

“Korea-EU Relations at 55: Leveraging ASEM in Uncertain Times”
Tuesday 12 June (14:00 – 18:30) The Hotel, Room 26.3, Brussels

On 12 June 2018, the KF-VUB Korea Chair, with the kind support of the Embassy of the Republic of Korea (ROK) to Belgium and the EU, organized a conference on “Korea-EU Relations at 55: Leveraging ASEM in Uncertain Times.” As 2018 marks the 55th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the EU and Korea, the conference provided an excellent opportunity to assess the current state of the EU-ROK relationship and to explore opportunities for further cooperation in the future. In the first panel, European and Korean panelists including Dr. Tongfi Kim (Senior Researcher, KF-VUB Korea Chair and Assistant Professor, Vesalius College), Ms. Shada Islam (Director of Europe and Geopolitics, Friends of Europe), Dr. Jun Hae-won (Associate Professor, Korean National Diplomatic Academy) and Professor Kim Sung-han (Professor, Korea University and former ROK Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs) exchanged views on ASEM and EU-Korea political and security cooperation. Afterwards, in the second panel, EU-Korea economic relations were discussed by Dr. Tereza Novotna (Academic Collaborator, Institute d’études européennes, ULB), Dr. Kim Heungchong (Senior Research Fellow, Korea Institute for International Economic Policy), Ms. Nevena Mateeva (Policy Officer for Korea and Japan, DG Trade, European Commission) and Professor Moon Woosik (Professor, Seoul National University). The event brought together some 60 people from the EU institutions, the diplomatic community and, European and Korean academic organizations and think tanks.

After welcoming remarks by Dr. Ramon Pacheco Pardo (KF-VUB Korea Chair, Institute for European Studies, VUB), HE Kim Hyoung-zhin (ROK Ambassador to Belgium and the EU) provided an opening address in which he reaffirmed Korea’s commitment to contribute to the development of ASEM in the lead up to the biannual ASEM summit that will take place coming fall in Brussels. Korea is still the only country in the world that has three key agreements with the EU in full effect: a framework agreement, a free trade agreement (FTA) and a crisis management participation agreement. The Ambassador therefore sees many ways in which the EU-ROK relationship can support ASEM’s initiatives in reaction to worldwide challenges.

The first panel was chaired and moderated by Dr. Tongfi Kim. The first speaker, Dr. Jun Hae-won explained that although several limitations exist to EU-ROK crisis management cooperation, both parties can overcome them and should aim to define their security relationship in a broader way. The EU and Korea are like-minded countries, with many shared values and interests. Also, the legal framework enabling Korea to participate in EU crisis management operations and missions is in place. Nonetheless, because both are often preoccupied with the problems in their immediate neighborhood, the level of cooperation has remained low. With Korea’s participation in the EU-led Operation Atalanta, a counter-piracy military operation in the Horn of Africa and the Western Indian Ocean, an important first step was taken. Moreover, the EU has confirmed its commitment to enhanced security cooperation in and with Asia in May’s Council Conclusions (FAC 28/05/2018). It is now up to both parties to build on this foundation and to combine their respective experience to take the security partnership forward.

The second speaker, Professor Kim Sung-han, focused on how Korea and the EU can contribute to global governance by supporting the liberal international order at a time of apparent US retreat from its leading role in global affairs. More specifically, Professor Kim described four key tasks for the EU and Korea, and Europe and Asia more broadly, in collectively managing the planet. First, the EU and Korea should act as role models and promote rules-based international cooperation on the basis of shared democratic values. Second, both parties should engage North Korea and help bring the country into the international community. Third, they should promote regional and multilateral cooperation in the Asia Pacific region and link it to Europe through ASEM. Fourth and finally, the EU and Korea should enhance cooperation on issues of international development through the EU-ROK Policy Dialogue on Development.

The last presentation of the first panel was delivered by Ms. Shada Islam. Ms. Islam sees a new world order emerging. Although many challenges present themselves, we are living in exciting times. We are living in an “Eurasian century” and ASEM has great potential to help create a new and stable global order. For achieving this new order, Europeans have to do two key things. First, it is important to be willing to work with all countries of economic importance. Even if we do not always share the same values with everyone, the entire world has a common interest in peace and stability. Second, it is important to update and modernize the way we approach issues of global governance. The new order should be more inclusive, open, adaptable and flexible. Because ASEM is an existing platform where people come together despite disagreements and political animosities, the meeting should be put at the center of the emerging global order.

The second panel on economics was chaired and moderated by Dr. Tereza Novotna. In his presentation, Dr. Kim Heungchong first provided a short historical overview of the EU-ROK economic relationship. He explained how the mid-1990s marked an important turning point in the relationship. In the period leading up to the 1990s, the EU provided Korea with non-reciprocal, unilateral market access. As Korea experienced rapid economic growth and development, the relationship became reciprocal, and the EU no longer regarded Korea as a poor country in need of special treatment. Indeed, by the late 1990s, the EU was issuing many anti-dumping lawsuits against Korea. This changed nature of the relationship was also reflected in the EU’s first strategic reports on Korea and in the conclusion of the 1996 EU-ROK framework agreement. Moreover, all of this happened in parallel to the establishment of ASEM in 1996. Korea has always been very active in ASEM as it provides it with a unique platform to have its voice heard on regional and global issues. Dr. Kim concluded his presentation with a proposal to establish an ASEM working group to strengthen connectivity with North Korea. This would be an initiative that both the EU and the Republic of Korea can contribute to.

After working on the implementation of the EU-ROK FTA for four years, Ms. Navena Mateeva is in an excellent position to share practical insights. According to Ms. Mateeva, the agreement is a big success and has had a positive influence on the EU-ROK relationship. The FTA has not only resulted in a stronger economic relationship, but also allowed both parties to get a better understanding of each other’s position and policy views on a range of other issues. Although much progress has been made in eliminating customs duties, there has been less progress in the area of trade as it relates to sustainable development. Nonetheless, Korea

has been a reliable and good partner for the EU, both in the bilateral relations and in the global trade context.

The final presentation of the panel was given by Professor Moon Woosik. He expressed concern with the decrease in investments into Korea and the increasing unemployment rate, especially for young people. In addressing both problems, Professor Moon does not see a significant role for ASEM at this point, because of the membership of China. Nonetheless, Korea should continue to promote globalization and regionalization and find ways to minimize animosities with China and Japan. At this point, an additional challenge for the Korean government is how to deal with the (economic) development of North Korea. According to Professor Moon, South Korea should capitalize on the many investment opportunities that will present themselves as North Korea opens up and develops. As a matter of fact, South Korea might even need the North Korean economy more than the other way around.

After a short Q&A session with the audience, Dr. Steven Everts concluded the conference with a closing address. Dr. Everts listed many reasons to feel positive about EU-ROK relations. EU-ROK security cooperation has clearly taken off in the last couple of years, but the plan is to go further in the future. He also referred to the Council Conclusions of 28 May in which the EU committed itself to enhanced security cooperation in and with Asia (FAC 28/05/2018). The EU also is glad that Korea has been very active in the framework of ASEM. For the upcoming ASEM summit this fall, two key themes stand out: rules-based multilateral cooperation and connectivity. He concluded his talk by emphasizing ASEM's potential as an ideas laboratory, a safe place for unsafe ideas. The EU and Korea can and should help lead the way.