Introduction

EU–Korea relations have evolved dramatically since the end of the Cold War. The changing relationship between the EU on the one hand and South and North Korea on the other has come in the context of growing mutual interest from all sides. As of 2020, the EU and the Koreas have deeper and more comprehensive relationships than they did in 1991. This is particularly true for South Korea, the only country in the world with the three key agreements covering economic, political and security relations with the EU signed and in effect.

On the EU side, the Commission’s 1994 *Towards a New Asia Strategy*¹ and 2001 *Europe and Asia: A Strategic Framework for Enhanced Partnerships*² underscore and have provided the framework for three decades of stronger interest and presence in East Asia. The EU moved from a policy based on a paternalistic, ‘teacher–pupil’ relationship in the 1994 strategy to a more realistic, partnership-based approach with the 2001 document. The result has been more comprehensive relations with its three strategic partners in East Asia: South Korea, China and Japan.

As for South Korea, it has developed a middle power identity since its transition to democracy in the late 1980s. Conservative and liberal presidents alike have sought to make South Korea an independent foreign policy actor, with the South Korea–United States alliance as a pillar but not the end goal of the country’s foreign policy. As a result, Seoul has become more active in global affairs, including as an agenda-setter or even rule-maker in some areas. This has led to greater interest in strong relations with the EU, which South Korea perceives as an important partner bilaterally and in global affairs.

In the case of North Korea, the end of the Cold War meant the collapse of the world as Pyongyang knew it. Diplomatic and, crucially, economic support and partnerships with fellow communist countries disappeared almost overnight. By the 2000s, economic and political reliance on China had become entrenched. North Korea sought to diversify its diplomatic and trade links. In the 1990s, this included reaching out to the EU. However, relations with the EU deteriorated as North Korea sought to develop its nuclear programme. This has resulted in a weakening in relations.

This chapter is organised as follows. In the next section, I will describe and analyse the evolution of contemporary EU–South Korea relations from 1991 to 2020. In the section after,
I will do the same with contemporary EU-North Korea relations. I will then summarise the key points in the conclusion section.

Contemporary EU-South Korea relations

Contemporary EU-South Korea relations can be divided into three distinct periods. The first period, covering 1991–2000, served for both sides to learn more about each other. The second period, from 2001–2009, was marked by an upgrade in the bilateral relationship. The third period, from 2010 onwards, was defined by South Korea becoming the EU’s strongest like-minded partner in Asia.

Learning about each other, 1991–2000

South Korea established a permanent mission to the EU in 1989. The EU reciprocated with a delegation of its own to South Korea in 1990. Thus, by the end of the Cold War, both sides had showed their diplomatic commitment to each other. A partnership and cooperation agreement would follow. It was signed in 1996 and would eventually enter into force in 2001. This agreement strengthened the bilateral economic relationship while also calling for stronger political relations. Relations throughout the 1990s came in the context of the EU’s 1994 Asia strategy and South Korea’s quest for middle power status, symbolised by its accession to the OECD in 1996.

The key development during this period was growing bilateral trade and investment. Trade in goods almost doubled from US$20,664 million in 1991 to US$40,272 million in 2000 (see Table 3.1). It became more diversified as South Korea’s growing middle class started to demand a greater variety of goods and services and as South Korean companies moved up the value-added chain and European consumers began to buy their products in larger amounts. Also significant was the growth in South Korean greenfield investment in Europe, as the country’s chaebol and other firms opened factories across the continent. Up until then, FDI flows had been heavily dominated by European firms investing in South Korea.

Growing market-driven economic relations led to both parties agreeing to two trade agreements in 1997. Furthermore, the EU supported South Korea during the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis (AFC), before Japan and the United States, by calling on the IMF to provide bailout packages for the countries affected by the crisis. Furthermore, the EU also agreed to set up the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) Trust Fund in 1998 to support the countries suffering from the crisis. Controversies regarding the IMF’s bailout package aside, these actions showed the political importance the EU gave to strong economic relations with South Korea.

On the diplomatic front, in practice, the EU and South Korea strengthened relations through multilateral institutions. The EU joined the executive board of the Korean Peninsula Energy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Exports</th>
<th>Imports</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Balance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>9,566</td>
<td>11,098</td>
<td>20,664</td>
<td>−1,532</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>8,762</td>
<td>10,895</td>
<td>19,657</td>
<td>−2,133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>9,710</td>
<td>10,661</td>
<td>19,371</td>
<td>−951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>13,135</td>
<td>12,013</td>
<td>25,148</td>
<td>1,122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>16,411</td>
<td>16,128</td>
<td>32,539</td>
<td>283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>18,332</td>
<td>16,608</td>
<td>34,940</td>
<td>1,724</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>16,568</td>
<td>17,747</td>
<td>34,315</td>
<td>−1,179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>9,560</td>
<td>20,029</td>
<td>29,589</td>
<td>−10,469</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>11,780</td>
<td>21,966</td>
<td>33,746</td>
<td>−10,186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>15,395</td>
<td>24,877</td>
<td>40,272</td>
<td>−9,482</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: International Monetary Fund
Development Organization (KEDO), the body set up to provide energy assistance to North Korea in exchange for a freeze on its nuclear programme, in 1997. South Korea was another member of the board.\(^8\) This meant that South Korea was cooperating with the EU on its core diplomatic-security interest: relations with North Korea.

Meanwhile, the Asia-Europe Meeting, set up in 1996 and bringing together the EU and East Asian countries, served Brussels and Seoul to discuss political, people-to-people and economic matters.\(^9\) Similarly, South Korea’s membership in the OECD provided a platform to engage in discussions about economic issues. Cooperation through multilateral institutions thus quickly became a preferred modus operandi for both parties.

**Upgrading relations, 2001–2009**

The EU’s 2001 Asia Strategy was to a large extent a reflection of shifting power dynamics from West to East. Hence the focus on partnerships. With the EU-South Korea Partnership and Cooperation agreement entering into force in 2001, conditions were set for both parties to strengthen their bilateral partnership. This included the launch of a biennial summit in 2002,\(^10\) the EU’s third with an Asian country after Japan and China. This would eventually be replaced by a head of government summit in 2009.\(^11\) Meanwhile, the Commission’s 2006 *Global Europe: Competing in the World* emphasised bilateral trade agreements as an area in which the EU could lead.\(^12\) This matched South Korea’s ambition to become a free trade agreement (FTA) hub.\(^13\) This was part of South Korea’s middle power diplomacy. It laid the groundwork for the launch of bilateral FTA negotiations.

The main development during the early part of the 21st century was growing trade and investment. Building on South Korea’s quick recovery from the AFC and strong global growth until the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), bilateral EU-South Korea trade in goods reached US$75,459 million by 2009 (see Table 3.2). Bilateral investment stock meanwhile had reached US$65,692 million by then (see Table 3.3). The expansion in the types of goods and services traded continued throughout this period. But a change took place with regard to investment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3.2 EU-South Korea trade, US$ millions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: International Monetary Fund*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3.3 EU-South Korea FDI, US$ millions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outward stock</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inward stock</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Bank of Korea*
when Central and Eastern European states started to join the EU from 2004. South Korean firms began to move and open new factories in this region, leading to a four-fold increase in investment into the EU between 2004 and 2009—especially from chaebol. These were a market-led developments, but Brussels and Seoul also gave a political boost to bilateral economic relations with two trade-related agreements in 2005 and 2009.14

Furthermore, the EU and South launched FTA negotiations in 2007,15 which signalled that government leaders in both Europe and South Korea wanted to facilitate the conditions to boost trade. Negotiations were also launched in the context of competition between the EU and the United States to strengthen trade relations with third parties once it was clear that the Doha round of trade negotiations was not moving forward. The United States had launched FTA negotiations with South Korea in 2006 and had signed an agreement one year later. One month after the agreement was signed, the EU and South Korea launched their own FTA negotiations.16

With regard to diplomacy, stronger relations through multilateral institutions continued. The EU remained committed to multilateralism. For South Korea, its identity as a middle power was to a large extent based on being active or even leading in multilateral institutions. Thus, cooperation in institutions such as the OECD, the UN system or the G20 established after the GFC came naturally.

Diplomatic relations, however, were particularly strengthened at the bilateral level. Regular biennial summits symbolised this phenomenon. At a practical level, several high-level political dialogues on issues such as non-proliferation, disarmament and arms control or international cooperation and development were established.17 Furthermore, Brussels and Seoul signed three science and research agreements in 2006.18 These dialogues and agreements symbolised stronger links, which were also reflected in deeper people-to-people links such as student and cultural exchanges or tourism flows.

In contrast, cooperation in security matters weakened. Most notably, KEDO was shut down and the EU was excluded from the Six-Party Talks launched to address the second North Korean nuclear crisis.19 In other words, the EU was excluded from the resolution of South Korea’s main diplomatic and security concern. This came in the context of a shift in the EU’s perceptions and approach to North Korea, as explained in the following.

The EU’s strongest partner in Asia, 2010 onwards

The EU–South Korea relationship evolved dramatically from 2010 onwards. Both parties signed their Framework Agreement and FTA in 2010. The Framework Agreement entered into force in 2014.20 The FTA was provisionally applied from 2011 and officially entered into force in 2015.21 The EU and South Korea then signed a Crisis Management Participation Agreement (CMPA) allowing for South Korean participation in EU peacekeeping operations in 2014. The agreement entered into force in 2016.22 Meanwhile, the EU became a dialogue partner of South Korea’s Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperation Initiative (NAPCI) from its inception in 2014.23

### Table 3.4 Key EU-South Korea agreements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Date signed</th>
<th>Date of entry into force</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Framework Agreement</td>
<td>May 2010</td>
<td>June 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Trade Agreement</td>
<td>October 2010</td>
<td>July 2011 (provisional)/December 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis Management Participation Agreement</td>
<td>May 2014</td>
<td>December 2016</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Furthermore, it was included as a member of the Northeast Asia Plus Community of Responsibility (NAPCR) that replaced NAPCI in 2017. In other words, Seoul formally made the EU part of its Northeast Asia security multilateralism strategy for the first time.

Trade and investment continued to dominate the bilateral relationship between the EU and South Korea. The FTA boosted trade in goods between both sides from US$95,045 million in 2011 to US$11,412 million in 2019 (see Table 3.5). The EU benefited in particular. Its perennial trade deficit with South Korea became a surplus in 2012–17 thanks to booming demand for European goods among South Korean consumers and initially subdued demand for South Korean high-end goods due to the Eurozone Sovereign Debt Crisis. The stock of bilateral FDI also grew from US$73,569 in 2011 to US$136,605 million (see Table 3.6). Meanwhile, the EU and South Korea established over 15 bilateral bodies to discuss all aspects of bilateral trade.

This FTA was the first ever for the EU in Asia, as well as one of its first new-generation FTAs covering services or issues such as labour and environmental rights. Thus, it was a model for later FTAs with countries in the region including Japan, Singapore and Vietnam. Also, the EU–South Korea FTA entered into force before the US–South Korea FTA, which was awaiting approval by US Congress until 2012. This was a diplomatic victory for the EU. On the South Korean side, the FTA with the EU was part of its FTA hub strategy. It allowed Seoul to sign FTAs with the ‘big three’: China, the EU and the United States. The entry into force of the FTA with the EU also served to put pressure on US Congress to approve the US–South Korea FTA. FTAs were crucial for South Korea, as its companies were now competing head to head with their counterparts in other parts of the world, most notably Japan.

Political and diplomatic links between the EU and South Korea also strengthened once the Partnership Agreement was signed. Arguably, relations became stronger at the bilateral level. As the EU became more integrated thanks to the Treaty of Lisbon and South Korea sought to strengthen relations with countries across the world, Brussels and Seoul came so see themselves

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3.5 EU-South Korea trade, US$ millions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Exports</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37,008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Imports</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50,980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Balance</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: International Monetary Fund*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3.6 EU-South Korea FDI, US$ millions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outward stocks</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54,512</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inward stocks</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19,021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Balance</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Bank of Korea*
as natural partners. Head of government summits first launched in 2009 continued. Starting from 2015, the EU and South Korea also held ad hoc foreign minister-level meetings, and the number and range of high-level dialogues increased to cover areas such as Middle East and North Africa and cyber or counter-terrorism. Upon his election, Moon Jae-in became the first South Korean president to send an envoy to the EU.

Diplomatic relations in multilateral organisations also strengthened. The Treaty of Lisbon gave legal personality to the EU. This enhanced the role of the EU in the UN, where it obtained speaking rights. The EU also became actively involved in the G20, International Atomic Energy Agency and World Trade Organisation (WTO). With South Korea becoming more active in multilateral fora, practical cooperation with the EU increased. Having said that, the weakening of global governance since Donald Trump became US president and the waning influence of ASEM as expansion made it unmanageable underpinned a shift towards stronger EU-South Korea bilateral cooperation to the detriment of the use of multilateral institutions.

It was security relations that made South Korea the strongest EU partner in Asia. Arguably, this was the area in which relations intensified the most from 2010 onwards. To begin with, the EU and South Korea started to cooperate in anti-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden. This cooperation was legally formalised when the CMPA entered into force. This was a textbook case of a common threat bringing Brussels and Seoul together. With the CMPA in effect, there was also potential for more cooperation on this type of issues.

On the North Korean nuclear issue, the inclusion of the EU in both NAPCI and NAPCR signalled that South Korea saw a role for the EU in the multilateralisation of security frameworks in Northeast Asia. Above all, South Korea saw the EU as a potential example of reconciliation between both Koreas and in Northeast Asia at large. On the EU side, the Council’s 2018 Enhanced EU Security Cooperation in and with Asia symbolised its willingness to become more involved in East Asia’s security affairs. This Asia Security Strategy included nuclear issues among its key priorities. Thus, there was a natural push for the EU to become more involved in the management of the North Korean nuclear issue and engage in South Korea’s multilateral initiatives.

Contemporary EU-North Korea relations

Contemporary EU-North Korea relations can be divided into three distinct periods. The first period, covering 1991–2002, saw a quick rapprochement between the EU and North Korea. The second period, from 2003–2015, was defined by a deterioration in relations. The third period, from 2016 onwards, was marked by stalemate and the EU’s prioritisation of sanctions and pressure.

In with a bang, 1991–2002

The EU’s 1994 Asia Strategy was published just three months before the United States and North Korea signed their Agreed Framework to put an end to the first nuclear crisis. The North Korean nuclear issue was checked by name in the EU’s strategy. On the North Korean side, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the weakening of economic and political relations with China—which normalised relations with South Korea in 1992—forced Pyongyang to look for new partners, especially as a result of the ‘great famine’ of 1994–98, in which hundreds of thousands of North Koreans died. As a result of the EU’s and North Korea’s priorities, they held their first-ever political dialogue in 1998 and normalised relations in 2001.
North Korea’s nuclear issue was always the most urgent matter for the EU when dealing with Pyongyang. In 1997, the EU joined KEDO. This organisation was set up to provide North Korea with two light-water reactors in exchange for the dismantlement of its nuclear programme. The EU became one of only four members of the executive board, along with South Korea, the United States and Japan. Therefore, the EU went from no involvement in dealing with North Korea to a crucial position due to its participation in KEDO. Throughout the 1990s, arguably this was the EU’s most tangible contribution to the security of East Asia.

Shortly after, the EU and North Korea launched regular and formalised political and diplomatic engagement. In 1998, they launched their bilateral political dialogue to address North Korea’s nuclear programme, regional security and the human rights situation in North Korea. The dialogue was later supplemented with relations within the multilateral setting of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Started in 1994, ARF was the main security dialogue in East Asia when it was launched. The EU had been part of the ARF since its first meeting, and North Korea joined in 2000. Thus, by 2000, Brussels and Pyongyang had two main channels of communication and relations at different levels. This supported the EU’s push to have a stronger presence in East Asian security affairs as well as North Korea’s move to diversify relations.

There was a big boost to EU-North Korea relations in 1999–2001, following the first round of their political dialogue. During this period, all member states except for France established diplomatic relations with North Korea. The EU itself also did, in 2001. Therefore, in a relatively short period of time, EU-North Korea political relations had moved from non-existent to formalisation. This signalled that both sides were ready to leave behind Cold War enmity.

On the economic front, relations also progressed quickly. The EU and its member states started to provide aid to North Korea in 1995. EU aid during this period peaked at US$61.20 million in 2002 (see Table 3.7). At a time when other donors were a balking at providing aid to North Korea, the EU was stepping in. Furthermore, European and North Korean firms started to trade. During this period, there were years when the EU was North Korea’s third largest trading partner. The Commission also issued a Country Strategy Paper for North Korea in 2001, which included technical assistance. This was supplemented by a National Indicative Programme in 2002, which provided more detail about the type of assistance the EU would provide. In other words, the EU was showing its commitment to supporting North Korea’s economic reform and growth.

The ‘critical engagement’ era, 2003–2015

The EU’s 2001 Asia Strategy included specific references to North Korea’s nuclear programme and poor economic conditions. The 2001 Country Strategy Paper and 2002 National Indicative Programme also did. The EU had established diplomatic relations with North Korea in 2001. In other words, Brussels stood ready to engage holistically with Pyongyang. Alas, the second North Korean nuclear crisis starting in October 2002, and the de facto end of KEDO at the end of the year, put an end to these plans. EU-North Korea relations began to deteriorate. They never recovered the depth of the late 1990s and early 2000s.
There was a feeling of betrayal in the EU, where there was a consensus that North Korea had reneged on the Agreed Framework. At the same time, the advent of the George W. Bush administration and its clear move towards unilateralism reduced the role of the EU in the North Korean nuclear issue. This was exacerbated with the Bush administration’s effective termination of KEDO after it refused to make the oil shipments included in the Agreed Framework from 2002 onwards. As a result, by 2003, the EU had launched a policy of ‘critical engagement’ towards North Korea.

The EU’s critical engagement policy relied on both carrots and sticks. Therefore, the political dialogue between the EU and North Korea continued. However, the EU had become secondary to the resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue and could not influence US policy. Thus, North Korea started to lose interest in the EU. Contacts continued through the ARF. And the EU was admitted to the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) in 2013. Launched in 1992, CSCAP was the main track-2 security organisation in the region. North Korea also was a member. Therefore, the EU and North Korea kept their dialogue alive and continued diplomatic engagement through multilateral fora. But engagement was minimal compared to the situation in the previous years. The EU finally interrupted the political dialogue after the 14th round in 2015.

Indeed, the EU’s policy towards North Korea became increasingly reliant on sticks. On the diplomatic front, the EU became one of the strongest promoters of UN Human Rights Council and General Assembly resolutions. The EU also pressed North Korea on this issue through its bilateral dialogue. Both the Bush and Barack Obama administrations used human rights as a pressure point on North Korea. The EU sided with the United States on this matter.

Sticks also included economic sanctions. Starting in 2006, the UN imposed sanctions on North Korea. The first came after one of its rounds of missile tests in July 2006. Most, however, followed from North Korea’s nuclear test of October 2006 and subsequent development of its nuclear and missile programmes over the years. Starting from the first round of sanctions, the EU put pressure on North Korea through the transposition of UN sanctions and the imposition of autonomous sanctions. The EU’s stance on sanctions was criticised by North Korea. By the mid-2010s, Pyongyang was thinking of Brussels as simply a follower of US policy.

Economic engagement did continue in the form of aid. However, aid levels dwindled significantly throughout this period of time. Aid provision was down to US$8.94 million in 2015 (see Table 3.8). North Korea had to compete with other low-income countries for aid. But its political regime, human rights situation, and nuclear programme made it less attractive to the EU and its member states compared to low-income countries in other parts of the world.

### Table 3.8 EU aid to North Korea, US$ millions

|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|

Source: OECD

The years of sanctions and pressure, 2016 onwards

North Korea conducted three of its six nuclear tests in 2016–17. Furthermore, Pyongyang carried out its second-highest and highest numbers of missile tests in 2016 and 2017, respectively. These tests came together with a substantial tightening of the sanctions regime on North Korea, including those targeting the general economy and population. In this context, EU-North
Korea relations deteriorated significantly. Brussels essentially followed a policy of sanctions and pressure. This would continue even as inter-Korean and US-North Korea diplomacy took hold in 2018. That same year, the Council adopted the Asia Security Strategy, with its focus on nuclear proliferation. On the North Korean side, the perception that the EU would simply follow US policy became entrenched.

With the political dialogue interrupted since 2015, official bilateral EU-North Korea relations ground to a halt. The European Parliament did maintain contacts and visits with the Supreme People’s Assembly. But even those links were at the initiative of a small number of Members of the European Parliament and had limited support across Parliament. Contacts continued through the ARF and CSCAP as well. But these took place in a multilateral setting and did not focus on the North Korean nuclear issue specifically. Thus, EU-North Korea diplomacy was very limited from 2016 onwards.

Indeed, on the political front, the most significant development was the EU’s tightening of human rights and general diplomatic pressure on North Korea. Even as the Trump administration disregarded the issue of human rights as it focused on the nuclear issue, the EU continued to pursue this issue through UN bodies. And in 2019, it was the EU-3 of France, Germany and the United Kingdom that issued official condemnations of North Korea’s return to missile testing, even as the United States played down the tests. This prompted official rebukes from North Korea. In addition, several EU member states reduced their diplomatic presence in North Korea. Other member states asked North Korea to do the same with their embassies in their countries. Most notably, Spain expelled the North Korean ambassador, and Italy refused to provide the necessary credentials to the incoming ambassador.

Economic pressure on North Korea increased substantially from 2016 onwards. The EU continued with the transposition of UN sanctions and substantially increased autonomous sanctions. The latter essentially covered almost the entire North Korean economy. Concurrently, the EU launched demarches to remind and pressure third countries to implement UN sanctions on North Korea. Furthermore, some member states, including Germany, toughened visa issuance even on North Koreans not related to the country’s nuclear programme.

Furthermore, aid flows continued to be very low (see Table 3.9). Even as North Korea suffered from the COVID-19 pandemic that hit much of the world in 2020, aid from the EU and its member states was slow to come. Partly, this was the result of the 2016–17 sanctions regime having made aid delivery more difficult. But partly it was also the result of a lack of interest from EU donors.

**Conclusion**

The relationship between the EU and the two Koreas has evolved significantly in the 1991–2020 period. By the end of the Cold War, EU-South Korea relations were essentially based on trade and investment. South Korea only opened its permanent mission to the EU in 1999, which the EU reciprocated with its own delegation in Seoul one year later. As for EU-North Korea relations, they were essentially non-existent at the official level.
EU-South Korea relations have strengthened considerably over the past three decades, to the extent that this is the strongest relationship that Brussels has with any country in Asia. The relationship encompasses politics, economics and security. No other country in the world has three agreements covering these areas signed and in effect. The EU-South Korea FTA was a first for Brussels in Asia. For South Korea, deeper engagement with the EU is part of its middle power agenda. Trade and investment still dominate the bilateral relationship, but politics, diplomacy and security are crucial components of the relationship as well.

EU-North Korea relations developed rapidly in the 1990s all the way up to 2001, when they established diplomatic links. Throughout these years, both political and economic relations strengthened considerably. However, relations started to deteriorate in 2002 due to the second North Korean nuclear crisis. From then on, the EU implemented a policy of critical engagement and, later on, active pressure. As a result, as of 2020, official political and economic relations between the EU and North Korea were almost non-existent. Instead relations were defined by an extensive EU sanctions regime.

In the context of the EU’s growing attention to East Asia, the Koreas play an important role. This is particularly the case for South Korea, which has been the country that has embraced this EU’s turn to the region more fully. Thus, the relationship with South Korea has served the EU to model its burgeoning relationship with Japan. The FTA with South Korea has been a model for similar agreements with Singapore, Vietnam and, again, Japan. As the EU continues to seek stronger ties with and across East Asia, the South Korea model informs its policy.

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