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EVENT REPORT

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the Geopolitics of Health
24 October 2023
Brussels

On 23 October 2023, the European Institute for Asian Studies hosted a briefing seminar and related discussion on the role of health in securing peace throughout the Korean peninsula. The speakers discussed their experiences and observations on the DPRK's national health system, challenges for international aid providers, and the potential dialogue facilitator role of the EU in future health cooperation initiatives.

Dr Kee B. Park, Lecturer on Global Health and Social Policy (including Korea Health Policy) at the Harvard Medical School and Director of the Korea Health Policy Project (KHPP). As Director of the North Korea programme at the Korean American Medical Association, he emphasised how health is an important path to the process of trust building and peace, especially in the current climate of renewed international tension. He warned against the dehumanisation of North Koreans, which increases the likelihood of armed conflict and mass civilian casualties. The foundational role of systemic change as the only effective path to improve health outcomes was furthermore underlined.

Lucy Roberts, international peacebuilding director at the American Friends Service Committee, discussed her experience working in the DPRK pre-pandemic as part of an NGO, focusing on the international challenges that organisations face when choosing to aid North Koreans. She emphasised the importance of respect and trust with local partners in enabling successful health collaboration.

Dr Park introduced the discussion with a briefing on the pandemic's impact on the DPRK's health system. The pandemic-related restrictions caused international health organisations to leave the country, while many have not resumed their operations since. The current sanction regime has also blocked peaceful health projects from operating in the DPRK. Dr Park highlighted how, in combination with the politicisation of medical aid, these factors have led the DPRK to a strategic shift in health policy since the pandemic, where it is now seeking a more independent health cooperation framework based on solidarity and partnership.

As part of the DPRK's shift in health strategy, a nation-wide strengthening of the national health system is underway, with both medical equipment and Chinese pharmaceutical imports growing at unprecedented rates. Dr Park suggested that the pandemic could be an opportunity to reset and change the approach on international health aid to the DPRK, to a principled, impartial and realistic health cooperation framework. As part of this, the creation of a non-politicized health fund was proposed, following the example of the Green Climate Fund. Roberts expressed the need for a tweaking of sanctions in order to facilitate health related work in the DPRK.

During the interactive Q&A session, the speakers responded to questions on human rights, the effect of cultural biases on health aid politicisation, the WHO's pandemic treaty negotiations, the role of China in health cooperation, and praiseworthy policy successes from the DPRK. Their answers focused on the DPRK's innovation in the healthcare sector, the need for the EU as a dialogue facilitator between the US and the DPRK, health as a path to trust building, and the WHO's central role as a global health coordination platform.

In their concluding remarks, the speakers mentioned that the world has much to learn from the DPRK in the sustainability and environmental areas, recognizing it is a complex country that cannot be reduced to simple stereotypes. They also highlighted the need for open dialogue between the US and the DPRK, especially with regards to health cooperation, where agreement and trust can be more easily found.