

[all](#) > [Editorial & Opinion](#)

[Column] Shared dilemmas at a historic turning point for Korea, Europe

Posted on : 2025-10-20 17:15 KST Modified on : 2025-10-20 17:15 KST

The European predicament mirrors what is happening in Korea today



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and other European leaders follow US President Donald Trump through the White House during their multilateral talks on Aug. 18, 2025. (UPI/Yonhap)

By Chung-in Moon, James Laney Distinguished Professor at Yonsei University

Not long ago, I had a chance to discuss pressing issues with German leaders in Berlin. Those leaders said that, without exception, both Germany and Europe as a whole confront an unprecedented crisis that they call an “epochenwende,” or a turning point in history. My German associates also offered the gloomy prognosis that this crisis cannot be weathered through standard measures.

German leaders said the current crisis consists of three shocks.

First is the Russian shock. Just two years ago, European leaders believed the Russian threat could be managed through diplomatic means. They thought the war in Ukraine could be ended through US-led military deterrence, sweeping international sanctions and diplomatic negotiations.

But things are much different now. German leaders said there are limits to the current approach and that Russia is becoming an existential threat to Europe. In fact, they view Putin’s Russia in similar terms as Nazi Germany in the 1930s.

As long as Putin remains in power, German leaders argued, Russia will not abandon its expansionist policy, which poses a serious threat to European security.

The current situation is very grave, with Russia sending drones not only into Ukraine but into Poland, Denmark, the three Baltic states and even Germany. Given Russia's heavy-handed attitude, German leaders say, the only option is to "fight fire with fire."

In other words, even leaders of Germany's Social Democratic Party — the chief advocates of Willy Brandt's inclusive "Ostpolitik" — now regularly adopt a hard-line stance toward Russia.

Second is the Trump shock. US President Donald Trump has declared that Europe must take responsibility for its own defense and demanded that NATO members allocate 5% of their GDP to defense spending to make that possible. When Spain refused to play ball, Trump said it should be kicked out of NATO.

Trump has also openly hinted at the possibility of pulling out American troops currently stationed in Europe. He has also made remarks that appear to condone Russian behavior, ramping up Europeans' doubts about the US.

I could perceive intense antipathy for Trump, who has unilaterally imposed tariffs on Europe and demanded a massive investment of US\$600 billion in the US, which he has publicly described as the EU's "gift" to the US.

Trump's imperial tendencies are another source of concern. The haughty attitude Trump exhibited when he invited European leaders to the White House in August, ostensibly to resolve the war in Ukraine, was insulting and infuriating for Europeans.

The third shock behind this historical turning point is the surging influence of the far right in European domestic politics. Far-right groups that oppose immigration and European integration and that hold chauvinistic attitudes are gaining ground throughout the continent.

In Germany, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) enjoys more popular support than the ruling Christian Democratic Union or the Social Democratic Party. Far-right parties have taken power in Poland, Hungary, Italy and Slovakia, and — most recently — the Czech Republic.

Far-right political parties enjoy the enthusiastic support of the younger generation. While this is partly a result of sluggish economies and rising unemployment, it's also an important indicator heralding a sea change in European politics.

The MAGA movement in the US is another important factor. Trump, Vice President JD Vance and tech mogul Elon Musk have signaled their support for the creation of a new kind of transatlantic far-right coalition. French President Emmanuel Macron has warned that these trends may represent the rebirth of the "dark enlightenment" of authoritarianism.

Mainstream European voices have a pretty clear stance about this historical turning point.

The Russian threat will continue for the time being, they say, and the US is no longer

trustworthy. Therefore, Europe will have to forge its own path by increasing defense spending, implementing a draft and building up its defense industry to become more capable of defending itself. While Europe will try to delay the US' departure as long as possible, it must move toward independent European security in preparation for the day when the US can no longer be counted on.

Mainstream voices in Europe call for seeking opportunities with China and India while adopting a strategy of diversification that promotes cooperation with countries in East Asia and the Middle East. Some say that while economic recovery and job creation are important for countering the rise of the far right, it's also necessary to expand education about liberal democratic values in the 21st century.

The European predicament mirrors what is happening in Korea today. I feel a sense of solidarity forged in our shared affliction.

Korea faces the need to deal with the North Korean threat, create a framework for peaceful coexistence, reduce our overdependence on the US and lay a foundation for autonomy in our national defense. It's also essential that we become more competitive and diversify our export items and trading partners.

To keep younger people from embracing the far right, we must raise the standard of living and adopt innovative forms of democratic education.

In short, there's a dire need for close deliberation with Europe about overcoming our triple crises in peace, the economy and democracy.

Please direct questions or comments to [english@hani.co.kr]

Original Korean