

The 10th anniversary of the EU-Korea Strategic partnership¹

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A decade of a special relationship – the EU only maintains ten strategic partnerships worldwide. As we reach the ten-year point with Korea, now is the moment, not to look back but to look forward and act. The pressing circumstances of great power rivalry, particularly in Asia, and the global onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic leave us no time to indulge in congratulatory speeches. As this special relationship is not well understood and the term ‘strategic partnership’ is often used light-heartedly, allow me to make a few reflections on the content, nature, goals and purpose of the concept. To this end, at least, understanding history and looking back can be useful.

A ‘strategic partnership’ has to have added-value compared to a ‘normal’ bilateral relationship. Partners in a strategic partnership must have the resolve and the ability to participate actively at the global and/or regional scale. They must be able to exercise influence, generate support for common causes and project power, either regionally or globally. These states may be held together by adherence to a region or a common cause. This necessitates the will and ability to take on corresponding responsibilities such as participation in UN peacekeeping, (regularly) serving as non-permanent members of the UNSC, and the organisation of international conferences devoted to the solving of international problems, to norm setting or to the development of global governance.

The EU uses its Strategic Partnerships to reinforce its commitment to multilateralism. In making multilateral

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engagement an important element of a strategic partnership, the EU promotes the goal of making effective multilateralism an organising principle of international relations – something that is now more important than ever. Strategic partners should attempt to coordinate positions on solving common problems or threats in multilateral fora, in spite of inherent limits to cooperation arising from the absence of consensus on multilateralism and its functions.

¹ This brief is based on a presentation at the HUFs Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence Roundtable “A Decade of EU-Korea Strategic Partnership: Looking Back, Looking Forward”.

Shared values are an important, but not a constitutive or necessary element of a strategic partnership: if values coincide, a partnership of choice can be set up; if common interests prevail without overlapping values, a partnership of necessity can be entered into. While the EU-Korea Strategic Partnership is a partnership of choice, as such a good reason to celebrate its 10th anniversary, the EU-China Strategic Partnership enters into the second category, a partnership of necessity. The June 2020 EU-China Virtual Summit made this clear in plain language: “Engaging and cooperating with China is both an opportunity and necessity. But, at the same time, we have to recognise that we do not share the same values, political systems, or approach to multilateralism. We will engage in a clear-eyed and confident way, robustly defending EU interests and standing firm on our values.”

Thus, the 2010 Conclusions of the European Council on relations with Strategic Partners did not refer to values. The same levels of development, type of political system or geographic location are not preconditions for a strategic partnership. The 2016 EU Global Strategy does not specifically deal with strategic partnerships, an omission which I regard as an oversight.

As a precondition to formulating any strategy, the objectives to be realised and the means to achieve them have to be clarified. Strategic partnerships serve the purpose of providing peace, security, prosperity and sustainable development. This is facilitated through fighting the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; terrorism; climate change; striving for a viable, predictable, open international trade and investment system; stabilising the international financial system; preventing (managing) conflicts to allow trade, growth and development including needed secure lines for transportation (sea lanes); ensuring energy security in terms of geopolitics but also sustainability e.g. promoting renewable resources; building capacity to allow effective and responsible participation in international affairs.

In order to qualify a partnership as ‘strategic’, certain conditions have to be met both internally and

externally. Internally, after some years of trust and confidence building among partners an upgrade to ‘strategic partnership’ has to meet the agreement of all Member States and the EU institutions. Externally, a strategic partnership has to rest on reciprocal interests, rights and duties to realise mutually defined objectives. It has to be multidimensional in both substance and geographic scope. In terms of substance it has to be built on comprehensive relations, the main groups being politics and security (including climate change; energy security); economics, finance and trade; and people-to-people contacts. Its scope has to be global or at least with a strong regional impact e.g. transcending the purely bilateral dimension. Multilateral cooperation is a strong goal.

Strategic partnerships are built on a variety of common interests, which outweigh differences which should be handled peacefully in a spirit of mutual respect and equality, with the objective of avoiding open conflicts. These partnerships make use of a ‘soft-institutionalised’ and flexible architecture which may be complemented by more formal legal instruments (partnership and cooperation agreements, FTAs,...). This architecture should allow for informal, result-oriented interaction to deal with pertinent issues, and not only with a predetermined selection of topics for scripted speeches.

Ideally, a strategic partnership relies on both normative and substantive interests. However, in reality there is hardly a perfect match of both interests. Therefore, political judgement has to be made, in which the EU’s principled policies with regard to human rights and rule of law (partnerships of choice vs. necessity) are used to determine whether it is justifiable to favour one interest over the other and decide on trade-offs. In order to ensure public support, particularly if substantive interests prevail over normative ones, public diplomacy has to be used to communicate the motivation and rationale behind such decisions. With opposing strategic interests of two or more partners, the EU will have to take a clear and predictable position. Member States have to stand collectively behind such agreed positions, not giving third

parties the chance to play off the EU institutions against Member States and Member States against each other.

Foreshadowed in the 2003 EU Security Strategy, the Strategic Partnership with Korea was established in 2010, resting on three pillars of cooperation: politics, security and economics. In the political arena, the Framework Agreement has provided a major platform for promoting EU-Korea political dialogue and developing a common stance toward a shared global agenda. More than 30 Dialogues and consultation channels have been established. The consultations on human rights and the dialogues on the Middle East and North Africa, on Disarmament and Non-Proliferation, and on development assistance provide the infrastructure to facilitate substantive joint work on issues of global and regional significance as befitting a strategic partnership. Dialogue and cooperation channels addressing climate change, technology, education and culture figure equally high on the agenda, in this way covering issues of global significance. This global dimension is drawn together at the Vice-Ministerial-level with the High Level Political Dialogue, which in turn feeds into the political level.

When it comes to security, the main agenda item involves North Korea's missiles, nuclear programme, and the challenge of non-proliferation. The two parties have coordinated sanctions against North Korea, whilst the EU has offered steady support for the Republic of Korea's efforts to promote a peaceful, diplomatic solution. In terms of human security, the EU has taken the lead in international efforts to promote human rights in North Korea, and remains one of the only outside parties to maintain a continuous presence on the ground in implementing humanitarian assistance. The dynamic security environment on the Korean Peninsula may offer the EU new opportunities for constructive engagement. South Korea has enacted a Crisis Framework Participation Agreement (FPA) with the EU and has begun to participate in the EU common security and defence policy through cooperation in preventing piracy in the vital sea lanes around the Gulf of Aden. Laudable as it is, there is

room for intensification of this operation and for increasing the scope of security cooperation in general.

In the economic arena, the EU-Korea FTA has established solid trade and investment relations. This allows South Korea to diversify its trade relations and EU companies being one of the largest sources of investment in Korea are another asset. Participating in the "Brussels effect" of rule and standard setting offers an advantage in participating in the creation of the global level playing field.

The Strategic Partnership between the EU and South Korea has been in place for less time than many of the other partnerships. Despite the achievements of the last decade, there remains a lot of potential to further mature and develop the partnership. Both sides need to make additional efforts, but it is understandable that Korea is focused on the situation on the Korean Peninsula. The 70th anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War and the lack of a peace treaty after seven decades is a grim reminder of this situation, characterised by the roller-coaster relationship with North Korea, as seen over the last weeks.

Nevertheless, incredible economic development has made Korea the eight largest economy of the world, a major trading nation and an essential link in international value, production and technology, and research chains. The democratic system is firmly entrenched and Korean society proudly shows off its achievements; from the handling of COVID-19 to the success of its movies, popularity of its food and footballers, as well as musicians and K-pop. This level of advancement creates a responsibility vis-à-vis the international community to help build a stable, reliable, rules-based international system, but is also, first and foremost, in the interest of South Korea which is a de facto island deprived of natural resources, located at the centre of a tough neighbourhood. Therefore, global engagement is not a luxury item, but a must. The need to cooperate internationally to overcome the COVID-19 crisis is another reminder. Climate change another one.

Respect for rule of law is of particular importance. In order to reach an agreement on denuclearisation, non-proliferation and peace with the North, there has to be confidence that *pacta sunt servanda* must reign, otherwise there is no incentive to agree. A rules-based trade regime anchored in the WTO is essential for a trading nation. Taking the other partner for granted endangers not only personal relationships, but is also an obstacle to further development of inter-state partnerships.

South Korea is used to dealing with the US, China and Japan for a variety of reasons, but often does so to quell tensions – the EU is a rather calm partner, certainly not a troublemaker. But this does not mean that the EU can be ignored. Conversely, when EU policy makers think about Asia, China, India and Japan loom large – South Koreans themselves refer to their position as the shrimp between whales. We need an intensification of contacts by South Korea with the EU, as well as with EU Member States. For Europeans the maxim that a China policy is not an Asia policy, but there is no Asia policy without a China policy continues to apply. The 10th anniversary of the Strategic Partnership is a good occasion to start a short reflective process leading to an intensification of interaction, which would be in the interest of both sides.

The EU has developed various Asia policies. I was personally involved in the strategies presented in 1994 and 2001. Since 2016, we have had the EU Global Strategy. In 2018, Council Conclusions on security cooperation in and with Asia was added, as well as the European Connectivity Strategy. Why is there no corresponding Korean paper? To my knowledge, only China published two EU-strategy papers. Korean policy planners have work to do in developing a Korean strategy towards the EU. Dealing with perception gaps, whether in terms of interests or foreign policy endeavours, versus the reality that both partners find themselves in may be helpful, as might the definition of concrete areas of cooperation in the sense of a functional approach.

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comprehensive and rules-based connectivity, to improve the implementation of human rights, to fight climate change in deeds not words, and to strengthen international law and international governance, as well as the United Nations system. It also allows us to work together on much needed down to earth issues such as making us more crisis resilient by improving international health governance and joining hands in the development of COVID-19 vaccines and cures.

In sum, as we mark ten years of the strategic partnership, it is more important than ever that South Korea and the EU work together to reinforce the rules-based international order. To this end, the work programme should include measures to reinforce the functioning of multilateral organisations, especially the World Trade Organisation, the World Health Organisation and the International Criminal Court. The current circumstances present an unprecedented opportunity to put words into concrete action in addressing climate change. The post-COVID economic recovery and the transition to a sustainable, socially just, resilient and climate neutral economy should be achieved together, toward a green, digital and resilient economy of the 21st century and not the obsolete carbon economy of the past century.

Young people are major victims of the social and economic consequences of the pandemic, including bearing the burden of reimbursing the debt now being generated, an incredible 10 trillion Euro worldwide. Handing on a world endangered by climate change and pollution, as well as the need to make huge debt repayments, would break the covenant between generations and be highly irresponsible. The EU and South Korea should build on cooperation in regional security. The EU has provided a blue print, through the Council Conclusions on Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia, including new security challenges such as cyber-security. Based on shared values, we should deepen cooperation to foster human rights, at home and abroad. The European Connectivity Strategy is by definition long-term, but we need networks of connectivity now to build peace and prosperity in East Asia.

The 2020 Virtual meeting of Leaders agreed on a substantive press release which covered many areas in addition to the main theme, COVID-19. In their discussion, leaders ticked most of the boxes to allow substantial preparation for the 'real' summit in Seoul. It remains to be seen what 'as soon as possible' means in the present circumstances but hopefully

not later than 2021. As a special 'gift', the day after the summit saw the entry into force of the Council recommendation to start lifting travel restrictions for residents of fourteen countries, including the Republic of Korea. The 10th anniversary is not the moment to look back, but forward – we do not have the luxury to 'wait and see' but must start moving, now.

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