

From Like-Minded to Like-Acting: The EU-ROK Strategic Partnership in Times of Crisis

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The year 2023 marked the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between the Republic of Korea (South Korea) and the European Union (EU). From early beginnings to upgraded bilateral ties in the form of a strategic partnership in 2010, this relationship has developed into a comprehensive and valuable link between the two parties. South Korea is the only country with which the EU has concluded key agreements covering all three pillars of economic, political, and security affairs (e.g., Free Trade Agreement, Political Framework Agreement, and Crisis Management Participation Agreement), flanked by a number of specific agreements in several fields. Providing the institutional structure to the bilateral relationship, these agreements reflect and advance the normative alignment between two like-minded polities.¹ The concept of advancing particular values within foreign policy practice is a signature policy of the prosecutor-turned incumbent President Yoon Suk-yeol.

The pledge to pursue a holistic values-based approach and thus to conduct a “responsible and contributive diplomacy”² is the most recent iteration of the Korean conservatives’ ambition to raise the country’s profile in global governance. While an emphasis on liberal democratic values has been a common theme among successive administrations, Yoon stands out in his more overt declarations of Seoul’s responsibility to enforcing individual freedoms, human rights, and the rule of law on a global stage. Such conceptions of statecraft derived on the basis of norms and values aligns closely with those of the EU, which does not only advocate for the aforementioned principles—alongside peace and democracy—but is also viewed within international affairs as a representative model for them. As Ian Manners has argued, the EU is best understood as a “normative power” whose influence over the international order rests upon its ability to redefine what is normal in global politics.³

In spite of economic cooperation being the most developed and productive form of interaction within this partnership, over the last six years, both ends of the Eurasian continent have shown steadfast commitment to expand the comprehensive collaboration largely in response to the changing global landscape. Following the presidential inauguration in May 2022, the Yoon administration sent a special envoy to the EU and Europe in continuity with Moon Jae-in, who was the first South Korean president ever to do so. Showing that Moon’s decision was not a one-off, the move of the then-newly elected president suggests that strengthening bilateral relations with Brussels is viewed by both sides of the political spectrum as beneficial for South Korea’s national interests. In turn, South Korea is high on the European chancelleries’ agendas, much more than before as the number of European embassies in Seoul has increased with four more that have been opened between 2020 and 2024 (i.e., Estonia, Lithuania, Slovenia, and Luxembourg). As the Yoon administration has pivoted more clearly towards the West and the US, the South Korea-EU relationship has evolved to become more multifaceted but at the

same time has also increasingly come to be dominated by security and geopolitical issues beyond purely economic matters.

Economic Security in the Context of US-China Strategic Rivalry

The last decade has been marked by an array of challenges to the EU and South Korea both as individual actors but also as partners, including the increasingly contentious relationship between the world's two largest economies, politicization of the COVID-19 pandemic, the global semiconductor industry becoming a matter of crucial geopolitical importance, and the weaponization of gas supplies after Russia's re-invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Unlike other major economies, it took time before the concept of economic security could take center stage in the EU.⁴ Russia's aggression against Ukraine has shown Europeans the high cost of its excessive reliance on Russian energy supplies, forcing Brussels to hurry to compensate for the wasted time and reduce this type of overdependency.

It is within the broader context of the all-encompassing strategic competition between the United States and China that the central question of how to chart a path forward for effective regional and global engagement that balances security concerns and openness has emerged for both Brussels and Seoul. For the European Commission, this has meant engaging in a profoundly necessary political debate for the first time in its history on how to link security considerations and 'de-risking' measures with its economic relations with other players around the world, in other words, how Europeans can respond to China's race to become a technology innovation superpower and Washington's resolve to slow down its pace. The Economic Security Strategy that was unveiled in June 2023 is based on three principles: the to promote the competitiveness of its economy, to diversify when needed to address critical dependencies that could be used to harm the EU's interests, and to partner with like-minded countries.⁵ As part of this three-pillar approach to EU economic security, in January 2024, the Commission adopted five initiatives, namely, (1) enhancing foreign investment screening, (2) improving export control coordination, (3) discussing risks associated with outbound investments with key stakeholders, (4) exploring means of expanding support towards dual-use technology research and development, and (5) prompting the European Council to recommend enhanced research security measures.⁶

Such measures have been devised as a means of ensuring the EU's economic security while still upholding the openness of trade, investment, and research through **partnering** with the broadest possible range of countries to advance shared security interests. Seoul has thus emerged as a key partner to Brussels in this realm, not only on the basis of a mutually beneficial economic relationship but also because of a shared commitment to the same underlying norms and values. Self-identifying as "like-minded" partners is particularly relevant in the field of trade policy standardization. One such example is in the contentious domain of digital economy with the main normative values repeatedly underlined by the EU being consumer protection and the safe and ethical use of emerging technologies, which oftentimes contrasts with core partners like the US.⁷ Yet, in the case of South Korea, there has been a remarkable convergence as seen in the EU-ROK Digital Partnership launched on November 28, 2022 that embraces "human-centric digitalization."⁸ This expression conveys the idea that maintaining an open market in digital services should take into account the ethical implications of the Internet of Things and should therefore not come to the detriment of citizens' interests, particularly in terms of the use of personal data. Such convergences between the EU and South Korea can also be seen at the geostrategic level, particularly in relation

to the broader issues of economic and supply chain resilience, which have emerged as a pressing consideration as a result of the increasing frequency of economic coercion being deployed as a foreign policy tool by the Chinese leadership.

Joint or coordinated actions to counter coercive economic practices have thus become one of the main priorities for the EU's strategic partnerships with Indo-Pacific countries with particular reference to "the sustainable extraction and processing of critical raw materials, necessary for the green and digital transitions."⁹ In the case of both Brussels and Seoul, the primary response has been to embrace de-risking in lieu of decoupling so as to strengthen their hand against Beijing but without necessarily engaging in open confrontation.¹⁰ This has meant developing an awareness of vulnerabilities and translating that knowledge into concrete actions that mitigate the risk of being too exposed to a particular dependency that ultimately undermines economic and national security considerations. Within the EU, derisking from China and diversifying towards South Korea in relation to mitigating supply chain disruptions to new and emerging critical technologies have taken place both at an institutional and nation-state level not only because Korea is a technological powerhouse but because they share the same norms and principles. Against the backdrop of a new geoeconomic reality of economic coercion as an ever-looming threat, two examples best capture the strategic relevance of the EU's trade ties with South Korea at the level of individual member-states. Developments in the semiconductor and electric vehicle (EV) battery industries highlight the delicate balancing act that derisking entails and the challenges that both the EU (and its individual member-states) and South Korea must navigate in their quest for economic security in a time of increasingly fractious US-China relations.

Semiconductors have become central in the technological arms race between the United States and China which has caught both suppliers and consumers of the electronic component within the crossfire.¹¹ In an effort to mitigate the fallout of great power competition, the Netherlands and South Korea established a strategic partnership on November 17, 2022 with a strong emphasis on "strengthening existing collaboration between the two countries' semi-conductor industries and expressed their intention to support the private sector in order to sustain a resilient supply chain in that sector."¹² This has since translated into the signing of a series of deals worth more than KRW 1 trillion (EUR 673 million) between the Dutch manufacturer ASML—the sole manufacturer of extreme ultraviolet lithography machinery used to design and manufacture cutting-edge semiconductors—and the Korean semiconductor manufacturers Samsung and SK Hynix, who are global players in their own right within the high-tech industry.¹³ This expansion of bilateral relations has been expressly driven by a desire by the public and private sectors to minimize disruption to the status quo given that China remains a major producer of semiconductor components in more mundane technologies such as automobiles and consumer goods as well as a consumer of more advanced chips that it is unable to manufacture itself.¹⁴ While both countries continue to seek means of obtaining a form of digital sovereignty, they have both also faced the same increasing pressure from Washington to mirror the export controls imposed by the Biden administration in 2022 in an effort to limit China's access to more advanced semiconductors.

The Netherlands has since imposed additional export measures clearly aimed at China—but explicitly insisting that the controls were "country-neutral"—from September 1, 2023 following an agreement struck with the United States and Japan.¹⁵ Seoul meanwhile continues to deliberate over whether to acquiesce to Washington's request that they impose similar export controls and thus reinforce their pre-existing security alliance but in turn damage relations with its largest trading partner.¹⁶

Similarly, in the case of lithium-ion batteries and fuel cells for EVs, there has also been the practice of friendshoring between the EU and South Korea as a means of reducing reliance on China. These measures began with South Korean battery manufacturers LG Energy Solution, Samsung SDI, and SK On establishing EV battery plants in Poland and Hungary in 2017 that continue to supply European manufacturers like Volkswagen and BMW. But since then, Korean car manufacturers Hyundai and KIA Motors have also opened and operated factories specifically building EVs in Czechia and Slovakia while Hyundai Mobis is slated to build a new battery plant in Spain in 2024.¹⁷ Alongside the aforementioned manufacturers gaining a high level of access to the EU—the second-largest market for electric vehicles behind the US—individual member-states have also benefited from the profits of secondary exports as key manufacturing hubs for Korean batteries.¹⁸

This intensification of the regional bloc's partnership with Korea has been particularly important given the centrality of reducing vehicular emissions as part of its goal of achieving net-zero carbon dioxide emissions by 2050 but also concerns about the potential of becoming as dependent on Chinese suppliers for batteries as member-states were on Russian energy resources before the war in Ukraine.¹⁹ Though Korean battery manufacturers have recently lost their substantial market share from 70.6% of the European EV market in 2021 to 57% in 2022 due to Chinese competitors offering much cheaper alternatives as a result of domestic oversupply, a commitment to shared values is likely to reverse the trend.²⁰ The EU's implementation of the Critical Raw Materials Act and the Batteries Regulation, which have an emphasis on limiting dependence on critical minerals to below 65% and reducing carbon emissions, will ultimately benefit South Korea given its own moves to diversify its sources of critical minerals for EV batteries and its more stringent approach to controlling emissions during the production process.²¹

Green Partnership in the Pacific

At the EU-Korea Summit in 2023, the two sides identified three more pillars through which they were willing to work in the next phase of the relationship: (1) digital partnership, (2) security, and (3) green partnership.²² Alongside environmental considerations within their domestic boundaries, both the EU and South Korea have articulated a shared commitment towards tackling anthropogenic climate change as a global issue. Climate change should be understood not only in sectoral terms but has increasingly become a major component of foreign policy for the two partners. This is particularly evident in the case of the Pacific Islands, where both partners are actively attempting to put into practice their shared views regarding the environment. Yet, despite the substantial benefits of taking a coordinated approach, EU and South Korean policymaking has largely operated on individual terms, which currently represents a weakness but should also be viewed as an opportunity. In the first instance, both partners have a point of comparison in relation to their respective strategies to draw lessons on which approaches have worked (or not) and thus develop stronger policies moving forward. Moreover, striving for more coordination represents a win-win-win for all parties involved given the efficiencies and optimization that can be implemented in practical measures while at the same time widening and deepening relations through the establishment of new cooperation mechanism and the improvement of existing ones.

But before drawing any particular lessons, we must first get a clearer understanding of recent and existing frameworks of Brussels' and Seoul's initiatives towards the Pacific Islands Countries (PICs). The EU has had a longer-standing Pacific policy as articulated in "Towards a Renewed EU-Pacific Development Partnership" set out by the EU Commission and the

High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy but which has since been modified as part of the “EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo Pacific.”²³ This strategy towards the Pacific has largely been couched within the imperative of economic development, with the EU serving as a major provider of financial support to the region with the 2021-2027 budget for official development assistance (ODA) amounting to EUR750 million at the same time as the European Investment Bank provides EUR763 million in loans.²⁴ Furthermore, aligned with its own status as a supranational organisation, the EU’s engagement with Pacific Island nations has prioritized regionalism and multilateralism through a partnership agreement with the Organisation of the African, Caribbean, and Pacific States since 1971 and through serving as a dialogue partner of the Pacific Islands Forum from 1991 onwards.²⁵

Environmental policies are at the forefront of Brussels’ approach with distinct recognition of the particular vulnerability of the PICs to the impact of climate change. This has translated into a centering of efforts around climate change in all policy areas as well as biodiversity and environmental protection stewardship through the Team Europe Initiative on Green-Blue Alliance for the Pacific launched in 2021 at COP26 in Glasgow. The Green-Blue Alliance is a partnership between the EU and Pacific Islands countries that came with an initial EUR197 million financial package aimed at advancing “ambitious sustainable efforts both in terms of climate ambition, disaster risk reduction, ocean governance and environmental protection” in support of facilitating the Pacific Islands Forum’s 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent.²⁶

In the case of South Korea as a contrast, a burgeoning partnership with the fourteen PICs is another relatively recent development but one which appears to be making up for the lost time entailed by Moon Jae-in’s New Southern Policy (NSP). This was a consequence of ASEAN and India serving as the focal point of South Korean efforts under the NSP, which translated into a corresponding neglect of other areas such as the Pacific Islands.²⁷ The Yoon administration’s active expansion into the Pacific through bilateral, multilateral, and regional measures is tied intimately with both its own domestic imperative of South Korea becoming a Global Pivotal State but also with its renewed trilateral partnership with the United States and Japan, who are bolstering their own efforts to (re)engage with the PICs.²⁸ Alongside a robust diplomatic presence with the region through its current network of embassies with plans to open a new diplomatic mission to the Marshall Islands, Yoon organized the Korea-Pacific Islands Summit held in Seoul in May 2023.²⁹ In the joint statement issued by Yoon and his Pacific Islands counterparts entitled “A Partnership in Pursuit of Freedom, Peace and Prosperity for a Resilient Pacific” following the meeting, those in attendance devoted significant sections of the text towards acknowledging the climate emergency declared by the Pacific Islands Forum in 2022 and the need to “mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change, which remains the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific.”³⁰ They outlined the necessity of tackling the challenge of the climate crisis through a suite of measures including climate financing and technology transfer for renewable energy projects, improving monitoring and prediction systems, disaster risk management and resilience measures, and biodiversity conservation efforts.

Seoul’s tangible commitment to assisting the region is reflected in the scaling up of South Korean ODA to Pacific Island nations to \$39.9 million by 2027 from a very low base in 2023 of approximately \$15 million to the entire region of Oceania, which also includes Australia and New Zealand.³¹ Alongside more direct bilateral measures, South Korea has also increased its involvement in indirect regional-level initiatives that have largely been led by the United States.³² This has included the previously mentioned Trilateral Partnership on the Indo-Pacific that has since been reinforced and expanded

following the August 2023 Camp David Summit, which has prioritised buttressing Pacific regionalism and cooperating to tackle the priority areas of climate change, unlawful fishing, and economic development.³³ In relation to climate change specifically, this has also involved Seoul's endorsement of the Pacific Islands Forum's *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* and its accession in 2023 as a partner nation in the informal Partners in the Blue Pacific mechanism founded by Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States to support the Pacific Islands in achieving their 2050 targets.³⁴ The disjointed individual approaches taken by the EU and South Korea towards tackling climate change as an extension of their foreign policies despite having aligned objectives and underlying principles can also be seen in relation to their broader strategic approaches to the Indo-Pacific as a whole.

Embracing the Indo-Pacific as a Strategic Space for the EU-Korea Relationship

Another sign of growing convergence as part of EU-Korea relations is a commitment to engage constructively with the Indo-Pacific amid its rise as a strategic space. Both the EU and South Korea had pledged to advocate for inclusive multilateralism as the preferred approach to implement their respective strategies for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. The origins of this alignment have been favored by a palatable shift in South Korea's foreign policy stance, with the domestic transition from a progressive administration to the incumbent conservative government. In particular, the latter's willingness to not only deploy the terminology of the "Indo-Pacific" but to make it a major element of South Korean foreign policy represents a more overt alignment on one side of the current iteration of strategic competition between the West and China. South Korea's relatively late articulation—despite being a country located within the Indo-Pacific—of its own national imperative with regards to the region came about in the 2022 Strategy for a Free, Prosperous, and Peaceful Indo-Pacific Region White Paper.³⁵ Seoul's foreign policy approach in this context has been self-characterized as being underpinned by the core principles of inclusiveness, trust, and reciprocity but should also be understood within a broader context of South Korea's deepening cooperation with Washington and Tokyo.

As part of ambitions towards developing the ROK into a "Global Pivotal State," Yoon articulated his country's commitment to ensuring the regional status quo at the November 2022 ASEAN Summit held in Cambodia in advance of the aforementioned white paper's release. The South Korean commitment to the conception of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)" primarily advanced by Japan and the United States can also be seen in its involvement in the Trilateral Partnership for the Indo-Pacific. In the Phnom Penh statement released by Yoon, President Biden, and Prime Minister Kishida announcing the development of this new trilateral mechanism, the three leaders recommitted to a "partnership guided by shared values, driven by innovation, and committed to shared prosperity and security."³⁶ In embracing the FOIP and thus aligning itself not only with Tokyo and Washington but with the EU and several of its member-states as well who have released their own strategies towards the Indo-Pacific with a similar commitment, South Korea is thus signaling a clear intent in taking a larger role in international affairs. But constraints imposed by domestic and international developments have meant that Seoul's ambitions have remained primarily in the realm of intent with few concrete actions having been taken since the release of its strategy.

Nevertheless, there is a clear demonstration of Brussels' assigning particular importance to Seoul as a partner within the Indo-Pacific region in a range of strategic areas. Of various partners within the Indo-Pacific itself, South Korea was featured

most prominently by far in the EU “Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific,” appearing fourteen times across the document and overshadowing fellow regional powers such as Australia and Indonesia. As part of this, the EU envisions a series of measures primarily related to high technology including advancing cybersecurity measures and data protection as well as constructing better and more diversified supply chains such as in the case of semiconductors and other critical hardware. Yet, the ultimate focus of much of this activity has been in the realm of traditional security, with a prime focus on conventional defense cooperation between the EU and Korea on a regional level but also on a bilateral basis between individual member-states within the bloc.

The ever-present issue of a nuclear-armed North Korea and the threat it poses on the Korean Peninsula and beyond continues to be a recurring aspect of security considerations in the EU-South Korea relationship, with non-proliferation and disarmament remaining high on the list for both parties.³⁷ On a bilateral basis with individual nation-states, South Korea has also come to develop issue-based ties on particular security problems including cyber-security with the Netherlands as explored further above, maritime security with France, Germany, and the United Kingdom,³⁸ and through weapons exports of small arms, tanks, artillery, and fighter jet aircraft with Estonia, Finland, Poland, and Norway.³⁹ Combined with broader US-China strategic competition and Russia’s ongoing war against Ukraine, this has also prompted a closer alignment between Seoul and the other major security player based in Brussels, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), of which all but four EU member-states—Austria, Cyprus, Ireland, and Malta—are members. On July 11, 2023, during the annual NATO summit held in Vilnius, Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg and Yoon upgraded bilateral relations to an Individually Tailored Partnership Programme (ITPP) which covers eleven areas of cooperation including regular dialogues and consultation, non-proliferation, emerging technologies and cyber defense, anti-terrorism, political-military connectivity, equipment interoperability, participation in military exercises, cooperation in science and technology, security responses to climate change, women’s participation in international affairs, and public diplomacy.⁴⁰ As Stoltenberg outlined in his remarks to Yoon, NATO and its members “value the partnership with you [South Korea] because security is not regional, security is global ... What happens in the Indo-Pacific matters for Europe and what happens in Europe matters for the Indo-Pacific.”⁴¹

It is within this context of entangled global security considerations that Seoul has become increasingly involved in the conflict in Ukraine in a variety of ways. In the first instance, it has applied a series of unilateral economic measures against Russia in March 2022⁴² and recently levying a fresh round of sanctions against Russian vessels, organizations, and individuals for participating in arms trading with North Koreans in April 2024,⁴³ joining the EU in advancing economic pressure on the Putin regime. South Korea has also been a steady supplier of aid to Ukraine, pledging a \$2.3 billion package for reconstruction projects and humanitarian assistance alongside sending non-lethal items and equipment such as mine clearance devices, bulletproof vests, and helmets.⁴⁴ The South Korean defense industry has also been a central player in rearming EU and NATO member-states who have been supplying arms and ammunition to Kyiv at a faster rate than traditional arms exporters like the United States, France, and Germany can deliver replacements. The 2022 initial mega-deal signed between Poland and South Korea for 1,000 K2 tanks, 672 K9 self-propelled howitzers, 288 K239 Chunmoo missile launchers, and 48 FA50 light combat aircraft worth \$12.6 billion has opened the door for further arms deals amid a high level of interest from a range of Central and Eastern European countries who are seeking to expand and modernize their forces as Russian threat looms large.

Despite expressing a steadfast commitment to the underlying principles of supporting Kyiv's fight for sovereignty and maintaining the international rules-based order, Seoul has refrained from directly supplying Ukrainian forces with lethal weapons, equipment, and ammunition. While under its Foreign Trade Act South Korea is forbidden to export arms to governments that are involved in wars, its reluctance has been motivated more by fears that direct weapons supply to Ukraine could prompt Moscow to assist Pyongyang to develop its conventional and nuclear weapons program further.⁴⁵ This has been a significant point of divergence with its EU partners, who alongside Washington and London, have been putting pressure on the Yoon administration to change its stance and supply much needed arms and ammunition. Vladimir Putin's June 2024 visit to North Korea and the subsequent signing of a mutual defense treaty may change the strategic calculus for South Korea with National Security Adviser Chang Ho-jin hinting that the Yoon administration is in the process of reconsidering its longstanding policy of not supplying Ukraine with lethal weapons.⁴⁶ Doing so would put Seoul in lockstep with many of its partners in Europe and North America, creating the deeper security ties that it has been seeking. But at the same time, this could also translate into retaliation from Moscow, who has already communicated that any moves to supply weapons to Ukraine would result in "decisions which are unlikely to please the current leadership of South Korea."⁴⁷

Conclusion

The EU-Republic of Korea relationship has advanced significantly since the opening of diplomatic relations of 1963 but has particularly accelerated in recent years due to a convergence between the two parties on a range of global issues. Like-mindedness and the ability to create mutually beneficial structures, institutions, and processes particularly in the economic realm have underpinned their partnership, but there is more that could be done in a range of other spheres. In particular, despite much talk about the importance of security cooperation, there is a need to translate discussions into concrete actions beyond piecemeal and bilateral efforts between individual EU member-states and South Korea. The fact that both Brussels and Seoul have the material capabilities and a strong pre-existing diplomatic relationship means that security cooperation between them is a realistic possibility. Given contemporary challenges and those yet to come, comprehensive and coordinated action from the EU and South Korea on the basis of normative values would go a long way in helping to create a more sustainable and effective international system.

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