

HEALTH, TRADE AND NORTH KOREA: THE EU-SOUTH KOREA SUMMIT AND FUTURE TIES

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June has been the month of EU virtual summits with its Asian counterparts. On 22 June, Presidents von der Leyen and Michel held a [videoconference with China's President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang](#). A week later, on 30 June, the two EU leaders met up [online with South Korean President Moon Jae-in](#). (To this EU-Asia line-up, one could also add the [EU-Japan video-summit](#) with Prime Minister Abe that took place earlier in late May).

The key focus of these meetings was clear: fighting the Coronavirus pandemic and its economic fallout. However, the [EU also raised a human rights agenda](#) directly with Beijing, stressing its concerns over the national security law in Hong Kong and individual cases, such as of two Canadians Michaels Spavor and Kovrig, who were [charged with espionage](#) by the Chinese authorities just three days before the summit.

Brussels and Seoul, on the other hand, share views on liberal values and numerous issues of common interest, including global governance and the preservation of the rules-based international order. Since there is no major disagreement between them on these broader questions, what was the key take away from the EU-ROK summit? And how will the EU-Korea partnership play out in the future?

At the videoconference, the Europeans wanted to talk health and trade, while North Korea – and the EU's support with it – was on President Moon's mind. The EU's willingness to adequately respond to Seoul's overtures and seize the initiative on the DPRK will be vital for the EU-Korea partnership in the upcoming months. More importantly, it will also affect the way in which a "geopolitical" EU will play its hand in learning how ["to speak the language of power"](#) – as the EU's High Representative (HRVP) Borrell put it - in Asia and beyond.

South Korea's Flattening the Curve Impresses the EU... and Rightly So

The ROK's performance in battling COVID-19 has been stellar so far, with only [285 deaths per 13,244 cases](#) for population of around 52 million as of 8 July. In contrast with Beijing's heavy-handed approach, Seoul has employed "mass testing" rather than "mass lockdowns" through its ["test, trace and treat"](#) programme. In fact, if there is an Asian country which the EU should take inspiration from, including holding [national elections](#) with a record turnout amidst the pandemic, it is definitely South Korea.

Brussels has acknowledged Seoul's accomplishments by including the ROK in the exclusive club of [15 countries whose nationals are allowed to enter the EU](#) from 1 July. Although South Korea has not closed its external borders to the Europeans and, in fact, no other nationals, one can hope that, in the spirit of reciprocity, Seoul will also lift its onerous and expensive quarantine rules for European arrivals.

On the Coronavirus front, Brussels and Seoul are clearly key partners. Seoul has already pledged [over 45 million euro](#) to the European Commission's Coronavirus Global Response fund, matching China's contribution. The EU-ROK summit has provided a further impetus for mutual collaboration, such as in vaccine research, information sharing between disease control centers and PPE supply-chains – all areas where international cooperation is sorely needed.

Like-Minded Partners on Open Trade and Markets but With Some Bumps on the Road

The [EU-ROK free trade agreement \(FTA\)](#) was the first of the modern EU-led trade deals. Lifting barriers since 2011 has hugely benefitted both sides (although some non-tariff barriers are still to be removed in industries such as agriculture).

Yet as much as the FTA has been a model for those with Japan, Canada, and others, the EU has also used the agreement to demonstrate how it won't cave in on difficult items related to implementation. Particularly with the view of a trade pact with MERCOSUR, the EU has invoked a dispute settlement mechanism under the FTA's sustainable development chapter. In South Korea, labour issues have been subject to [interpretations of history](#) and [partisan politics](#). Only after Moon's party achieved a [supermajority in April's elections](#) is there a chance for passing laws on trade unions and ratification of most of the four outstanding ILO conventions in the National Assembly as required by the FTA.

At the global level, Brussels' Berlaymont and Seoul's Blue House agree on fighting protectionism and preserving the WTO's multilateral trading system. There is also a broad complementarity between the respective "[Green Deals](#)" to tackle the climate change and the digitalization policies. For all this positive talk, putting the words into practice will be crucial. If Seoul wants the EU to compromise on other political issues, such as North Korea, it would be well advised to make a substantive move on its labour laws otherwise a good bilateral relationship can quickly sour.

North Korea on Moon Jae-In's Mind

Such frictions, however, pale before the matter of highest priority, and of personal commitment, by Moon Jae-In: improving the South's relations with its Northern neighbour. The last [EU-ROK summit in October 2018](#) failed to produce a joint statement mainly because the Blue House did not manage to convince European governments to ease sanctions on the DPRK so that Seoul and Pyongyang could go ahead with inter-Korean projects.

A leadership change in Brussels and a better appraisal of European priorities on Seoul's part contributed to this year's progress: [a joint press release](#). In addition to supporting Moon Jae-In's pursuit of greater stability and security on the Korean peninsula, European Council President Michel encouraged resuming talks between the US and North Korea during a [press briefing](#). Since then, Moon's administration has been pushing for [another Trump-Kim summit](#) before the US presidential elections in November 2020. However, whether the Blue House's efforts are realistic, or whether another summit would amount to anything more than a photo opportunity, remains an open question.

Nonetheless, the recent resurgence of tensions on the Korean Peninsula – from [North Korea blowing up the liaison office](#) with the South to the [DPRK's threats to redeploy troops](#) into the demilitarized zone – show that Pyongyang does not consider Seoul a partner for cooperation or a facilitator in the talks with the US.

The Blue House would want Brussels to help with, or possibly even take over, the South's initial mediating role with the DPRK. The European Council President clearly confirmed that the EU wants to play [a more active role in Asia](#). For this to happen, however, the EU needs to step out of its comfort zone and do what it did with Iran (and what it is trying to do with China): chart a North Korea policy independent of the US.

The summit would have been a good occasion to task HRVP Borrell to draft a new Korean Peninsula strategy to recalibrate the EU's present approach of "critical engagement" from being overwhelmingly "critical of" to slightly more "engaging with" the North Koreans. Such a "[Borrell plan](#)" would have been a nice gesture to honor the 70th anniversary of the breakout of the Korean War earlier in June and to celebrate ten years since launching the EU-ROK strategic partnership later this year. As the discussions with China illustrate, designing a new strategy [does not imply that the EU would have to give up its long-standing defense of human rights](#) either.

As [recent comments](#) indicate, Pyongyang had expected a new European policy on North Korea from leaders of EU institutions who came into office in December 2019 (and advised them to listen to the European DPRK experts – not only this author – who have been calling for the EU to reformulate its outdated policy since a long time).

The primary target of Pyongyang's pleas for an "impartial and objective" EU North Korea policy is a modification of the [EU's](#) and the [UN's](#) existing restrictive measures. Even though these measures are agreed upon by EU member states, Brussels does not need to wait for a change of mood in Paris and Berlin or, indeed, in Washington. The European Commission together with HRVP Borrell could very well adopt an [innovative approach](#) to North Korea – similar to their creative [EU-China strategic outlook](#) that classifies China into four different categories according to a policy area, including labeling Beijing a systemic rival.

Such a novel "EU-Korean Peninsula strategic outlook" could outline diverse policies with distinct tools in each group, such as [bilateral diplomacy, inter-Korean relations, security and nuclear issues and humanitarian aid and exchanges](#). Even as Brussels – rather than EU capitals – has emerged as a policy innovator on China, its approach toward the Korean peninsula has for years remained the same. Brussels [continues to blame the DPRK for lack of progress](#), and insists on – and demarches the others – to keep sanctions in place, equally annoying both Pyongyang and Seoul as a result.

The Covid-19 pandemic could serve as a rationale for debating a new EU Korea Peninsula strategy as well as temporary exemptions (rather than blanket lifting) from sanctions to facilitate delivering urgently needed medicines, test kits and other humanitarian goods to the DPRK, but also tools required for water management. After all, how can you wash your hands regularly with no water piping? If Brussels is eager to adhere to the [UN's appeal](#) and ease the sanctions on Teheran and Caracas due to the public health emergency, it should apply the same standards to Pyongyang.

A Summit as An Invitation to Another Summit – and A More Active EU

Although the EU-ROK virtual summit followed those with China and Japan, in no way was it less significant. Whereas the Covid-19 crisis has underscored the underlying tensions in the EU-China relationship, and highlighted the limits of relying on the US, it has revealed that there are other partners across Asia that the EU can, and should, work closely with. In fact, [HRVP Borrell has already pointed in that direction.](#)

In contrast to claims that authoritarian regimes and methods of shutting entire countries down are best suited for handling public health disasters, South Korea has shown how a democratic government can deal with an epidemic with full transparency and efficiency. In preparing for a second Coronavirus wave, or a new outbreak, teaming up with Seoul would be a smart plan for Brussels and the European capitals.

The video-summit served as an initial get-to-know-one-another session between the Blue House and the new leadership in Brussels. President Moon [extended an invitation to an in-person gathering in Seoul later this year.](#) By emphasizing the EU's support for promoting dialogue between Washington and Pyongyang and saying that "the EU can play a big role", he clearly encouraged the EU to take action on the North Korean file.

Brussels has been waiting for such an invitation since at least 2017/18. If handled well, the Korean Peninsula could indeed become that prized gateway for the EU's geopolitical ambitions in Asia and beyond. Accommodating President Moon's wishes would also create a vast amount of good will in the Blue House to make concessions on other issues dear to European hearts: from trade through Iran up to Russia/Ukraine.

Should European leaders stick to their current stance on the DPRK, however, they risk alienating Seoul, which may prove to be an invaluable ally once the EU starts looking for potential counterparts in Asia to navigate the US-China rivalry.

Moon Jae-In has [repeatedly recalled](#) the European experience from the 1950s as a model for his vision for the Korean Peninsula. In the year commemorating the 70th anniversary of the Schuman Plan, it would be a shame if Ursula von der Leyen, Charles Michel and Josep Borrell missed this opportunity.