

EU-ROK Relations Leveraging ASEM in Uncertain Times

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by Dr Steven Everts

Relations between the European Union (EU) and the Republic of Korea (ROK) have come a long way. It is clear things are moving and both sides want to cooperate to the next level. The key question is how. Having worked on EU-Asian relations since 2012, I have seen up close a genuine transformation of this relationship, buttressed by the triad of the Free Trade Agreement, the Framework Agreement and the Framework Participation Agreement. South Korea was the EU's first Asian partner to have this triad in place. And these agreements have been catalysts for a truly transformed partnership. Both sides have a real interest in making the most of their like-mindedness and shared values, including the ones that are threatened these days: democracy, rules-based multilateralism, human rights and human security.

On the economic side, there is a need to stick together in a world of rising protectionism and economic nationalism, and a need to stand up for the WTO and the rules-based trading system. In recent years, there has been a significant expansion of cooperation on science and technology, green tech, climate change and the 4th industrial revolution. There are no fewer than 30 policy dialogues but there is still plenty of scope to do more and to make these dialogues more operational.

The same applies to the field of foreign and security policy. EU-ROK cooperation on Iran's denuclearisation is a case in point. A few years ago, before the JCPOA (or Iran deal) was concluded,

As Brussels is preparing itself for the 12th ASEM Summit and the EU-ROK Summit that will take place on 18-19 October, this is a good moment to take stock of the partnership and see how the EU and ROK can optimise their cooperation in the ASEM framework. At a time of accelerating global change and threats to the rules-based international system, the EU and South Korea have a massive joint interest to step up their cooperation and maximise the opportunities of the ASEM framework.

there was initially some reluctance by ROK to curb oil imports and, yet, as strategic partners we came to an agreement. This helped pave the way for the success of the JCPOA. The EU and ROK have a shared interest to uphold the agreement, both per se and for the effect it has on denuclearisation negotiations with the DPRK. On the latter, the EU is fully supportive of efforts by ROK and other partners to work for complete denuclearisation (CVID) in line with relevant UN Security Council Resolutions, and work for peace on the Korean Peninsula.

Cooperation on counter-piracy is another good example. Since 2016, South Korea has made regular contributions to the EU's operation ATALANTA off the coast of Somalia. In fact, the EU's wish to deepen security cooperation in and with Asia has been highlighted by the Foreign Affairs Council Conclusions, adopted in May 2018, in which South Korea was highlighted as a Strategic Partner. This could be done bilaterally or in ASEAN-led regional fora, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum where both participate, for example, on maritime or cyber security.

All this is based on shared values and interests, and nurtures a relationship of friends helping each other out. Another example occurred last year in 2017 when a Korean cargo ship with 24 men on board got lost off the coast of South America. With satellite imagery, the EU was able to help bring all safely home.

The importance of ASEM is easily grasped with some key statistics: ASEM is a sizeable chunk of global power representing 55% of global trade, 60% of global population and 65% of global GDP. ASEM brings together 53 partners on an informal platform for dialogue and cooperation. Around the ASEM table, you find the quasi-totality of Asia and the quasi-totality of Europe. With no secretariat or budget, ASEM is flexible and comprehensive in nature, covering three pillars of security, economy and culture.

South Korea has been very active in ASEM. It hosted the September 2017 Economic Ministers' Meeting, in Seoul, which produced strong messages on the importance of rules-based trade and the WTO. It then organised the Education Ministers' Meeting, last November, also in Seoul, which discussed cooperation on higher education and life-long learning which is a very dynamic and concrete area of ASEM's work.

The ASEM12 Summit will take place on 18-19 October, in Brussels, under the theme "Global Partners for Global Challenges". It is the biggest Summit in Brussels this year and the biggest event

on the Euro-Asian calendar. In addition to the Summit itself, there will be several important side events such as the Asia-Europe People's Forum, the Asia-Europe Labour Forum, the Asia-Europe Business Forum, and the ASEM Cultural Festival. It will, thus, be a full week of high-level exchanges on bringing Europe and Asia closer together.

Based on the attendance at previous summits and confirmations so far, for ASEM12 we expect an 80-85% attendance rate of Heads of State or Government, with positive indications from China, Japan, Russia, ROK and most of ASEAN being present at the top level.

This is a world of rapid change and geo-political uncertainty where rules are often bended or selectively applied. Hence, the importance of ASEM12 is to send a clear signal on the value of a rules-based international order and multilateralism.

Connectivity will be the second big theme for the Summit. Many discussions on Euro-Asian connectivity begin and end with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It is important to have a broader prism. Across Europe and Asia, there are in fact many plans, many belts and many roads including those developed by ROK but also Japan, ASEAN and India. The EU, for its part, is also working on a connectivity strategy and EU Foreign Ministers are expected to set out the EU's own vision just ahead of the ASEM12 Summit.

The beauty of ASEM is that it brings to the table all the main protagonists relevant to the issue of connectivity. Last November, ASEM Foreign Ministers agreed to a widely used multilateral definition of connectivity. It stresses the need to uphold international norms and standards including market principles and working towards sustainability with regards to environmental, as well as fiscal and social issues.

At ASEM12, leaders are expected to adopt a document with ambitious outcomes. The EU is keen to break with the ASEM habit of issuing 25-page statements. The aim now is to adopt something much shorter with key common messages on key challenges.

In short, it is of great importance to have close EU-ROK cooperation in the ASEM framework. On issues such as rules-based multilateralism and connectivity, we are genuinely very close. We need to make the most of that – at ASEM12 and beyond.

About the author



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For more info on ASEM12, please visit:

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2018/10/18-19/>

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