

MAPPING OUT EU-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS: KEY MEMBER STATES' PERSPECTIVES

Editor: Ramon Pacheco Pardo

Contributors: Ugo Armanini, Nicola Casarini, Linde Desmaele, Alice Ekman, Maximilian Ernst, Mario Esteban, Bruno Hellendorff, Remy Hemez, Bjorn Jerden and Oskar Pietrewicz



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What is the perspective of key EU member states towards South Korea? While EU-South Korea relations have attracted growing attention in recent years, the relationship between key EU member states and the Asian country remains underexplored. This report addresses this omission by describing and analysing the recent evolution of the relationship between Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Poland and Sweden, on the one hand, and South Korea on the other. The report covers the areas of economic relations, security relations, bilateral relations and North Korea, and cultural relations.

The report shows that there is a clear trend towards greater cooperation between key EU member states and South Korea. This trend holds regardless of who is in power in South Korea, with the report covering the second half of the Lee Myung-bak government, the whole Park Geun-hye government, and the first half of the Moon Jae-in government. The trend also holds regardless of the type of government in the EU member states analysed.

Thus, it can be said that the Strategic Partnership signed in 2010 and the Free Trade Agreement in operation since 2011 served as a first turning point for EU-South Korea relations. This is specially the case for member states with their own bilateral strategic dialogue or partnership with South Korea. Also, the EU-South Korea relationship has accelerated since President Donald Trump took office in the United States in 2017. President Trump's unpredictability and lack of coordination with allies has actually served as a second turning point in the strengthening of EU-South Korea relations.

Moving into *economic relations*, the EU-South Korea Free Trade Agreement has clearly served to boost trade and foreign direct investment in both directions. Having said that, there are disparities across member states. Those with greater synergies with South Korea in areas such as goods and services produced or lower labour costs, for example, have benefited the most from the agreement.

Focusing on *security relations*, the Strategic Partnership has served as a catalyst to strengthened EU member state-South Korea cooperation. Several member states have engaged in concrete, material cooperation in areas such as joint activities or arms sales. There is also a political willingness to deepen cooperation with South Korea

across the EU. This is especially the case for member states with their own strategic dialogue or partnership.

Regarding *bilateral relations and North Korea*, there is support for a common EU position towards Pyongyang; the so-called ‘critical engagement’ mixing carrots and sticks. Having said that, there are some internal divisions. Some member states clearly prioritize North Korea’s nuclear programme and take a tougher line on Pyongyang, whereas others take a more holistic view and would support deeper engagement along with sanctions.

Looking at *cultural relations*, people-to-people ties are becoming stronger. Public diplomacy, research and educational exchanges and cultural exchanges per se are growing across member states. They have been facilitated by the agreements signed by Seoul and Brussels and other government programmes. But cultural relations are to a large extent driven by the peoples of both Europe and South Korea.

Overall, EU member states seek to coordinate with South Korea at the bilateral level. They see potential for deeper cooperation with a country often described as a ‘like-minded partner’ by the EU. There is a question as to whether this clear wish for greater cooperation has been successfully uploaded to the EU or even United Nations (UN) levels. The report suggests that this is not always the case.

Notwithstanding the above, the report shows that there is a lingering lack of mutual knowledge and understanding on both sides, including among elites. On the European side, this is reflected in sub-optimal knowledge about domestic dynamics in South Korea and its position and policy at the regional and global levels. On the South Korean side, this can be seen in the limited understanding about the different positions and roles of member states vis-à-vis South Korea, Northeast Asia and globally.

Furthermore, China, especially, and Japan are considered to be more important than South Korea across member states in general. For the most part, this is related to differences in the size of their economies, their degree of involvement in global governance, and, in the case of China, the impact of differing worldviews and values. The report shows that there are exceptions though, especially with regards to Japan. This is the result of stronger economic links with South Korea and, sometimes, the degree of a member state involvement in dealing with North Korea. In any case, it should be noted

that Asia is becoming increasingly important across Europe even if not the top priority; this includes the relationship with South Korea.

In general, there is a sense across EU member states that there is potential for more cooperation with South Korea. But there are questions as to whether support for multilateralism, cooperation with like-minded countries and the prioritization of universal values is happening on the European side. As for South Korea, there is a question regarding whether it has, or wants to have, a value-driven policy. The report suggests that a natural alignment of interests and values rather than an active value-driven policy is the main driver behind stronger cooperation in recent years.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SOUTH KOREA

- Ensure a smooth transition across administrations when it comes to Europe policy, considering that Europe is increasingly important for Seoul and non-divisive.
- Appoint a MOFA special envoy for coordination with Europe sitting in Office of the President strategic meetings, with a remit including the EU, EU member states, NATO, the UN and other international organisations.
- Address the expertise deficit among policy-makers, especially, and civil society to enhance knowledge about EU member states, based on key indicators coming out of the Strategic Partnership.
- Proactively identify areas for cooperation with specific EU member states or groups of member states, without feeling constrained by the existing EU dialogue and cooperation framework (or 'EU straightjacket').
- Proactively work together and liaise with the EU and its member states to come up with common positions in multilateral organisations.