerns about severe side effects and some of the experts interviewed also suggested a political motive to further isolate itself. Furthermore, this research shows that the pandemic impacted the relations between the EU and North Korea. While the effect of the pandemic hindered humanitarian aid and cooperation, this research illustrated that there are also new opportunities opening from it. The EU can take this as a chance to revise their critical engagement policy towards the DPRK and develop a coordinated plan for taking up diplomatic dialogue and humanitarian aid again. Lastly, potential opportunities and challenges were outlined, and policy recommendations given based on the experts' opinions. An upcoming challenge

will be the reinstalment of the communication channels as well as battling the worsened humanitarian situation. Despite the challenges, new opportunities in restructuring the approach can be taken and while the EU and its members do not have a leading role in DPRK affairs, their involvement is still important. This study was limited to the exploration of the EU's policy towards the DPRK as the EU member states have a number of embassies and diplomatic exchange, and therefore have insights and firsthand experiences US and ROK officials cannot have. However, with the latter two countries being the most involved and the most prominent actors that are involved with the DPRK, more research on the recent US and ROK political developments towards North Korea as well as how Covid has changed and impacted the political agenda is necessary. Additionally, this study is limited to the opinions of the interviewees, and further interviews might be necessary to gain a broader picture and gain more opinions on the matter. Moreover, sources directly from North Korea are extremely hard to access and depict a dubious and non-reliable source of information that might be heavily influenced by propaganda. Therefore, quotes and information from North Korean politicians and resources have to be put in this context,

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Abstract in Korean

COVID-19 대유행은 유럽 외교관들과 비정부기관(NGO)들이 북한을 떠나게 만들었고, 북한은 엄격한 봉쇄 조치와 원조 제의들을 거부하며 스스로를 더욱 고립시켰다. COVID-19 대유행 이전 연구자들은 유럽연합의 소위 '비관적 관여' 접근법을 집중적으로 연구해왔다. 그러나 COVID-19 대유행이 북한과 유럽연합간 관계에 새로이 복잡한 층을 추가함에 따라, 연구자들은 COVID-19 가 유럽연합의 비관적 관여 전략에 미친 영향에 대하여 아직 연구하지 못하고 있다.

본 연구의 목적은 유럽 비정부기구 근로자와 외교관들의 북한 입국이 허용되는 팬데믹 이후의 다음 단계 다음 단계에 대한 도전과 기회를 파악하고, 정책 권고를 도출하는 것이다. 본 연구는 전문가 심층 인터뷰와 문서(무슨 문서?)들의 정성적 분석 자료를 활용하였다. 조사 결과, 전문가들 사이에 유럽연합의 정책 방향성을 제재에서 관여로 전환하여야 한다는 합의점이 존재한다는 것을 확인할 수 있었다.

또한, 본 연구를 통해 팬데믹이 유럽연합의 대북 인도주의적 지원에 차질을 야기하였음에도 이로부터 새로운 가능성도 동시에 열리고 있다는 것 확인할 수 있었다. 유럽연합은 이를 기존의 대북 비관적 관여 정책을 수정하고, 외교적 대화와 인도주의적 지원 재개를 위한 계획 수립에의 기회로 활용할 수 있다. 나아가 본 연구는 북한의 고립 원인을 탐구하고, 그 원인이 COVID-19 에 대한 공포가 주요하였음에도 동시에 정치적 계산 역시 원인 중 하나였다는 것도 탐구하였다.

Appendix:

Former German ambassador to DPRK Schaefer

Interview

Personal communication on zoom and e-mail communication with ambassador Thomas Schaefer, former German ambassador in South Korea and North Korea.

E-mail communication on March 24th 2023:

I am happy to contribute to your master's thesis. However, I left North Korea in the summer of 2018 and therefore can contribute little detail on the period since then. But I was not surprised by the North Korean reaction to Covid and to the international offers of assistance, as it coincided with the fundamental aversion of large parts of the North Korean leadership to international cooperation and the experience of past years.

I think your question about how foreign aid is perceived is fundamental: for many years there has been dissent in the leadership about international aid, foreign investment, and generally cooperation with foreign countries because there is a fear that along with foreigners and foreign money, foreign ideas might enter the country. There is agreement that safeguards must be taken against this. What these safeguards should be, and whether there should be any cooperation with foreign countries at all, is controversial. The military and parts of the party, for example, have always opposed the Kaesong Special Economic Zone, even though it was Kim Jong Il's baby. When the Ebola crisis broke out in 2014, there were discussions among the NK leadership about how to respond: In the end, the country was then effectively closed for a few months, although neighboring countries were not affected at all. It was quite clear that Ebola was taken by parts of the leadership as an excuse to push back cooperation with foreign countries. In the case of

Covid, I suspect the NK response is a mix of genuine concern about contagion and aversion to foreign countries. The rejection of vaccine offers also speaks to this. I believe that the ambivalent attitude of the NK leadership to international cooperation is the broader context in which the question of the NK response to Covid and Covid offers of assistance should be seen. You can find elaborations on this (also in English) in my book, I have also written about it in NKNews and various other publications, most recently for East West Center in Washington.

Q2: Did the EU/US /ROK sanctions and humanitarian aid approach to North Korea change significantly after the start of the pandemic?

Q3: Are there differences in sanctions and humanitarian, vaccination policy approaches from EU countries/ ROK/ US?

I do not have any knowledge about question 2 and 3.

Q4: Do you think that the EU should develop a stronger North Korean strategy and emerge as its own actor to help facilitate dialogue, for example as a mediator?

Q5: What challenges and opportunities arise specifically in the EU's policy towards North Korea from Covid?

I believe that the first important thing to note is that the EU's policy of "constructive engagement," as a mix of incentives, pressure, and confidence building, has also been pursued in a similar form, at least at times, by other countries, including South Korea, China, the United States, and even Russia. The EU has only ever played a supporting role, commensurate with its importance in the region. A role as a "mediator" was never in question, nor was it ever necessary, as there have always been channels of talks, including between NK and the US, in recent years, even in difficult times. If there were periods of radio silence, this was a conscious political decision by North. Incidentally, I do not believe that the EU could fill a role as a "mediator." The states involved in the six-party talks have far greater NK competence than the states of the EU.

Please consider my answers only as a start. I am happy to go into further detail

Notes from personal communication on zoom on 5th April 2023, requested not to record.

- There is a tug of war within the Labor Party who gets more power. He notices discrepancies in political direction in nuclear policy, budget, economy, and relations with South Korea. One prime example was the military opposition with the Kaesong Industrial Zone. Even though the zone was developed as a project that the leader Kim Jong Il supported a lot and implemented it, there was opposition by the military from it. Other examples include Kim Jong Il's attempts to establish an international finance zone which got shut down by other party officials of the workers party quickly. The strict lockdown of North Korea during Covid-19 was again a hardliner position that prevailed.
- Therefore, it is very important when planning the post-covid strategy, it is crucial to consider that the leader in North Korea does not have the decisive power all alone, and it is important to understand that there are different political camps within the party and the Kim family as well. Within the Kim family, this became evident with the assassination of Kim Il Nam. Or, when Schaefer was able to set up a the "United Buddy Bears" exhibition in the city center of Pyongyang in 2008. This was the very first art exhibition from a foreign country in North Korea, and on top, it was in the public space and thus accessible to everyone. It took almost 2 years to negotiate this with the North Korean authorities. They did not want the US and South Korean Buddy Bear to be part of the exhibition, but still it was a success. Schaefer thinks that under Kim Jong-un today, this would never be possible again and that his political advisors and people he listens to are hardliners, which is reflected in his politics.
- Schaefer thinks that North Korea will not open up again until the new presidential elections in the US. The reason for this is that the North Korean leadership is hoping that Trump or the Republicans get reelected, as the Hanoi Summit has shown that some people are willing to give North Korea international recognition,

which they hope they can manipulate and instrumentalize. They cannot do that with Biden and the Democrats.

- For the North Korean leadership, the most important thing is international recognition, because this gives them some legitimacy and acknowledges them as a country and actor in the international arena.
- It is important to keep up the critical engagement strategy, however, the engagement part should become more prominent again. Also, the EU needs to work closer with other actors involved, such as Japan and the US. While the US has their own communication channels to North Korea, the advantage of the EU is clearly that they have member states with their own embassies there. From own experience, you will get a feeling for the politics of North Korea when you become an ambassador here, and you understand the decision-making process within the worker's party. We can report this information to our partners, who are not able to get these insights. Thus, it is important to make the EU participate in the solving of the conflict on the Korean peninsula.

Dr. Seliger Hanns Seidel Foundation Interview

Personal Interview with Dr. Bernhard Seliger, Resident Representative of the Hanns Seidel Foundation in Korea. At Office of Hanns Seidel Foundation in Seoul, South Korea on March 30 2023.

Sophia Brachtendorf: Did the pandemic change the relationship between the EU and the DPRK?

Dr. Bernhard Seliger: So, first of all, very clear. The pandemic has, of course, completely worsened the relationship and even deteriorated it to the point where people are talking about breaking off relations in most cases. That is, the Western diplomats have all left. We now only have Russians and Chinese left. And all the U.N. personnel are out, except for the local forces, who, by the way, are still being paid, which is also dubious. And the

North Koreans seem to be quite happy with that. At least there seem to be a lot of them who say, actually, that's fine with them, so they're all gone and now they can do what they want with it. The diplomats didn't have any special monitoring function or anything, but at least, they were allowed to go around Pyongyang freely. But there was no compliance with the Vienna Convention. After that, you're allowed to go around freely throughout the country. And then we have taken similar measures, for example, the North Korean diplomats in Germany are theoretically only allowed to drive around freely in Berlin and Brandenburg. But no one follows that. And if they're somewhere in Brandenburg, no one checks that, of course. That is, they drive around the country as they want. Well, but there in North Korea it is quite clear. As soon as the car is at the border, it is stopped. But still. In Pyongyang, they could drive around more or less as they wanted, were also often stopped, but were also sometimes arrested, illegally but then released again quite quickly as they were diplomats. And now they are completely gone.

Sophia Brachtendorf: Did they leave voluntarily?

Dr. Bernhard Seliger: No, the diplomats said we insist that we have certain rights here under the Vienna Convention. And they said either we comply, comply with their rules or you have to go out. So that was not voluntary. But it was clear, they left, before that they were under house arrest for months. Apart from the fact that they really couldn't meet anyone, no North Korean, and there were difficult supply problems, there was nothing left to buy and you couldn't go to China, as they had done in the past. So these were all reasons why they left. All projects were stopped and so on, there was also no more exchange. That could have been done, of course. The EU could have said then you have to leave our states as well, to the North Korean diplomats. That would have really hurt them.

Sophia Brachtendorf: Why didn't that happen? Simply so as not to jeopardize the relationship?

Dr. Bernhard Seliger: We (Germany) have a powerless foreign policy and we also have no ideas. We can of course, we say, we come back sometime. But the British do it differently. They have a stand-by team and always say we want to be the first to go back. But that's not good either. Because what would be good is if the EU would use this phase now and say, we'll do a coordinated return. It would be best. The best thing, I think, would be to do something like a stakeholder conference. I already talked to some people about it. Can be a great role model in the Vatican. Maybe that wouldn't be so bad either, if you have a symbolic place and then the states come there, the NGOs come there, who were there and come back and deal with it and maybe also international donors. If you then clarify 2 to 3 things, for example, under what conditions do we go back? And since France does not recognize North Korea, the EU has no representation either. If one were to say, we'll solve all the problems simultaneously. That would be the best thing to do now. Then secondly, to what conditions do we return? If we all are together and say, otherwise there is just no return and there are no projects, we also stop the payment of the local forces. That would hurt them. The EU itself has of course less and less money as before. The parliament had once this goal 10 million € per year, that is for years, that was already little. Compared to in the past, before 2005, there were the big projects. But then there was always this €10 million. But then the danger is that the North Koreans don't negotiate with everybody anymore. Many, of course, like Germany, have no interest at all. They say what's the point of North Korea and they want to come back, they have the embassy there and so on, but that's not the case now. And then there are many countries that say, this is not our priority, we have enough other things to do.

Sophia Brachtendorf: Was it different before Covid?

Dr. Bernhard Seliger: Before that. Yeah, so there's been for a long time, for ten years, so this fatigue, nobody wants to give money and they're just tired of North Korea. But there is also still international interest. So people would like to go there again, cooperate with them, and of course there are many topics that are partly cross-border, but it has become

much more difficult, also because of the situation now with Russia. Russia is no longer a partner to the EU. That was always important for new projects.

Sophia Brachtendorf: So is there is still hope to make small progress?

Dr. Bernhard Seliger: I don't know, for example, if Putin is overthrown, who knows. Maybe we get someone worse, but who knows then in the long term, if Russia changes, then maybe at the border to North Korea something will change, where after all is a free trade zone. That is, one must pay attention to it. And we must not forget that the humanitarian situation is bad, perhaps even very bad in North Korea. Now they are probably importing a little bit of food, but not as much as they need to and nobody knows that. But if you go there, then you have to look at what is necessary in humanitarian terms. And we have to say quite clearly that we are not being honest here either. In Africa, also in dictatorships and in countries, in which one would have to say, that is money thrown out, but they stay for humanitarian reasons, one would have to say then also in North Korea they have to do that.

Sophia Brachtendorf: So against that backdrop, what do you think the EU should do?

Dr. Bernhard Seliger: At the very least, we have to go back in and negotiate with them. I think negotiating makes sense anyway. Isolating them is not a good idea. Isolating them completely politically now is not a good idea. You have to show limits. You don't have to throw something at them that disappoints people and states. But I don't think it would be a good idea to suspend relations.

Sophia Brachtendorf: What role, if any, could the EU play?

Dr. Bernhard Seliger: The EU could act in a coordinated manner; in which case it would be stronger. But I think that is unlikely to happen. Even though that would be ideal. Of course, it would be best to work together with the others, which means working together

with the UN. The UN and the EU that would be a good solution. But at the moment there is no one who wants to initiate this.

Sophia Brachtendorf: Why do you think that is? North Korea has received various offers of help. Why did they not accept that, because of pride?

Dr. Bernahrd Seliger: That had many reasons, but one reason was actually a lack of understanding. That was first they had the vaccination which would actually be good for them, but it needed cooling. They said no, we don't want that, it's too dangerous for us. They are not the only ones to decline AstraZeneca. They also went to the Congo, in an airplane, had to turn around with all the vaccines, because they also said, allegedly there were side effects. And then they said they wanted to have other vaccines, but they just couldn't have them because of the cooling chain. Now they have just partially vaccinated with Chinese vaccines, of which they once said, they are not good enough, do not trust them. There is probably some, but they are badly vaccinated, and I suspect they will suspend vaccinating people. They also realized, of course, the pandemic didn't cause mass deaths. So sure, they may have had more deaths than they thought, but not that they had a mass dying. That's not what happened. It was just a flu and when it reached them, it was no longer particularly dangerous.

Sophia Brachtendorf: Perhaps also because they took strict measures?

Dr. Bernhard Seliger: The measure was understandable. First, the fear of side effects, cost humanitarian costs. Secondly, of course, this has been a trap, in which also the New Zealanders were, the Australians too, but you cannot isolate a country and after all, their medical system was so weak. And in the beginning, if really the virus in the beginning was more dangerous than the later mutations, then they just got that later. They also have a young population, which just maybe also helped. But obviously they survived that. They certainly wanted to open up when the Chinese opened up, they prepared it and then

they saw what happened, so they did not. But it was only bad for a week or two in China, and now no one is talking about it anymore.

Sophia Brachtendorf: And when do you think that would be realistic, that North Korea opens up again?

Dr. Bernhard Seliger: They want to wait until the pandemic officially ends. And that could be on May 10, because the Americans have already said that they want to end the pandemic on May 10. And if the Americans say that, then that is of course a strong push for the WHO. We don't know, but it could be that they would say globally. Even if there are individual infections now, it is no longer a pandemic, there is no longer such a thing. And then they will have protected themselves from the virus, so to speak.

Sophia Brachtendorf: Will this still have an impact on relationships in the long run for them?

Dr. Bernhard Seliger: You can open up; but it won't be the same for years. Starting with the fact that the embassies not only left but destroyed everything on the ground. Also, what the Germans specifically said, they don't believe that two or three years without maintenance, for example, all the old East German pipes there, water pipes and so on, survived the winter. That is, there really could be massive damage so when a diplomat can come, they have stay in the hotel. That will be probably at the beginning so for a longer time, but it could last still years, until it is again like 2019.

Sophia Brachtendorf: What is your impression? What do Koreans think of the helpers or the foreigners in the country?

Dr. Bernhard Seliger: For the government, it is necessary evil. They have said quite clearly several times, no we don't want any aid, that's poisoned. But of course, it's quite different when you talk to your partners. They are happy, of course, and they always make it quite clear to tell us to come back as soon as we can.

Sophia Brachtendorf: That means that, overall, what needs to be done now, also on a higher level for the EU countries, is simply coordinated cooperation with all of them.

Dr. Bernhard Seiger: That would put us in a better negotiating position than if everyone went there alone. The EU is not a negotiating partner at the moment, because it has no relations, because France does not recognize North Korea. And it's not only that they said that they are taking care of it from here and for Maria, who is now the ambassador of the EU, she often went there in the past because of the projects, but they were not officially accredited there. That is with many others here, this Diplomacy Group. Basically, in North Korea this double accreditation to North Korea, but that's something else with the EU, a different status. Of course, this could be solved in one go. But I don't think that will happen. This is simply a rule of the EU. If the state is not recognized by an EU state, then there goes no relationship. While, for example, Estonia has no diplomatic relations. This is not a problem, but the recognition of the country. Why this is so, no one knows.

Sophia Brachtendorf: There is also no way around the fact that one could say other EU institutions could try?

Dr. Bernhard Seliger: There is the Food Security Office, which the EU uses often, but you cannot have an ambassador there. So the Office was so to speak, that was the unofficial EU ambassador basically. And insofar I think, if it comes again to a deployment of the European organizations and so, they will also go back there.

Sophia Brachtendorf: Does the EU have its own goal for North Korea or is it rather that it simply follows the Americans?

Dr. Bernhard Seliger: That's clear, they have the critical engagement strategy. And as part of this strategy, they also have the development strategy or humanitarian strategy. And they also have projects for that. And these projects have not been abandoned, but simply stopped. And they just said, we now have a project pipeline of 2 to 3 years. That means

that when you come back, the old projects will be worked off first, then new ones might come along, but that could be the case. In the past, there was this 10 million cap, which was always such a thing, and you don't want to shake it because you don't want to renegotiate it in parliament, because you're not sure whether that would get a majority again.

Sophia Brachtendorf: And what do you think about critical engagement?

Dr. Bernhard Seliger: That's what you can do, because the alternative would be only critical or only engagement. Neither of these works well with North Korea. I mean, otherwise you can say, sure, you just don't go in but you actually compromise quite clearly with North Korea just like with China or earlier with Russia or something. I hope that what we are doing is better than not doing anything at all.

Dr. Sabathil former EU ambassador in ROK Interview

Personal communication via Whatsapp call on 20th March 2023 with Dr. Gerhard Sabathil, former diplomat of the EU in South Korea and former Director in the EU Commission and the EEAS for Asia Pacific.

Sophia Brachtendorf: Why do you think the pandemic failed to facilitate dialogue-building despite North Korea needing vital humanitarian assistance?

Dr. Sabathil: Dialogue with North Korea is such a difficult topic anyway. You may know that it has become even more impossible to continue even our dialogues, despite a temporary bettering of the situation. As a preface, before I was Ambassador to South Korea, I had been Director for East Asia in Brussels, and I had the opportunity to conduct our dialogue in North Korea one time, in 2015. Then we had tried to get that going every now and then, but also failed because our member states were not all willing and there were endless arguments about how far we should get involved there at all. The United

States also did not appreciate in any way that we were involved. But then there was no more dialogue. In the last five or six years, when I was in Seoul, there was another attempt to arrange a meeting. Then again the Americans did not like it and since then there has been no more meeting at all. So I think I am the only one who had been in Pyongyang with my staff in 2015 and since then the contact has been largely interrupted again. In this respect, Corona has actually been just another occasion to prevent the possible dialogue. The reasons were many, especially in political nature. They live in a state of fear. All outside contacts with or without Corona were limited to a minimum. As I said this is quite mutual and therefore it is actually nothing special or was actually predictable that one did not come together. Also the humanitarian aid was always seen with distrust. That is why our help was very dosed and yes little welcome, but also from our side little motivated.

Sophia Brachtendorf: Why is there so little motivation?

Dr. Sabathil: There are no normal conditions of any kind there due to the political situation and so little motivation from our side, because as I said, the temporary possible added value was low. North Korea is not a priority in the European foreign policy. So the only motivation to do something there is just the humanitarian side. The hope that anything political could come out of this is minimal, so after resource assessment you would say what is the point? Why should we get involved there? There are also very few member states represented there, not even at ambassador level in part, but only below that. At the time, the German ambassador, was also limited in every respect in wanting to do something, which then of course also reflects on the motivation. After all, you spend your time there and wait for the day that something starts to move. But that's not the case. So that's why North Korea is just a black hole, but you could move so much more in the Western world with the same energy. And so why bother with North Korea? In that respect, also to your second question, perhaps I see very little impact, actually, of the

pandemic on the sanctions, which have remained unchanged. Or the humanitarian situation. There was simply no need there. So as I said, we get blocked not only from ourselves, also from the United States. Even China, for example, as the country that is still most open to Korea, had no interest in that the Europeans were there.

Sophia Brachtendorf: Do you think this could change in the future? As The relationship with the US and South Korea is very biased, but it is not so much with the EU. That the EU could be a kind of mediator for a better basis for communication or relations of some kind?

Dr. Sabathil: No. First of all, don't overestimate the Europeans' foreign policy power and effectiveness. The whole thing also has mainly economic motives. So there is, after all, no economic trade policy with North Korea. And we don't have the strength and energy, we don't have unity at all. We have already decided on this eight years ago, when it was specifically about any subsidies. Secondly, who wants that? The Americans? The Americans have actually never had any interest that the Europeans are somehow active there. The United States did not really like the idea that we would have made our mark on North Korea, and so on. So, as I said, we are a small light there for lack of capacity. And as far as Germany in particular is concerned, for example, the distrust of Germany and of course of North Korea is particularly pronounced, because we always propagate this idea of unification. And in my dialogue at the time, this also caused more problems than it helped that we, kept explaining and recommending our German model to South Korea and then translated all kinds of documents into Korean about it. It did not go unnoticed by North Korea. So as much as we would like to help, we are met with particular distrust because we have successfully carried out a unification.

Sophia Brachtendorf: Is that perhaps also a reason? Precisely because the policy is not very pronounced or does not have any particular motivation to follow the approach of the

U.S., for example, with regard to sanctions, that this is generally followed and no strategy of its own is developed in this sense?

Dr. Sabathil: So as I said, the capacities, our unity, the interest are minimal. And the main interest is according to our non-proliferation and human rights foreign policy. Mediator role, for these reasons, is not possible at all, because a mediator must meet the requirements to be somewhat open to something that comes from the other side. Things between North Korea and the West are very different from normal diplomatic relations. I have always followed the problems that the German Foreign Ministry, but also the Berlin security authorities have had over the last few years to monitor the activities of the DPRK embassy in Berlin. You know that their hotel is problematic. So it's not just diplomacy that is overwhelmed, but also international diplomacy. I also know there are difficulties for people involved with DPRK affairs, that something could happen under the heading of humanitarian aid or mediator, where one is then somehow misused and where security concerns then play a greater role. And risks are also of a personal nature. So the scope for doing something about it, or for doing something about it under the eyes of the world public, the press, the actors, for blaming someone for mistakes, is huge, so that I don't think it's worth the risk of taking action.

Sophia Brachtendorf: You have already mentioned that within Europe, some member states are perhaps a bit friendlier towards North Korea, while others are more negative. Do you remember which countries were friendly and which completely critical about North Korea?

Dr. Sabathil: In my time there were 6 EU embassies in North Korea. I don't know if the numbers are still correct. Some were represented only at the business carrier level, so for Switzerland, the Bulgarians, the Romanians. And Germany took over the East German embassy there. Then of course there were the old friendships of eastern EU member states there, the Bulgarians and Romanians, the Czechs and the Poles. And the Swedes, the English and the Germans. France only had a trade delegate and a culture office. Partly

they that because there were also North Korean embassies in our member countries then there was thus the old North Korean in East Berlin for example and of course the large embassies in Poland, Czechoslovakia, at that time still Bulgaria and Romania. It became clearer that they finance themselves in all kinds of legal and illegal activities beyond the Vienna Protocol, beyond the diplomatic protocol. And I remember this ridiculous dispute at that time, when it was about whether we should accept the invitation to the national holiday, we always talked for hours about such things between the member states in Brussels. And when we said, no, we won't go there, the Bulgarians and Romanians went anyway, because they said, we are not ambassadors at the level of chargé d'affaires. And when they were then confronted, they said, but they did not go there as guests, but only as observers. Also has shown how incompetently the EU has handled it. I have tried before. I tried when we met monthly. When we met monthly, as ambassadors of the EU member states and I had to coordinate, to invite, to organize. And there was a humanitarian working group. But that was also eyed suspiciously in South Korea. And it was very difficult that South Korean employees, who knew the language, could be motivated to look at North Korean websites. I am sure that is illegal and punishable. So our diplomatic activities have been hampered by South Korea, hampered by the Americans, and still hampered by ourselves in different ways. We are far from being able to play any role there or even wanted to.

Dr. Novotna Fellow EU-Korea center FU Berlin Interview

**In person communication on 24th March 2023 with Dr. Tereza Novotna,
Research Fellow at the EU-Korea Center at Freie Universität Berlin.**

Sophia Brachtendorf: Why do you think North Korea did not accept the international help that was offered?

Dr. Novotna: If you compare North and South Korea, I think what's interesting is that at the first phase, South Korea has done a much better job. But once the vaccines became available, South Korea had to catch up. But in terms of North Korea, they closed borders quite early. I think they closed the borders either one day or two days before China closed, which is why I personally think that they had some kind of early warning from the Chinese. They didn't do it because they like North Korean, but they did it because of themselves. Nevertheless, I think it meant that North Korea knew early enough so therefore it had sort of zero COVID from the very beginning. I think they have actually done a good job. If you compare the reaction to Covid between North and South Korea, both were two extreme opposite cases. So basically, North Korea didn't really need to accept assistance because they just closed down so early. Then I think Omicron was a different story. It was not that smart from Kim Jong-un to have this military party meeting, which turned out to be some kind of super spreader event.

Sophia Brachtendorf: A bit then after the outbreak, for example with the earthquake in Syria. I mean, there are European sanctions in place, and I think they temporarily got lifted to make sure that they could send some humanitarian help there. Why do you think this didn't happen in the case of Covid-19 to North Korea?

Dr. Novotna: Well, the biggest question is the vaccine, the problem is from Covax was that it would provide only vaccines of 25 percent of the population which in theory would be enough for Pyongyang but it wouldn't cover the whole country. The second problem is, and I think that was the problem that we never discussed, about how to deliver the vaccine and how to distribute. And I think what the North Koreans would have liked was that they basically just bring these packages, dump them at the border. They would keep them in quarantine for some time and then they could distribute them. But this was basically unacceptable. For the international because it needs to be secured where it goes. I think what Covax wanted is actually people, foreigners coming in to at least monitor what's been done and I think that was a no go for the DPRK. I'm not so sure whether it

was no go because of Covid, because they were worried that the health workers or the insurance workers would bring Covid-19, or whether basically didn't want them to look around. Maybe a mixture of both. But for AstraZeneca, you have, I think, three weeks where you can keep them under normal fridge temperature. I mean, it still has to be in the fridge, but it doesn't have to be in the deep freeze. And North Koreans can manage the normal fridge temperature. Then the question came to which vaccine. The North Koreans clearly knew that the Chinese vaccines were not that great. So they declined them, I think twice. I think the official reasoning was, well, we don't have Covid, so we don't need it. They were waiting for the mRNAs and declined AstraZeneca due to side effects, that's what I believe. I mean to be honest, if you think about Europe at the same time, they also did not want AstraZeneca because of the side effects. So it was a little bit of a problem with global south in general when they were offered vaccines, basically these countries say, well, you are basically offering us the vaccines you don't want. It would be good enough for us but not for you. So you would think on one hand, you know, it's better than nothing, but on the other hand it is just the left over.

Sophia Brachtendorf: Do you think this affected, like, the opinion in North Korea about foreign aid in some way?

Dr. Novotna: I never thought about this before. But in general I think they've always tried to hide the international cooperation. Also if the EU and Covax gave in and sent them new vaccines, then it would have created a domino effect, so maybe Syria said we want that too. If you check the NK News Covid tracker, that is quite interesting. They had a lot of cases with omicron, but almost no deaths. But this is impossible, given the number of infections, it should be much higher. There are very few people with this opinion, but as no one knows what was going on there really, it is important to consider every explanation and not just the easiest one. The number of cases is too many, when looking at the deaths from Covid. I think they inflated the number of cases to make it seem worse and get mRNA vaccines. Then suddenly they said, oh, we got rid of it, we declare victory.

It was never bad; they just did not meet the Covax conditions, so they faked it. Also, they never said Covid for their propaganda, but just fever. But it didn't work. I know you asked me whether they are angry with the international community. I think they could potentially be angry that this didn't work. But now interesting thing is I think that they did have vaccination. Maybe China sneaked some vaccines into the North. Except for China, there's not really anybody who would want to help them. Or what heard is that they actually did manage to develop their own, and there were some rumors that it's possible. Because I mean, why not? In this case, it's probably something like related to cybercrime. So my expectation would be that they probably managed to just hack, get some information on how to produce the vaccine. I think probably people really underestimate their hacking skills or the way they get information. I think nobody has evidence what happened in there, but it's an interesting perspective. But what speaks against is that they didn't put it into propaganda. They should be kind of proud of it. If I had to place a bet, I would think that they manage to get some sort of Western technology.

Sophia Brachtendorf: What is the relationship like between Europe and North Korea?

Dr. Novotna: That's the thing with North Korea. It's kind of like a black box. And then I would be also interested in the relationship between South Korea and European Union, because my idea was that because obviously there's a bit of a difficult relationship with South Korea and the US. Because they're like direct enemies to them. But then I don't think there's a super negative relationship with Europe or European countries, maybe even opposite, maybe even more positive ones, due to longer Soviet Union times. We have a strategy, it's called critical engagement, that's the EU policy. But the policy that's a while ago, very old from 2007. It combines being critical and engage at the same time, I think what the problem that engaging and has become only critical. So I see there is a need for recalibration.

Sophia Brachtendorf: What do you think the EU could do more?

Dr. Novotna: I think a mediator or at least facilitator role is realistic. This is one of my key arguments in my research, the EU did organize donor conferences for Syria, Afghanistan, why not North Korea. Sometimes we just need to get lucky with the EU institutions too, to make them interested in North Korea. But it is a slow process. We have 60 years of EU Korea relations this year, that would be a good starting point. North Korea will also be on the agenda, but I am very sure the Europeans just say again we condemn the missile. Maybe a start to reengage is when the politicians visit DMZ. There would be the need to some incentive for them to start focusing more on political aspects instead of purely economic and cultural tourism things. And then if this step is taken, then from there on maybe they can also take a bigger role in unification process or get step by step maybe more involved. There is a difference between the EU and the members. In Germany historically interested in North Korea and we have 6 EU countries like embassies in Pyongyang. They are now on vacant. So coming back there would be a good starting point too.

Dr. Oswald Interview (Welthungerhilfe)

Personal communication via Zoom on 29th March 2023, with Dr. Andreas Oswald, country director for Welthungerhilfe for North Korea. Welthungerhilfe is one of six European NGOs working directly in North Korea.

Sophia Brachtendorf: What is Welthungerhilfe's project work in North Korea like? Could you give a quick overview?

Dr. Oswald: Sure. So all the projects for North Korea, they all go under the label of humanitarian aid. What we do is a mixture of humanitarian aid and development work. That means, for example, in 2018 there was a very poor harvest because of the drought and we distributed food. But that is rather the exception. What we do more is to develop the agricultural sector, for example teaching new techniques such as tissue culture for

potatoes or rice. Sometimes we also work in disaster management and in the water sector, so trying to diversify our work a little bit. There is always the problem that there are not too many projects and donors, and it is mainly the EU and the AA, the German Foreign Ministry, that provide donations to help.

Sophia Brachtendorf: Does this mean that the interest in project work in the DPRK is not that big? There are probably regions in the world that get much more attention.

Dr. Oswald: Firstly, it depends on the resources, secondly, it is difficult due to the sanctions, and thirdly, NGOs or organizations from South Korea, for example, would like to come, but then they are not allowed.

Sophia Brachtendorf: What does the day-to-day work look like? How many Welthungerhilfe employees are on site?

Dr. Oswald: When I started, in 2019 we had three international project managers and then a finance officer responsible for the finances and then of course quite a few national employees. For every project that you do, you have someone assigned who is responsible for the technical side. And then there is someone from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who is responsible for the administrative side of all the permits that you need. The whole project implementation is not difficult because everything is already very well organized. If they say they drive you somewhere or do something for you, normally they really do.

Sophia Brachtendorf: What was everyday life like for you?

Dr. Oswald: Very different. Well, how should I put it. My job is a job, and you get along pretty well with your colleagues. We were able to move around in Pyongyang freely. If we wanted to go out of the city, we needed permissions. But within Pyongyang we used to do many bicycle tours or visit local restaurants. You just live in your, well, so ghetto would be an exaggeration to say, but it is quite far off the city. There are then these extra housing for foreigners. But then everyone is there, all foreigners. Whether that is now

Chinese and Indians, or Europeans. Without a permission, no Korean comes in at all. But we are free to leave and go and eat at restaurants or go to stores or anything else. That was until Covid.

Sophia Brachtendorf: Then how did that change through Corona when that started?

Dr. Oswald: That started with the regulations on February 1, 2020. That's when the borders were closed. And then later we all and everyone who had contact with foreigners had to quarantine 14 days. After the 14 days there were again 14 days extension. During the time you were not allowed to move in or out of our building. So then four weeks in total. And really all foreigners were affected, no matter whether they had been abroad at all in the last few months. After quarantine was over, they had strict measures. For offices frequented by foreigners, we also had to measure the temperature. And it was then taboo for us to go into restaurants. Only two supermarkets left in the foreigner town we could go to. In that regard, even though it was strict, they did everything right not to contract the virus. Then once a week or once a month medical committees visited to check all people.

Sophia Brachtendorf: So, you could still work normally?

Dr. Oswald: We could no longer travel, a travel ban was imposed. Even Koreans could not always travel as they wanted, everyone had to get permission and then actually hardly ever got it. We could no longer travel to the farms on the countryside, which of course was bad because it brought our work to a virtual standstill. And what was even worse was the fact that the borders were closed. With a financial burden of sanctions, the country is completely closed off. That is, you cannot even do a simple transfer, you need to bring money into the country which was not possible anymore. At that time, no one knew what was going on. Everyone was thinking, maybe it will take months, but in two months it is over. Then at the beginning or middle of March they offered flights to leave. Everybody who wanted to leave the country could fly out. And then relatively many flew out. I

stayed because I thought it would end soon. No one was expelled per se. Those who wanted to stay could stay, and those who wanted to leave could leave. Many left out of uncertainty, not because they had to.

Sophia Brachtendorf: I always had the impression that maybe the government systematically started to end these projects, so to speak, and to expel the foreigners. I didn't realize that that was more or less a voluntary process.

Dr. Oswald: Yes. There were already the first problems in February because they closed the borders. Because, for example, from the UN or so a lot of people were abroad, and they could not come back. And then there were also situations where their family was suddenly left alone in North Korea. So sometimes there were hardships. At first, it was just going to work, but the funds then slowly ran out. And the fact that you could not go to the project sites and also and there was no more money, the project work itself had to be stopped then and we have also started relatively quick to reduce staff. It no longer made sense to continue the projects like before. But nobody was forced to leave.

Sophia Brachtendorf: Why did you leave then? Since you could no longer travel to look after the projects properly.

Dr. Oswald: A mixture of everything. I could just not do my job properly. There was the approval for a request to the government at the end of August, to allow a convoy. That means you could not leave individually, but you have to go in a group, a convoy of maximum 30 - 40 people. We then left by foot to China. It was not sure if we could get the permission from China to enter. But in the end, it went well.

Sophia Brachtendorf: In retrospect, various offers were also made to North Korea to help with the Covid situation. Why do you think that was rejected? At least officially.

Dr. Oswald: It's hard to tell. I think from pride, to show they do not need it. And other countries would need it more than North Korea. It is better than other countries. That Covid was something what they get sorted out themselves.

Sophia Brachtendorf: Perhaps they also simply did not have that many cases? You have also said at the beginning, actually, they have reacted quite well in the sense.

Dr. Oswald: Well, in their first response they made a lot of correct decisions. But economically, common goods traffic across the border had come to a standstill. And ships had to be quarantined three months.

Sophia Brachtendorf: What was the general situation with the sanctions? Did it affect the work on site or was that imposed?

Dr. Oswald: The fact that we could not have a bank account was really difficult. You have to get the money from abroad. And if you have, for example, let's say machines from China, larger tractors or anything else, then you have to submit applications to the sanction committee, and they have to approve your request. It makes everything a bit more difficult. Mostly there weren't any problems with getting the requests granted, but it could take half a year to get something approved.

Sophia Brachtendorf: What was the mood there with regard to foreign aid?

Dr. Oswald: I don't think it was made out a big deal or communicated to the public. It gets acknowledged that it is needed though. And we just tried to help and that's why it all worked. During the famine in the 90ties, there was need for aid from the UN and the civil sector. That is how these organizations were permitted to work in the country. They had no choice other than let foreign NGOs into the country during the famine in the 90s. There was no other way. And now there are six NGOs, and the UN has an office there too. And then there are others, the political foundations, German foundations that have some projects here. There are rumours that projects are going to start in the second quarter

again. That would be desirable if something were to move again. We are ready to go back anytime. But it will take time because we need access to banks, tools, money etc.

Sophia Brachtendorf: That means that it is now on the North Korean side, so to speak, that they have to make the conditions clear before anything is resumed?

Dr. Oswald: Yes, so I suppose if they open the borders again, we need to talk about conditions to pick up the work.

Sophia Brachtendorf: I had also read a month or so ago that there are food shortages.

Dr. Oswald: Recently we did a meeting with our working group agriculture and food. These are all projections, estimating the crops 1/2021 22. And of course, there's been a tremendous decline in the import of seed and fertilizer and machinery and so on. So, the agricultural situation looks really bad.

Sophia Brachtendorf: Then if that prediction were correct about the food shortages, would North feel compelled again to open the borders?

Dr. Oswald: It seems that their agricultural production declined over the last few years due to the lack of inputs such as fertilizer or spare parts for machines. We don't know how severe the situation actually is but it might influence their decision to let us resume our work.

Sophia Brachtendorf: So then, do you think you can just resume your work there?

Dr. Oswald: The first step would be that the borders would open and quarantine restrictions removed, then we would have to assess the situation and reopen the offices. That will take some time before we could become operational again.

Sophia Brachtendorf: Do you think that has a longer-term impact on cooperation? The Covid situation?

Dr. Oswald: Yes, certainly. Even if the borders open again, we do not have free access to rail traffic or shipments, and rules for land transportation are all very different. That makes it difficult. The prices for everything that we would need have gone through the roof. Also, cars and things like that have to be repaired after all this time. And that's already a huge cost. So now if you say, come back tomorrow and then I'm sure it will take until the beginning of next year to get it up and running again, until we can get back to normal project work.

Sophia Brachtendorf: Do you think then that the whole five, six organizations will come back? Or do you think that this might also have an effect, that maybe less help will come to the country?

Dr. Oswald: I think everyone is ready to come back. For us it would be important to have at least one of the EU embassies here again. We need to coordinate it carefully among ourselves.

Prof. Kim Unification Education Interview

E-Mail Interview with Professor Jiyoung Kim, 22nd March 2023, from National Institute for Unification Education in the Ministry of Unification

Q1: Why do you think the pandemic failed to facilitate dialogue-building despite North Korea needing vital humanitarian aid?

I think that there are four reasons. First, because of fears about the security of the North Korean authorities. North Korea feared that the Covid-19 pathogen would be transmitted to the northern region in the process of exchange to receive support for Covid-19. And while the infection that North Korea is concerned about is natural, it seems that hostile countries suspected that it could intentionally spread the infection.

Second, the North Korean authorities have also used the Covid-19 pandemic situation politically. With the recent emerge of the marketplace generation, ideological control within North Korea has become more difficult than before. A weakening of ideological control leads to weakening of political control. So, in the name of Covid-19, we have strengthened political control over people's inter-regional movement.

Third, the North Korean authorities seem to have thought that the containment policy could prevent the Covid-19 outbreak. In fact, according to unofficial information, Covid-19 spread in North Korea, but the North Korean authorities controlled Covid-19 infection through a complete containment policy like China. In addition, the infected patients were recommended to reduce fever and treatment through North Korean traditional medical methods.

Fourth, there was support from China. There were economic difficulties due to Corona, but with food and material support from China, we were able to pass it on without receiving aid from the West and from Korea.

Q2: Did the sanctions approach change significantly after the start of Covid-19?

The nature of US, ROK and EU sanctions did not fundamentally change since Covid. The US and ROK governments offered North Korea vaccines under the condition of starting negotiations about their nuclear program. North Korea has quite a bit of distrust in the US and South Korean governments since the Hanoi summit in 2019. More specifically, the North Korean authorities seem to have thought that that the Biden administration and the South Korean government were engaged in diplomacy with the goal of changing the North Korean system and no intentions of easing sanctions. Therefore, North Korea also did not have any expectations in the US or South Korea and focused on their nuclear program and self-sufficient economic development instead.

Q3: Are there differences in sanctions and humanitarian aid recently in the light of the pandemic vaccinations policy approaches from EU countries, ROK and the US?

I don't think there was a particular difference in the three countries' North Korea vaccine policies. The vaccine support policy of all three countries was not very active, and the basic position was that support could not be provided because there was no official request for support from North Korea. Switzerland, which has a neutral character among European countries, has continued to provide aid to North Korea as an exception.

Q4: Do you think that the EU should strengthen its own North Korea strategy and emerge as an actor to help facilitate dialogue, for example as a mediator?

First, several countries in Europe, such as Germany, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom have rich experiences in exchange and cooperation with North Korea since the 1990s, and Germany and Switzerland in particular maintain a lot of experience on humanitarian cooperation.

Second, the countries maintain an apolitical process when promoting humanitarian exchanges and cooperation with North Korea. While maintaining criticism of North Korea's political system or political human rights situation, assistance to North Korea is promoted through dialogue with North Korea rather than political consideration. This is a difference from the US. For this reason, North Korea prefers to receive humanitarian aid from European NGOs and international organisations.

Third, unlike the United States, European countries are in a flexible position as a third actor between the two Koreas. The US is South Korea's military ally, and the North Korean authorities define it as a hostile country. However, Europe seems to believe that it can play a role as a balancing actor as a third actor between North and South Korea.

However, I think the relationship with North Korea was good in the past when Europe's foreign policy tended to be more independent from the US one. For example, when Prime Minister Persson of Sweden headed the EU, both North and South Korea considered Europe an important third actor. On the contrary, it seems to have limitations in playing an independent role between the two Koreas as it has recently been showing a similar trend to that of the US foreign policy.

Q5: What challenges and opportunities arise specifically from the sanctions policy and humanitarian aid towards north Korea from Covid-19?

Biden's US seems to believe that the sanctions against North Korea will allow North Korea to come out as a forum for dialogue. In particular, it seems that he believed that if the economic and social situation deteriorated due to Covid-19, an opportunity for negotiations could come due to sanctions against North Korea. However, if you look at North Korea's recent moves, it is legislating nuclear weapons and testing various types of missile launches. Sanctions against North Korea seem to promote tougher military provocations rather than attracting North Korea to a forum for dialogue. From the perspective of March 2023, Covid is no longer a challenge factor or opportunity factor for sanctions against North Korea. North Korea is focussing on restoring its economy, which has been difficult due to Covid-19, and China's economic aid to North Korea continues. Also, since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, North Korea has been providing diplomatic support to Russia, and Russia is showing a tendency to strengthen economic exchanges and cooperation with North Korea.

In conclusion, as China and Russia continue to provide aid to North Korea, North Korea is likely to continue its military provocation even more sternly.

Q6: What are your impressions of the general attitude of the DPRK towards foreign and European humanitarian aid?

North Korea does not appear to be so desperate for aid from Europe. The reason is that support can be obtained from China and Russia, Therefore, North Korea does not seem to appreciate simple economic aid without fundamental diplomatic normalization or sanctions relief agenda after the failed Hanoi summit in 2019. Of course I believe it is important for them to receive unconditional aid such as from the European humanitarian organisations.

22.03.2023

Professor Ruediger Frank from the University of Vienna.

E-mail communication on 22nd of March 2023

Q1: Why do you think the pandemic failed to facilitate dialogue-building despite North Korea needing vital humanitarian assistance?

Because there has been a change in the alternatives from North Korea's point of view. There is always a need for aid; the pandemic has not led to a qualitative change. But the need to take the risks associated with accepting aid from the West has decreased. Reason: return of Cold War camp logic, more politically motivated support from China and Russia. The "anomaly" (from NK point of view) of the last 30 years is thus over. The country is again part of a team, not a lone wolf.

Q2: Did the EU/ US/ ROK sanctions and human aid approach to North Korea change significantly after the start of the pandemic?

No

Q3: Are there differences in sanctions and humanitarian and recently in the light of the pandemic vaccinations policy approaches from EU countries/ ROK and the US?

I cannot answer this.

Q4: Do you think that the EU should develop a stronger North Korean strategy and emerge as its own actor to help facilitate dialogue, for example as a mediator?

Objectively speaking: no. As a highly heterogeneous actor, the EU is not very strong in foreign policy anyway. Korea is also not very high on the EU's list of priorities (to say the least), and there are better and more credible alternatives. Last but not least, 2/24/2022 has made the EU even less inclined than before to do anything in foreign policy without collusion with the US. All of this is true if one is interested in RESULTS. It does not apply if you are interested in PROCESS, as is true for most bureaucrats and politicians.

Developing a strategy and having a dialogue for its own sake - I'm sure that will appeal to many stakeholders, including experts. It will bring them money, attention and confirmation of their raison d'être. It will not solve the problems in and around Korea.

Q5: What challenges and opportunities arise specifically in the EU's sanctions policy and humanitarian aid towards North Korea since COVID-19?

The long-standing dilemma continues to exist: the aspect of humanitarian aid, which is gladly placed in the foreground, is subordinated to political-ideological and alliance-political considerations.

Q6: How does North Korea view foreign aid?

It was and is a necessary evil.

Korean Sharing Movement NGO Interview

Notes taken form personal meeting on 2nd December 2022 with the Director-General Jong Do Sohn and Program Officer Kyudong Kim from Korean Sharing Movement

Q1: How did the pandemic influence your work?

With the European foreign diplomats and NGO workers leaving the country due to the pandemic, the work for Korean organisations working in North Korean affairs changed drastically, because Korean NGOs are not allowed to be directly stationed in North Korea. We are dependent on the reports of the foreign workers and diplomats, but after they left there were no more reports obviously, and we could not get any information about the current situation in North Korea from them. Also, since we work with defectors, we noticed the number of defectors going down drastically due to stricter border controls and the strict North Korean Covid-19 measures.

Q2: Why did North Korea not want to accept vaccinations?

Since Biden and Yoon pressure on North Korea has been increased, for example through military exercises. North Korea had the fear that accepting the vaccination offers came with political leverage over them from the US and did not want to make itself more dependent. North Korea also did not reject the vaccination offers from COVAX, but simply ignored them. Opening up to receive vaccinations would also have meant foreigner in the country to monitor the distribution, which is what North Korea did not want. Their resources have become scarce, which is why they entered the strict lockdown. Also, North Korea intensified the relationship with China and Russia, which is why they could have gotten vaccines from these countries as well.

Q3: How does the Human Rights situation in North Korea pre-covid compared to the situation during Covid?

With the closure of the border to China and Russia, no more humanitarian aid could come into the country. The humanitarian situation was already bad before, but with the lack of help from foreign countries, the situation got much worse. With the closure of the border, we were unable to get any supplies for food or agriculture into the country.

Q4: Do you think the EU should develop a stronger DPRK strategy?

EU has potential to take on a more important role, as it has better contacts to the international community. So far, we are under the impression that the EU had a strong orientation on what the US did. But EU role is important, as the embassies of EU member states in North Korea also represent US interests. The EU could take a role as facilitator to create dialogue between North Korea and the West. To prevent the stronger alliance of North Korea with China, the EU should put less pressure, for example by imposing new sanctions, but should focus on dialogue-building and engagement more. Also, the EU has a bigger voice than just the member states individually, so they should use it and get more engaged.

Q5: Did the pandemic made the situation worse?

Surely it made North Korea turn more to China and Russia for help. There was hope in the beginning to re-establish a proper dialogue, but instead North Korea became more hostile. Especially after the Hanoi summit. The pressure should be decreased by offering humanitarian aid without any conditions.