

Novotná, Tereza; Christiansen, Thomas; Lee, Moosung

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EU-Korea relations at 60: managing cooperation in the context of great power rivalry

Tereza Novotná¹ · Thomas Christiansen² · Moosung Lee³

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Introduction

The European Union (EU) and South Korea are traditionally strong allies. While their respective bilateral relations with the USA are of paramount significance, both sides have intensified their cooperation over the past decades. Both have been strong advocates of continued liberalisation of world trade, both are strong supporters of multilateralism and global governance and both have had to contend with disruptions to their economic ties and security alliances with the USA during the presidency of Donald Trump, leading to considerations of a greater strategic autonomy.

The free trade agreement (FTA) signed by the two parties in 2010 was one of the most far-reaching and comprehensive trade deals at the time and the first such agreement for the EU with an Asian country. For Korea, the FTA with the EU was a useful and significant counterbalance to the trade agreement negotiated with the USA during the same period. Beyond trade, the establishment of a strategic partnership, with regular summit meetings and dialogues on political, security, cultural and societal matters, was a logical extension of this strong trade relationship (Chung and Lee 2019). These formal agreements between the EU and South Korea are based on, but also reinforce, the foundations of a broader agreement on liberal values, commitment to multilateral cooperation and support for the institutions of global governance.

2023 marked the 60th anniversary of the formal establishment of diplomatic relations between the EU and South Korea. Therefore, the year constitutes a suitable moment in which to assess the past development, the current state and the future prospects of this relationship. Examining the relationship between the EU and South Korea at this point in time, however, also needs to consider the rapidly evolving global context in which these relations are embedded. Beyond the

✉ Tereza Novotná
tereza.novotna@fu-berlin.de

¹ Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, Germany

² Luiss University, Rome, Italy

³ Myongji University, Seoul, South Korea

importance of ties with the USA for both Europe and Korea, their respective relations with China are also of great relevance. This, in turn, means that the geopolitical and geo-economic rivalry between these two superpowers has great significance for EU-Korea relations (Ross et al. 2020; Novotná 2022). Confronted with the spectre of global power rivalry heading towards a ‘New Cold War’ between China and the West, yet aware of the value of their economic interdependence with China, both the EU and Korea have sought to pursue a policy of ‘hedging’, i.e. maintaining a broadly cooperative attitude towards China without causing offense to their American ally.

The EU and South Korea have been responding to the intensifying rivalry between the USA and China in ways that may not have been anticipated. It is commonly expected that the US-China competition could potentially descend into a mutually destructive cycle with EU-Korea relationship becoming its collateral damage. However, considering the EU’s normative approach to foreign policy, and South Korea’s commitment to upholding its foreign policy goals, it is not inevitable that their relationship will be solely defined by power dynamics behind US-China tensions. There might be other, unforeseen outcomes.

The contributions to this special issue elucidate these new aspects of EU-Korea relationship, as opposed to a wealth of previous studies that provide an overview of bilateral relations (Harrison 2013; Casarini 2021) or are focused on specific sectors, such as trade (Siles-Brügge 2011), security (Casarini et al. 2022), energy (Cherry 2012) and culture (Loisen and De Ville 2011). In addition, there are other studies that deal with the effects of how basic norms and values, which help constitute and consolidate the EU’s self-identity, have shaped and guided the EU’s external relations. Out of these studies, those which address the effects of the EU’s normative identity on its relations with South Korea are of a particular note.

For instance, Su (2018) examined the concretisation of the EU’s normative power through measurable standards, exposing the impact of European values and norms on Korean trade reforms. Similarly, Han (2021) discussed the EU’s approach to promoting labour rights in its relations with Korea in light of the EU’s self-image as a normative power. However, these studies do not directly address the EU-Korea bilateral relationship and possible effects of the US-China rivalry. In a similar vein, other authors examine political and security aspects of the bilateral relationship while investigating the likely impact of the EU’s self-identity on its own influence. Their focus, however, remains narrow, exclusively dealing with EU-North Korea relations (Lee 2012, 2016) and the EU-South Korea strategic partnership (Chung and Lee 2019; Reiterer 2020). Therefore, they do not effectively tackle the effects of the US-China rivalry.

Considering the likely impact of the US-China competition, now is the appropriate and opportune moment to revisit the EU-Korea relationship, particularly since this changing and volatile new geostrategic environment is likely to act as a new variable affecting the bilateral ties. Against this background, the objective of this special issue is to identify, dissect and examine whether, in which ways and to what extent the basic norms and values have determined the EU-South Korea bilateral relationship. In doing so, the contributions to this special issue explore the degree to which bilateral relations can continue to follow their long-term trajectory despite the

intensifying US-China rivalry, thereby allowing the EU and Korea to keep projecting what was considered ‘normal’ in the post-Cold War era.

This special issue analyses in detail seven significant areas for cooperation: regional cooperation, military security, trade and economic security, culture, parliamentary diplomacy, public health and climate change along with energy transition. It further explores the nature of the relationship between the EU and Korea across a range of dimensions and against the background of a successful past cooperation as well as current challenges in the global environment. In particular, we identify opportunities and obstacles for deepening of the relationship, while providing a comprehensive, up-to-date and critical examination of the ties between the two partners at a critical stage in global politics. By doing so, we explore how each partner has contributed to the other’s development and prosperity, and suggest any areas of improvement. We also discuss in detail the challenges facing the EU-South Korea relationship in the present day and their implications for the future. As a result, we strive to provide a comprehensive and critical evaluation of the current state of EU-Korea relations, with an overarching emphasis on how effectively these two actors have cooperated in political and economic domains in light of the Sino-American rivalry, and with a focus on potential implications for other middle powers who have also been pursuing hedging policies.

However, before we embark on observing the past and current developments, and before we introduce the contributions to this special issue, we need to reflect on the theoretical, conceptual and methodological aspects that underpin a thorough understanding of EU-Korea relationship. For that reason, the following section will discuss in depth the manner in which the EU and South Korea have conceptualised their own identities as actors in international politics—which is a challenge particularly for the EU as a non-state actor in a Westphalian system of sovereign states—and how these self-identities inform and shape the bilateral relationship. The third section of this Editorial will focus on the key factors that influence EU-Korea relations, taking into account the impact of various significant events, the relevance of salient issues and the role of domestic politics.

Conceptualising EU-Korea relations

Examining bilateral relations between the EU and Korea during the intensifying US-China rivalry necessitates further discussion of an overarching conceptual framework. For this, a two-dimensional approach appears to be best suited. Firstly, we need to investigate the norms and values that both the EU and Korea have agreed to promote, and how these norms and values in turn helped consolidate their mutual relationship, thereby fulfilling the individual political objectives of both partners. The other avenue leads us to investigating the institutional factors, mainly due to the fact that the bilateral relationship has developed on the basis of the FTA, the Framework Agreement and strategic partnership. These institutional frameworks have not only structured the bilateral relationship but also affected the EU’s and Korea’s self-identification processes in a co-constitutive way. Therefore, the special issue raises these questions: did a set of institutional frameworks act as an institutional constraint

inhibiting EU-Korea cooperation, particularly when faced with geopolitical competition? If not, in what ways, and to what extent, do these institutional frameworks continue to function as overarching elements that promote EU-Korea cooperation, thereby making the bilateral relationship geared towards maintaining the norms and values that are considered essential and paramount by both partners?

Firstly, we need to reflect on the reasons why the EU is unique in terms of how it makes sense of itself. While positivists assume that identity depends on material interests, constructivists interpret relationships in a holistic way, arguing that identity of an actor is not exogenous to the system affecting its behaviour. On the contrary, the constructivists argue that interests depend on identities and that identities, as distinct phenomena, are endogenous to interactions occurring in a social space, and are therefore understood as the core to explaining actions (Wendt 1994: 385).

On the basis of such a social constructivist tradition of relating identity to interests, as well as self-identity as a motivation for actions, the EU's self-identity and its role in shaping its external relations has long been a subject of academic studies. The first such studies date back to the 1970s when the then European Community (EC) was defined as a civilian power. The concept of civilian power was largely based on the observation that the EC's reliance on diplomacy, as well as economic and political incentives rather than on the threat of military force, have made it into a different kind of actor (Duchêne 1972). After the civilian power concept was first proposed, follow-up studies were published. When the end of the Cold War led to the transformation of the global security environment and, therefore, a new need to redefine the world order emerged, Ian Manners, among others, developed the concept of normative power Europe. Having emphasised the EU's historical legacy as well as its hybrid polity that incorporates both supranational and intergovernmental forms of governance, he conceptualised the EU as a normative power that may have the capacity to frame the norms of world politics (Manners 2002). Once the concept of normative power Europe began to draw scholarly attention, its main focus nonetheless was how the EU would be able to overcome the destructive effects of the statist ontology which is inherent in world politics and how it could lure world politics away from the expectations of state sovereignty. In a sense, this would be a rational (but also normative) choice given that the EU seeks to come to terms with its own past which is marked by inter-state conflicts and struggles while providing an alternative worldview for a post-Westphalian world order.

As long as states are the only and most important unitary actors in international politics, the inter-state conflicts are inevitable, and the EU may not remain immune to the inherently destructive nature of the international system. In order to transcend the conflictual nature of international relations, the different albeit normative way in which the EU is structured and governed is therefore noteworthy. Its basic norms, such as promotion of human rights, respect for the rule of law, a functioning market economy and liberal democracy, have all been embodied in the EU's internal governance and its external relations. These are not only interesting but also important points that lead to implications for a further discussion about institutional effects on EU-Korea relations. This is largely because the way in which the institutions structure the EU-Korea bilateral relationship is related to the value systems that both the EU and South Korea have agreed to promote.

Based on the EU's idiosyncratic way of constructing and consolidating its self-identity in external relations, we can assume that EU-Korea relations are also anchored within a particular mode of social interaction. It is therefore significant that the EU-Korea relationship is embedded in a distinct institutional architecture through which the identity of both partners is reflexively represented, practised and consolidated.

These claims result in two theoretical implications. Firstly, as long as the EU and Korea interact in social contexts which institutionally help both parties project and, formally or informally, enforce the values they share (Smith and Huaixian 2010; Lee 2022), we can argue that these institutions function as social spaces where we can investigate how these key norms and values are accommodated and practised. By doing so, we can test the roles which are played by the EU and South Korea within such contexts, assuming that they would be related to the ways in which actors assert their international identities and enhance their status and prestige as global actors (Michalski and Pan 2017: 612). Consequently, it is relevant to investigate how a new contextual condition set by the US-China rivalry generates its own effects. To analyse the likely effects of the re-configured strategic environment, we should take into account the institutional effects, as well as how the core norms and values co-constitute both the self-identity of the actors and the nature of institutions that come into play. Through such a conceptual approach, we can evaluate the ways in which, and the extent to which, the institutions keep the EU-Korea bilateral relationship intact, or vice-versa, challenge it.

Secondly, we can imply that—because of the institutional constraints which are formed due to their tendency to stress some of the core values and norms as the basis for the bilateral relationship—EU-Korea relations will not necessarily develop in a way that would fully expose and subjugate them to the US-China rivalry. If we consider the EU's tendency to not only turn third parties into significant 'others', but also to essentialise self-reflexively its present self and past other (Diez 2005), we may also interpret differently the way how EU-Korea relations evolve. On the basis of such a theoretical assumption, the task for individual case studies in this special issue therefore is to evaluate the validity of such an assumption. Such a task is even more plausible if we examine the EU's foreign policy as a policy reflecting the EU's normative values. As Manners (2008) points out, given that the EU's external relations see, interpret and react to the world based on the EU's norms and values, EU-Korea relations will not necessarily be affected only by the logic of power politics, but also by the virtue of living by example, the duty of its actions being reasonable and the consequence of doing least harm.

Keeping these conceptual arguments in mind, we now turn to the question of which areas to focus on in order to make sense of the EU-Korea relationship under the new geostrategic context. Such a methodological discussion can help identify the differences in the ways in which the bilateral relationship evolves, the nature and scope of the agendas that both the EU and South Korea consider to be important and necessary, and the methodology they use to make their relationship unique and different.

The drivers of EU-Korea relations: events, issues and domestic politics

The EU-Korea relationship can be investigated along the lines of these three variables: firstly, the occurrence of events over time; secondly, the nature and scope of salient issues; and, thirdly, the role of domestic politics which involves both state and non-state actors. In the following section, we briefly explore the relevance of each of these factors.

With respect to the time variable, it is necessary to determine the watershed moments that influenced the development of EU-Korea relations. Although the EU-Korea diplomatic relations were established in 1963, and have now marked their 60th anniversary, the relationship has gone through a series of transformations. The first transformation relates to the EU's commitment to Asian affairs since the publication of its strategy 'Towards a New Asia' (European Commission 1994). With a particular objective of strengthening the EU's economic interests, and thereby contributing to political stability in the region, the EU began to recognise South Korea as an important partner with which to cooperate.

After the 1990s when both the EU and Korea committed to one another, the heyday came in the 2000s–2010s. Since the 2000s, the two partners have entered into several mutually beneficial deals, making South Korea the only country with which the EU has concluded a 'triad' of agreements in areas of trade, security and other vital sectors (Pacheco Pardo 2020). Since then, the depth and breadth of the EU-Korea relationship have been transformed, moving both entities towards a more equal and comprehensive partnership.

Under these circumstances, the agenda for cooperation has also been extended, ranging from economic to political and even to security. Moreover, to make such a comprehensive cooperation feasible, parallel institutionalisation processes took place. Firstly, the FTA has consolidated the bilateral economic cooperation. While the primary objective of economic cooperation is to maximise material interests of both partners, the FTA has also created a potential template where global norms and values can be reflexively represented (Su 2018). It is therefore necessary to examine how economic relations between the two actors are unique which, in turn, provides an input into our attempt to understand the bilateral relationship against the backdrop of the economic impact of the US-China rivalry, not least because both the EU and Korean economies are deeply interconnected.

Secondly, the unique features of EU-Korea relations have also been demonstrated by a wide range of areas for political cooperation. In 2010, the FTA was complemented by the Framework Agreement along with the establishment of strategic partnership, making these two agreements represent the crucial milestones in the EU-Korea relationship. Both the Framework Agreement and the strategic partnership have broadened the scope of the partnership and expanded it beyond trade, encompassing a wide array of areas including human rights, education, research, health governance and climate change. Providing the basis for a more comprehensive partnership of an inclusive nature, they reinforced the fact that the bilateral relationship was not solely grounded in economics but was

multifaceted, integrating a plethora of fields, and making the partnership develop in such a way as to help practise the norms and values that both agreed to promote (Lee 2022; 235). It is therefore important to examine the ways in which the EU-Korea relationship has developed, asking whether or not it will inevitably be entrapped by power politics which is a scenario to be expected due to the intensifying US-China rivalry in a variety of fields.

Given that the strategic nature of the relationship was confirmed and gained a new traction after the EU and South Korea had concluded the Framework Participation Agreement in 2014, which is an agreement that enhances joint cooperation in crisis management operations under the EU Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), it is also necessary to discuss the security aspects of EU-Korea cooperation. When military cooperation under the aegis of the CSDP is conducted, however, the way in which both parties deal with new security threats, such as in maritime security, is different (Jun 2018). This aspect also needs to be analysed, particularly since the US-China rivalry will likely have an impact in this area. In addition, it is also relevant to discuss the ways in which the EU and South Korea address traditional security threats such as development of nuclear weapons by North Korea. Given that South Korea has pursued the so-called 'Sunshine Policy', which the EU has also contributed to, regional-cooperation and regional-conflict-nexus approach have been discussed as alternative ways to alleviate the spiral of securitising moves among the parties to the conflict (Lee 2016). However, whether or not this remains a viable alternative is a controversial question. Nonetheless, this controversy leads us to an ensuing question whether, and to what extent, a normative methodology may survive the pressures for change which are caused and intensified by the geostrategic competition between the USA and China.

Last but not least, the effects of domestic politics are another layer of analysis that penetrates the time- and issue-based approaches. Given that external relations are based on, and are often a reflection of, domestic politics (Putnam 1988), the evolution in terms of the way in which domestic political actors see how their external relations differ deserves a further scrutiny. This implies that the evolution of EU-Korea relations may also be dependent on how individual party politics interpret them, the perception and receptiveness of the public towards them, and the positions and interests of the private sector reacting to diverse political, economic and security initiatives and cooperation.

All in all, to examine the will, commitment and the capability on the part of the EU and South Korea to maintain and advance their underpinning principles, i.e. not only to highlight their material interests, but also to stress their shared norms and values, it is important to investigate their bilateral relationship in a world which is marked by amplified political tensions, which poses a new challenge to their partnership that they have built over the six decades and which tests their capability to meet the needs of a more interconnected and complex world.

Contributions to the special issue

Lee and Diez (2023) explore the post-World War II experience of conflict and regional cooperation in (Western) Europe and East Asia. Their article argues that while regional integration among a set of initially six and successively more

countries helped transform inter-state as well as inter-societal relations in Western Europe under the shadow of the Cold War, the ideological confrontation between East and West, the unevenness in terms of size, and the small number of states meant that violent conflict persisted in East Asia for at least another decade, and regional integration was not a realistic option. Yet, despite their differences in terms of receptiveness to and preferences for regional cooperation, regional integration remains one of the most promising avenues for achieving or at least institutionalising peace. This article assesses the scope for EU-Korean collaboration in regional integration, outlining the European and Korean perspectives on regional cooperation and conflict resolution.

Since the launch of EU-Korea strategic partnership in 2010, a significant progress has been made in strengthening the bilateral security cooperation as one of the policies within the EU-Korea bilateral relationship. Chung and Tonra (2023) revisit this bilateral security cooperation through a theoretical lens of constructivism. Their article specifically focuses on the way in which, and to what extent, shared ideas play a role in the areas of non-proliferation, human rights and cyber security. Moreover, they ask the question whether and how the EU and South Korea see one another as a competent and reliable partner for strengthening of this security cooperation, particularly when faced with a growing strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific.

Christiansen and Kim (2023) examine trade relations and the issue of economic security between the EU and South Korea. Although the EU-Korea partnership has been mainly based on economic cooperation, the article argues that there is also an opportunity to deepen and widen related areas other than trade relations. Therefore, the legal infrastructure underpinning EU-Korea relations, namely the FTA, the Framework Agreement and the Agreement for the participation of Korea in EU Crisis Management Operations, are subject to an analysis. Examining possible meanings attached to these bilateral agreements, their relevant future challenges and their wider significance, particularly given the growing geo-economic competition across the globe, the article delves into the ways in which both sides respond to the constraints that are caused by economic statecraft and technological disengagement observed in the US-China rivalry. The article furthermore discusses the future prospects of the EU-Korea economic relationship.

Novotná and Kim (2023) analyse public health governance in the EU and South Korea as illustrated on the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the shift in the concept of security which now encompasses not only national security but also human security, the article uses this concept of human security as its theoretical framework and puts the global health crisis into a human security perspective. In its empirical parts, the article explores how Europe dealt with COVID-19 and compares it with the case of pandemic management in South Korea. While employing the concept of human security and applying it on the global health emergency, the article presents its empirical findings in a chronological manner from the initial stages of the pandemic up to the rollout of COVID-19 mass vaccinations. The article concludes by identifying seven key lessons from the pandemic management such as the role of independent public health institutions and

digitalisation and by highlighting a mutual convergence in approaches in both regions after the onset of the Omicron variant. Furthermore, the article pinpoints potential areas for a future cooperation between the EU and South Korea through which the two partners could contribute to global health governance.

The cultural relations between the EU and Korea are the main theme of the article by Yoon and Zamorano (2023). With the intensification of EU-South Korea cultural relations over the past decades and a growing positive perception of the EU among the Korean public, this article argues that both parties have fostered their cultural relations. Since the 'Hallyu' became a Korean cultural movement on a global scale which deeply affected Europe from the 2010s onward, this article highlights relevant moves on both sides, such as the initiation of the protocol on cultural cooperation under the EU-ROK free trade agreement and an emphasis on collaboration in the audiovisual sector. In addition, the article argues that the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic has strengthened the global image of K-Culture given the fact that K-Pop, culture and cinema have gained an unprecedented global attention via over-the-top (OTT) services. Therefore, this article examines the Hallyu expansion in Europe and the EU's cultural influence in South Korea. In particular, the article focuses on EU cultural policy and diplomacy, South Korea's policy orientation and diplomacy promoting its culture abroad and the current state of Hallyu and its perception in Europe.

Guahk and Hernandez Pepe (2023) discuss parliamentary diplomacy between the EU and South Korea. The article examines how the Korean National Assembly and the European Parliament have strengthened and deepened their diplomatic relations over the past 20 years. While paying a particular attention to the role of the Delegation for Relations with the Korean Peninsula in the European Parliament which has sought to consolidate the links with its South Korean counterpart since its establishment in 2004, the article argues that the Delegation has fostered dialogue between the EU and Korea regarding trade and cooperation in security and defence, maintained a potential channel of communication with North Korea and helped Korea extend and enhance its relationship with other key countries across the globe. Examining parliamentary involvement which aims at strengthening of the EU-Korea strategic partnership, and looking at continuity and the role of party politics and changes of power due to parliamentary elections, the article also discusses the future outlook for parliamentary diplomacy during an increasing geopolitical competition.

Lee and Lee (2023) focus on green politics and energy transition. Given the initiatives for an acceleration of transition from fossil fuels to clean and low-carbon energy both in the EU and South Korea, the introduction of the European Green Deal in 2019, the ROK's announcement of the Green New Deal initiative in 2020 and the global consensus on de-carbonisation to meet the renewed 1.5C target, this article argues that energy and climate change agendas are one of the major policy issues for the EU-Korea strategic partnership. However, the article also argues that while both parties ambitiously raised de-carbonisation targets, both paths towards energy transition face many challenges. The energy crisis in the aftermath of the war in Ukraine is examined as the most noticeable challenge because the supply of Russian oil and gas was significantly reduced and energy prices spiked worldwide, while energy security became a much more urgent issue. Therefore, the article

analyses major initiatives towards energy transition in the EU and Korea while comparing their key strengths and challenges in times of global energy crisis. Critically assessing the measures for managing energy security and energy transition, reviewing the European Green Deal and the Korean Green New Deal and identifying their common tasks and opportunities, the article recommends a new policy agenda for EU-Korea cooperation that would jointly tackle energy security and transition.

Final remarks

Taken together, all contributions to this special issue provide a comprehensive picture of EU-Korea relations at this particular inflection point 60 years after the establishment of diplomatic ties. They broadly reflect the key points raised in the conceptual discussion, even if these were intended as a common framework that could be equally applied across all the articles. They also address in varying ways the key factors identified above, illuminating the manner in which events, issues and domestic factors have interacted in shaping the development of relations between the two sides. What emerges from these analyses is a multifaceted relationship that is built on strong foundations, and has relevance both internally and internationally, beyond the world of formal diplomacy. At the same time, global geopolitics, and in particular the rivalry between the USA and China, pose imminent risks to the relationship that has developed in an earlier era of globalisation. The deterioration of the liberal international order, discourses about de-coupling and economic security and the spectre of a new Cold War are all detrimental to the kind of international affairs that both the EU and Korea have embraced and fostered in the past. If the past 60 years have been a success story of two middle powers engaging with one another for a mutual benefit, a continuation of this engagement in the more adverse conditions of great power competition will be challenging, but all the more important.

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