

Socialization on a Second Track? European Track 1.5 Initiatives with North Korea

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Engaging North Korea in stable structures of international cooperation is among the most pressing challenges of international relations. While the country's formal (Track-1) foreign relations have repeatedly aroused the interest of international research, its informal foreign relations receive far less attention. Building on personal experiences and interviews with other practitioners and organizers, this study addresses the main characteristics as well as the strengths and limitations of European Track-1.5 initiatives with North Korea. It is argued that such European Track 1.5 initiatives are critical in order to facilitate dialogue with North Korea, especially when regular channels of communication are blocked. While these initiatives thus do play a critical complementary role to official dialogue with North Korea, they are faced with a number of challenges and limitations, ranging from a vulnerability to political framework conditions to a set of structural limitations.

Keywords: North Korea, Europe, Track 1.5 Diplomacy, Conflict Resolution, Regional Security

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I. Introduction

Maintaining peace and security on the Korean Peninsula is a task that ultimately requires a comprehensive engagement of North Korea on various levels and with a variety of actors and institutions. While the involvement of both Koreas, the U.S. and China is obvious, the process of transforming the Armistice Agreement into a comprehensive peace regime will require the support of further actors as well. Although Europe's immediate diplomatic clout is limited, there are a number of crucial contributions that can be made to support peace and stability in Korea. In fact, while the EU's North Korea policy, officially labeled as critical engagement, has become ever more restrictive in recent years – implementing the most comprehensive sanctions regime against North Korea currently in place¹ – individual EU member states and academic institutions throughout Europe have made valuable contributions by both sustaining channels of communication with North Korea (often when official dialogue was lacking) and repeatedly acted as facilitators of dialogue and created important spaces for discreet discussions between the DPRK and major conflict parties involved. Despite an increasing significance, however, there is very little documented information about these talks, as they are usually held informally, without media access and conducted under Chatham House rule.² Except in rare cases, even the fact that the talks took place – let alone their subsequent impact – is not made public. Against this background, it is hardly surprising that international scholarship on North Korea has rarely addressed this important issue. Based both on personal observations and experiences as a participant and organizer as well as

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- 1 Eric J. Ballbach, "The end of Critical Engagement: on the failures of the EU's North Korea strategy," *Analyses of the Elcano Royal Institute*, ARI 101/2019, <http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano_en/contenido?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_in/zonas_in/ari101-2019-ballbach-the-end-of-critical-engagement-on-failures-of-eus-north-korea-strategy> (March 22, 2020).
 - 2 The Chatham House Rule originated in June 1927 and was refined in 1992. It states: "When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed."

on interviews with other Track 1.5 organizers and practitioners, this study aims to provide a first approach to the phenomenon of European Track-1.5 initiatives with North Korea. The primary objective of this paper is therefore not on the individual motives of the parties involved, but rather to elaborate on the main characteristics of European Track-1.5 initiatives with North Korea as well as on their main strengths and the central challenges and limitations of these initiatives.

II. What is Track 2 and Track 1.5 Diplomacy?

While the term is used frequently among security experts, diplomats and academics, 'Track 2' and 'Track 1.5' are elusive concepts that defy any straightforward and easy definitions. At the same time, however, many attempts have been made over the years to approach the term and underlying concept of Track 2. These definitions have focused either on the specifics of the activities themselves, on the actors constituting the respective processes, on the different types of Track 2 / Track 1.5 processes or their place in the larger negotiation processes, among others.³ Given the lack of a common understanding, the terms Track 2 and Track 1.5, as used today, "cover[s] a myriad of different kinds of dialogues"⁴ – describing very different methods, objectives, participants, forms of organization and degrees of institutionalization. It is therefore essential to clarify how the term is understood in the following, whereby the distinction between Track-2 and Track-1.5 in particular is essential.

It is widely agreed upon that the term Track-2 was coined by Joseph Montville to denote unofficial conflict resolution dialogues. He defined Track-2 diplomacy as "unofficial, informal interaction between members of adversary groups or nations that aim to develop strategies, influence

3 Peter Jones, *Track Two Diplomacy in Theory and Practice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), pp. 7-8.

4 George P. Shultz, "Foreword," in *Track Two Diplomacy in Theory and Practice*, ed. Peter Jones (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), pp. xi.

public opinion, and organize human and material resources in ways that might help resolve their conflict.”⁵ The concept of Track-2 diplomacy is thus first and foremost to be distinguished from traditional official diplomacy, or Track-1 diplomacy.⁶ From a historical perspective, then, Track-2 activities were long conducted before the term was even coined. For example, the unofficial Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs, a conference for scientists established in 1957 to assess the dangers of nuclear weapons and discuss strategies for nuclear disarmament, or the Dartmouth Conferences (first held in 1960) that covered U.S.-Soviet Union relations more broadly, are often described as leading examples of Track-2. Both of these conferences are characterized by two features that are still deemed central to (the success of) Track-2. Firstly, the conferences provided a crucial space for consultations among influential individuals to discuss issues of peace and security – often at times when official consultations were hard to realize. Secondly, they produced fresh ideas and provided crucial background work that (later) featured prominently in subsequent Arms Control Agreements such as the Partial Test Ban Treaty (1963), the Non-Proliferation Treaty (1968), the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (1972), the Biological Weapons Convention (1972), and the Chemical Weapons Convention (1993). The first acknowledged case of a modern Track-2 endeavor was initiated in the mid-1960s by former Australian diplomat John Burton and his colleagues at the University College London. Aiming to help resolve a boundary dispute between the newly independent countries of

5 Joseph V. Montville, “Track Two Diplomacy: The Arrow and the Olive Branch: A Case for Track Two Diplomacy,” in *The Psychodynamics of International Relations (Vol. 2): Unofficial Diplomacy at Work*, ed. Vamik D. Volkan, Joseph V. Montville and Demetrios A. Julius (Massachusetts: Lexington Books, 1991), p. 162.

6 While this differentiation is straightforward, it naturally implies that Track-2 is still to be regarded as diplomacy, which, in most cases, it is simply not. Track-2 practitioners are no diplomats – and even if they did or still do hold a diplomatic position, they do not act in an official diplomatic capacity when performing Track-2. Track-2 activities are thus no substitute for Track-1 diplomacy, but rather are intended to provide a bridge to or complement official Track-1 negotiations (cf. Hussein Agha, Shai Feldman, Ahmad Khalidi and Zeev Schiff, *Track II Diplomacy: Lessons from the Middle East* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003)).

Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia, they established a series of workshops with influential non-officials of the respective countries to explore the causes and underlying aspects of the dispute(s) and developing potential solutions. At the heart of Burton's method of 'controlled communication' was the conduct of informal, unofficial workshops chaired by a neutral third party who facilitated the conflict parties' mutual analysis of problems with the aim of helping them develop solutions that were not apparent through traditional diplomatic techniques.⁷ The results of these informal consultations were then transmitted to their governments and were subsequently incorporated into a set of crucial agreements between the countries.

Drawing on Burton's ideas, Herbert Kelman, who initiated the longest-running informal dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians, defined his "interactive problem solving" method as

"an academically based, unofficial third-party approach, bringing together representatives of parties in conflict for direct communication. The third party typically consists of a panel of social scientists who, between them, possess expertise in group processes and international conflict, and at least some familiarity with the conflict region. The role of the third party (...) differs from that of the traditional mediator. Unlike many mediators, we do not propose (...) solutions. Rather, we try to facilitate a process whereby solutions will emerge out of the interaction between the parties themselves. The task of the third party is to provide the setting, create the atmosphere, establish the norms, and offer the occasional interventions that make it possible for such a process to evolve."⁸

The reference to the role of the third party is crucial to the discussion that follows, as they typically do not act as mediators and usually avoid pushing their own ideas, but rather take the role of facilitators that aim

7 John W. Burton, *Conflict and Communication: The Use of Controlled Communication in International Relations* (New York: The Free Press, 1969).

8 Herbert C Kelman, "Interactive Problem Solving as a Tool for Second Track Diplomacy," in *Second Track/ Citizens' Diplomacy: Concepts and Techniques for Conflict Transformation*, ed. John Davies, Edy Kaufman and Edward Kaufman (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), p. 82.

at helping the conflict parties to move beyond the mere exchange of official government positions and examine the roots of their disputes. Naturally this requires a process of ongoing interactions under controlled circumstances, key to which are the rules of the meetings to which the participants agree beforehand.

Since the 1960s and 1970s, a number of scholars and practitioners have contributed to the further development and refinement of the term and concept of Track-2. For example, Ron Fisher's "Interactive Conflict Resolution"⁹ model (1993) and Diamond and McDonald's (1996) concept of "multi-track diplomacy"¹⁰ both showed that Track-2 processes can have very different audiences and that such processes must not be reduced to the hitherto common portrayal of dialogues among "influential people." Rather, as peace is not made between elites only, a broader level of interaction may be vital depending on the conflict.

A crucial expansion of the general concept of Track-2 was made in the 1990s by Susan Nan and others, who have introduced the notion of Track-1.5, referring to a growing number of initiatives that are situated between the official (Track-1) and the unofficial (Track-2) level. Nan defines Track-1.5 as "diplomatic initiatives that are facilitated by unofficial bodies, but directly involve officials from the conflict in question."¹¹ Mapendere further clarifies that Track-1.5 aims "to influence attitudinal changes between the parties with the objective of changing

9 Ronald J. Fisher, "Developing the Field of Interactive Conflict Resolution: Issues in Training, Funding and Institutionalization," *Political Psychology*, vol. 14, no. 1 (1993), pp. 123-138.

10 Diamond and McDonald distinguish nine tracks of peacemaking activities, i.e. government, professional conflict resolution, business, private citizens, research, training and education, peace activism, religion, funding and media, and public opinion. See Louise Diamond and John McDonald, *Multi-Track Diplomacy: A Systems Approach to Peace* (Conneticut: Kumarian Press, 1996), p. 15.

11 Susan A. Nan, "Track One-and-a-Half Diplomacy: Contributions to Georgian-South Ossetian Peacemaking," in *Paving the Way*, ed. Ronald J. Fisher (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005), p. 165.

the political power structures that caused the conflict.”¹² While Track-1.5 involves officials, they usually participate in such dialogues in a ‘private capacity’ and often rely on (unofficial) third parties to facilitate the process as a non-official dialogue, often in strict secrecy. Due to the involvement of government officials, Track-1.5 dialogues are therefore often much closer to official diplomatic processes and/or decision-makers. As Jones aptly puts it: “Track One and a Half is the closest that unofficial dialogues get to official diplomacy.”¹³ Most cases of unofficial dialogue with authoritarian states are therefore more fittingly understood as Track-1.5 initiatives, for the representatives of these countries are conventionally attached to their respective foreign ministry, defense ministry or other governmental institutions.¹⁴ In fact, understanding how close any given activity below the Track-1 is to official diplomacy has been among the recurring themes in attempts to define Track-2 and Track-1.5. This is indeed a very sensitive issue and, as will be discussed further below, a close proximity of Track-1.5 or Track-2 dialogues to official diplomacy can be enormously beneficial in some cases, while being perceived as harmful in others. Another important debate relates to the subject matter of the respective dialogues. While conflict resolution is a central theme of many Track-2 dialogues, a number of unofficial dialogues are focused more generally on exploring new approaches to a multitude of policy-relevant issues. These may include dialogues aimed at building new norms, and discussions of regional security or specific steps to peace and security building.

12 Jeffrey Mapendere, “Track One and a Half Diplomacy and the Complementarity of Tracks,” *Culture of Peace Online Journal*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2000), p. 69.

13 Jones, *Track Two Diplomacy in Theory and Practice*, pp. 19-20.

14 As Track 1.5 meetings often involve official participants from the countries in question, this type of diplomacy is also described as “hybrid diplomacy,” because it ultimately is a mixture between Track 1 and Track 2.

III. North Korea's Participation in Security-Related Track-1.5/II Initiatives: An Overview

Despite the widely held belief of an overall isolated state, expressed most commonly by the label of the “hermit kingdom,” North Korea is embedded in a multilayered and complex web of bilateral and multilateral structures of interactions. These structures encompass official and unofficial channels of dialogue on different levels, with different actors and institutions involved, different forms of organization, different degrees of institutionalization as well as different objectives. Within this complex web of interactions, North Korea's multilateral relations to international organizations and institutions have come to play an ever more crucial role.¹⁵ While North Korea has more broadly participated with international organizations ever since the 1970s, Pyongyang's increasing engagement with security-related Track-1.5 structures are a comparably new phenomenon in the country's foreign policy canon. However, since the end of the Cold War, the mere number of such Track-1.5 initiatives in which North Korea did or still does participate successively increased – and European Track-1.5 initiatives with North Korea have played an increasingly important albeit mostly overlooked role. Against this background, the remainder of this chapter first provides a broader overview on security-related Track-1.5/II dialogues with North Korea, before the different arrangements of these dialogues are discussed.

1. North Korea and Security-Related Track-1.5/II Dialogues: A Genesis

Since the outbreak of the long-running North Korean nuclear crisis over a quarter-century ago, Track 1.5 dialogues and people-to-people exchanges between North Korea and the international community, and

15 Eric J. Ballbach, “Engaging North Korea in International Institutions: The Case of the ASEAN Regional Forum,” *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, vol. 26, no. 2 (2017), pp. 35-65.

particularly the U.S., have, at times, played a significant role in getting official negotiations on track, sending diplomatic signals, and regularizing interactions between North Korean officials and international experts. While international experts have visited North Korea before the 1990s, tangible Track-1.5 contacts between North Korea and the outside world only began to take place on a regular basis as the Cold War was coming to a close. As the first North Korean nuclear crisis unfolded in the early 1990s, unofficial talks and back-channel messages played an important role, often complementing official talks, e.g. through the “New York Channel” – the DPRK Mission to the United Nations. For instance, in 1993, a North Korean delegation attended the first meeting of the Northeast Asia Cooperation Dialogue (NEACD) – an annual Track 1.5 multilateral forum which convened the U.S., China, Russia, Japan, and the two Koreas, although North Korean diplomats did not resume attendance at NEACD meetings until 2002. At the same time, North Korean diplomats did regularly attend meetings convened by the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP) and worked with renowned international think tanks, such as the Atlantic Council, to send occasional delegations abroad.

Amidst revelations of a secret North Korean uranium enrichment program and the collapse of the Agreed Framework in 2002, North Korean engagement with Track-II and Track-1.5 interlocutors further increased, for these unofficial dialogues repeatedly helped jumpstart and/or complemented official negotiations. For instance, during the Six Party process (2003-2008), the multilateral format designed to address the North Korean nuclear challenge, Track-1.5/II dialogues frequently provided the opportunity to complement official negotiations with unofficial discussions in a less rigid format. In specific terms, the annual NEACD conferences, whose makeup mirrors that of the Six Party Talks, provided the opportunity for officials to engage in informal side conversations. Moreover, a series of Track-1.5/II conferences jointly organized by The National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) and The Korea Society brought North Koreans to New York for discussions with prominent American foreign policy experts, and

occasionally included U.S. officials participating in an unofficial capacity.

In other occasions, these Track-1.5 talks helped kickstart official dialogue, or at least allowed both North Korean diplomats as well as representatives from other participating countries to refine their negotiating positions. An NCAFP meeting convened in the summer of 2005, for example, achieved – in the words of Han Songryol, then the DPRK’s Ambassador to the UN – a “decisive breakthrough for the resumption of the nuclear six-party talks,” leading to the September 19, 2005 statement on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Track-1.5 dialogue also helped the Six Party Talks get back on track in the spring of 2007, after U.S. financial sanctions imposed in response to North Korean illicit financial activities and North Korea’s subsequent first nuclear test had led to a breakdown in negotiations.¹⁶

In the absence of sustained official dialogue between the U.S. and North Korea since the collapse of the Six Party Talks (apart for the talks leading to the Leap Day Deal), Track-1.5/dialogues have continued to serve as a mechanism for communication and information gathering. These talks have more recently often been held throughout Europe and Asia, both in the form of regular conferences and especially in an ad hoc format.

2. *The Different Arrangements of Track 1.5 Dialogues with North Korea*

There are numerous Track 1.5 dialogues throughout Europe and Asia involving North Korean representatives. While there naturally are a number of intersections, there are also considerable differences between them, e.g. with regard to their thematic focus, their personnel composition, or their degree of institutionalization. Another important

16 Lee, Karin J, “The DPRK and Track II Exchanges,” *NCNK Newsletter*, vol. 1, no. 6, November 6, 2008, <<http://www.ncnk.org/resources/newsletter-content-items/ncnk-newsletter-vol-1-no-6-the-dprk-and-track-ii-exchanges/>> (date accessed March 22, 2020).

difference is the respective dialogues' organizational structure, and we may distinguish between conference-type Track 1.5 dialogues from more exclusive, informal initiatives.

Conference-type Track 1.5 dialogues are usually held in a larger, conference-like setting, not necessarily but often in the form of (bi-) annual gatherings. Typical examples for such conference-like Track 1.5 dialogues involving North Korean officials are the biannually held General Conferences of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific¹⁷ and the annual meetings of the Ulaanbaatar Dialogue on Northeast Asian Security.¹⁸ At these comparatively large gatherings, a

17 Founded in 1993 with the objective of initiating a multilateral process of security cooperation below the formal Track 1 level, CSCAP was established to contribute to regional confidence-building by strengthening dialogue, consultation and cooperation on the issue of regional security among experts, officials and others in a private capacity, as well as to formulate policy recommendations for various international and regional organizations and institutions. Primarily, membership in CSCAP is based on the participation of experts from renowned research institutions and consists of national membership committees (NMCs) composited from single countries and/or regions (cf. Dirk Strothmann, *Das ASEAN Regional Forum: Chancen und Grenzen regionaler Sicherheitskooperation in Ostasien* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2012), p. 137). While CSCAP aims at disseminating a cooperative security approach and innovative ideas, the member committees differ at times significantly with regard to their respective interest, norms and worldviews. With its distinct organizational structure consisting of a steering committee, specific sub committees, a secretariat, the NMCs, and a number of working and study groups, CSCAP is the most densely institutionalized security-related Track-1.5 process in East Asia. The significance of the security dialogue within CSCAP primarily arises from the issuance of tangible confidence-building measures such as the publication of annual outlooks on the respective national security policies of the member states or the passage of recommendations and cooperation guidelines. Moreover, CSCAP is a vivid example for the creation of 'epistemic communities' (cf. Peter M. Haas, "Introduction: Epistemic Communities and International Policy Coordination," *International Organization*, vol. 46, no. 1 (1992), pp. 1-35).

18 The UB Dialogue emerged from the 2008 conference on "Security Perspectives of Central and Northeast Asia: Ulaanbaatar as a New Helsinki," organized by the (foreign ministry affiliated) "Institute for Strategic Studies." The UB Dialogue was first held in 2014 and is based on three interrelated objectives: the establishment of an institutionalized dialogue mechanism in Northeast Asia as a building block to achieve the long-term objective of regional peace; to increase mutual understanding and regional cooperation (both through the annual conference and further initiatives such as the "NEA

rather broad spectrum of topics is discussed, often concerning different aspects of regional security. It is important to note that while the developments on the Korean Peninsula are among the important topics discussed, these initiatives are not limited to said issues.

North Korea has participated since 1994 in CSCAP-related events via the “Institute for Disarmament and Peace.” In its interaction with CSCAP, North Korea focused its attention on the biennially held General Conference, which constitutes an international forum enabling the exchange among high-ranking officials and security experts from the Asia-Pacific region on relevant security issues. In the context of the General Conference, North Korean representatives frequently participated in both formal and informal meetings, thereby seizing on the opportunity to present its own views and perspectives on the security-related developments and challenges in the East Asian region. For instance, in 2003, a North Korean representative used one of the few opportunities at that time to transmit to the other participants Pyongyang’s own view regarding the intensifying nuclear conflict. On the other hand, North Korea’s participation in CSCAP time and again revealed the immediate influence of the national government in Pyongyang on the DPRK’s member committee, for the delegates solely expressed official government positions in the nuclear conflict without putting forward new ideas or room for maneuvering. Besides its participation in the General Conference and the contributions to the ‘Annual Security Outlook,’ North Korean representatives participate,

Mayors Forum” or the “NEA Youth Symposium,” among others); and contributing to tangible confidence-building in the region, especially with regards to the reduction of military tensions between the states. The UBD focuses on topics and issues of common regional interest and bases its modus operandi on the principles of mutual respect, trust, multilateralism, openness, and transparency. Beyond the core states of East Asia – China, Russia, Mongolia, Japan, North Korea, and South Korea as well as the U.S. – the UBD also involves representatives from further regions as well as from regional and international organizations such as the U.N. or the E.U. Against this background, the UBD constitutes a Track-1.5 process which comprises of government officials, diplomats, and scholars and that aims at tangible security cooperation and consultation in the following issue-areas: Traditional Security Issues, Non-Traditional Security Issues, Energy Connectivity, Infrastructural Development, and Environmental Protection.

albeit intermittently, in (some of) CSCAP's working groups/study groups. For instance, representatives from the DPRK participated in the study groups on "Preventive Diplomacy" (2013), "Regional Security Architecture" (2013-2014), "Countering the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Asia-Pacific" (2005-2014), and "Nonproliferation and Disarmament in the Asia-Pacific" (2014-2017).

Between 2014 and 2018, North Korea participated annually at the UBD and uses the rather open format both for statements and presentations in the domain of traditional security issues as well as for informal side-line consultations. In the ensuing debates, North Korean representatives do use their right of rebuttal. However, the UBD not only provides a space for formal consultations within the realm of the annual conferences, but also allows for informal contacts on the sidelines of the event. The fact that the conference is held within the premises of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs already suggests those intentions. For example, demonstrating the political significance of the 5th round of the Ulaanbaatar Dialogue, informal meetings between representatives of Japan and North Korea took place on the sidelines of the conference. According to reports in the Japanese press, after that meeting, Taro Kono, the Japanese Foreign Minister, announced in a press conference in Tokyo that Japan would seek opportunities to set up direct contacts with North Korea, so that the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe could hold meetings with Kim Jong Un. This is also reflected in the composition of North Korea's delegation. While the North Korean delegations at the UBD are in flux, they usually comprise representatives from the Institute for Disarmament and Peace as well as officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the North Korean embassy in Ulaanbaatar. Moreover, sideline events of the UBD also allow for informal consultations with other participants – an opportunity which is regularly seized upon by North Korean representatives at the UBD.

Exclusive, Informal Dialogues

Besides such conference-type Track-II dialogues, North Korea also

participates in informal, non-institutionalized, and often more exclusive dialogues. In fact, the security-related Track 1.5 dialogues in Europe are usually organized in this more exclusive format. Compared to the conference-like Track 1.5 dialogues involving North Korean officials, the more exclusive dialogues usually differ both in terms of a usually narrower and more specified set of issues, such as C(S)BM, risk-reduction or regional security, and with regard to its format and organizational structure that may be held ad-hoc or in a more institutionalized setting. Overall, European Track-1.5 initiatives with North Korea have more recently taken place in Geneva, Oslo, Madrid, Helsinki, and Stockholm, among others. As these discussions are generally conducted on the basis of the Chatham House rule, the results are usually not conveyed to the public. Moreover, such informal ad hoc dialogues also vary with regard to the respective topics discussed, the participants, and the objectives linked to them. While conference-type dialogues conventionally address a broader set of issues and topics, informal dialogues tend to discuss a more confined set of issues in a much narrower thematic focus, such as particular military and/or political confidence-building measures. Rather, such informal dialogues often aim at an open, yet intensive exchange of ideas regarding specific topics or sets of topics, such as decided steps to confidence-building.

IV. European Track-1.5 Initiatives with North Korea

1. General Characteristics of European Track-1.5 Initiatives with North Korea

European Track-1.5 activities with North Korea, while differing in their respective objectives, personnel constitution, and degree of institutionalization, share some key characteristics, as is shown in Table 1.

<Table 1> Major European Track 1.5 Initiatives with North Korea

Country	Official nature of meeting	Participants	North Korean participants (level)
Finland	Explores approaches to building confidence and reducing tensions on the Korean Peninsula	NK diplomats, former U.S. and South Korean officials and academics, observers from the United Nations and Europe	Choe Kang Il, a deputy director general for North American affairs at North Korea’s foreign ministry
Sweden	Regional security issues, confidence and security building	NK diplomats, European experts, supplemented occasionally by U.S. experts and observers from regional and /or international institutions and organizations such as the EU or the UN	Vice Foreign Minister level, Korea Europe Association
	CBMs	Experts and government figures from South and North Korea, sometimes also from the U.S., Japan or China	Institute for Disarmament and Peace
Spain	Regional security	NK diplomats, experts from Europe, South Korea, China, Russia, Japan, observers from EU	Vice Foreign Minister level, Korea Europe Association, Institute for Disarmament and Peace
Switzerland	Regional security	Bilateral dialogue and annual conference (Zermatt roundtable)	Institute for Disarmament and Peace

European Track-1.5 processes with North Korea are, for the most part, not organized in large conference-type settings, but are usually conducted as rather exclusive, informal dialogues typically facilitated by an impartial third party, often a think tank or, less common, a university institution. While the personnel composition might differ, these dialogues usually bring together North Korean representatives (typically from the Institute for Disarmament and Peace¹⁹ or the Korea-Europe

19 According to information provided by the DPRK’s Foreign Ministry, the Institute for Disarmament and Peace (IDP) is a policy research institute under the Ministry and

Association²⁰) with academics from Europe and other countries of the Northeast Asian region. Officials from European countries and/or international organizations such as the EU or the U.N. are frequently invited to participate in these dialogue initiatives as well – albeit they usually do so in a private capacity or as observers. Though these dialogues are unofficial in the sense that the participants, apart from the North Koreans, do not officially represent their respective country or institution, the involved participants usually do have access to decision-makers at home. And in most European Track-1.5 exercises there is in fact an essential understanding that the attendees, upon return, will brief authorities. Track-1.5 dialogues therefore simultaneously constitute an informal, back-channel method for communications, while providing everyone involved with “an elegant protective layer of ‘plausible deniability’” (Zuckerman 2005: 5-6). For government officials participating in a private capacity, Track-1.5 dialogues enable them to present “personal views that are not necessarily authorized by government (...) [which] allows for some degree of candor.”²¹ In a limited number of cases, European Track-1.5 meetings with North Korea involved more high-ranking decision-makers from the concerned

studies ways for achieving disarmament, peace, and security on the Korean Peninsula and on regional and worldwide basis, and makes policy recommendations in this regard, organizes and conducts academic exchanges on an international scale, as a member of the “Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific Region,” focuses on promoting the process of peace and disarmament in Asia, and exchanges experiences and information on disarmament, peace, and security affairs with its foreign counterparts. The Institute for Disarmament and Peace consists of the Disarmament Division, the Peace and Security Division, the Reunification Division and the External Affairs Division.

20 The Korea-Europe Association is a ‘civil organization sponsored by the MoFA. The mission of KEA is to “realize interchange and cooperation with the European policy study institutes and civil organs in the domain of media, education, culture, art, sports, etc., promote exchange of views on major international issues including situations of Europe and Northeast Asia, and provide advisory service for making policies in the areas concerned. The Association involves sitting and former officials from various fields, and it is composed of the sections of respective relevant fields” (DPRK, Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

21 Michael J. Zuckerman, “Track II Diplomacy: Can ‘Unofficial’ Talks Avert Disaster?,” *Carnegie Reporter*, vol. 3, no. 3 (2005), p. 6.

parties, as was the case with the unofficial meeting in January 2019 in Sweden. Overall, European Track-1.5 initiatives have contributed to the development of a community of experts who are engaged in discussing new approaches to regional security and confidence- and trust-building and debate, in detail, what contributions European countries and /or the EU can make in this regard.

While the overall thematic orientation and the respective aims of European Track-1.5 dialogues with North Korea differ, they share the main objective of opening new or maintaining existing channels of communication with North Korea. Hence, we might state that European Track-1.5 dialogues with North Korea are especially important in times when official relations are blocked, i.e. when there are few other and in some cases no means of communicating. While these dialogues also involve the discussion of current positions of the conflicting sides, they usually aim at moving beyond the mere debate of official positions. Rather, most of these dialogues are designed as one- or two-day workshops in which the participants are given the opportunity to step back from official positions. This allows for the exploration of the underlying causes of the dispute in the hope of jointly developing alternative ideas, thereby fostering, over time, a changed perception of the conflict and the “other.” Against this background, many European Track-1.5 dialogues with North Korea are designed as ongoing processes rather than “one-off” meetings.²² All of these meetings, while not exactly secret, are conducted quietly and informally. This is done to create an atmosphere within which “outside-the-box” thinking can flourish and participants are not afraid to propose and explore ideas that could not be entertained by an official process or by one where exchanges might be repeated in the press.

22 While ad hoc Track-1.5 meetings do occur, as was the case in January 2019 in Sweden, these are built on the success of previous and continuous engagement initiatives on the Track 1.5 level.

2. Main Strengths of European Track-1.5 Initiatives with North Korea

It is among the major strengths of European Track-1.5 initiatives with North Korea that they are often successful in opening new and sustaining existing channels of communication with North Korea, thus providing a critical space for dialogue with Pyongyang. In so doing, European Track-1.5 initiatives with North Korea both opened and sustained direct channels of communication between European academic institutions and the DPRK and have repeatedly facilitated unofficial dialogue between academics and officials of the Northeast Asian region. It has been acknowledged by numerous Track-1.5 organizers and practitioners that the European dialogues facilitated with North Korea gained a particular significance in times when official Track-1 dialogue channels with North Korea are blocked or restricted, when Track-1.5 processes serve as a bridge for allowing direct communication among states that do not have formal relations on the official Track-1 level or when the relations of the involved parties are locked in a confrontational relation, in which official Track-1 dialogue might not be realized due to political opposition. In such circumstances, European Track-1.5 dialogues regularly offer an alternate route to the continuation of the discussion of pressing issues when official routes are blocked. While European Track-1.5 initiatives with North Korea are in no way a substitution for official Track-1 negotiations, such processes can and repeatedly did play a critical complementary role, and they are particularly useful in “hard cases such as North Korea or Iran” in order to facilitate communication where and when regular channels of communication are closed or non-existent.²³ For example, following North Korea’s expansion of both missile and nuclear testing activities since 2015 and the subsequent expansion of the international community’s sanctions regime against North Korea, official dialogue with the DPRK by and large broke down. Although several informal Track-1 meetings between North Korea and the USA and between North and South Korea continued to take place after 2008, the dialogue

²³ Zuckerman, “Track II Diplomacy,” p. 6.

between the reunification ministers of the two Koreas in January 2018 was the first formal meeting between the two Koreas since December 2015. The last official meeting between North Korea and the US before the resumption of the dialogue on the two secret services in 2018 took place within the framework of the negotiations of the so-called Leap Day Agreement. In 2015, furthermore, the EU halted the political dialogue with North Korea originally established in 1998 and only a few European countries made efforts to continue (bilateral) dialogue with North Korea outside the framework of the EU. In this particular context, European think tanks and university institutions played a crucial role in sustaining existing and opening new channels of communication with North Korea. Moreover, European Track-1.5 dialogues have repeatedly provided an informal space for (semi-) formal Track-1 consultations between North Korean officials and their counterparts from other countries, as is illustrated in Table 2.

<Table 2> Major Meetings Facilitated by Europe

Country	Time	Official nature of meeting	Major Participants	Remarks
Norway	May 2017	Explore bilateral issues between U.S. and North Korea	Choi Son Hui, Vice Foreign Minister of the DPRK, diplomats, former officials and scholars from SK and U.S.	First direct consultations between North Korea and the U.S. following the election of Donald Trump
Sweden	January 2019	Discussion of issues concerning security developments on the Korean peninsula, including confidence building, economic development and long-term engagement	Choi Son Hui, Vice Foreign Minister of the DPRK, Stephen Biegun, U.S. Special Representative for North Korea, and Lee Do-hoon, Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Peace and Security Affairs	First working-level consultations between North Korea and the U.S. since resumption of dialogue in 2018
	October 2019	Exploring possibility for finding common ground between U.S. demands for North Korea's complete and verified denuclearization and Pyongyang's demands for sanctions relief and security guarantees	Kim Myong Gil and Stephen Biegun	First formal working-level discussion since Hanoi summit between U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un

While the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) in Sweden has carried out informal Track-1.5 initiatives with North Korea for a number of years, in 2019, these endeavors provided the space for a more high-ranking dialogue initiative directly facilitated by the Swedish Foreign Ministry. The meeting, which brought together high-ranking officials from North Korea, South Korea, the U.S., and European experts, and which was jointly organized by SIPRI and the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, constituted the first working-level meeting between the envoys of the U.S. (Stephen Biegun), North Korea (Choe Son Hui), and South Korea (Lee Do-hoon). Moreover, a Track-1.5 meeting held in Oslo in May 2017 provided the framework for the first official discussions between the new Trump administration and North Korean government representatives in Oslo in May 2017. The informal discussions between Joseph Yun, then special representative in the U.S. State Department, and Choi Son Hui, Chairwoman of the influential America Bureau in the DPRK's foreign ministry, paved the way for further discussions via the New York channel in June 2017, which ultimately allowed for the consultations that lead to the release of U.S. student Otto Warmbier.

It is noteworthy the Track-1.5 initiatives in both the case of Norway and Sweden have been supported by the respective Foreign Ministries. This goes to show that, if supported by the respective government of the organizing third party, European Track-1.5 initiatives can, and by all means repeatedly did, serve as a facilitator for official Track-1 diplomacy among the main conflict parties. While Europe's limited influence on hard security issues in Northeast Asia may be considered a shortcoming, it is precisely the fact that European countries are not considered as strategic powers that allow European actors to serve as facilitators of dialogue with North Korea – and Track 1.5 initiatives play a crucial role in this regard. In fact, several officials from the conflict parties that participated in European Track-1.5 initiatives, including those from the U.S. and North Korea, acknowledged how useful these can be. Among others, the officials emphasized the role of the participating European experts and officials in contributing to the discussions, allowing issues to

be probed and questions to be raised that the participating officials from the main conflict parties could respond to. While no one expects that any government official (even when participating in a private capacity) would stray too far from official positions, European Track-1.5 dialogues certainly provide a space for the participating representatives to discuss certain ideas, options, and concepts more freely. As such, on the most basic level, European Track-1.5 dialogues (can) help the participants to better understand the policies and perspectives of the involved parties as well as of European countries. In this regard it was pointed out by a number of European Track-1.5 practitioners with North Korea that the respective initiatives can serve as laboratories for the development and testing of new ideas, “offering new inputs, impressions, ideas for consideration.”²⁴ Given their informality and the fact that they are usually private, not governmental initiatives, new concepts or specific proposals can be debated without officials having to commit. While on the one hand no binding decisions are made in such discussions, it is precisely due to the suitable institutional design of such dialogues that allows all participants to gain full benefits from incorporating itself into Track-1.5. In the best case, Track-1.5 processes can serve as a mechanism for the development of policy advice to governments, particularly with regard to new issues or longer-term questions that require a continuous discussion. European Track-1.5 initiatives can thus also serve as a kind of “reserve of intellectual capacity.”²⁵

Aside from the discussion of new ideas, European Track-1.5 dialogues involving North Korean officials time and again served as crucial mechanisms for information-gathering, to determine red lines, hint at upcoming actions by the respective governments or float trial balloons, and convey certain messages when other lines of communication were blocked. For example, following the election of Donald Trump, when official Track-1 dialogue with the U.S. was non-existent, North Korean representatives have repeatedly used their participation in informal dialogue processes in Europe, which regularly

24 Zuckerman, “Track II Diplomacy,” p. 7.

25 Jones, *Track Two Diplomacy in Theory and Practice*, p. 28.

involve U.S. experts as well, to gain information on the policy positions of the incoming Trump administration. On the other hand, international participants have been able to probe North Korea's positions in more depth and to assess what might be realistically expected from pursuing Track-1 talks.²⁶

Lastly, continued Track-1.5 dialogues with North Korea have allowed the participants to maintain or build working relationships and to get to know each other. This social component should not be underestimated, as it can lead to greater trust among participants, which, in turn, increases the possibility to discuss more sensitive topics and issues, which might not have been possible at the beginning of a dialogue. Beyond this, Track-1.5 initiatives allow the participants to develop a keener appreciation of each other's perspectives and concerns, which is a prerequisite for achieving shared understandings on difficult issues.

3. Challenges and Limitations of European Track-1.5 Initiatives with North Korea

While European Track-1.5 initiatives with North Korea without a doubt are a crucial asset, they also face a number of challenges and limitations. Among the major challenges is the dependence of European Track-1.5 initiatives on the political environment. Although European Track-1.5 with North Korea is usually facilitated by private institutions such as think tanks and university institutions, they are all but immune to an unfavorable political environment. One of the factors that determines the 'political vulnerability' of any European Track-1.5 dialogue is the attitude of the government within which the organizing third party operates. Simply put, when the respective governments are

26 Joel Wit, "How to Talk to a North Korean," 38 *North*, April 22, 2011, <<http://38north.org/2011/04/joelwit042011/>> (date accessed April 1, 2020); John Power, "Millions Spent, But What Has Track II with N. Korea Achieved?" *NK News*, October 29, 2015, <<https://www.nknews.org/2015/10/millions-spent-but-what-hastrack-ii-with-n-korea-achieved/>> (date accessed March 25, 2020).

skeptical towards any form of engagement with North Korea, political challenges for Track-1.5 organizers and practitioners in those countries can and frequently do occur. Among others, Track-1.5 organizers (and to some extent Track-1.5 practitioners) have been accused of pursuing activities that run contrary to the respective government's foreign policy, and in a few cases the issuance of visa to North Korean participants have been denied. In other words, when Track-1.5 is seen as a hindrance to the official policy line in the respective country, some of the core functions of Track-1.5 dialogues are at risk, such as the communication and transmission of information from the Track-1.5 to the Track-1 level, which is naturally much more complicated when the Track-1 level is not receptive. This suggests that not every European country is equally well positioned to conduct Track-1.5 initiatives with North Korea. Moreover, an unfavorable political environment also bears the risk of North Korea cancelling its participation in European Track-1.5 dialogues. For example, following the failed Hanoi summit, North Korea not only withdrew from most official Track-1 dialogues with the U.S. and South Korea, but also temporarily cancelled its participation in European Track-1.5 dialogues.

Another crucial challenge for European Track-1.5 dialogues with North Korea is to manage the sometimes extremely high expectations placed on these initiatives. Especially when official Track-1 dialogue with North Korea was absent, European Track-1.5 dialogues with North Korea have repeatedly been confronted with unrealistic and ultimately unfulfillable expectations. While the off-the-record format of Track-1.5 talks with North Korea has been extremely important to allow for a more candid discussion of ideas, and for government officials to review the proposals that come out of such meetings without having to immediately take a public stance on them, the quiet nature has frequently led to media speculation about "secret talks" on the hard security issues on the Korean Peninsula. However, Track-1.5 initiatives are no substitute for official Track-1 diplomacy, and Track-1.5 practitioners usually do not possess political power. As such, they typically do not have the ability to linearly influence foreign policy or

even encourage an agreement or enforce agreement implementation.²⁷ Moreover, especially in authoritarian regimes such as North Korea, it is uncertain in how far the leadership is open to advice from lower level officials. Further complicating the situation is the lack of coordination among many of the existing Track-1.5 processes in Europe. This lack of coordination – caused partly by the informal nature of these dialogues but also by institutional competition – not only encourages avoidable thematic overlaps, but also provides Pyongyang with a selective approach to when, and with whom, they will engage in Track-1.5 talks. Another major challenge for European Track-1.5 dialogues with North Korea is the challenge to broaden the topics that are discussed as well as to incorporate a broader range of perspectives into such meetings. While the discussion of regional security, peace-building, and confidence-building are of the utmost importance, there are further issues that need to be tackled with North Korea below the official level. For example, in contrast to Track-1.5 dialogues with Iran, Track-1.5 talks with North Korea have generally not featured extensive discussions on the technical aspects of potential nuclear agreements. For quite some time now, a number of experts have called for quiet unofficial talks with North Korea to discuss such issues as the safety and security of its nuclear arsenal, to better understand North Korea's conceptions of nuclear deterrence, command and control, and strategy as well as, more recently, on the technical aspects of North Korea's denuclearization process. However, it is extremely difficult to implement ongoing dialogues with North Korean institutions outside of the Foreign Ministry, which might not be the most appropriate interlocutors for such technical discussions. Finally, while it was argued that the social component of such dialogues is crucial, as trust is built successively, it is questionable if or in how far European Track-1.5 dialogues with North Korea can achieve what some observers and practitioners of such initiatives have described as a crucial measure of success: socialization. While the dialogues might very well have an impact on the perceptions and attitudes of the participating officials, it

27 It should be reminded, however, that these are not the objectives of European Track-1.5 initiatives.

is questionable if they can encourage more moderate views at home.

V. Track-1.5 with North Korea – Some Lessons Learned

This study addressed the comparatively new phenomenon of European Track-1.5 initiatives with North Korea, focusing primarily on the general characteristics of these initiatives as well as their strengths and limitations. However, the question remains of how we measure success? How do we know if and when a Track-1.5 initiative with North Korea is useful? While the answer to this question depends heavily on the objectives of the respective initiatives and although there is no universal playbook for successful Track-1.5 initiatives with North Korea, some practices have proven generally effective in the contexts of European Track-1.5 dialogues with North Korea.

To begin with, ongoing initiatives have proven to be much more effective than one-off programs, both in terms of its effectiveness to establish working relationships and as a way to ensure that projects have a broader impact and discernable outputs. The social component of such dialogues is of crucial importance. In fact, some of the most valuable exchanges during Track-1.5 talks with North Korea, as well as relationship-building, have taken place away from the conference table in less formal settings. Convening Track-1.5 talks in relatively isolated settings, where participants can venture out of the conference room and engage in lengthy one-on-one conversations, has proven effective in the past – while ensuring confidentiality especially from media reporting. Socializing over dinner, after a day’s meetings have wrapped up, has also enabled more candid conversations. While any individual Track-1.5 meeting “may fail to produce immediate and tangible results, the process of ongoing dialogue builds a foundation upon which successful initiatives can be built.”²⁸

28 Daniel Wertz, “Track II Diplomacy with Iran and North Korea: Lessons Learned from Unofficial Talks with Nuclear Outlier,” *The National Committee on North Korea*, June 2017, p. 12.

This, however, requires that both Track-1.5 organizers and funders have deep commitments to the process, continuing even amidst potentially unfavorable political framework conditions and short-term setbacks such as temporary suspensions of participation by individual participants, visa cancellations, complications related to sanctions, or a lack of broader political progress. It is only this combination of continuity and commitment that allows Track-1.5 practitioners to take a more long-term view not driven by governmental political agendas or affected by election cycles, which is crucial in terms of creating a climate that allows frank discussions.

Another crucial element determining the success of any European Track-1.5 initiative with North Korea is the role of the third party. There is no overstating the significance of the role of the third party to a dialogue's success, which is the key to providing the space where participants feel sufficiently comfortable, and yet also challenged, so that new thinking can flourish, even in the most difficult situations. "The third party role is an art, like being an outstanding negotiator. But it is an art which must be informed by careful study of the process and by much experience."²⁹

Track-1.5 dialogues have also proven most effective when participants have sought to identify realistic goals – such as refining proposals for confidence-building measures, achieving greater clarity on a party's policy objectives or negotiating stance, discussing possible contributions that involved third-parties can make or balancing steps necessary to overcome specific roadblocks to Track-1 talks. As Jones puts it, "there has to be the capacity for (...) a sensible, informed, yet at the same time far-reaching and unconstrained discussion of the issues at hand."³⁰ Productive Track-1.5 dialogues therefore need to strike a balance between seeking to break with conventional thinking and allow for the discussion of new and potential transformative ideas while at the same time stay within the realm of what is ultimately possible and

29 Jones, *Track Two Diplomacy in Theory and Practice*, p. 171.

30 Jones, *Track Two Diplomacy in Theory and Practice*, p. 169.

realistic. In practice, this means discussing discrete, achievable steps that may lead to tangible results and positive momentum, while those aiming to outline grand bargains will likely be ignored by policymakers and have little impact. That is not easy, but progress in particularly intractable disputes requires a space for ideas which fall between well-established positions, on the one hand, and fantasy, on the other. Such ideas are hard to find, especially in situations of conflict, but they are the key to real change.

Ultimately, a crucial factor in identifying what is possible – and what is not – are the participants of the respective dialogue. Overall, it is of crucial importance to the success of European Track-1.5 initiatives that the people involved have a standing in their respective communities. If the objective of the exercise is to develop ideas which can influence events, the people at the table must have the ability to make themselves, and the ideas they have developed, heard at the appropriate levels when they go home.

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