

## What EU-ROK Partnership within the US-China Conflict?

Dr. Tereza Novotná, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellow,<sup>1</sup> Free University Berlin & Senior Associate  
Research Fellow, EUROPEUM Prague

Draft – please do not quote without the permission of the author

**Keywords:** EU foreign policy, South Korea, China, United States, geopolitics, Covid19

### **Abstract**

The chapter examines the ways in which the EU and South Korea can cope with the conflict between the US and China both as the result of a shorter-term Corona crisis and of previous underlying long-term trends. The chapter suggests that the EU should intensify cooperation with the Republic of Korea (ROK) as the key country in North East Asia which is in a similar situation of “being caught between the US and China”. The chapter argues that the EU and ROK should: firstly, strengthen their Strategic Partnership, especially in the areas of common interest such as health, trade, digitalization, climate change and multilateralism; secondly, identify areas where the EU and ROK can pre-empt the Sino-American rivalry from escalating by coming up with joint proposals that would be acceptable both to the US and China (e.g. North Korea); and, thirdly, create a network of like-minded partners in South/South East Asia (e.g. ASEAN countries) and Asia-Pacific (e.g. New Zealand, Australia), particularly since most of these countries have also been successful in combatting Covid19.

### **Introduction**

*“...perhaps the best way is to see COVID-19 as the great accelerator of history. It strengthens trends that were already present before... everywhere we look we see increasing rivalries, especially between the US and China. The pressure to choose sides is growing. As EU, we should follow our own interests and values and avoid being instrumentalised by one or the other. We need a more robust strategy for China, which also requires better relations with the rest of democratic Asia. That’s why we must invest more in working with India, Japan, South Korea et cetera.”*

Josep Borrell, 25 May 2020

With these words, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs (HRVP) Josep [Borrell outlined](#) how he sees the long-term geopolitical challenges for the European Union (EU) that have not been brought about, but were reinforced by the Corona crisis when he greeted German ambassadors during their annual gathering in May 2020. HRVP Borrell, who is also Vice-President of what its President Ursula von der Leyen termed the [“geopolitical” Commission](#), to some extent echoes his predecessor, Federica Mogherini. HRVP Mogherini included a chapter on a “Connected Asia” into her signature [EU Global Strategy](#) in 2016. The EU’s “strategic autonomy” has become one of the buzzwords in her policy template, while the section on Asia emphasizes expansion of the EU’s partnership across Asia, including with South Korea. Yet the Covid19 pandemics caught the world unprepared, revealed the disappointing shape of global leadership and has thrown the EU Global Strategy and, in one way or the other, the entire EU’s relationship both with China and the United States (US), but also with partners such as the ROK, into disarray.

---

<sup>1</sup> This publication is a part of the „EUSKOR“ research project that has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 797977. You can visit the EUSKOR website here: <https://www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/polwiss/euskor>

This chapter examines the ways in which the EU and South Korea can cope with the world emerging after the pandemics in the light of the conflict between the US and China which is seen both as the result of a shorter-term Corona crisis but also a consequence of previous underlying long-term trends. Since both the EU and South Korea face a similar challenge of “being caught between the US and China”, and because South Korea (next to Japan) is the key counterpart for the EU in North East (NE) Asia, the chapter suggests that Brussels and Seoul should prioritize strengthening of their Strategic Partnership, which celebrated ten years in October 2020, and solidify their work on matters of mutual concern.

The chapter therefore argues that the EU and ROK should: firstly, intensify their mutual cooperation, especially in the areas of common interest such as health, trade, digitalization, climate change and multilateralism. Secondly, the two counterparts should identify areas where the EU and ROK can preempt the Sino-American rivalry from escalating by coming up with joint proposals that would be acceptable to both the US and China. In this regard, the chapter argues that, for instance, a joint position on North Korea would be a good starting point. Thirdly, Brussels and Seoul should create a network of like-minded partners in South/South East Asia (e.g. ASEAN countries) and Asia-Pacific (e.g. New Zealand, Australia) that have also been thrown into an unenviable situation of being asked to choose sides between the two superpowers, particularly since most of these countries have also been successful in combatting Covid19.

After introductory remarks, the chapter first outlines the broader geopolitical context of the US-China tensions and places the EU (and South Korea) within it. Then, the chapter proceeds with mapping out of several areas that are most suitable for an intensified collaboration between Brussels and Seoul, but also provides a few warnings where the two capitals may disagree. At the same time, the chapter takes the issue of North Korea as an example of an area where even though the US-China disagreements have so far been muted, the two superpowers are increasingly more likely to face off one another. The chapter concludes with suggesting that like-minded partners might want to jump on the board and create a network of states that do not want to choose either the US, or China, but may want to collaborate more closely with the EU and the ROK instead.

### **Geopolitics vs Pandemics: Europe and South Korea Caught between China and the US**

The European view on how the Trump Administration has approached the Covid19 pandemics has been, to put it mildly, ambivalent at best. On the one hand, Brussels has shared Washington’s concerns about uncertain origins of the Coronavirus and handling of the illness by Beijing, including the lack of transparency by the Chinese authorities at the beginning of the epidemic. Even though the Europeans may have disliked President Trump’s rhetoric about “China virus”, Beijing didn’t endear itself to them by a rather clumsy “mask diplomacy” towards various EU Member States and aggressive statements and steps against any critics condemning the Chinese intransigent approach.

On the other hand, the delayed and ineffectual response to the dangers of Covid19 by the Trump Administration which was compounded by uncoordinated actions, such as the [US travel ban on European countries](#) whose leaders did not receive any advance notice and the American attempt to [buy off and monopolize a German company](#) that has been one of the frontrunners for a Covid-19 vaccine, has made the US a dubious leader and ally in the fight against the common enemy – Coronavirus – in the eyes of many Europeans. In fact, according to a [Pew poll](#) from late September 2020, a staggering 84% of the Europeans (and 93% of the South Koreans) think that the US has done a

bad job dealing with the Coronavirus outbreak, whilst China received an average of 40.3%<sup>2</sup> for handling Covid-19 well among the surveyed Europeans (but only 20% among the South Koreans).

These developments induced by the worldwide Coronavirus emergency have nonetheless been accompanied by tendencies that could have been observed for some time. In the spirit of his “[withdrawal doctrine](#)”, President Trump took the US out of the World Health Organization (WHO) in the midst of a pandemic – as much as he pulled the rug under the Iran nuclear deal, the Paris Climate Accord, UNESCO, INF Treaty and others, which are all international agreements and organizations that have been the pillars of multilateral world order. Yet despite the departure of their founder, EU leaders have been trying to salvage these institutions and been drumming up support among other partners who are in favor of rescuing multilateral institutions, including Seoul, to keep these international entities in place despite the US’s withdrawal.

Similarly, with the rise of China throughout the preceding decades and its clear demands to have a seat at the table while suggesting that Beijing is ready to take on greater responsibilities commensurate with its increased weight, tensions over who will set the standards of global trade have already surfaced under previous US administrations. After all, it was President Barack Obama who proposed the Trans-Pacific (TPP) and Transatlantic (TTIP) partnerships in order to reduce the growing Chinese economic clout and to foster open trading rules in tandem with Washington’s close partners, such as the EU.<sup>3</sup>

Yet since the start of the Trump Presidency, the US-China trade frictions have increased in spite of a temporary truce due to the “phase one” trade deal in early 2020. Given the economic repercussions of the Corona crisis, and the prospects of a protracted economic recovery, the US-China trade war is not likely to end anytime soon. Despite the efforts to negotiate an investment treaty with China by the end of 2020 and a “mini-TTIP” [removing tariffs on lobsters, crystal glass and lighters](#) across the Atlantic, the EU risks being caught in the middle, partly owing to its dependence on the Chinese market and partly because of its own strained trade relationship with the US.

It is however not only the US which has become more antagonistic towards the EU. The Chinese Communist Party leaders have clearly become more assertive and not shied away from using belligerent language particularly on social media, including trolls, propaganda and statements by “wolf warrior” diplomats posted to European capitals, as well as violence to deliver the same message of strength on the ground. Beijing’s attempts to suppress the protests against the extradition and national security laws in Hong Kong, and harsh words against anyone who stands up for the Hong Kongers, including the UK and other governments, are the cases in point.

Moreover, Beijing has also been willing to employ other ruthless tactics against foreign countries and nationals, including “hostage diplomacy” (e.g. the [cases of two Canadians](#) who were arbitrarily detained in China in retaliation for the arrest of Huawei’s CFO Meng Wanzhou on the behest of the US), an old-fashioned espionage (e.g. the [case of a former EU Ambassador to Korea](#) who has been accused of spying and, together with his Chinese partner, has allegedly been [intimidating the Chinese dissident community in Berlin](#)) and weaponization of trade (e.g. trade tariffs against Australia after

---

<sup>2</sup> Author’s own calculations, based on Pew Research, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/09/21/americans-give-the-u-s-low-marks-for-its-handling-of-covid-19-and-so-do-people-in-other-countries/>, accessed 10 October 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. J.-F. Morin, T. Novotna, F. Ponjaert and M. Telo, *The Politics of Transatlantic Trade Negotiations: TTIP in a Globalized World*, GEM Series. Ashgate, London, 2015.

Prime Minister Morrison had been vocal in calling for investigating the genesis of Covid19 disease and China's responsibility for it).

Worries that a similar tool of coercion could be aimed at EU citizens and countries as a retribution for political actions that go against China's wishes emerged after the speaker of Czech Senate visited Taiwan with a large business delegation in the late August 2020. Although China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi warned that the Senate speaker would ["pay a heavy price"](#) for "crossing the line" of One China policy, this incident has so far resulted only in mutual summons of ambassadors in Prague and Beijing and in retraction of an order of [several pianos](#) produced by a Czech family firm that were no longer desired to be delivered to China. Czechia meanwhile received a solid backing from other European governments, including Germany and France, whose foreign ministers expressed their strong displeasure over Beijing's reaction, a gesture which was not only greatly appreciated by Prague but one which may potentially contribute to generating a more unified European stance on China (and Taiwan).

Yet it is not only politicians who can get caught up in a quandary which was not originally meant to have any worldwide implications. A member of [BTS enraged Chinese netizens after receiving an award for promoting US-Korea relations](#) on behalf of the most popular Korean boys group. In his acceptance speech, RM referred to 2020 as an especially meaningful year to be awarded because of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Korean War and remembered those Americans and South Koreans who sacrificed their lives in the struggle. Despite inspirational appeal of his address, the K-Pop singer did not recall the thousands of killed Chinese who however fought on the other – North Korean – side in the ["War to Resist the US Aggression and Aid Korea"](#), angering his Chinese fanbase and prompting Samsung, Fila and other companies to remove BTS merchandise from Chinese online platforms. To calm down the backlash, [a senior official from Beijing's ministry of foreign affairs had to intervene](#).

Although at this point it seems that neither of the two episodes will have any further repercussions, they nonetheless illustrate how difficult it might be for European and South Korean governments and individuals to position themselves between China and the US. While timing of Minister Wang's confrontational words was particularly unfortunate given that he uttered them during his own tour around Europe which was aimed at mending ties with the Europeans (and that to an extent failed), Washington has also been sending its top diplomat to lobby for the US side. In fact, [US Secretary of State Pompeo paid an unexpected homage to Prague](#) less than three weeks before the Czech-China clash over the Taiwan visit, while cancellation of Mike Pompeo's journey to Seoul in October 2020 has probably [motivated the Chinese foreign minister to put his own travel to Seoul on hold](#). As the saying about a ["shrimp among whales"](#) goes, it no longer refers only to (South) Korea, but the EU is increasingly squeezed between China and the US in a very similar way.

Even though some of the shorter-term animosities between Washington and Beijing (plus Washington and Brussels) might dissipate should Joe Biden, a Democratic candidate and foreign-policy wonk, be elected to the White House in November 2020, there is equally the danger that the current hostility between the two big powers turns into a systemic long-term competition and a new version of Cold War. Given the bipartisan consensus over the threat of a rising China among US policy-makers, even with a Democratic majority across the US government, the Sino-American rivalry may remain the defining feature of the years to come. This leaves the EU – as well as other "middle powers" such as South Korea – in an unappealing predicament of having to chart a course between the two superpowers – China and the US.

### **Making the Most Out of The Pandemics: The EU and South Korea Partnership**

The EU, and the German EU rotating presidency in particular, have been trying find a way between two superpowers and been pushing China to move on especially trade issues in order to conclude the comprehensive investment agreement before the year's-end – and before the US elections. Even though Chancellor Merkel's brainchild, the summit between President Xi and 27 EU heads of states and governments, had to be postponed from September in Leipzig to spring 2021 in Brussels, the EU held, in an unprecedented way, [two virtual summits](#) with Chinese leadership (one of them [with participation of Merkel](#) as the substitute for the September get-together) within the time-span of three months. Moreover, the German Presidency slated a special informal gathering focusing on EU-China relations for mid-November 2020.

The EU's "now or never" spirit on an agreement with China, compounded by the lack of US leadership, has partly overshadowed, but also partly stimulated a no less important virtual summit: [a videoconference between South Korean President Moon Jae-in and EU Presidents von der Leyen and Michel](#) at the end of June 2020. On the European side, the objective was to solicit South Korea's deeper cooperation on fighting the Coronavirus pandemic and its economic and global fallouts, whereas President Moon wanted to recruit the EU's support for his inter-Korean cause. [Health, trade and Korean peninsula affairs](#) were therefore the key takeaways from the summit aiming at deepening of the EU-ROK strategic partnership, particularly in the light of the Covid19 and the US-China competition. Should the scheduled in-person EU-South Korea reunion actually happen in Seoul in November 2020, the agenda will likely reflect a similar set of items.

### ***The Top Priority: Fighting Covid19 Together***

On the Coronavirus front, South Korea and China represent two poles on a continuum on how public institutions can cope with the pandemics. On one side of the spectrum, Beijing has since early on used "mass lockdowns" and other drastic measures as the key instrument to combat the spread of Covid19, whereas Seoul focused on "mass testing", creativity and transparency via its "[test, trace and treat](#)" programme. The EU member states have been fluctuating between these two approaches – with, for instance, Madrid and Paris opting more often for the Chinese way, while Berlin and Helsinki going in the South Korean direction.

The European Commission has been impressed by South Korea's Covid19 performance in three areas: sheer numbers (in spite of several serious flare ups, the ROK has had [450 deaths per 25,424 cases](#) for population of around 52 million as of 21 October), democracy (holding [national elections](#) with a record turnout while maintaining public trust in the state-mandated measures) and openness (South Korea has never closed its external borders even though a "K-quarantine" rules represent a natural barrier for short-term tourism). In contrast to Europe where most countries focus on "[forward tracing](#)" of those who could have been in contact with a Covid19-positive person to avert future infections, South Korea's center for disease control has also been employing a strategy of "backward tracing" where the key is to pinpoint the "patient zero" in order to detect the past infection chains stemming from this first ill individual – a method that has helped Seoul (but also Tokyo and many South East Asian capitals) to bust large clusters of contaminations.

The chaotic (mis)management of Covid19 in Washington did not inspire any Europeans for emulation although those who may have underestimated the "second wave" of the Coronavirus – such as Prague – might end up in a similar situation as in the US, at least until their governments get their infection rates back under control. Contracting the disease clearly did not sway the "Superspreader-in-Chief" to take epidemiological precautions seriously either and, therefore, the US under President Trump is more of an outlier than a third model for tackling the illness.

As a token of appreciation for Seoul's good job, [South Korean citizens have been allowed to enter](#) the EU, mostly without obligation to self-isolate upon arrival. Chinese nationals have been accorded the same privilege of free EU admission but subject to reciprocity by Beijing – the key rationale why the Americans have been barred from entering the EU (notwithstanding the extent of the pandemics in the US).

Brussels has also been thrilled when Seoul pledged over 45 million euro to the European Commission's [Coronavirus Global Response fund](#), thus matching China's contribution, whereas the US has never contemplated to accede to the fund. Similarly, the "[Team Europe](#)" has been very pleased when [South Korea committed to join Gavi's COVAX facility](#) which supports equitable access to Covid19 vaccine. China declared a similar intention – but yet again, it has been the current [US administration which has shown no interest in participating](#) in this WHO-led but EU-sustained vaccination scheme. In addition to the PPE production and supply chains, Brussels and Seoul have therefore proved to be fitting partners in fighting Covid19 both in terms of shared teamwork and solidarity with third parties. As horrendous as it may be, the pandemics might bring Brussels and Seoul closer together in a previously under-explored health sector, while simultaneously helping the EU and ROK maintain a healthy distance from the US and China.

Moreover, Covid19 could also enhance engagement with North Korea on a humanitarian level, including through the COVAX facility where the DPRK is classified as a low-income economy eligible for participation via the mechanism's contributions market. Contrary to [various speculations](#), an early shutdown of the DPRK borders<sup>4</sup> (as much as a possible early warning by Chinese authorities about the deadly virus), coupled with extremely strict anti-epidemic measures, may have prevented the Coronavirus from spreading around North Korea. The DPRK government has been accepting only a limited Coronavirus-related humanitarian aid, and would have been more enthusiastic about easing of sanctions to mitigate the economic effects of the country's complete isolation. Nonetheless, Pyongyang may welcome a free supply of shots against Covid19 via an international instrument such as COVAX rather than being dependent on its neighbours, China and Russia, for its vaccination stocks. If successful, Coronavirus assistance to the DPRK via COVAX could also advance the inter-Korean relations and amplify the EU's weight on the Korean peninsula.

### ***Long-Term Concerns: Trade, Digitalization, Climate Change... and North Korea***

Although the EU and ROK have tremendously benefitted from their [free trade agreement \(FTA\)](#) and the FTA has become a template for future trade deals with Japan, Canada, Singapore, etc. (see chapter by Pacheco Pardo), Brussels and Seoul still wrestle with outstanding bilateral issues. These difficulties primarily relate to [Seoul's reluctance to ratify four ILO conventions](#), forcing the EU to invoke a dispute settlement mechanism under the FTA's sustainable development chapter with the latest [hearing by a Panel of Experts in October 2020](#). Even though Brussels' prime motivation for this rare move was to make an example out of Seoul by holding it accountable to its legal promises because of contentious trade talks with MERCOSUR, solving the ILO matter would reinforce the otherwise excellent EU-ROK trade relationship, particularly in the face of accusations by US President Trump that Brussels and Seoul have both been "ripping off" the Americans.

By being exposed to the Sino-American trade conflict, Brussels' Berlaymont and Seoul's Blue House have elevated preservation of the multilateral trading regime to one of their long-term priorities. The EU has fought the US attempt to block the functioning of the World Trade Organisation's (WTO's) appellate body by setting up an alternative "[multi-party interim appeal arbitration arrangement](#)"

---

<sup>4</sup> The DPRK announced its first ban on foreigners entering the country two days before Wuhan, China went into lockdown, on 23 January 2020.

[\(MPIA\)](#). Even though South Korea has initially indicated its willingness to become a member, it hasn't so far joined MPIA – in contrast to China. At the same time, the Blue House has been putting a lot of effort in [campaigning for its trade minister Yoo Myung-hee](#) to get her elected into the post of the WTO's director general. Even though Ms Yoo's chances might be narrow due to Japan's likely unwillingness to support her, Seoul surely needs the EU's vote. Backing of the EU's invention for upholding the WTO's appeal system could be a potential tradeoff with Brussels to drop its support for Nigeria's counter-candidate, Ms Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, for the WTO's top job. A nearly fully operational WTO with a new Korean boss at helm could bolster the multilateral trading system in fighting protectionism as well as the EU-ROK partnership.

Given the conflict over Huawei and its safety is one of the hottest points of contention between the US and China, building reliable 5G networks without annoying one or the other power is another long-term priority encompassing both digitalization and national security – for Brussels as well as Seoul. Because of dangers posed by North Korea, the South cannot afford to lose trust and information sharing with Washington as [Secretary Pompeo once muted](#) could happen to allies such as Berlin should they use Huawei in their telecoms infrastructure. Equally, Seoul does not want to provoke the Chinese into another trade and tourism boycott as it had happened when the Blue House under President Park Geun-hye allowed deployment of the US-made [THAAD anti-ballistic missile system](#).

In a similar vein, the Europeans have been for some time grappling with the question of whether or not (and where) to allow Huawei into their next generation digital equipment. Even though the EU has agreed on a [general toolbox](#) to measure cybersecurity risks, the final decision is up to each EU Member State and the largest one – Germany – still has to make up its mind. Yet if the EU and South Korea were to agree on an enhanced cooperation in this field, it would put them in a good stead vis-à-vis the American and Chinese pressures, particularly if Samsung and Nokia/Ericsson were to team up rather than compete.

There is even a greater complementarity between Brussels and Seoul when it comes to their views on climate change. [Seoul's Green new deal](#) matches well with the [European green deal](#). Despite concerns about implementation, Beijing has also moved towards the “greener” side with President Xi's promise of China becoming carbon-neutral by 2060. In contrast to Donald Trump's aversion to any climate talks and the Paris Accord, should Joe Biden win the US Presidency, his revamped [clean energy and environmental justice plan](#) may also overlap with the others and Biden has already promised to bring the US back under the Paris treaty. There is therefore a good prospect for a more extensive trilateral or, if the Democrats win the White House, quadrilateral cooperation that could bring closer together Brussels and Seoul one side and Beijing (and Washington) on the other in at least one policy area.

Confronting the climate change might also be an efficient way of bringing North Korea into the international fold. Involving the DPRK officials in “green deal” negotiations might be a good way of having discussions on a less controversial subject than, say, denuclearization. Sitting around the same negotiating table and debating an issue of concern for all the parties can create mutual trust and learning from one another. It would also surely be beneficial for the North Koreans to get more information on, and actual assistance in, building a tidal and wind power instead of developing the nuclear one. Such a climate dialogue could also improve the inter-Korean relations: after all, it was Pyongyang which ratified and entered into force of the Paris Accord a few months earlier than Seoul did.

Even denuclearization could be tackled through the prism of preserving the nature. Instead of dismantling the Yongbyon nuclear reactor and other similar facilities, the deliberations could refocus

on how to keep them safe in order to avoid disasters such as in Fukushima or Chernobyl which, should such a catastrophe happen, could affect all the neighbouring countries from South Korea through Japan up to China and beyond. Nuclear safety should be in everyone's interest, including the staunchest critics of Pyongyang: capitals equipped with the necessary knowledge and manpower, like Paris, Tokyo and Washington, could share lessons on how to prevent – and how (not) to cope with – a nuclear plant accident. As with procuring a Covid19 vaccine through an international mechanism, talking nuclear safety within a global forum where the DPRK is viewed as an equal player might be a good training ground for other, more difficult, negotiations whereas Pyongyang might be willing to make more concessions.

Such a rosy scenario may however not materialize. Natural disasters like floods and typhoons may keep striking the DPRK countryside, while North Korea may indeed decide to procure, officially or surreptitiously, some amount of the Covid19 vaccines for the elites as well as the basic necessities from its closest neighbor – China – while leaving the remaining population vulnerable. Insulated from the outside world by a Corona-related shutdown more so than by any sanctions, and without any substantive contacts with South Korea, Pyongyang may be tempted to not just show off, but to actually try out its latest [massive ICBM weapon](#). However, in the era of the heightened Sino-American competition, instead of the international community rallying behind a US-led “maximum pressure 2.0”, Beijing (and Moscow) will not want to give up on North Korea as its political buffer zone while [doing its utmost to keep it economically afloat](#). Moreover, with the human rights situation deteriorating within China itself, a new Sino-Korean kinship might be developing. As an ordinary Chinese put it: [“We used to think North Korea was our past – now we realize it’s our future.”](#)

To avoid an uneasy choice which of the two policies – American, or Chinese one – towards the DPRK to pursue, Seoul and Brussels may now have the last chance to prevent North Korea from becoming yet another theater for disagreements between Beijing and Washington – and to [stop it from slipping completely into the Chinese orbit](#). The EU has always claimed that it needs to be asked by the relevant parties to get engaged on the Korean peninsula affairs. President Moon's call for the EU [to “play a big role”](#) did just that. It is now up to the EU to respond appropriately, [revamp its policy towards the DPRK](#) and work closely with its South Korean partner to draft proposals that could help resolve the North Korean conundrum without alienating either Washington, or Beijing – or, indeed, Pyongyang. Another EU-ROK summit, potentially still in the autumn 2020, might be the best opportunity to do so.

### **What EU-ROK Future within the US-China Conflict? Strengthen the Partnership, Create Network of Like-Minded Allies**

2020 should have been the year when the two Koreas would, ideally together rather than separately, commemorate the beginning of the Korean War 70 years ago, and, if things went extremely well, would perhaps even declare the end to that war. The Coronavirus pandemics eclipsed any such efforts. Yet it wasn't just the Koreans who remembered the armed conflict – and used it for current political purposes. When visiting an exhibition in the honor of the Chinese People's Volunteers forces entering the war, President Xi Jinping portrayed this action as the [“historic and resolute decision”](#) of the Chinese communist party to resist the American aggression. Instead making the most out of the anniversary by rooting for peace, China's top leader deftly used the opportunity to call for yet another – albeit so far cold – war with the US.

Although any similar situation is hardly imaginable in Europe when commemorating, say, the beginning of the Second World War, President Xi's remarks clearly indicate where things are headed in the near future: the Sino-American rivalry will encroach on other areas that will become subjugated to it.



Europe should take this Korean experience as a serious warning. But what can the EU and South Korea do about it? How can Brussels and Seoul navigate the contest between the US and China that has started under the Obama Presidency, if not earlier, has been clearly visible as of the inauguration of Trump Presidency, and has accelerated since the Corona crisis?

The chapter argued that the EU and South Korea should, first and foremost, strengthen their mutual Strategic Partnership in a number of areas: health, trade, 5G networks, climate change and multilateralism. Secondly, Brussels and Seoul should try to identify areas where they can pre-empt, or at least manage, the rivalry between Beijing and Washington from escalating (such as in the case of North Korea). Last but not least, however, the EU and ROK should explore whether there are any other like-minded partners, especially around Asia-Pacific, who would be reluctant siding with either the US or with China but would prefer teaming up and building alliances with the EU and South Korea.

The ASEAN countries come quickly to mind: the EU has become a “networked” power through its numerous concluded (or under negotiation) FTAs with ASEAN members across Asia and has been a large contributor for the (post)-pandemics aid and recovery in the region. Similarly, President Moon’s New Southern Policy serves an analogous purpose of joining up with ASEAN to create a network of friends supporting the reconciliation on the Korean peninsula. A good case could also be made for an enhanced collaboration with Australia and New Zealand. Should such a strategy work, the EU could upgrade and expand its standing in Asia and beyond, while South Korea might get a better shot at solving the inter-Korean issues. Brussels and Seoul may soon discover that finding together like-minded allies happy to join up forces can prove to be the most effective counterweight against any forced choice between Beijing or Washington. Most of all, such an enhanced cooperation can help reviving multilateralism and rules-based order across the globe. Such a policy will benefit us all.