Ordering East Asia, Discovering South Korea—Interpreting the European Union's Engagement with South Korea in the Context of its Representations of East Asia

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Abstract

While much has been published on the negotiations and development of EU-South Korea relations over the past decade and a half, the sudden upgrading of bilateral relations in the late 2000s has hardly been explored. This article contributes to closing this gap by proposing an interpretation of the EU's approach to South Korea against the backdrop of its engagement with East Asia at large. To do so, it develops a framework of discursive spatial ordering, which is then used to analyse the discourse on East Asia in documents of the European Commission and the Council of the EU since the end of the Cold War. The focus is on the extent to which the EU identifies with Easy Asia, or differentiates between itself and this region, whether and how it differentiates amongst players within East Asia, and to what extent it perceives hierarchical asymmetries in these relationships. The article argues that the comparatively low level of priority for South Korea in the EU's engagement with East Asia up to the mid-2000s can be related to a general perception in Brussels that all of East Asia displayed important deficiencies in terms of economic governance and to a focus on Japan and especially China as main players in the region. In the second half of the 2000s then South Korea quickly moved centre-stage in EU policy towards East Asia for several reasons: firstly, as it became clear that China would not follow EU expectations in terms of economic and political reforms, both South Korea and Japan gained in weight due to their status as "like-minded countries;" secondly South Korea was identified as a commercial partner that could help the EU to outperform major competitors (in particular the

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US), while Japan was seen as an important competitor itself; lastly, and outside the economic sphere, the EU was also interested in showing its new (post-enlargement) weight in international affairs by contributing to the management and mitigation of the security challenges emanating from North Korea.

Introduction

South Korea, or the Republic of Korea (ROK),[1] stands out amongst the strategic partners of the European Union (EU), for the comprehensive set of legally binding agreements the two have established, including a Framework Agreement to generally enhance political and economic links, a Free Trade Agreement (FTA), and an Agreement on the participation of South Korea in EU crisis management operations. In addition, many aspects of these agreements display characteristics that are unprecedented in EU external relations. At the moment of its signature, the FTA was the most comprehensive trade agreement ever concluded by the EU, it was the first after the EU's Global Europe communication of 2006, which marked its shift from an exclusive multilateral focus in the early years of the Doha Round to bilateral trade negotiations, and it was the first with an Asian partner. The agreement on crisis management cooperation makes South Korea "the first and only East Asian state to have a formal security cooperation arrangement with the EU" (Richey 2017, p.3, see also Christiansen and Richey 2021, p.407).

Bilateral relations were also strengthened at a remarkable speed. After a long period of relatively unambitious contacts and agreements, diplomatic activity hiked in the second half of the 2000s, with the beginning negotiations towards an FTA in 2007 and towards a Framework Agreement in 2008 (Park 2017, p.833, Wissenbach 2013, p.530). The efforts bore fruit in 2010: the Framework Agreement was signed in May and during the summit in October a strategic partnership was proclaimed and the FTA signed (Council of the European Union 2010). At their summit in March 2012, the two sides then decided "to boost bilateral cooperation and put in place regular political dialogues on world affairs and consultations on global human rights issues" (Wissenbach 2013, p.522), and within roughly two years from that they managed to finalise the crisis management agreement, which was signed in May 2014. This fast-tracked upgrade of bilateral relations justifies the metaphor that South Korea "gate-crashed the exclusive club of EU strategic partners" (Wissenbach 2013, pp.521-522).

This last point implies a puzzle: why was there such a sudden leap in ambition, leading to a significant, comprehensive upgrade of bilateral relations within only five or six years? And why were aspirations comparatively limited before? Of course, the EU had established diplomatic relations with South Korea already in 1963, and the 1990s saw the conclusion of a Framework Agreement for Trade and Cooperation (signed in October 1996) and of an Agreement on Cooperation and Mutual Administrative Assistance on Customs Matters (signed in April 1997). But should one not have expected broader and more sustained efforts, not only in light of South Korea's impressive performance in terms of economic growth in the 1970s and 1980s, but especially given its re-conversion to democracy and the increasing attention to human rights since the late 1980s? After all, the EU had

[1] These names and abbreviations will be used interchangeably in this paper.

established in the Treaty of Maastricht, signed in 1992, that one of the objectives of its new Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) would be "to develop and consolidate democracy and the rule of law, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms,"[2] and the policies, norms and ideas debated in Europe during the 1990s led to the coining of the term Normative Power Europe just about ten years later (Manners 2002). The slow engagement with South Korea in the 1990s may seem all the more surprising when compared with the energy the EU put into the progressive development of relations with China, an authoritarian one-party system that put its repressive inclinations on display in 1989—which stands in stark contrast to what was happening in the Republic of Korea at the same time.

While much has been published on the negotiations and development of EU-South Korea relations over the past decade, or better, since the upgrade of the relationship around 2010 (see for example Christiansen and Richey 2021, Richey 2017, Wissenbach 2013, Marx et al. 2014, Elsig and Dupont 2012, Hwang and Kim 2014), the puzzle of the sudden increase in ambition after a period of relative neglect is hardly mentioned and never explored. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to closing this gap by proposing an interpretation of the EU's approach to South Korea against the backdrop of its engagement with East Asia at large. Bilateral relations do not evolve in a vacuum, and the presence, in South Korea's direct neighbourhood, of two other states, China and Japan, with which the EU has important, though very diverse, relationships, undoubtedly have had an impact on EU-ROK engagement. As Harrison has pointed out, this bilateral relationship "must be understood in the context of the [EU's] wider policy on external affairs and its Asian policy, in particular" (Harrison 2013, p.8).

While it is impossible to compare directly the relationships the EU entertains with partners that are so different, or to construct any direct causality between their respective development, this raises the broader question of whether and how bilateral relations of the EU with various actors in East Asia are connected to each other, and possibly interdependent in the broader context of its approach to the region as a whole. Put differently and in relation to South Korea: to what extent can the study of the EU's engagement with East Asia and its various counterparts in that region help us to understand changes in EU-ROK relations?

The EU and South Korea in the East Asian context: a spatial-ordering approach

In order to address these issues, this paper takes inspiration from a non-classical approach to geopolitics that focusses on spatial ordering. Here, attention shifts away from the hard power of Westphalian states and their competition over territories, and instead highlights how economic, normative and other cooperative policies and related discourses essentially reflect (and project) representations of how space is or should be organised, along with related meaning. Such discourses of spatial ordering, or the mental maps which they express, then constitute the context of meaning within which any bilateral relationship is imagined, considered and developed. From such a perspective, the EU can be seen as "a fundamentally geopolitical actor" (Browning 2018, p.108), and this despite its ongoing shortcomings in the defence

[2] Treaty on European Union, art. J.1 (2), Official Journal of the European Communities, C 224, vol. 35, p. 94, 31.8.92.

sphere (see e.g. Martill and Sus 2019).

A crucial element in this approach is the idea of borders, as any spatial ordering depends on divisions of space, and the relation between the resulting portions of space. Walters (2004) discusses various "geostrategies of borders," and their different ways of dividing and connecting territories, both geographically and in a political, social and cultural sense. This includes ideas of fundamental similarity across some contemporary European borders, the role played by intermediate spaces beyond the formal borders of our own polities, the dynamic of discrimination and assimilation across colonial borders or also the radical separation and othering of space associated with "barbarians" (Walters 2004, pp.679-692). While a full discussion of these geostrategies is beyond the scope of this paper, what we can retain in view of the analysis below, are two dimensions from Walters' considerations: first, similarity and difference in how spatial units (like a country, a group of countries, a region, etc.) are represented, and secondly, the degree of hierarchy in the relationships between them.

With regard to the first dimension, an entity's spatial ordering discourse can represent any two or more spatial units, including itself, as more or less similar to or different from each other. Such representation may fall anywhere within a continuum from complete identification to radical differentiation, or othering. The simple idea of "friend vs foe" illustrates the underlying idea to some extent, but it captures only two points on the continuum, while in practice there are many subtle degrees of assimilation and differentiation. If so far the framework does not presuppose any value judgment about the involved spatial entities, the second dimension adds precisely that. In principle, discourses of differentiation could be completely neutral, but in practice they tend to convey a sense of hierarchy between the differentiated units. While crude declarations of authority and submission are possible, they are rare in contemporary policy statements, or at least in those publicly accessible. By contrast, superiority and inferiority are oftentimes expressed implicitly by reference to higher and lower levels of knowledge, experience, performance, progress, etc., or even more indirectly by putting one spatial unit in the position of judging or guiding others.

At a minimum, discursive spatial ordering concerns two spatial units, with a simple distinction between "us" and "them," in which case it is basically an instance of othering, though understood in a spatial logic. But it is important to note that it may also involve many more third actors to create complex and nuanced landscapes of similarity, difference and hierarchy. While the own spatial unit, for example one's own country, is always part of such landscapes, the other unit(s) can be virtually anywhere outside of this "self." Walters' discussion revolves around the EU's engagement with its direct neighbourhood, and it is true that the notion of border suggests territorial contiguity. There is no fundamental reason, however, why geostrategies of spatial ordering should not be projected over longer distances. It will always matter, after all, to what extent the EU identifies or differentiates between itself and any other region of the world, whether and how it differentiates within that region, and to what extent it perceives hierarchical asymmetries in the concerned relationships, i.e. between itself and the others and amongst the others involved.

Taking together the points above, if the EU's mental maps of East Asia constitute the context for its engagement with any specific country in that region, then studying their evolution over time may help us to get a better understanding of why bilateral relations with the ROK intensified so quickly in the second half of

the 2000s. What I will do in the following section is thus an attempt at discerning identification, differentiation and hierarchy in representations of East Asia and of the international actors in the region in selected official documents of the EU since the end of the Cold War.[3] The documents stem from the executive bodies of the EU, in particular the European Commission and the Council of the EU. This means that statements from the European Parliament and its members are not included, as the great diversity within this body makes it more challenging to draw conclusions on dominant views and attitudes. In the analysis, the role of South Korea receives particular attention, but other players in the region, most notably China and Japan, will also emerge as meaningful focal points of the EU's representations of East Asia. Thematically, the main focus will be on the economic dimension of the relationship. In the EU's engagement with East Asia, economic relations have always played a central role, and official communications tend to be particularly rich and detailed on issues related to EU economic interests. At the same time, the EU also holds normative preferences in the economic sphere (relating in particular to its idea of a liberal market economy and related regulatory standards), which it tends to project externally, as well as views on its status *vis-à-vis* others (in terms of being in line, or not, with "best practices" of economic governance or also the perceived right to advise or guide others on the matter). However, other issues (like for example democracy and human rights) will also be included when they appear helpful in underlining or illustrating an argument.

Against the backdrop of this analysis of EU representations of East Asia and international actors in this region, the discussion will then turn to interpreting the evolution of bilateral relations between the EU and South Korea in an East Asian context. In this section I will argue that the low level of attention to South Korea up to the mid-2000s can be related to several factors. Firstly, the EU had an initial tendency to treat East Asia collectively as below what it perceived to be international standards in terms of economic policy at home and international economic cooperation. Secondly, those individual players that did receive specific attention fell into three categories, all of which did not include South Korea: those in transition from planned to market economies (which included China), those with particularly promising markets (again including China) and those which were perceived as potential economic competitors (in the region only Japan). Thirdly, when the EU started to place more emphasis on "like-minded partners" in East Asia, Japan initially outshone South Korea, even though the latter also received a more favorable treatment than before.

The sudden rise in ambition in the second half of the 2000s then reflected new trends in the EU's view on the region and international affairs at large. First and foremost, EU discourse of differentiation, with the EU itself in a position of superiority, became more and more focussed on China, while the ROK gained a status as "like-minded partner" equivalent to that of Japan. At the same time, the EU's strategy for bilateral economic engagement in the context of the failing Doha Round showed much concern about economic competitors. In this regard, South Korea moved centre stage as a partner that could help the EU to outperform major competitors (in particular the US), while Japan was seen as an important competitor itself. Lastly, and outside the economic sphere, the EU was also interested in showing its new (post-enlargement) weight in international affairs by contributing to the management and mitigation of the security challenges emanating from North Korea.

[3] Note that this includes a short period before the establishment of the EU with the entry into force of the Treaty of Maastricht in 1993. For those years the discussion below will relate to the European Community (EC).

Differentiation, identification and hierarchy in EU representations of East Asia as a partner in economic cooperation since the end of the Cold War

The EU has produced a host of documents on relations with its counterparts in East Asia, as well as on the broader Asian region, and in most of them economic exchange and governance play an important role. Over the following pages, I will use a selection of the most prominent ones to analyse the discursive spatial ordering with regard to East Asia enacted by policy makers in EU executive institutions in Brussels. While most of the documents are not exclusively targeted at East Asia (understood here as including Greater China,[4] Japan, Korea and Mongolia), they all include substantial discussion of this region and several of the international actors within it, so as to make them relevant for this analysis.

The discussion will focus on three different time periods: the early 1990s, the early 2000s and the second half of the 2000s. They show a gradual shift from a collective differentiation between "us" Europeans and "them" in East Asia to a selective identification with certain East Asian actors, and from generally positioning the EC/EU in a superior role *vis-à-vis* the whole of East Asia to exempting certain "like-minded" countries from this treatment. South Korea is among those with whom the EU progressively identifies and towards whom it ceases to take a position of superiority. Note that the pattern of representation from the last period covered extends until the present, and the discussion below will show this with brief reference to some more recent documents.

The EC/EU and East Asia in the early years after the end of the Cold War

One of the earliest efforts by the EC/EU to make sense of its relations with East Asia in the post-Cold War period is a speech given by Frans Andriessen, at the time Vice-President of the European Commission and Commissioner of External Relations and Trade, during a seminar organised by Dutch Bank ABN-AMRO in Beijing in October 1991. Andriessen's visit to Beijing was part of a new tide of bilateral visits after their interruption for more than a year following the Chinese government's repression of protest in June 1989 (Gaenssmantel 2009, p.172). Unsurprisingly this speech also relates to "[t]he tragic events on Tian An Men Square two years ago" and calls for respect for human rights. But otherwise, most of the comments concern economic affairs, broadly understood, including in bilateral relations, assistance and aid to third parties, and international governance.

In the speech, Commissioner Andriessen makes hardly any explicit attempts at systematically distinguishing between actors within East Asia. He devotes particular attention to relations between the EC and China, which he describes as "a major power in the Asia-Pacific region and the world," though the Chinese focus is certainly related to the fact that the speech is given in Beijing (Andriessen 1991). Japan also comes up a few times in the speech, with a positive reference to its role in G7 efforts "to support reform in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe," but also with explicit criticism in that it could do "[m]uch more […] to sustain the open international system and help meet the global challenges of the 1990s" (Andriessen 1991). South Korea receives virtually no attention in this speech.

[4] Taiwan is considered to be part of this region, which is why the expression "Greater China" is used here. At the same time, the documents analysed contain hardly any treatment of Taiwan's particular characteristics as a separate actor, which is why it will play no major role in the ensuing discussion.

In terms of differentiation or identification between East Asia and the EU, Andriessen makes a visible effort at striking an inclusive tone on the relationship between Europe and Asia, mostly by presenting challenges as common or global. At the same time, however, the challenges he mentions, like for example, "keeping freedom, both political and economic, at the top of the international agenda" or sustaining the open international system, seem to reflect European, or Western, concerns about the impact of rising Asia rather than Asian priorities (Andriessen 1991). This undermines the attempted inclusiveness of the speech, and unveils it as largely rhetorical.

In fact, the speech paints very different pictures of the EC and its partners in East Asia. On the European side, it highlights achievements in terms of economic and political freedoms and openness and its active efforts at promoting them internationally. Considerable space is devoted to elaborating how the EC has been actively pursuing and implementing economic and political freedoms and openness, both at home and in its policies towards Central Eastern Europe (CEE) and the Soviet Union. Also in East Asia, the EC has been playing a positive role, for example in that it is contributing to solving the issue of how to have "China and Taiwan" participate in GATT, and in that "European enterprises and experts have contributed to the modernisation of the Chinese economy" (Andriessen 1991).

For East Asian partners, Andriessen describes how further progress depends on the adoption of similar approaches. He sees "boundless prospects" for them, but only if "the individual is given a chance to develop his [sic] creativity and talent." He also feels entitled to remind them that they are "part of the broader international system which affects their own internal development" and which "involves responsibilities as well as rights," though he concedes that "Asia's fast-growing countries are increasingly recognising" this (Andriessen 1991).

Against this backdrop, it is unsurprising that Andriessen highlights the EC's "determination to liberalise further the open international system, from which Europe, Asia and our partners throughout the world have so much to gain." In his comments on China, Andriessen suggests that if problems arise because it does not adjust its commercial policies to international norms, the EU will not adopt "strong-arm tactics"—but it "attaches the highest importance to their resolution, preferably through consultations." While this may be seen as a veiled threat, the speaker also provides, earlier in the speech, some kind of justification: in the context of his discussion of CEE countries, he highlights that, if others fail to liberalise commercially, this would be costly also for the EU, since "the West" would be asked to "finance the gap" (Andriessen 1991).

All this not only differentiates between the EU and its partners in East Asia, it also implies a vision of hierarchical asymmetry. The EU knows how the international system works and what is needed to ensure socio-economic development, the states of East Asia are only starting to recognise and learn; as a result, the EU is in a position to assess the performance of others, while East Asia is on the receiving side of this relationship and subjected to judgement; lastly, the EU actively guides and teaches others (as should rightly be expected from an actor with superior knowledge), while its counterparts in East Asia are passively benefitting from this engagement. So the EU puts itself in a position of superiority, including knowledge/awareness of universal standards of policy or governance or absolute (quasi-scientific) facts; the right to arbiter or judge; and the role of an active teacher or guide (or possibly transformer), ready to share insights with others and actively sustain them in their quest towards knowing and doing the

right things. This EU-centric hierarchical differentiation is presented as highly benevolent, with a paternalistic tone of "we know what is best for you, and we are ready to take up the implied responsibility." The idea that the EU will have to foot the bill of any mistakes and therefore will have to make sure, one way or another, that things move into the right direction also fits this parent-child metaphor. While South Korea receives hardly any separate attention in this speech, it is briefly mentioned and by no means taken out from the collective meaning attributed to the EU's interaction with East Asian counterparts.

If the Andriessen speech of 1991 can be considered an early snapshot of a longer process in Brussels and EC/EU capitals to make sense of the fundamental changes taking place around 1990 and their implications for Europe, a more thorough and elaborate reflection is offered by the European Commission in its 1994 paper *Towards a New Asia Strategy*. While considerable space is devoted to individual countries, this is largely illustrative, and embedded in a broader discourse on limitations and policies needed in East Asia. Structured distinctions between any players that are similar to the EU and those that are different are still largely absent, but they go a little further than in the 1991 speech. One group that is frequently mentioned, and clearly seen as different, is that of transition economies, moving from central planning to market-based economies and including China and Mongolia in East Asia.

Beyond that, in contrast to Andriessen 1991, there are frequent references to single countries. In fact, each of the states of East Asia is mentioned, though attention is not equally distributed. Japan is discussed most elaborately, as an important economic player in the region, as a partner with whom the EU has made some policy experiences that could also inspire relations with other countries in the region, and as a close US ally in regional security. But there are also important differences, as it is "careful to disassociate itself from the more assertive tone of some US or European pronouncements on human rights" (European Commission 1994, IV, 1.2). In the commercial sphere, both Japan and South Korea are seen as "striking examples" of "import protection," which the EU should attempt to reduce or restrain (European Commission 1994, IV, 2.2.10).

When turning to instances of implicit identification and differentiation *vis-à-vis* actors in East Asia, it is noteworthy that the 1994 Asia Strategy, unlike Andriessen in 1991, contains only very few attempts at inclusive rhetoric, which are also quite generic, as for example when, towards the end of the main part (IV), there is some reference to "the fact that we are all now partners in a global economy" and the related need to lead "a non-confrontational dialogue of equals" (European Commission 1994, IV, 2.1). But otherwise, the core concern of this document is the promotion of European economic interests. This includes, in a general sense, "to benefit from the economic opportunities," to create "favourable conditions for European investment in Asia" (European Commission 1994, IV, 1.1), and also to address regulatory barriers, or more specifically "to obtain from Asian partners modifications of their legislation and administrative regulations which hamper the development of European trade and direct investments" (European Commission 1994, IV, 2.2.1). The Commission also proposes to shift from a focus on development towards using "economic cooperation to promote European trade and investment" (European Commission 1994, Executive Summary), a move justified by the high rates of growth and dynamic change in Asian economies, and arguably an early version of the current debate on "graduating" from developing country status in the context of international commercial law.

Beyond the emphasis on European interests, the 1994 Asia Strategy contains implicit differentiations, which reproduce to a significant extent the patterns already highlighted in the Andriessen speech. Hereby the dominant discursive logic is that of Asian states not (yet) being in line with generally accepted standards of behaviour. In contrast to Andriessen, little effort is made to emphasise the performance of the EU as a virtuous example, but since it is put in a position of encouraging, helping and promoting positive change in East Asia, it is implicitly but unequivocally put in a position of higher achievement.

Aside from comments on political standards, including democracy and human rights, which are not the focus here, such differentiation becomes visible, for instance, when the Commission states as a general point that the EU "should look for ways to associate Asia more and more in the management of international affairs" (European Commission 1994, Executive Summary), or also when it proposes that it should be a policy priority "[t]o integrate into the open, market-based world trading system those Asian countries which are moving from state controls to market-oriented economies" (European Commission 1994, I, Priorities). Economies in transition, in East Asia China and Mongolia, are the main targets. Internationally, it is one of the priorities proposed by the Commission "to integrate [them] into the open, market-based world trading system" (European Commission 1994, IV, 1.1.1 and I, Priorities). Domestically, it sees the EU in a position to extend "expertise and policy advice" and "to assist them to set up the institutions, policies and laws to make a smooth transition to market-based economies" (European Commission 1994, IV, 2.2.2).

However, for the Commission, the limitations in East Asia not only concern institutional involvement in international structures of governance and specific economic policies at home, but also insufficient understanding of the underlying logic of modernisation and development: "The impressive economic growth, especially in developing East Asia, should not prevent a critical assessment of its sustainability: high growth calls for adjustment […]. In the context of much of Asia this concerns in particular political liberalisation, as better paid, better fed people demand more individual freedom" (European Commission 1994, IV, 1.1). In other words: reluctance to implement political reform on the part of certain governments in East Asia puts at risk the sustainability of economic growth. This idea of specific knowledge or awareness, which is yet to be achieved in East Asia, comes back with regard to other global challenges, like for instance the fight against illegal drugs (European Commission 1994, III, 2.2.3).

At first sight, the explicit focus in 1994 on self-interest might suggest a largely pragmatic approach, unassuming in normative terms, and symmetric rather than hierarchical, or paternalistic, in that all actors can be considered to pursue their self-interest, or at the very least to attempt not to go against it. However, as in Andriessen's speech of 1991, the differentiations between the EU and its East Asian partners imply hierarchical asymmetries: between those who are aware of rules and responsibilities of governance, universal standards for domestic policy, and the laws of socio-economic development, and those who are not; between those entitled to assess others and those who need to be critically assessed; between those who contribute their fair share internationally and implement the correct economic policies and those who do not; and between those who can provide support, and those who need it. Unsurprisingly, the EU is always presented as more advanced, active and knowledgeable, while its East Asian partners are consistently put in a lower position. To be fair, one should add that there is a degree of awareness

on the part of the authors of the Asia Strategy, that this attitude may not necessarily be welcome. Since "the [European] Union will not be able to take for granted automatic acceptance of European values and ways of doing things," it "favours frank and open dialogue," and its "new strategies will be based upon an appreciation of the cultural, economic, social and political characteristics of each of the EU's individual partners in Asia" (European Commission 1994, IV, 1.3). However, this is just mentioned once, and its concrete meaning remains unclear amidst the dominant rhetoric of a Europe that knows better, does better, and thus is entitled to judge and guide its partners. Amidst these broad representations of the region, the EU and other major players, South Korea remains, as in Andriessen, very secondary, with the only difference that concern about commercial protectionism is explicitly highlighted here.

An interesting difference, as compared to the speech of 1991, is that, in addition to this rhetoric of European superiority *vis-à-vis* most partners in Asia, the Commission also points to competing actors in the region, and the need to be "aware of [their] ideas and actions" in order "to safeguard its interests and maximise the potential of its own policies" (European Commission 1994, IV, 1.2). The two players discussed in this context are on the one hand Japan, which is "gradually assuming a higher profile throughout Asia," and on the other the US, which "has started to place increasing emphasis on its Asian Policy" (European Commission 1994, IV, 1.2). Beyond its central role in Asia security, the US is seen as adopting a less political and more pragmatic approach towards Asia, especially in the economic field (European Commission 1994, III, 1.1). This concern over competition suggests a degree of insecurity regarding the EU's position in the region, though mostly in terms of economic benefits and not so much regarding the validity of the system of knowledge, norms, policies and institutions the EU represents and promotes internationally.

The early 2000s: more self-assured, less Eurocentric

The main source for this period is a Commission Communication published in 2001 under the title *Europe and Asia: A Strategic Framework for Enhanced Partnership*. It is presented as an update to the 1994 Asia Strategy, taking into account developments since then, but it is a very different document. It is much better structured than its somewhat chaotic predecessor, and it adopts a more neutral, analytical tone. This implies that, while naturally present and visible, EU interests are less dominant and not highlighted as frequently and aggressively as before. What this new paper demonstrates, by contrast, is a growing confidence in the EU's status as an important global player, as visible in the "core objective" of the strategy, namely "strengthening the EU's political and economic presence across the region, and raising this to a level commensurate with the growing global weight of an enlarged EU" (European Commission 2001b, p.3, repeated pp.15 and 28).

With regard to explicit spatial ordering, the 2001 Strategic Framework devotes more room to profiles of individual countries in East Asia than the texts discussed so far, in particular China, Japan and Korea, with Mongolia and Taiwan playing very marginal roles. China receives most attention, in particular its "increasing economic and political influence across the region," and the fact that its "increasing economic power is likely to translate into growing Chinese assertiveness on the

regional and international scene" (European Commission 2001b, pp.8, 22). This is presented as comprising risks for the EU: "China is already becoming a major competitor to developed economies in the region and beyond," and "[s]trengthening our relations with China will be a major opportunity, and challenge, for the EU for years to come" (European Commission 2001b, p.22).

If by 2001 China has become a competitor within the East Asian region for the EU, Japan, which was presented as such in the 1994 Asia Strategy, has now become the object of explicit identification, the first time this can be observed in EU documents on East Asia. In particular, the Commission writes that the establishment of regular and wide-ranging dialogue since the Joint Declaration of 1991 "largely reflects a growing mutual awareness of shared interests, for instance in the continued health of the multilateral system, common challenges such as environmental degradation and the ageing society, and shared values such as the rule of law and human rights" (European Commission 2001b, p.23). On this basis the EU envisages moving "from dialogue to closer policy coordination and concrete joint activities in the political and security, economic, justice and social fields" (European Commission 2001b, p.23). The Commission also devotes some space to the Korean peninsula, and in this context also explicitly to South Korea. Here the language is generally positive, for example when highlighting the "considerable steps forward in political liberalisation and economic reform in South Korea under President Kim Dae-Jung," as well as "the increasing strength of our economic and political relations" (European Commission 2001b, p.23). But in contrast to the case of Japan, the statements remain largely generic and point to potential rather than real identification. Both the beginning focus on individual partners in East Asia and the dominance of Japan in this regard are reflected also in the EU's Security Strategy of 2003.[5] While it proposes strategic partnerships with Japan and China, this is *not* done for South Korea, thus confirming the far more limited role attributed to this partner in the early 2000s.

In terms of implicit differentiation, in the 2001 *Strategic Framework*, the EU keeps itself in a position of superior knowledge and continues to take for granted its right to judge the performance of its counterparts in East Asia and to guide and teach them. For example, when discussing the Asian Crisis, the Commission comments that it has "underlined the imperative need for all the countries concerned (Japan no less than China and other emerging economies of the region) to continue with a pro-active reform agenda, both in the financial and corporate sectors and in the field of social policy" (European Commission 2001b, p.8). In a similar vein, it proposes to "[help] those countries which are seeking to build a business climate conducive to trade and investment" and to "encourage sound policy reform in the financial and corporate sector" (European Commission 2001b, p.16). The Commission also continues to display confidence in the quality of its own record in terms of policy development and implementation. This is visible, for instance, when it states that "we should build a stronger dialogue on economic and financial policy issues, sharing our own experience on regional macro-economic cooperation" (European Commission 2001b, p.13) or also in the affirmation that "Europe's own experience in regional cooperation on economic and financial policy may be of particular interest to Asia" (European Commission 2001b, p.16).

In 2001 we also find reference again to the idea of integrating East Asian partners into the norms and structures of international governance, as in the action point to "strengthen the open and rules-based international framework embodied

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European Union 2003. *A Secure Europe in a Better World. European Security Strategy*. Brussels, 12 December 2003.

in the WTO" (World Trade Organisation) in the context of "partnerships and alliances with Asian partners" (European Commission 2001b, p.18). China is the main target in this regard, which is not surprising considering that it is about to enter the WTO when the Strategic Framework is published. The Commission explicitly points out that "[i]t is a clear EU interest to ensure that China plays a constructive and cooperative role both in the region and in the world" (European Commission 2001b, p.22). It also states its readiness to support China, in its "transition to an open society," including on the topic of human rights, with regard to its "integration in the world economy," and more generally in view of the reform process, sustainable development, etc. (European Commission 2001b, p.22).

However, such attempts at actively promoting institutions of governance in the region are far less frequent than in the texts from the early 1990s, and most of the time the rhetoric is softened through a language of cooperation and dialogue in the face of common challenges. For example, the Commission's ideas of strengthening the WTO are phrased as being about "working together" rather than about making others understand what is correct. It also writes about "strengthening our efforts to improve market access and investment conditions on *both sides*," or claims that "[t]here is much to be gained from dialogue and exchange of best practices on the links between trade and social development, including the promotion of core labour standards" (European Commission 2001b, pp.16-18, emphasis added). And after mentioning the lessons from the Asian Crisis for countries in the region, the authors add immediately that the EU is "subject to the same market disciplines, and needs to be no less vigilant on the need for good governance in the financial and corporate sector, or on the essential importance of responsive and affordable social policies" (European Commission 2001b, p.10).

This effort at toning down EU rhetoric on East Asian inferiority, and at placing less emphasis on the gap between itself and its partners in the region, represents a significant difference between the *Strategic Framework* of 2001 and EU discourse in the early 1990s. But implicitly, the EU continues to put itself in a position of superiority in terms of knowledge, policy implementation, the right to judge others and the ability to guide them. Note that this is visible, in comparatively subtle manner, even *vis-à-vis* Japan, despite the explicit identification described above. In the economic realm this shines through in concern about Japan's economic stagnation and the related priority of a "Regulatory Reform Dialogue with the aim of reviving the Japanese economy through opening markets further and stimulating inflows of direct investment from the EU" (European Commission 2001b, pp.23-24). Also in the case of South Korea, the positive comments on recent achievements are completed with a priority point that the EU should provide "encouragement to South Korea to persevere on the path of economic reform" (European Commission 2001b, p. 24).

So in the early 2000s, many of the older patterns of differentiation and hierarchical asymmetry live on in the EU's discourse on East Asia. But spatial ordering is becoming more sophisticated, and the division between "us" and "them" is no longer as simple and straightforward as it used to be. This is largely due to the increasing identification of the EU with selected actors in East Asia, most prominently Japan. At the same time, while there is no explicit emphasis on Japan and the US as economic competitors, the recognition of potential competition from China is noteworthy, as it concerns an actor otherwise regularly submitted to implicit differentiation. This implies concern about a far more extensive sort of

competition than with Japan and the US in 1994, which could contest the entire system of knowledge, norms, policies and institutions that constitutes the logic of EU spatial ordering. This is arguably a much greater threat to Eurocentricity than before.

From the mid-2000s onwards: more differentiation and focus on "like-minded" countries

From the mid-2000s onwards, there are fewer programmatic papers with extensive comments on the region as a whole, but the EU continues to engage in discursive spatial ordering of East Asia. Relevant statements in this final period under review, which extends until the present, as mentioned above, are more dispersed and they tend to come either from the Council, generally in more succinct form than Commission papers and with less focus on economic affairs, or they appear in points on East Asia within broader Commission papers on EU external policies and engagement strategies. The following paragraphs will use a number of such documents to show the relative stability of EU representations of East Asia in this extended period.

The European Commission's famous *Global Europe* communication of 2006, which marked the shift from a purely multilateral outlook on international trade to an embrace of bilateral free-trade agreements (FTAs), contains some insightful points on EU representations of East Asia, despite its universal scope. First and foremost, in terms of potential FTA negotiations, South Korea emerges as top priority in the region, while Japan is not mentioned at all in this regard. This is related both to expected economic opportunities and a sense of competition with the US, which is already negotiating an FTA with Seoul at that time (European Commission 2006b, p.11). Indeed, the theme of economic competitors, especially the US and Japan, returns in this text, in particular with regard to exports to Asia (European Commission 2006b, p.4). At the same time, both Japan and the US are subject to implicit identification in terms of a shared interest in enforcing international trade rules, in particular those regarding intellectual property rights (IPR), while China is subjected to differentiation as a prime target for IPR enforcement efforts (European Commission 2006b, p.8). China is also differentiated from South Korea: even though economically it might be a promising partner for an FTA, it "requires special attention because of the opportunities and risks it represents" (European Commission 2006b, p.11).

A last point on the *Global Europe* communication regards the explicit desire to "promote our values, including social and environmental standards and cultural diversity" (European Commission 2006b, p.5). Via a footnote reference is made to the Commission communication *Promoting Decent Work for All* of May 2006, and here Asia is mentioned as a target of such value promotion (European Commission 2006a, pp.4, 7). Even though subtle and limited in comparison to the texts treated in the previous parts, this brings back the point on superior awareness, better performance, right to judge and ability to guide on the part of the EU.

A highly relevant document for the analysis of the EU's discursive spatial ordering towards East Asia are the Council's *Guidelines on the EU's Foreign and Security Policy in East Asia*, adopted in 2007. Like the Commission's 2001 *Strategic Framework*, the *Guidelines* include specific comments on individual

countries in the region, and their particularities. The first specific partner mentioned is Japan, who is again placed at a high level of identification: "As the longest established free market democracy in the region, Japan is already an important partner in this respect, sharing many EU values" (Council of the EU 2007, point 5). It is noteworthy here that any reference to what Japan should keep in mind or do has disappeared, and so has the idea of the EU encouraging or guiding Japan in any such undertaking, meaning that the remaining elements of superiority identified in 2001 have disappeared in the meantime, or at least they are not mentioned any more.

This high level of identification is now, for the first time, also extended to South Korea, in that "Japan and the Republic of Korea are natural political partners in Asia. Europe, Japan and the Republic of Korea have a close similarity in overall views and are 'like-minded' in many ways" (Council of the EU 2007, point 17). For sure, there is more elaboration on the qualities of Japan and its similarities with the EU, for example when emphasising that "Japan plays an essential role in multilateral organisations and a key role in Asia" (Council of the EU 2007, point 17). The somewhat lesser role attributed to South Korea is also visible in the projects for bilateral dialogues, which is supposed to be "strategic" for Japan, as for China and the US, while for the ROK it is only a "political dialogue on regional issues" (Council of the EU 2007, point 10).

The idea of a triangle of "like-minded" states including both Japan and Korea in East Asia next to the EU, is an innovation as compared to previous EU documents, and of great relevance for understanding the acceleration of engagement with South Korea towards the end of the 2000s. In stark contrast to this, towards China the old rhetoric continues, highlighting global standards, to which countries have to conform, and with the EU in a position of guiding others in the right direction, all this despite the "strategic" nature of the EU's engagement with this East Asian country: "The EU has a big interest in encouraging China to take on its global responsibilities, notably in the political, economic, commercial and monetary fields as well as to play a constructive role in the promotion of effective multilateralism and the resolution of international and regional issues" (Council of the EU 2007, point 6).

Just like the *Global Europe* communication of 2006, the 2007 *Guidelines* pick up the discussion of dominant powers and potential competitors for the EU. Here the focus lies on "the region's major players," with the EU having a "stake" in good relations amongst them, in particular between China and the US as well as China and Japan. This is revealing about the EU's self-perception as being part of the sphere of major regional players, and also about South Korea, which is not mentioned here. In other parts of the documents, the EU reiterates this "major player" vision of itself, by emphasising its potential influence on East Asian security and by emphasising (and probably grossly overstating) its potential to have an impact on intra-Korean tensions (Council of the EU 2007, point 25; on the EU's role with regard to security issues in the Korean peninsula, see Giumelli 2023).

Aside from implicit classifications of more or less influential players, there are again the well-known attempts at differentiating between the EU and East Asian counterparts in general. This concerns, as in previous documents, EU knowledge and experience which is deemed valuable for East Asia: "The EU's economic presence in the region, and its unique experience of post-war reconciliation and political and economic integration, position it well to play an important

role in helping to bolster regional security" (Council of the EU 2007, point 9). The Council also returns to global standards of governance, like "effective multilateralism [...] and regional integration," and universal norms, such as human rights, democracy and rule of law, including the usual idea of an active EU that "encourages and supports" the efforts by its more passive East Asian partners (Council of the EU 2007, points 13 and 15). This is all reproposed specifically for China, in more detail and with more emphasis (Council of the EU 2007, points 15 and 16).

Overall, the general rhetoric of asymmetry in favour of the EU is more explicit in the *Guidelines* than in the Commission communication of 2001, along the established lines of Eurocentric hierarchy, based on higher levels of awareness and knowledge on the part of the EU, confidence about its own high achievements in terms of implementing correct policies, as well as the right to assess and teach others. However, in contrast to the early post-Cold War period, this general vision of a Eurocentric pyramid is modified through both identification and competition. This means that while the gap between the EU and East Asia is generally re-proposed, there are what could be called "outposts of likeness" of the European centre, namely the "like-minded" players Japan and South Korea, which are almost entirely exempted from explicit or implicit rhetoric of superiority. At the same time, China is clearly the main target of the rhetoric of hierarchical differentiation. The discussion of various potentially competing great powers, including the clearly not-like-minded China, highlights the awareness of challenges to Eurocentricity and the set of ideas on which it is based. Taking all this together, one can also highlight a clear scale of importance in the EU's mental landscape of East Asia, with China and Japan as "major players" at the top and the ROK a little further down, though clearly above Mongolia, which is hardly ever mentioned.

The basic structure of the EU's mental map of East Asia has remained unchanged since the 2007 *Guidelines*, albeit with some changes in emphasis. While a general attitude of superiority is maintained in terms of knowledge about governance, norms and economics, this finds concrete expression only in relation to China. Towards Japan and South Korea, by contrast, a discourse of identification is deployed, with virtually no signs of asymmetry. At the same time, China keeps its role as a major power and a competitor, which shows concerns about vulnerabilities in the implicit Eurocentric spatial order. This continuity is visible in various documents, which will be briefly discussed in the last paragraphs of this section.

The Commission communication *Trade for All* of 2015 adopts a similarly pragmatic tone as the 2006 *Global Europe* communication, but like its predecessor it also contains some indications of discursive spatial ordering in the economic sphere. While it does not treat East Asia separately, one section is dedicated to Asia, which is described as "crucial to European economic interests," and the major East Asian economies, namely the ROK, Japan and China are all discussed. With regard to South Korea, *Trade for All* confirms its central role as an economic partner in East Asia, on the basis of the FTA signed in 2010, which is seen as "the most ambitious trade deal ever implemented by the EU," and which the EU would like to develop further, for example to include investment (European Commission 2015a, p.23). In contrast to 2006, for Japan an FTA is mentioned and considered a "strategic priority," but since negotiations are ongoing in 2015, Japan is clearly a step behind South Korea in this regard (European Commission 2015a, p.23). Both partners continue to be subject to a high level of identification, for the ROK

in the context of pride and ambition regarding the FTA and its future, for Japan in highlighting the potential for cooperation on rules and standards for international trade (European Commission 2015a, p.23).

By contrast, China, which is a "top priority" along with Japan, as highlighted in the foreword by Trade Commissioner Cecilia Malmström to the version published by the EU publication office (European Commission 2015b), is again subjected to explicit differentiation. While the desire to intensify cooperation is highlighted, including through formal agreements, the Commission also makes it clear that "implementation of a range of domestic reforms in China" would be necessary to envisage more ambitious goals, like for example an FTA. If here the EU judges China against its own rules and standards for economic policy at home, it also again shows the sense of entitlement to express what would be appropriate behaviour in international governance, here in the "multilateral trading system and plurilateral initiatives" and to guide others in the right direction (European Commission 2015a, p.23).

One year after *Trade for All* the European External Action Service presents the EU's *Global Strategy* of 2016. While limited in terms of coverage of both East Asia and economic themes, this document still reconfirms some of the enduring features of the EU's discursive spatial ordering in East Asia. First of all, it shows once again a tone of certainty about the ideas and norms that are considered best, both domestically and internationally, about the EU's positive track record in this regard and about its entitlement to assess others against this backdrop and to guide them onto a virtuous path of improvement. This attitude characterises the EU's general outlook in international affairs, meaning that while not targeted at East Asia exclusively, related statements are part of the standard discursive repertoire also towards this region. Secondly, the *Global Strategy* devotes considerable space to China, which confirms implicitly that China is seen as a crucial actor, in the region and globally. The discussion also reproposes the idea that economic relations with China bear significant potential, which the EU desires to pursue cooperatively, but it also reaffirms the strong differentiation, in that it has not adopted the norms and policies preferred by the EU and therefore should be targeted by efforts at promoting them (European External Action Service 2016, pp.37-38). A last relevant point is that the EU repeats its strong focus on "like-minded" states, though here not only in East Asia, but in global governance at large (European External Action Service 2016, p.43).

As a final, and more recent, document, we will take a quick look at the EU's *Indo-Pacific Strategy* of 2021. While still broader in terms of geographic scope, it brings us somewhat closer to our target region of East Asia, especially in comparison to the documents with a global outlook of 2015 and 2016. The tone of the *Indo-Pacific Strategy* is different from all preceding documents, as it displays very clearly the idea of EU resistance to a new advance of authoritarian regimes and the related risks to the principles, norms and practices the EU has been promoting in domestic and international governance. This theme was already visible in the 2016 *Global Strategy*, and it can even be traced back to discussions of China as a potential competitor in the early and mid-2000s, but it has become more prominent in the EU's statements since the idea of "systemic rivalry" entered its discourse on China in 2019 (European Commission and High Representative 2019, p.1). The *Indo-Pacific Strategy* thus states that the "EU intends to increase its engagement with the region to build partnerships that reinforce the rules-based international order," while the "engagement will be based

on promoting democracy, the rule of law, human rights" (European Commission and High Representative 2021, p.1). More in the economic sphere, on which we are focussing here, the EU laments that "efforts to establish a global level playing-field based on transparent trade rules are increasingly undermined by unfair trade practices and economic coercion," and proposes to "promote […] access to open markets and ensure a stable trading environment" (European Commission and High Representative 2021, p.2).

However, despite this more combative tone, the *Indo-Pacific Strategy* does not show any marked difference in terms of the EU's discursive spatial ordering of East Asia. The well-known attitude of superior knowledge and performance combined with a sense of entitlement to assess and guide partners becomes stronger, but the basic logic remains similar to the other documents from the period since the second half of the 2000s. This means, that China continues to be subjected to persistent differentiation. This is done both explicitly, for example when the text mentions that "the EU will continue to protect its essential interests and promote its values while pushing back where fundamental disagreements exist with China, such as on human rights" (European Commission and High Representative 2021, p.4), and implicitly, as when a list of "unfair practices" in international trade corresponds to the concerns that have been most prominently raised *vis-à-vis* China, namely "industrial subsidies, economic coercion, forced technology transfers and intellectual property theft" (European Commission and High Representative 2021, p.6).

Secondly, the strong identification of Japan and South Korea with the EU continues. While the focus on "like-minded partners" in international cooperation has increased, the two East Asian countries that are repeatedly mentioned in this connection are Japan and South Korea. This happens, for example, when the goal of enhancing "international digital partnerships" is mentioned, or on the topic of "research and innovation," where both are included under "partners sharing common values" that may become associated with the EU's Horizon Europe funding scheme (European Commission and High Representative 2021, pp.10-11, 17). In light of the previous point on China, it is also noteworthy that under connectivity, the EU first highlights its principled approach, "sustainable, comprehensive and rules-based," and then mentions partners, which include Japan and Korea in East Asia, but not China, and this despite the strong emphasis on connectivity in China's flagship Belt and Road Initiative (European Commission and High Representative 2021, p.12). Lastly, a slight difference to 2007 is the absence of any reference to China and Japan as "major" regional powers. Instead, the text mentions G20 members in the Indo-Pacific, which in East Asia include South Korea along with China and Japan (European Commission and High Representative 2021, p.1).

Reading the EU's engagement with South Korea against the backdrop of its discursive spatial ordering *vis-à-vis* East Asia

The analysis in the preceding section reveals a series of characteristics of post-Cold War EU engagement with East Asia, and their development and change over time. In this final section, I will revisit the key features of each the EU's

representations of East Asia in each period, and then discuss the implications for its relations with South Korea. At the end of the section, I will summarise to what extent this helps in solving the puzzle of the EU's late but fast engagement with South Korea.

In the initial post-Cold War period, the EU shows relative neglect for differences between the various countries of East Asia. Naturally, the EU discourse demonstrates a high level of familiarity with particular country profiles, but beyond that there is a tendency to treat them collectively as insufficiently aware of the norms of international economic governance and the laws of socio-economic development and therefore in need of assistance, which the EU is ready to provide on the basis of its superior knowledge and experience in that regard. This basically reflects a linear vision of politico-economic development and progress, in which the EU is more advanced than its East Asian counterparts, with all privileges that "advancedness" brings with it. Within this logic, the EU is particularly concerned about those East Asian actors it considers to be furthest behind, namely economies in transition towards market-based systems. China receives particular attention, which points to another prime concern for the EU, namely its own economic interests, in terms of export markets and international investment opportunities. In this context, Japan is mostly treated as a potential economic competitor, along with the US as extra-regional player like the EU itself.

This narrow view of Japan as a competitor may seem surprising in light of some 20 years of high-level consultations with the EU/EC and a fairly ambitious Joint Declaration in 1991 (Tanaka 2013, 512-513). For sure, even in the early 1990s, Japan stood out as doing better than others in the region in terms of progression along the linear development path projected by the EU (Andriessen 1991). But at the same time, trade frictions and imbalances dominated the bilateral agenda well into the 1990s, which explains the critical stance of the EU towards this East Asian partner in the early years of the decade (Hosoi 2019, p.299, Higashino 2016, p.438). Since South Korea is neither an economy in transition nor an economic competitor, and cannot reach by any means the level of perceived potential of the huge Chinese market, its relative neglect in the early 1990s matches this general approach to East Asia as a whole. The few explicit references to it, as a potential competitor in terms of investment in East Asia and as a protectionist player in international trade, also follow that logic (European Commission 1994, IV, 1.3 and IV, 2.2.10).

The 2001 *Strategic Framework* shows that a shift in the EU's representation of East Asia has taken place, with greater emphasis on differentiation within the region. This concerns first and foremost Japan, which is removed to a very large extent from the EU's rhetoric of judgement and guidance rooted in superior knowledge and experience. If this represents a very high level of identification with Japan, the EU also expresses appreciation for what it sees as politico-economic progress in the case of South Korea, though clearly to a lesser degree. In both cases, the rhetorical rapprochement probably relates to some extent to domestic developments and their effects. In Japan, the weaker economic performance during the "lost decade" had as a side-effect a re-balancing in trade with the EU and an easing of commercial frictions (Hosoi 2019, p.299). For the ROK, reform efforts after the Asian Crisis had an impact, even though they were not considered to be concluded (Graham 2003, ch.5). Beyond these actor-specific changes, however, it is striking that this rhetoric of identification *vis-à-vis* Japan and South Korea, though to a lesser extent for the latter, appears at a moment when, for the first

time, China is explicitly described as an economic competitor and, more generally, relations with it as a challenge for the EU (European Commission 2001b, p.22). Note that in those years the EU's bilateral engagement with China is (still) marked by high expectations in terms of politico-economic reform and progress (see European Commission 2001a and 2003). But a growing, more and more outward-looking and potentially challenging China cannot be disregarded when trying to explain the EU's slow shift towards increasing identification with Japan and South Korea.

The changes in EU discursive spatial ordering of East Asia visible in the third period under review here, i.e. from the mid-2000s onwards, are of particular relevance in view of enhancing our understanding of the upgrade of EU engagement with South Korea towards the end of the decade. A first point to highlight here is that throughout this period the EU deploys a rhetoric of full identification with both Japan and South Korea, which represents an upgrade for South Korea in comparison to the early 2000s. At the same time, discourse that picks up the nexus of superior knowledge and experience, in combination with a right to assess and guide others, is now almost exclusively targeted at China, which is also seen, and more explicitly, as a potential challenger in an array of fields. As in the previous period, it would seem that the quest for "like-minded" partners in the region compensates at least partly the strong sense of differentiation *vis-à-vis* the major regional player China. It is noteworthy that this evolution takes place at a time when the "honeymoon" in EU-China has ended and relations have entered a period of frustration and heightened tensions (Gaenssmantel 2010, pp.386-387, 399). The fact that East Asian neighbours of China, in particular Japan, had been concerned about EU plans during the "honeymoon" period of lifting its arms embargo against China (Gaenssmantel 2009, p.189) further underlines that the evolution of the EU's relations with various states in East Asia are interdependent.

If the complexities and challenges of engaging with China provide a relevant backdrop for understanding growing EU identification with Japan and South Korea, naturally facilitated by domestic changes in both countries, the question remains why the EU did not build on decades of diplomatic rapprochement with Japan, and in particular some recent improvements, and instead engaged on a path that led to a fast-tracked upgrade of ties with the ROK. Despite the relative speed, this was a gradual process rather than the result of a single decision on the part of the EU, and it is possible to identify specific elements in the EU's representation of East Asia, as presented in the preceding section, that can help us to understand some of the steps in this evolution. A first such element lies in the EU's economic approach to East Asia, and given the EU's track record of emphasising economic interests in the region, this is presumably of some relevance. In the 2006 *Global Europe* communication of the Commission, it is noteworthy that the ROK emerges as the prime target in East Asia for EU efforts at negotiating FTAs, on the basis of EU economic interests and South Korea's "negotiations with EU competitors" (European Commission 2006, p.9). This highlights the desire to outperform the US-ROK negotiations (which led to an FTA in 2007) in terms of liberalising ambition (Harrison 2013, p.7). While the US is not an East Asian state, the concern with economic competitors is also relevant *vis-à-vis* Japan, since Global Europe presents Japan in such a role.

Elements outside the realm of economic interests may also play a role. On the one hand, both the 2001 *Strategic Framework* and the 2007 *Guidelines* show an EU that is ambitious in terms of its weight in international affairs. One indicator

of this in 2007 is the confidence that it can have an impact on security challenges on the Korean peninsula, and this may also have motivated an intensification of relations with South Korea. On the other hand, the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), a platform for consultation and cooperation beyond East Asia, had provided a venue for regular high-level meetings since 2002, after the entry into force in 2001 of the 1996 Framework Agreement (Harrison 2013, p.12), thus progressively preparing the ground for deeper engagement between the EU and South Korea.

So in summary, the increasing identification of the EU with South Korea, but also Japan, should be read in the context of greater differentiation and a sense of challenge in relations with China. At the same time, economic competition, in particular with Japan and the US provides the backdrop for understanding why South Korea was selected for FTA negotiations, whose smooth development then carried towards greater ambitions in bilateral relations and further agreements. Naturally, other factors played a role here as well, like the EU's readiness to sponsor UN resolutions on North Korea since 2008, in close coordination with Seoul, for whom this meant that it could keep clear of additional complications in the delicate intra-Korean diplomacy (Christiansen and Richey 2021, p. 394).

Conclusion

This paper started from the observation that the quick development of, and increase in ambition in, relations between the EU and South Korea has not been explored in literature so far, and it proposed to do so by interpreting EU-ROK relations in the context of the EU's engagement with East Asia as a whole. The paper then developed a conceptual framework of discursive spatial ordering. It allows to identify patterns of identification, differentiation and hierarchy in how actors engage with the outside world, and in particular in how the EU has engaged with East Asia since the end of the Cold War. As a next step, the EU's spatial ordering efforts towards East Asia in the realm of economic reform, development and governance were analysed across a series of EU documents covering three periods: first, the early post-Cold War years, second, the early 2000s, and lastly, the (extended) period from the mid-2000s to the present.

In a last step, the paper proposed an interpretation of EU engagement with South Korea against the backdrop of the evolving EU representations of East Asia. This has shown that the intensification of EU-ROK relations has to be read against the backdrop of EU representations of China, which have been marked by a shift from collective differentiation, where China is simply an important counterpart in East Asia, to targeted differentiation, where critical assessment and guidance efforts are more and more clearly directed at China only. The emergence of China as a potential challenger, in the sense of a powerful political player who does not necessarily subscribe to the same ideas, norms and policies of economic reform, development and governance as the EU, also plays a role, as does the sense of economic competition *vis-à-vis* Japan and the US. This latter point can help us to understand why the first target for FTA negotiations in East Asia was South Korea, rather than Japan with whom diplomatic contacts had built up over a longer period and which had earlier been subject to identification in EU representations of East Asia.

Taken together this provides a meaningful context for understanding the EU's shift towards South Korea—even though it has also been discussed that other factors also played a role, including domestic developments in South Korea (like economic reform), specific international fora (like ASEM) and other international cooperative dynamics (like between the EU and the ROK at the UN). For future research this suggests that it would be worthwhile to investigate a specific historical moment in order to grasp more fully how mental geographies amongst political elites influence their engagement with counterparts in a region and how the strategies of engagement with different actors in a region can be interdependent.

Another noteworthy point that emerged from the analysis of EU documents is the continuous representation of the EU in a superior position, whereby selective identification, as for South Korea and Japan in East Asia, is an exception, which does not affect the broader sense of Eurocentric hierarchy in EU discourse. The projection in all this of EU-centred knowledge, ideas and standards, in combination with the sense of fragility *vis-à-vis* Chinese contestation, suggests an Orientalist trend of a self-reproducing European representation of East Asia, which reflects a need to rhetorically reassert EU superiority. At the same time, the fact that amidst differentiation and hierarchy South Korea was "discovered" and "identified" as a partner could also be taken as an indication of ways to leave the Orientalist trap.

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