

Europe and the Korean Peninsula:

Examining EU foreign policy towards the South and the North and what it means for inter-Korean relations and unification

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Why and how has Europe engaged with the two Koreas? What are the characteristics of European Union (EU) foreign policy towards the Korean Peninsula - and what are the differences of its approach with that of other actors such as the United States? And what is the distinctive contribution of Europe to inter-Korean relations and unification?

This year marks the 60th anniversary of relations between the EU and the Republic of Korea. Their level and intensity of cooperation has increased dramatically since 24 July 1963, when Seoul established official diplomatic relations with the European Community. In the last decade, the two sides signed a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) which entered into force in 2015; a Framework Agreement covering political cooperation, which entered into force in 2014; and a Crisis Management Participation Agreement that entered into force in 2016. These agreements cover the key areas of politics, trade, investment, and security, providing the EU and the ROK with a legal and more solid foundation upon which to further their cooperation on the Korean Peninsula.

The EU has also fostered relations with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The EU first started diplomatic relations with North Korea in May 2001 and most EU countries have since established official ties with Pyongyang, with the exception of France and Estonia. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, during the so-called period of 'active engagement' – which coincided with the ROK's 'Sunshine Policy' - EU-DPRK economic relations developed to a point that Brussels would become North Korea's third largest trading partner. However, since 2016 the EU-DPRK relationship has been characterized by disengagement and the imposition by Europe of some of the harshest sanctions aimed at deterring Pyongyang from developing its nuclear and missile programs.

This lecture presents the key determinants of EU foreign policy towards the South and the North, including discussion of the distinctive role played by Europe with regard to the question of inter-Korean relations and unification. It argues that the EU can be: (i) an independent variable for peace support on the Korean Peninsula, only marginally influenceable by Washington when it comes to supporting trust-building between the South and the North; (ii) an asset for those ROK policy makers – be they progressive or conservative – committed to dialogue and reconciliation with the North.