

# Korea Focus

## Strictly enforcing sanctions without closing the door: France's position on international sanctions against the DPRK

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# Strictly enforcing sanctions without closing the door: France's position on international sanctions against the DPRK

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As a responsible permanent member of the UN Security Council and a nuclear-weapon state recognized by the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), France plays a key role within the European Union on the North Korean nuclear and ballistic issue. Although it has no diplomatic relations and limited relations with Pyongyang, France is the main EU member state to draft the resolutions of the Council of the European Union on the issue, and therefore to propose not only sectoral sanctions, but also sanctions targeting North Korean companies and individuals. Regarding sanctions, Paris's position is clear: the international legal framework must be strictly implemented, and therefore UNSC and European resolutions must be strictly enforced, including sanctions. Yet, despite its image of intransigence, France remains open to a partial lifting of sanctions in the event North Korea would take concrete and verifiable steps towards its denuclearization. The debate in Paris is therefore not whether sanctions should be lifted during and at the end of a denuclearization process, but what steps are expected from North Korea before lifting some of the sanctions.

This short article will first contextualize French-North Korean relations, then analyze France's position regarding international and European sanctions targeting North Korea's nuclear and ballistic missile program, and conclude on the possible room for cooperation between France and South Korea on this issue. This article is based on official statements by the French government and academic and press articles, as well as a series of interviews conducted with French officials, diplomats and military personnel between March and June 2020.

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## No official relations yet some limited relations between Paris and Pyongyang

France is the only European Union country, along with Estonia, not to have diplomatic relations with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. And yet, as early as in 1968, General de Gaulle accepted the opening of a North Korean commercial office in Paris. Also, the DPRK became a member of UNESCO in 1974 and sent an ambassador to the French capital. Yet, despite the commitments he had made as a candidate in the 1981 presidential elections who went to Pyongyang and met Kim Il-sung, Mitterrand, having become President, refused to grant Embassy status to the office, which only became a General Delegation in 1984. Unlike its European neighbors such as Italy, the United Kingdom and Germany, France did not establish diplomatic relations with the country in the early 2000s, officially linking such an establishment with an improvement on the human rights issue. At the end of the 2000s, visits by diplomats and special envoys multiplied and led to the opening of a French Cooperation Office in Pyongyang in October 2011, but still not of an Embassy. The Cooperation Office temporarily closed on March 9, 2020 in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The mission of the French Cooperation Office is essentially humanitarian and cultural. France contributes to assistance to the North Korean population, focusing on food aid and support to French NGOs active in the country, two of which are resident there: Première Urgence and Triangle Humanitaire International, as well as to international organizations such as the World Food Program and UNICEF. France runs two cultural cooperation programs. The first aims to promote the French language by supporting the teaching of French at Kim Il-sung University and the Pyongyang University of Foreign Languages. The second aims to increase archaeological cooperation. France has been supporting the program set up in 2003 between the Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) and the North Korean Bureau for the Conservation of Cultural Property in the field of research, expertise and archaeological excavations at the site of Kaesong, former capital of the Kingdom of Koryo (918-1392). An archaeologist specializing in Korea, Elisabeth Chabanol, visits the site frequently and her work is unanimously acclaimed.

Bilateral economic and human exchange is very limited and was so even prior to international and European sanctions. Less than a dozen French people, mostly humanitarian workers, live in North Korea and a few dozen North Koreans live in France. For several years, students came to France to study architecture, and short-term language training courses were organized for students and teachers of the French language. Currently, a joint research project titled "City, Architecture and Urbanism in North Korea" funded by the French National Research Agency ANR entails some form of limited cooperation between French, Dutch, and North Korean scholars. Trade between France and North Korea is minimal, and it should be stressed that France has never been a major trading partner, unlike other European countries, including Germany.

Some economic cooperation projects have existed in the past, including the construction by the French company Campenon Bernard, decades ago, of the Yanggakdo Hotel in Pyongyang, well known to tourists as it is one of the few where they can stay, or even cooperation between French animation companies and the North Korean animation studio SEK. Finally, it should be recalled that part of the North Korean elite came to Paris for medical treatment in the 1990s and that French doctors, including cardiologists, treated the leaders Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il. It was in Paris that Kim Jong-un's mother, Ko Yong-hui, reportedly died in 2004, and that the daughter of Kim Kyong-hui and Jang Song-thaek committed suicide.

## A clear French position on the importance of international and EU sanctions

France has been very clear and transparent on its policy on the North Korean nuclear and ballistic issue. It considers the framework of the UN resolutions must be strictly enforced to promote international law and support the non-proliferation regime. Paris stands ready to assist, and participate in, any international effort in inspecting and dismantling North Korea's nuclear and ballistic programs. Indeed, compared to other EU countries, France has a unique expertise, being the only country to have dismantled its nuclear test site in the Pacific in the 1990s, and its Pierrelatte and Marcoule facilities dedicated to the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons.

The framework of the UN resolutions is a complex and binding legal framework that is considered as legitimate and necessary since it is one the international community agreed on for good reasons, with key safeguards allowing for humanitarian exemptions, etc. France is indeed not following a strategy of maximum pressure, and the country was one of the first to request the United Nations 1718 Committee for an exemption pursuant to paragraph 25 of Security Council Resolution 2397 (2017) to be able to engage in humanitarian activities. France is pursuing neither an ideological policy, nor a policy that blocks any progress in the Korean peninsula, but rather is pushing for enforcing strict compliance with international law through UNSC resolutions. France considers assistance and support to North Korea should be provided within the framework of the UNSC resolutions.

This policy was clearly spelled out by French President Macron in his speech to the UN Security Council on September 26, 2018:

*“At no time must the Security Council lose sight of the fact that North Korea continues to pose a nuclear and ballistic threat to the region and the world. France expects concrete gestures from the Pyongyang regime, demonstrating its real willingness to engage in a process of dismantling its nuclear and ballistic missile program in a complete, verifiable and irreversible manner. Pending such gestures, the dialogue must be accompanied by rigorous enforcement of the sanctions decided by the Council. And there we were united”.*

France repeatedly called on North Korea to make concrete gestures towards denuclearization and is not expecting complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization to be fully realized before it will consider lifting some of the sanctions. Actions should be taken in parallel and simultaneously, and there is indeed room for agreement.



That argument was made clear during the joint press conference of President Macron and President Moon in Paris, on October 15, 2018. President Macron declared France was “awaiting precise commitments from Pyongyang demonstrating its real willingness to engage in a process of dismantling its nuclear and ballistic missile programs” but also added that “at each stage, which will thus be verifiable and verified, we will be actors in the evolution of the international framework and will be able to accompany the progress thus obtained”.

The key question is then what steps North Korea should take to become trustworthy and initiate a concrete and verifiable denuclearization process. For example, France considers that the blowing up of entrance tunnels to the Punggye-ri nuclear test site was something completely different from irreversibly dismantling a nuclear test site under international supervision. French officials still consider North Korea has not taken any strategic decision to denuclearize, and all recent events seem to confirm this hypothesis.

## Some potential for more cooperation between Paris and Seoul on sanctions

France often states the unity of the international community is essential to denuclearizing North Korea, even more so since not a single component of the UN sanctions regime against North Korea is currently the object of robust international implementation. Actions from individual members of the international community do impact that unity and it would be best for such actions to be taken in coordination. This explains France’s strong involvement in the G7+ discussions on North Korea in terms of implementation of sanctions, exchange of analyses, work on the UN Panel of Experts established pursuant to Resolution 1874 (2009), joint approaches at the UN level and communication to the private sector on risk assessment regarding sanctions, etc.

In addition, French officials consider the international community and especially the EU should continually respond to North Korea’s ever evolving illegal activities and sanctions evasion techniques, be it cyberattacks for criminal purposes, such as those targeting European financial institutions in Malta and Spain in February 2019, or high-seas ship-to-ship transfers of oil and coal. France pushed for the adoption of the cyber sanctions framework in May 2019 – a tool that was first used in July 2020 against, among others, a North Korean entity – and deployed, jointly with the UK, maritime surveillance resources off North Korea that identified illegal instances.

France considers South Korea should closely coordinate with its allies and partners, and that actions implemented towards North Korea by South Korea cannot be disconnected from the larger nuclear and ballistic issue. France repeatedly states that the North Korea nuclear and ballistic issue is neither a local issue nor a regional issue, but a global issue. Resuming tourism to North Korea, for example, would be considered as going against the spirit of the UNSC sanctions since it would create an important source of foreign currency for the regime and then weaken the impact of other sanctions, especially trade-related ones. France is also very cautious regarding recent events along the DMZ since it remains a border with a country South Korea is still legally at war with and should not be disarmed unilaterally.

France and South Korea's cooperation on the North Korea nuclear and ballistic issue is improving and institutional mechanisms have been created. Since March 2016, a strategic dialogue between the two governments has been organized annually. The same is true, since 2017, for a complementary track 1.5 strategic dialogue by the Foundation for Strategic Research and the Korea University of National Defense, and some other security dialogues with South Korean think tanks. While the issue of sanctions is regularly mentioned, Paris and Seoul still lack a forum in which the core issue of sanctions could be more comprehensively discussed in order to improve mutual understanding – an urgent need that became clear during President Moon's state visit to Paris in October 2018.

The author, being a participant in existing bilateral strategic dialogues and director of the FRS-KF Korea program on diplomacy and security at the Foundation for Strategic Research, advises the creation of a track 1.5 dialogue on the sanctions issue covering both their effects and their implementation as well as their unintended impacts on the operation of humanitarian programs in North Korea. Such a dialogue between France and South Korea could gather officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Unification along with experts from think tanks and NGOs. In addition, the author offers to address the issue of sanctions within the framework of the Korea program of his Foundation via interviews with experts or officials from the Ministry of Unification aimed at raising awareness and improving the understanding of the related questions in France and Europe.

