The European Commission and EU Inter-Institutional Dynamics in the Relationship with the Republic of Korea

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Abstract

This contribution looks at EU-Korea relations from an EU institutional perspective. It investigates whether the traditionally leading role of the European Commission in the diplomacy with the Republic of Korea has been affected since the implementation of the EU-Korea Free Trade Agreement of 2011. We argue that the Commission's position vis-à-vis other institutions, most notably the Council and the European Parliament, continues to be dominant. This mainly has to do with the predominance of technical-economic issues and the lack of politicization in the relations with Korea. Given that there are no fundamental disputes on core values, the Commission—with its information asymmetry advantage—remains in the driver's seat, even though its position is not as unassailable as it has been before.

Keywords

European Union, Republic of Korea, EU institutions, European Commission, economic and political diplomacy, politicization

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1. Introduction

This article investigates how inter-institutional dynamics in the European Union (EU) operated in the economic and political relations with the Republic of Korea (ROK) during the last two decades. We thus look at the European side of the spectrum and focus on the interplay between Commission, member-states (assembled in the Council), European Parliament and European External Action Service. There are other EU actors involved in the bilateral relationship with Korea, but those will be left aside here, mostly for practical reasons of manageability of the topic. We are particularly interested in the question of whether or not the traditionally leading position of the Commission in the relationship with Korea has been affected in the period since the implementation of the EU-Korea Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in 2011.[1] To what extent does the EU Commission continue to be the dominant "agent", imposing its preferences on the participating "principals" (member-states)?

Related to this, the article investigates the main rationale in the relations between the EU and Korea. In 2011, Robert Kelly (Pusan National University) argued that the two actors have an "unremarkable relationship" with no real potential for expansion beyond the 2011 FTA. In his view, the two have thriving economic contacts, but a serious spill-over to other, political or even cultural, sectors was not to be expected because of a lack of jointly shared policy ambitions, particularly in the area of high politics. According to Kelly, the EU is unable to assist Korea in its acute security concerns vis-à-vis the northern part of the peninsula, while at the same time the ROK does not share EU preferences for soft power, regionalization and multilateral collective security. "Pro-regionalist elites", most notably the European Commission, pursue inter-regional ties for "internal institutional reasons", but, as Kelly predicted, "deep Korean attachment to the Westphalian state model" will very likely frustrate such ambitions (Kelly, 2011).

How should we assess these predictions and the qualification of an "unremarkable relationship" thirteen years later, in 2024, and to what extent are the EU institutions eager to change this situation? We hypothesize that *if* nowadays the relationship is still "unremarkable", it is very likely that on the European side the Commission continues to play the leading role in the inter-institutional framework, as technical facilitator. Conversely, in case the relationship has become more comprehensive and politicized throughout the years, we may assume that the Council, the member-states and the European Parliament have strengthened their position, probably at the expense of the Commission.

The present contribution thus focuses on the European Commission's ability to shape relations with Korea through cooperation and competition with the other EU institutions. A final introductory note is that this article focusses on *South* Korea (or ROK)—the relationship between the EU and North Korea will receive only minor consideration.

1 The signing of the EU-Korea FTA was in 2009, its activation in 2011, and the ratification took place in 2015.

2. The making of the Free Trade Agreement, 2007-2011

Looking at the history of EU-Korea relations, the position of the Commission as central EU actor became particularly visible during the FTA negotiations with Korea in the period 2007-2011. This development is covered extensively in an article by Manfred Elsig and Cedric Dupont (2012) who show how steering and dominant the Commission was in the bilateral interactions taking place during those years. They base themselves on the so-called Principal-Agent model, with the member-states, assembled in the Council, in the role of principals and the Commission as agent, to whom the principals have delegated responsibilities. Elsig and Dupont show that the agent continuously took the initiative, for a couple of reasons.

To begin with, by 2006/2007 the process of multilateralising global trade had reached a deadlock. From then on, the EU's emphasis moved to concluding bilateral trade treaties, focusing on region-to-region arrangements in an attempt to export the European model of post-Westphalian international relations to other regions of the world, as an element of the so-called Global Europe Strategy. The Commission immediately realized its potential to take the lead in this process, with its right of initiative and agenda-setting powers. It aimed at prioritizing free trade agreements not only with regional organizations, but also and increasingly with individual states. At that moment, apart from ASEAN and MERCOSUR, also Korea and, to a lesser extent, India came to be seen as attractive partners (European Commission, 2006).

Following this, the Commission managed to formulate two well-defined priorities, which became accepted as leading in the negotiations with Korea: the need for both market access and preventing discrimination against EU exporters operating on the foreign market. The Commission's focus was explicitly put on promoting *exports*—concerns of the European importing sector were made subservient to this leading principle.

In addition, these priorities were in line with the free trade ideology of the College of Commissioners in charge at that time, under President José Manuel Barroso—and particularly in line with the preferences of Trade Commissioner Peter Mandelson. Mandelson succeeded in having his liberal views accepted in the Commission, thereby overruling the opposition of some of his colleagues, most notably Günther Verheugen, the Commissioner for Industry. Verheugen had more time for the concerns of the European car industry—a highly present actor in the negotiations with Korea—but in this case he had to give in to the Trade Commissioner, who received the support from President Barroso.

Moreover, the Commission benefited from the so-called "information asymmetry advantage", an important element in the principal-agent approach. During the entire process, the Commission was in the lead to decide when and how and how much information could or should be shared with other stakeholders. Every six weeks, the Commission organized debriefings with the private sector. In its contacts with both the member-states and interest groups, the Commission prioritised those countries and groups that supported the leading policies of market access and addressing exporter discrimination. Of course, the objections of other countries and groups were taken into account as well but there was a difference in approach and prioritization (Elsig and Dupont, 2012).

Finally, a fifth argument, offered by Robert Kelly, focuses on the Commission's realization that the FTA with Korea would help to increase the institution's

own prestige, particularly vis-à-vis the bigger member-states. Kelly refers to "bureaucratic infighting purposes" and an attempt by the Commission to use the Korea case as an instrument to "improve its bargaining position against member-states fighting to retain policy-making authority" (Kelly, 2011).

The above-mentioned arguments help to explain the leading role of the Commission, as so-called agent, in the FTA negotiations with Korea. This does not mean that other actors were insignificant. The member-states (principals) were naturally present and visible. The intergovernmental Trade Policy Committee (TPC) closely monitored the Commission's actions in the negotiations. But the member-states were divided among themselves, they had different preferences and demands. For example, the issue of the objecting European car industry concerned in particular Italy and France (both producers of smaller cars), and to a lesser extent Germany. Very important was that the German government, at a certain moment, chose for a more conciliatory stance and decided to follow the Commission line. Without this elementary support, the Commission would have been unable to achieve its goal.

Apart from the Council and the member-states, the European Parliament (EP) was also in the position to make its influence felt. The Parliament had been given increased competences in external trade since the Treaty of Lisbon (2009). Trade Commissioner Mandelson during his term had little contact with the EP but, under his successor Karel de Gucht (2010-2014), the cooperation became more intense through the framework of INTA, a special EP committee for International Trade.

Another important influence came from an external actor: at the time of the FTA negotiations between the EU and Korea, Korea held similar negotiations with the United States. This of course impacted the EU approach and the position of the Commission. For example, the Commission's concerns about exporter discrimination were to a large extent dictated by the simultaneously developing Korea-US discussions.

Member-states, European Parliament and external actors certainly had influence, but all in all, it was the Commission that was in the driver's seat, dominating the policy discussions and decision-making on the contents and modalities of the FTA with Korea. The question posed here is whether this continued to be the case in the period after implementing the FTA in 2011. To what extent was the agent capable of imposing its views on the member-states and other actors in the decade that followed? How did the Commission manage the process and use its position in a strategic way to pursue its interests, not only regarding trade but also in other policy areas?

3. EU-Korea relations after the FTA's application, 2011-2021

In 2010, almost simultaneously with the FTA's implementation, the EU and South Korea upgraded their relationship to a Strategic Partnership. On 10 May 2010, the two sides signed a Framework Agreement, which entered into force on 1 June 2014. This agreement, the first of its kind between the EU and an Asian country, provided the basis for strengthened cooperation on major political and global issues such as human rights, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, counter-terrorism, climate change and energy security. The Framework

Agreement (FA) was an overarching political cooperation agreement with a legal link to the EU-South Korea FTA. The latter was an example of a "new generation" of FTAs, whereby trade policy was no longer only about trade but increasingly also an instrument to reach political goals such as sustainable development and monitoring worker's rights. Politics and economics became difficult to separate, exemplified by the link between FA and FTA. A joint Committee was established to facilitate the FA's implementation and promote the general aims of the Agreement, to maintain overall coherence in the relations and ensure the proper functioning of any other agreement between the two parties.

The Framework Agreement thus made the bilateral relationship more political. It also exposed some of the differences and potential controversies between the two parties. In the area of human rights, for example, the Republic of Korea had not acceded to four of the core conventions of the International Labour Organisation (ILO): two conventions on forced labour and another two on freedom of association, the protection of the right to organize and collective bargaining. Another issue was that the ROK was party to most of the main international human rights instruments, but with the exception of the optional protocol of the Convention against torture and the optional protocol to the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights on the abolition of the death penalty.

On the EU level the Korean labour issues brought to light differences of appreciation between European Commission and European Parliament. MEPs blamed the Commission for neglecting labour rights in the trade relations with Korea. They felt that the Commission should have acted much more assertively after the arrest of the Korean trade union leaders Han Song-gyan (December 2015) and Lee Young-joo (December 2017). It was not until April 2019 that Commissioner Cecilia Malmstrøm (successor of De Gucht) addressed the issue during a visit to Seoul, after which a bilateral expert committee was established to investigate the problem. Another issue of concern voiced by MEPs was the lacking possibility for Korean individuals to form groups and defend their labour rights. Some professional groups in Korea, most notably public officials and dismissed employees, were not allowed to become a trade union member. Since worker's rights were directly linked to the Free Trade Agreement, the Commission could have claimed a leading role in these issues, but apparently "labour rights did not receive the same priority as trade," MEPs concluded. Based on the Korean experience, they urged the Commission to be more insistent on the observance of ILO standards when concluding trade agreements with third countries (Harrison et al., 2019; Horn, 2020).

On the other hand, it should be argued that—apart from these critical interventions—the positions of the ROK and the EU were mostly aligned in important forums as the Human Rights Council and the UN General Assembly, not least with regard to the issue of human rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, North Korea). Moreover, the EU and ROK held human rights consultations on a yearly basis and organized joint celebrations on international events relating to human rights (EEAS, 2016).

Another political issue on which the EU and ROK worked together, was the support for international diplomatic efforts on disarmament and non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, particularly addressing DPRK nuclear and ballistic challenges. In support of a UN Security Council resolution, the EU adopted a series of sanctions against North Korea. On this dossier, an important role was reserved for the European External Action Service (EEAS) which coordinated the

EU positions in international non-proliferation and disarmament fora. In 2013, a Special Envoy was appointed in this area in order to reinforce the EU's actions and enhance visibility of its relevant policies (EEAS, 2016). In more general terms, the EEAS impact was limited to "public diplomacy" or human rights diplomacy rather than economics and trade.

The ROK showed activity as one of the 65 members of the Conference on Disarmament (CD), established in 1979 to negotiate the Biological Weapons Convention and the Chemical Weapons Convention. The EU further welcomed the ROK's participation in EU crisis management operations worldwide. In March 2017, a few months after the entry into force of a bilateral agreement on participation in crisis management operations, the ROK dispatched the warship Choi Young to the EU naval force's (EU NAVFOR) counter-piracy operation in the Gulf of Aden off the coast of Somalia (EEAS, 2016). This cooperation was successful, despite the apparent existence of language barriers between the two sides (Desmaele, 2018).

These were all signs that the bilateral relationship had become more comprehensive and more political than it had been before. What also became clear was that, apart from the ILO issues, the tightened relations did not lead to major discrepancies between the EU and Korea. On the contrary, the relations developed in a remarkably uncontroversial manner. They were hardly ever politicised, as in the case of Korea's neighbour, the People's Republic of China. Korea is one of Asia's very few cultures that has incorporated jointly shared values such as a rules-based international order and a democratic system. The EU does not need to engage in value promotion with Korea, because the ROK is already a "member of the club"—a huge difference with China (Park and Soon, 2010).

The smooth development of bilateral contacts was also visible in other policy areas. In education the EU and ROK recognized the crucial contribution higher education could make to developing a knowledge-based, globally competitive economy and to boosting growth and jobs. The two parties decided to expand the existing academic links, whereby the EU praised the outstanding reputation of Korean education and the country's leading role in research and technological development. On the cultural level the two decided to work together through a Protocol on Cultural Cooperation under the EU-Republic of Korea FTA. Particular emphasis was given to the audio-visual sector, granting preferential treatment to market access for co-production and the promotion of audio-visual works of the EU and South Korea through film festivals and similar initiatives. On the European side, an important role was attributed to EUNIC, the network of European national institutes of culture and national bodies engaged in cultural and related activities beyond their national borders. The EUNIC cluster in the ROK organized film screenings, festivals and concerts (EEAS, 2016; Chung and Lee, 2019).

Science and technology concerned another area for cooperation (European Commission, 2017 B). Since 2007 there has been the Agreement on the Scientific and Technological Cooperation between the EU and South Korea, and since 2006 the Agreement for Cooperation between Euratom and South Korea in the field of fusion energy research. In addition, the Joint Science & Technology Cooperation Committee (JSTCC) took place biennially, focusing on the research areas ICT, nanotechnology, health/bio, energy, and satellite navigation (Chung and Lee, 2019). These areas featured strongly in South Korean applications within the framework of the EU's Horizon 2020 programme (Korean participation as an associated member of Horizon Europe 2021-2027 is under discussion now).

Interesting for Korean applicants was also the EU Partnership Instrument (PI), which mainly concerned environmental issues, the green economy and climate change. Preventing and moderating climate change is a priority for both parties, which has led to joint actions, particularly technical cooperation on the emissions trading scheme. The ETS is a key policy for both sides toward meeting the targets of reducing greenhouse gas emissions (EEAS, 2016). In December 2015, the two adopted the Paris Agreement, once more recognizing the urgency of climate change as a widespread global threat (Chung and Lee, 2019).

Despite the progressive bilateral cooperation on environmental issues, the European Parliament blamed the Commission for making environmental standards subservient to trade. Like in the case of labour rights, MEPs felt that Korea was lagging behind in the greening of its economy and that the Commission was not doing enough to make the Korean government comply with the European standards because of the priority given to trade (Horn, 2020).

The strategic partnership intensified the cooperation between the EU and South Korea to a considerable extent. It did not just lead to a sharing of interests but also of values. To support the mutual bonds, an extensive institutional network was created, embracing more than 40 official forms of exchange.

In general, this system worked quite well, but there was also criticism that the bilateral institutional framework was not always used to the fullest extent. Some European observers remarked that, contrary to original intentions, top-level summits between the two sides were not held at a regular (yearly) basis. This was seen as regrettable because such summits were expected to give much-needed diplomatic boosts to the partnership. Another remarkable shortcoming was that the European Parliament did not have its own (separate) delegation in Seoul—the existing delegation covered the entire Korean peninsula. Observers felt that North Korean issues took too much of the delegation's time, which went at the expense of the attention spent on South Korea. Moreover, there was criticism that the potential for cooperation in security matters was underused, particularly in terms of information exchange on non-proliferation and cyber-security, but also with respect to peacekeeping operations and crisis management. The latter was seen as all the more regrettable, because in 2014 the EU and ROK had signed a crisis management participation agreement (CMPA), entering into force in 2016. As noted above, CMPA contributed to Korean navy involvement in the Gulf of Aden, but failed to produce many other tangible results. Finally, extra attention was demanded for connectivity matters, most notably EU support for South Korea's New Northern Policy to promote Eurasia (creating a peaceful environment through infrastructure projects), as well as helping Seoul's investment programme in North Korea. The idea behind this was that, once the time was ripe to ease the existing sanctions imposed on Pyongyang, the North could become the main gateway to connect South Korea with Europe (Desmaele, 2018; see also Council of the European Union, 2018). Also, Sae Won Chung and Jae-Seung Lee, in an article written in 2019, complained that the EU and South Korea "need to better understand each other, through more effective public diplomacy" (2019).

These criticisms showed that, despite all the initiatives taken, the EU was not using its full potential to explore and deepen relations with Korea. It also demonstrated that the relationship was not always seen as a top-priority matter, neither by the EU nor by Korea, and it reemphasized the relatively non-controversial nature of the cooperation. When things are running smoothly, there is less reason to have intensive discussions. There were exceptions—policy

issues that led to heated debates, like the labour rights controversy, where an independent panel of experts eventually (early in 2021) recommended that Korea should update its labour laws and ratify several fundamental ILO conventions.[2] The European Parliament had played an important role in making this happen. However, in general, the Commission was free to set its own course without many inter-institutional impediments. The member-states felt only marginally attracted to the political discussions concerning Korea. The EU institution most present in the dealings with the ROK, apart from the Commission and EP, was the European External Action Service, for example in issues of international proliferation and disarmament. The Council of Ministers hardly involved itself, which could be seen as another sign of the easy relationship with Seoul, coupled to a slight degree of indifference on the part of the European capitals (Pacheco Pardo, 2020). *If* the Council intervened, it was mostly done in the more general setting of Europe and Asia, without special reference to the ROK (Council of the European Union, 2018).

This was different as far as economic issues were concerned. Here, the member-states continued to have an active posture, most prominently in the contentious FTA-related areas of labour standards and sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) measures. Regarding the former, the Council supported the EP in triggering a dispute settlement procedure, as outlined above. With respect to SPS (or hygiene standards), member-states complained about the long-lasting Korean ban on EU beef exports—imposed in 2001 but not lifted until the second half of 2019 (EIAS, 2021). And even then, worries remained about the persistent obstacles to imports of EU animal products. Moreover, there was the continuously sensitive case of monitoring Korean car exports to Europe. In the years after the activation of the FTA in 2011, the French and Italian governments kept arguing about the problem of Korean-produced small cars (especially Hyundai's) swamping the European market. French leading car producer PSA Peugeot-Citroën claimed that it was forced to lay off workers because of its inability to compete with Korea. Paris begged Trade Commissioner De Gucht to do something about it and introduce surveillance measures in the form of a document to be filled in as an advance warning of the type and number of products transported to the EU. However, De Gucht was not much impressed by the French complaints and pointed to the overall positive outcome of the FTA for the European economy (The Korea Times, 2012). For example, in the category of cars with engines stronger than 1500cc (mainly manufactured in Germany), European exports performed very well, to the dismay of the Korean government. Another area of successful European exports concerned design brand goods such as luxury bags, shoes and watches, as well as European food products (cheese and wine). Due to all this, the EU since 2012 started to record trade surpluses with Korea after a long period of trade deficits (European Commission, 2017 A). Nevertheless, the import of smaller cars from Korea remained a headache for France and Italy, and the situation even seemed to aggravate when Hyundai and Kia started assembling motor vehicles in the Czech Republic and Slovakia (EIAS, 2021).

[2] Early in 2024, Korean ratification of ILO Convention 105 on forced labour was still pending.

4. Recent developments

These manifestations of member-state and Council interference in EU-Korea affairs were rare, however. In general, the FTA was considered a win-win situation for both actors involved and especially for the EU (EIAS, 2021). The continuously leading role of the Commission, supported by the EEAS, was re-emphasised in the "EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific", published in September 2021. In a Joint Communication, the Commission highlighted seven priority areas for EU action in the region: sustainable and inclusive prosperity; green transition; ocean governance; digital governance and partnerships (including research and innovation); connectivity; security and defence; and human security. The ROK was explicitly mentioned as a preferred partner in many of these priority areas, particularly prosperity (setting up supply chains for semiconductors), green transition (via a high-level dialogue on environment), digital governance (launching a partnership on digital trade), research and innovation (using the Horizon Europe programme), connectivity (through a transport dialogue) and security and defence, using the ESIWA (Enhancing Security Cooperation in and with Asia) framework on counter-terrorism, cybersecurity, maritime security and crisis management (European Commission, 2021 A and B; Desmaele et al., 2021).

Most of these initiatives are still only in the drawing stage, in need of further elaboration. A notable move ahead is the EU-ROK Green partnership of May 2023, which includes agreements on the transition to a circular economy and clean energy. Furthermore, much publicity is given to the bilateral Digital partnership, signed in November 2022, and dedicated to data protection and cybersecurity, although it is still unclear how successful the implementation of this document will be (Husenicová, 2022). For example, in the area of human-centered digital cooperation, the bilateral potential has not been fulfilled so far (Dekker and Okano-Heijmans, 2020).

Moreover, despite many recent developments, the same applies to the security and defence sector (Casarini, 2021). *If* Seoul shows interest in deepening security cooperation, it is via the NATO framework and not the EU. Illustrative was the visit of Korean president Yoon to the NATO summit of June 2022, as well as the Korean embassy in Brussels also being designated for its mission to NATO. As a result of this, we have recently been confronted with various academic documents that emphasize the shortcomings of EU-Korea cooperation and the absolute need for "moving to the next level" (Korea-EU cooperation, 2022; Husenicová, 2022; Stangarone, 2022).

These reservations mainly concern the political-security level, in other areas developments are much more progressive. An important element in EU-Korea relations, not addressed thus far, pertains to the regulatory power of the EU and its capacity to initiate transnational regulatory networks (Marx et al., 2014). In the course of time, the EU—as a global economic power—has acquired the authority to set common standards for many products and commodities worldwide, shaping both business practices and public policies. According to Anu Bradford, the "Brussels effect" has forced many countries and firms to follow and copy European regulations for their domestic production in order to be able to respond to the changing international environment and keep access to foreign markets. Korea is no exception here. One significant example in the Korean case is the EU REACH policy for chemical products (Bradford 2020, pp.199-203). The Korean

government voluntarily initiated a legislative proposal on chemical management after witnessing the implementation of new chemical regulation in the EU. Korea adopted an EU REACH type of policy (called "K-REACH") through a process of learning and emulation and after meeting with officials of the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) and the European Commission. The Commission played an important role in stimulating transnational regulatory networks and effectuating compliance with European rules (Lee, 2015).

What also should be pointed out here is the "adaptability" of the European Commission to new situations and circumstances. Under the leadership of President Ursula von der Leyen (2019-present) the Commission has become more "geopolitical", meaning that the old distinction between a technocratic Commission and a political Council and Parliament is not as obvious now as it has been historically. This transformation manifested itself already under Von der Leyen's predecessor, Jean-Claude Juncker (2014-2019). With the synchronization of electoral terms between Commission and Parliament, and the attempt to make the Commission more accountable to Parliament through the *Spitzenkandidaten* system (even if sometimes ignored), the Commission has become openly more political. As Commission president, Juncker was very explicit about the "electoral mandate" he was given. Despite the much-discussed vagueness of the term "geopolitical", it could indeed be argued that EU diplomatic relations, including the ones with Korea, are increasingly influenced by the Commission's political reach (Goetz, 2017).

5. Conclusion

A 2011 article by PNU scholar Robert Kelly posited that the EU and Korea had an "unremarkable relationship", mostly as a result of the "mutual irrelevance of one's security to the other". Specifically, the EU was not able to assist Korea in its "acute security dilemma" on the peninsula, while "sovereigntist" Korea did not share EU preferences for soft power, regionalization and multilateral collective security. In his analysis, Korea mainly pursued the relationship for "cost-free prestige-taking", whereas the EU saw this bridge to Asia as a "success for the promotion of liberal-democratic values in a non-European context". "Pro-regionalist elites", most notably the European Commission, pursued inter-regional ties for "internal institutional reasons", but "deep Korean attachment to the Westphalian state model [would] likely stymie such efforts". As a consequence, the chances for ROK-EU relations beyond the FTA were very meagre, also in the case of non-material export products such as food, film and pop music (Kelly, 2011).

The 2011 analysis is still highly relevant as far as the security issue is concerned. More than one decade later, despite an increasing number of political agreements resulting from the strategic partnership (e.g. on disarmament and peacekeeping within the CMPA and ESIWA framework), the EU continues to be unable to play an influential role in Asian high politics, nor has it the ambition to do so in the near future. This makes the EU an actor of secondary importance to Korea, especially compared to the United States (Chung and Lee, 2019). Park and Chung characterise the EU as an "incomplete power" for Korea: in the political realm, the EU is overshadowed by the US and also by the influences of regional powers like

China, Japan and North Korea (Park and Chung, 2019). Kelly was right with his prediction that, rather than security, economic growth issues were to dominate the list of mutual goals in foreign policy, with the FTA as the leading and most lasting accomplishment in bilateral cooperation (Kelly, 2011).

One may wonder whether the assertion that Korea "does not share [the] EU's preferences for soft power, regionalization and multilateral collective security" still holds true. In recent years, the ROK has shown increasing interest in expanding its multilateral commitments, particularly in relation to the ASEAN framework. Nowadays, deepening relations with ASEAN is central to both the EU's and South Korea's vision for the Indo-Pacific (European Commission, 2021 A; Desmaele et al., 2021).

Where Kelly's analysis was much less accurate was in the prediction that Europe would have little interest in non-material export products from Korea, such as food, film and pop music. What happened since 2011 was quite the opposite: what we see nowadays is a huge expansion of the number of Korean (BBQ) restaurants in Europe (The Korean Herald, 2021). But particularly impressive and unprecedented is the popularity of Korean films (*Train to Busan, Parasite, Decision to leave*, etc.), Netflix series (*Squid Game*) and pop music (K-pop, *Gangnam Style*) in the EU. As a result, the European interest in Korea has expanded dramatically, as is also visible from the number of university students who nowadays register for following courses in Korean language and culture.

This is partly the result of active policies by the European Commission, which has consistently promoted cultural and academic exchange with Korea, as witnessed by the Protocol on Cultural Cooperation (2010), the joint audiovisual projects, and the organization of film festivals. The Commission was primarily responsible for this, because the cultural protocol was part of the EU-Korea FTA—falling under the Commission's competence. At the same time, the Commission's influence in the area should not be exaggerated: member-states are still present here, both within and outside the EUNIC framework. Moreover, the current success of Korean films, Netflix series and pop music in Europe is mostly due to trending issues and the superb quality of Korean cultural production, rather than the result of European promotion activities.

In more general terms, since the FTA is still the most important outcome of EU-Korea cooperation, the Commission (agent) has remained the dominant actor in EU inter-institutional dynamics, benefitting—as before—from an information asymmetry advantage. In 2024, the FTA does not just cover the economic implications of the cooperation, but also labour rights, environmental issues, digital/technological and (as just mentioned) cultural matters, etc. Moreover, this so-called "new generation FTA" involves a great number of committees and regulations, requiring knowledge of technical details. The ensuing result is that the principals (member-states) very often leave the initiative to the European Commission. The member-states tend to get interested, particularly when economic relations with Korea get sour (see the southern European opposition to Korean car imports and the concerns about SPS measures), but in a more general sense they let the Commission have its way. Security and defence issues—areas where the Council prevails—continue to be of lesser importance in the bilateral relationship. Although many initiatives have been launched in this area recently, the majority is still in an incipient stage, leaving the Commission in charge in the role of agenda-setter (European Commission, 2021 A). The European Parliament has become involved, and has criticized the Commission for a lack of action in some

policy areas, sometimes successfully, but the overall picture is still of an EP being of secondary importance in the internal institutional dynamics towards Korea. Interestingly, the European External Action Service, as a relatively new player, has proved to be one of the most active European contributors to the EU-Korea relationship, mostly within the framework of the Strategic Partnership (EEAS, 2016 A and 2016 B; EEAS, 2021). Despite the formally independent position of the EEAS, it has a strong relationship with the Commission, and acts more in coordination than as an institutional rival.

Apart from the economic benefits of the relationship and the increasing political and cultural bonds, Korea continues to be important for the EU as one of Asia's very few cultures that has fully incorporated jointly shared values such as democracy, human rights promotion and a rules-based international order. The sharing of moral principles has further contributed to the non-controversial nature of EU-Korea relations. The EU does not need to engage in values promotion with Korea, because the ROK is already "member of the club" (Park and Soon, 2010). This is different from the situation with China and some ASEAN countries, where the issue of EU value dissemination is much more prevalent and also much more controversial. EU relations with Korea have become political over time, but—contrary to the situation with China—they are hardly *politicized*. In a politicized environment, characterized by fundamental disputes on core values, the EU Council and EP tend to be the main beneficiaries in terms of influence and involvement. However, in the relatively uncomplicated, uncontroversial (no longer "unremarkable"!) context of EU-Korea relations, it is the Commission that remains in the driver's seat, even though its position is not as unassailable as it has been before.

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