



# Parliamentary diplomacy between the EU and the Republic of Korea

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## Abstract

This paper studies the practice of parliamentary diplomacy in the context of EU–Korea relations arguing that this is an essential element in the bilateral relationship. Having defined the concept of parliamentary diplomacy, the development of interaction between the European Parliament (EP) and the National Assembly of Republic of Korea, Korean National Assembly (KNA) is being analysed. Their bilateral relations began in 1994 and further deepened in 2004 when the EP set up the Delegation for Relations with the Korean Peninsula. Subsequently, the EP Delegation and the KNA-EU Interparliamentary Council regularly met to discuss various issues, from trade agreements to security issues on the Korean Peninsula and defence matters more generally. This examination of parliamentary diplomacy also demonstrates the way in which bilateral relations have been influenced by electoral cycles on both sides and more generally by changes in the respective domestic political situations.

## Introduction

This paper charts the parliamentary dimension of the EU–Korean relationship, a key element of the bilateral relationship that also helps us to understand the most salient issues of mutual concern. Bilateral diplomatic relations between the EU and the Republic of Korea (RoK) were established in 1963. Against the background of important agreements signed between the two sides — the strategic partnership agreement in 2010, the Basic Agreement enacted in 2014, and the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) that became fully operational in 2015 — the National Assembly of Republic of Korea (Korean National Assembly, hereafter KNA) and the EP have also strengthened their diplomatic relationship over the past 30 years. This process started with the first joint meeting of the RoK-EU Interparliamentary Council in January 1994 and further deepened with

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the establishment in 2004 of the Delegation for Relations with the Korean Peninsula (DKOR). The Delegation has since then sought to foster dialogue between the EU and South Korea regarding issues of trade and cooperation in security and defence and also worked as a potential channel of communication with North Korea. Furthermore, on the Korean side, relations with the EP were part of an effort to extend and enhance its presence in its relationship with other core countries on the globe.

In order to study these developments, this paper examines the evolution of EU and South Korea relationship, identifying the issues of particular importance and assesses how the parliamentary involvement from both sides has the potential of strengthening their strategic partnership. One question in this regard concerns the continuity and the role of party politics on both sides, specifically examining whether there have been noticeable shifts in terms of their attitudes as a result of changing domestic politics, party politics, and/or parliamentary elections.

This paper is structured as follows: it first reviews the state of art with regard to the concept of parliamentary diplomacy which is employed in this paper. Second, it looks in turn at the internal arrangements and activities of both the EP and the KNA in terms of their activities with regard to parliamentary diplomacy. The third section is devoted to analysing the interaction between the EP and KNA, focusing in particular on the case of EP Delegation for the Korean Peninsula (DKOR) and the KNAs' position, including its attention to issues concerning North Korea. This paper employs qualitative research methods, with data collected from official documents of the EP in English and KNA in Korean, in order to gain a thorough understanding into developments in this field. The paper concludes with an outlook on the significance of parliamentary diplomacy between the EU and South Korea amid increasing geopolitical competition.

## The concept of the parliamentary diplomacy

The evolution of the term parliamentary diplomacy can be traced back to the 1950s when it was defined as 'multilateral negotiations characterised by institutionalisation, rules of procedure, public debate and the vote on draft resolutions' (Rusk 1955). The focus was then on the procedures and on specific methods of decision-making rather than on the type of actors involved in the negotiations, such as parliaments. In the 1980s, the latter started to be considered. The 'unusually slippery' (Murphy 2023) concept of parliamentary diplomacy started to include the agency of particular actors, and definitions such as 'practices by delegates of national parliaments in international parliamentary or quasi-parliamentary assembly' (Rittberger 1983) take the ground in a very restricted academic debate. As noticed by Gotz, this ambivalent meaning of the concept is at 'high risk for misunderstandings and confusion' (Gotz 2005). Thus, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, scholars of parliamentary diplomacy started giving more precise and straightforward definitions. However, they were still unable to find a common and shared one. Beetham describes parliamentary diplomacy in an essential way indicating the dialogue and interaction between parliamentarians as the core of this practice (Beetham 2006), while Weisglas and Boer define it as a common term to describe the wide range of international activities undertaken by a member of parliaments in order to increase mutual understanding between countries, to improve scrutiny

of government, to represent their people better, and to increase the democratic legitimacy of intergovernmental institutions (Weisglas and Boer 2007).

Another strand of literature focuses on the critical distinction between traditional state diplomacy and the growing practice of parliamentary diplomacy, focusing on the potential strengths and weaknesses of the latter. On one hand, it is argued that in the context of the globalisation of specific policy making processes and the valuable impact that parliamentary channels can have when the other channels are exhausted, 'the democratic tradition lies at the foundation of the parliamentarisation of international affairs' (Stavridis and Jancic 2016). At the other end, arguments have been made about parliaments, specifically in majoritarian systems, being solely 'a prolonged arm' of the executive branch or vice versa, raising scepticism about the level of independence of parliaments from governments (Bajtay 2015). As an intermediate view, we find arguments that define parliaments as actors between governments and NGOs, affirming that parliaments could have more political weight than the latter and more flexibility in their commitments and actions than the former (Weisglas and Boer 2007).

We agree with this latter middle-ground view, and we define parliamentary diplomacy as a strategic tool employed by parliamentarians for increasing cooperation between countries, regional organizations or international organizations, and for fostering dialogue in sensitive situations where state (and traditional) diplomacy might not be able to deploy. This second key characteristic of this form of diplomacy makes it an essential subject of analysis. In our case, it is fascinating to investigate the strategic approaches used by the EP when dealing with the Korean Peninsula geopolitical situation (and vice versa), such as the formation of a Delegation for the Korean Peninsula rather than two different delegations for DPRK and ROK.

Moreover, the EP is an interesting case for empirical study not only because of its particular institutional structure, composed of smaller and different bodies — such as Standing Committees, Delegations, and Assemblies — but also because, through the tools of parliamentary diplomacy, it has been increasingly playing informal, or 'hidden', roles in international disputes (such as its role in the development of the Six-Party negotiation talks in which the EU was not officially included). In the following sections, more details about the parliamentary diplomacy dimension of the EP and the establishment in 2004 of the Delegation to the Korean Peninsula (DKOR) will be discussed. However, they will first be preceded by a section comparing this experience with the KNA.

## **European parliament diplomacy at work: strengths and shortcomings of the delegations**

Despite having, since the coming into force of the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009, a veto power over the adoption of international agreements negotiated by the European Commission,<sup>1</sup> the EP's wider role in foreign relations and diplomacy remains an

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<sup>1</sup> Article 218(6) of the Treaty on Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) provides for the European Parliament mandatory approval before the conclusion of any international agreements concerning matters to which the ordinary legislative procedure applies (Delputte et al. 2016). However, while the EU agreements require the consent of the EP, the EP cannot modify the agreement.

under-explored area of academic research. Few scholars have investigated the EP as an international actor in trade (Orbie et al. 2015), or, more generally, the increasing role of the EP in international debates on human rights, international aid, or crisis management, among other dimensions (Stavridis & Irrera 2015). However, the literature on the role of the parliamentarians working in the EP delegations and the latter's role in foreign relations are still somewhat limited. The dimension of parliamentary diplomacy has just started to gain some ground in analysing the broader topic of the EU foreign policy (Goinard, 2020). However, the amount of research does not reflect its growing role.

The EP has been fostering a complex network of relations with foreign and international institutions by creating three different types of bodies and institutions: Standing Committees, Delegations, and Assemblies (Delputte et al., 2016). Following the scope of this research, the article will focus on the delegations, which can be considered as 'embassies on the move' (ibid. 2016).

These delegations can be established to maintain relations between the EP and individual parliaments of third countries, other global regions (such as in the case of the EP delegation with ASEAN), or with international organisations (such as NATO). Currently, we can count 44 delegations, covering around 190 countries, with around 944 seats<sup>2</sup> in total. The formal objective of these delegations to complement, enrich, and stimulate policies of broader implications (i.e. deepening relations could imply discussions about human rights and other potentially sensitive issues) rather than duplicating, replacing, or competing with the policies already followed by the executive (Bajtay 2015). The members of each delegation are nominated by Parliament's political groups, with the goal of reflecting the parliament's overall political balance (European Parliament 2023). In their turn, the delegation's members are then electing one chair and the two vice chairs. The EP delegations have been defined by some scholars as 'embassies on the move' (Delputte et al. 2016), because of their diplomatic nature. However, in contrast to the EU delegations of the EEAS, they do not have a permanent office, and more importantly, they are not representing the EU executive bodies but rather the only directly elected EU institution.

The European Parliament and its delegations represent the 'forefront of the global parliamentary diplomacy movement' (Stavridis and Jancic 2016) because the MEPs are less constrained than national parliamentarians and may benefit from their independence. They can potentially pursue their policy, and they can play a strong *legitimacy card*, as they are members of the only directly elected body in the European Union. In few words, EP diplomatic practices could make the EU foreign policy more efficiency and more democratic; however, these practices still present little (hard) power in comparison to the executive. Thus, although the EP serves as a benchmark for the evolution of parliamentary diplomacy around the world (Stavridis and Jancic 2016), many questions about the real diplomatic power and influence these bodies can exert in the foreign relations is still due to be answered.

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<sup>2</sup> Each MEP can have a seat in more than one delegation; thus, the higher number of seats than 750, the total number of MEPs.

Other shortcomings of the EP diplomatic practices relate to executive dominance in the field of foreign policy making, the apparent lack of independence and autonomy of these delegations, and the possible limited time and resources of parliamentarians who join one or more delegations. On the latter point, some parliamentarians have indicated that their work as members of delegations is generally ‘their third or fourth priority on the agenda’, and some of them considered the activities of these bodies as ‘political tourism’ or, even harsher, as ‘costly cheap talk’ (Herranz 2005). One further potential obstacle of parliamentary diplomacy is that the plurality of points of view exhibited in parliaments of multi-party democracies makes it challenging to present a coherent position abroad — though, as we will see below, this is not a major issue in the case of the EP’s Delegation for the Korean Peninsula.

The countries more relevant to the EP and the EU are easily detectable by looking at the numbers of the delegations’ members and the frequency of the interparliamentary activities. The largest delegation is the EU–USA, which has a total of 64 members, which are not only working within the traditional framework of the EP delegations but also under the framework of the so-called Transatlantic Legislators’ Dialogue (TLD). The EP and the US Congress coordinate this forum, and it also maintains contacts with high-ranking officials from the European Commission, the EU Presidency, and the US Administration. The second largest delegation is the EU–China, with 37 full members, which has been experiencing a decrease in the frequency of the official interparliamentary meetings. The last EU–China interparliamentary meeting occurred more 5 years ago, in May 2018. Regarding the relationship with Taiwan, the EP has been very vocal in condemning Chinese aggressive military exercises in the Taiwan Strait and calling for stronger relations with Taipei (European Parliament 2022). However, the EP does not have an official delegation with Taiwan, and it mainly maintains relations with Taiwan through the EP–Taiwan Friendship Group, which recently visited President Tsai Ing-wen in June of this year.

## The Korean National Assembly

Korea became an independent state at the end of World War II yet was soon divided into two states, leading to the creation of the Republic of Korea (RoK or South Korea) and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea) in 1948. The two states were on opposing sides of the Korean War from 1950 to 1953, and ever since the Korean Peninsula is occupied by two countries amid continuing political uncertainty, hostility and threats of renewed military conflict.

South Korea’s current political system is a presidential representative democracy in which the president is both the head of state and the head of government. The Korean constitution establishes the separation of powers among the executive, legislature, and judiciary branches. South Korea is a unicameral system with the KNA being composed of 300 seats (Guahk 2023). The KNA’s defined major activities are fourfold: legislation, finance, national administration, and parliamentary diplomacy (KNA N/D).

While South Korea is in principle a multi-party democracy, de facto it is a two-party system, with a progressive and a conservative party (Kim 2021). In organisational terms, the 21st KNA (2020–2024) there is Speaker and two Deputy Speakers, while the committee work is divided among 17 Standing Committees. The roles and duties of these Parliamentary Committees are set out in the National Assembly Act (Guahk 2023). Specifically with regard to the parliamentary diplomacy, the KNA has actively maintained relations and made diplomatic visits towards other national, supranational, and/or regional parliaments since its inauguration in 1948 (Choi 2016), and these activities have been institutionalised by an internal regulation since 1980s (Jung 2023).

According to these regulations, the KNA defines the Parliamentary diplomacy as follows:

Parliamentary diplomacy is the diplomatic activity carried out by members of the National Assembly and parliamentary diplomatic organizations targeting foreign parliaments, governments, and organizations for the purpose of securing support for pending domestic and international issues, promoting cooperation, and expanding exchanges. (KNA 2 N/A)

Furthermore, KNA stated that the diplomatic activities carried out by KNA, either collectively or individually, for the purpose of promoting cooperation, expanding exchanges, and securing international support for current issues at home and abroad. The diplomatic activities involved visiting the foreign countries, inviting the relevant counterpart to South Korea, and attending the international conferences and meetings (Jung 2023: 2).

Unlike the EU, which works with the concept of ‘delegations’, the KNA has various forms of interparliamentary groups. In this regard, the main actors of parliamentary diplomacy activity are the Speaker, Deputy Speakers, Standing Committees; as of June 2019, the Parliamentary Diplomacy Forum, 115 Parliamentary Friendship groups, which are based on the bilateral relations, the Korea–China regular interparliamentary exchange group, and other non-parliamentary members’ organisations under the jurisdiction of the National Assembly for the purpose of diplomatic activities. A temporary setting up of a delegation on a specific issue or for international conferences is also possible as of June 2023 (KNA 1 N/D; Jung 2023). Those parliamentary diplomacy groups are supported by administrative units such as the International Affairs and Protocol Bureau of the National Assembly Secretariat, the National Assembly Future Research Institute, the National Assembly Legislature Research Office, and the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Advisory Committee, depending on the purposes, needs, and demands (Jung 2023: 2).

The KNA’s parliamentary diplomacy can be traced back to 1948, when the Korean Constitutional Assembly established contact with the US Congress and the KNA also engaged with other national parliaments during the Korean War, mainly through exchanges of letters. Regular bilateral relations with other national parliaments and international organisations come into operation from the 1960s onwards. The KNA joined the Interparliamentary Union in 1961 and also started diplomatic cooperation with Japan in 1965. South Korea and Japan re-established their bilateral diplomatic relations, and their parliaments then set

up the Korea–Japan Parliamentarians’ Union in 1971 to promote understanding and friendship between two countries (Bang 2017). After that, the KNA signed a number of bilateral agreements with other countries and expended its contacts and launched the bilateral Parliamentary Friendship groups (Choi 2016).

In the 1980s, South Korea’s parliamentary diplomacy took shape more systematically, involving not only individual members, but also institutional representatives such as the KNA Speaker, the Deputy Speakers, Standing Committees, and Parliamentary Friendship groups acting as diplomatic entities. Moreover, parliamentary diplomacy had been institutionalised by a regulation on ‘Diplomatic Activities of Members of the National Assembly’, which had been introduced already in 1981 during the then authoritarian Chun government. This regulation defines the relevant arrangements regarding the main agents, the official acts, and budgetary issues (Reg. Diplomatic Activities of Members of the National Assembly: 1981).

The first Interparliamentary Council was established in 1993. This Council aimed to maximise Korea’s national interest by targeting three major powers bordering the Korean Peninsula as well as the European Union. It consisted of four subgroups: Korea–US, Korea–EU, Korea–Russia, and Korea–China Interparliamentary Council (NAS 1 N/D). Each of these subgroups had maximum of 50 members, which meant that nearly two-thirds of the Assembly were a part of the Interparliamentary Council during the 19th Assembly (2012–2016). The composition of the membership was based on need, with the approval from the Speaker, and the subgroup president sets up delegations — a selection of members — that meet with executives, considering the percentage of seats in negotiating groups (Choi 2016: 24). It has been argued that this was the most efficient and effective type of parliamentary diplomacy while it was active (*ibid*: 27).

In 2002, the Interparliamentary Council decided to shift its activities from bilateral diplomacy and focus more on activities targeting specific issues. For example, delegations visited to the USA, Europe, Russia, and Japan to discuss DPRK’s nuclear proliferation, and a fact-finding committee was sent to Iraq to investigate the military dispatch issues (*ibid*: 23). In this way, from 2003, investigation and inspection group activities aimed at resolving specific issues were strengthened, also in response to criticism of the lack of achievement on parliamentary diplomatic visits during previous decades (Kim 2015: 122). The council’s last visit to Brussels was in 2019 and discontinued in 21st Assembly.

The Parliamentary Diplomacy Forum was launched in June 2019 to further promote public diplomacy at the parliamentary level. Previously, the Interparliamentary Council was focused on the four major counterparts, but this new Forum set up 11 subgroups, each chaired by a senior member having served three or more parliamentary terms. There are subgroups on four major countries (USA, Japan, China, and Russia) as well as two intergovernmental organisations’ groups (EU and ASEAN), while the remaining subgroups deal with global regions (Africa, South America, Middle East, South Asia, and Central Asia). This is a positive development in the sense that the KNA does not only focus on important partners but can also give attention to all the continents around the globe. The guidelines on Parliamentary Diplomacy issued in 2019 regulate the membership, fixed terms, composition of

delegations, and other relevant aspects of the Forum's work (Operation Guideline on Parliamentary Diplomacy Forum No 369).

In addition, based on the study of KNA's interparliamentary activities, it is noticeable which countries are considered to be vital partners of South Korea. The most important partner is the USA due to their close relations from the very establishment of the ROK. Their relations centre on trade as well as defence and regional security, also concerning the DPRK. The People's Republic of China (PRC) is also visible in this context. The PRC was one of the subgroups in Interparliamentary Council since 1993 and Parliamentary Diplomatic Forum since 2019. KNA established another group, namely, Korea–China regular interparliamentary exchange group in the Assembly, which signed a bilateral parliamentary cooperation protocol in 2006 (KNA N/D). Moreover, Korea–PRC Parliamentarians' Union is established in early December 2022 (Kim et al. 2023: 3).

However, relations between the KNA and their Chinese partners have deteriorated in recent years, in line with the wider problems between China and the West. In terms of parliamentary diplomacy, tensions escalated in the region especially after the visit of the Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, to Taiwan in August 2022. From a Korean Chinese perspective, the situation worsened when a number of KNA's MPs, including the Vice Speaker, visited Taiwan at the end of December 2022. In an effort to diffuse the situation, the South Korean government stated that this visit in an 'individual capacity' and confirmed that the Korean government respects the 'One China policy' when the Chinese government officially condemned this visit by MPs to Taiwan.<sup>3</sup>

## EU–Korean parliamentary diplomacy in practice

The EP body in charge of fostering and improving the parliamentary dimension between the two is the 'Delegation for the Korean Peninsula', also known as DKOR. Before the DKOR's establishment in 2004, the EP/RoK parliamentary diplomatic relations were under the more extensive umbrella of the Delegation with the member states of ASEAN, Southeast Asia, and Korea. Table 1 lists the EU–RoK Interparliamentary Council Meetings that were held prior to the DKOR in 1994–2003. However, the meeting reports are not publicly available in this period.<sup>4</sup>

The decision to divide the Delegation into smaller and more focused bodies can already hint at a stronger will of the EP to introduce more effective and more focused parliamentary diplomatic practices with the two Koreas and also to counter the criticism that the work of the delegations was merely 'political tourism'. More specifically, with the establishment of the DKOR in 2004, the EP was reinforcing its

<sup>3</sup> It was a respond to a question from the news report in the regular briefing session of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the 5th of January 2023. The Korean words used are '국회의원의 개별 활동' and '하나의 중국을 존중한다는 입장을 유지'.

<sup>4</sup> On the Korean National Assembly Secretariat website, the relevant Korean side meeting report is available from 2007, the 10th Joint RoK–EU Interparliamentary Council meeting in Strasbourg in June 2007.



**Table 1** EU–RoK Interparliamentary Council Meetings from 1994 to 2003

<i>EU–RoK Interparliamentary Council Meetings</i>	Date	Locations
1st	Jan. 1994	Seoul
2nd	Jul. 1995	Strasbourg
3rd	Nov. 1996	Seoul
4th	May 1997	Brussels
5th	Jan. 1999	Seoul
6th	Dec. 2000	Strasbourg
7th	Apr. 2003	Seoul

interest in increasing and improving relations with a democratic ‘strategic partner’, such as the Republic of Korea, in trying to strengthen its role as a neutral player in the complicated inter-Korean relations, and to also pay special attention to the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), as another aspect of the EU’s ‘critical engagement’ doctrine (based on sanctions, humanitarian aid provisions, and people-to-people dialogue). Nevertheless, this strategic approach of putting together two very different geopolitical actors into one broader delegation has presented a few shortcomings (i.e. criticism by both sides regarding the EP ambivalence, allegations of not taking a solid stance, among other predictable limitations noted by the ROK and the DPRK).

One of the main rules of the EP delegation’s composition is to achieve party political proportionality, and the DKOR composition is not an exception to the rule. However, when focusing on the nationalities of the MEP members of the Delegation, it is noticeable that a high share of members has come from Germany (21%), the UK (when still an EU member states) (11%), and Italy (11%) (see Table 2). By adding up the percentages of the nationalities of the member states that currently have foreign embassies in the DPRK,<sup>5</sup> the share of this group in the delegation’s composition almost reaches 50% (Table 2). Moreover, when including in this count the MEPs represent Italy, a member state which has had a constant although quiet and informal connection with the DPRK, the share of Delegation members from these countries rises to 58% (Table 3). This could indicate a higher interest of the European Parliament to focus initially on the critical engagement with the DPRK during the first years from the establishment of the DKOR. This focus was gradually replaced with a more substantial consideration for the other Korean Peninsula region, the Republic of Korea (RoK), a shift that is noticeable also on the content of the Interparliamentary Meeting (IPM) minutes, partly available in the European Parliament Delegation portal.

<sup>5</sup> Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Poland, Romania, Sweden, and the UK (until 2020).

**Table 2** DKOR composition (2004–2024) by nationalities

DKOR (2004–2024)					
<i>Nationalities</i>	No. of MEPs in DKOR	%	<i>Nationalities</i>	No. of MEPs in DKOR	%
Austria	3	5	Luxembourg	1	2
Belgium	2	4	Malta	3	5
Bulgaria	2	4	Netherlands	1	2
Denmark	1	2	Poland	2	4
Finland	1	2	Romania	3	5
France	3	5	Slovakia	2	4
Germany	12	21	Slovenia	1	2
Greece	1	2	Spain	2	4
Hungary	3	5	Sweden	1	2
Italy	6	11	UK	6	11
Total				56	100%

### Interparliamentary meetings: the evolution of relations between the EP, the RoK and the DPRK

As for any European Parliament delegations, the DKOR's main intention is to hold regular meetings, to receive their counterparts in Brussels or Strasbourg and to pay official visits to the Korean Peninsula regularly. Unlike other delegations, the DKOR activities have never truly experienced much opposition or resistance by party groups or member states because the main items discussed in its parliamentary diplomacy activities, such as the security of the Korean Peninsula or the EU–RoK Free Trade Agreement, are not much — internally or externally — contested in the European public sphere and in the EU member states' national political debates.

This aspect of the DKOR reflects the longstanding, unique, and strategic relations that the EU has with the Republic of Korea, as one of the Asian democracies with whom the EU shares fundamental values and the same analysis on a number of global issues (DKOR, 2010), but also its role as a 'neutral actor' (DKOR, 2010.2) and a 'goodwill partner' (European Parliament Delegation for Relations with the Korean Peninsula (DKOR) 2005) in the inter-Korean relations political processes.

This ambivalent mission of the DKOR is also reflected in a few statements written, particularly in the minutes or reports of the first delegation's meetings, in which the DKOR's intention of visiting both the North and the South, when going abroad is explicitly spelt out.<sup>6</sup> Later, this determination will be gradually decreasing,

<sup>6</sup> For example in European Parliament Delegation for Relations with the Korean Peninsula (DKOR) (2013), we can read 'While the delegation's visits to the Korean Peninsula traditionally encompassed both the North and the South, to both sides' full satisfactions, preparations for this visit were somewhat overshadowed by the sinking of the *Cheonan* corvette on 26 March [...] it was felt that, in this particular context, a visit to Pyongyang would not be conducive to a serene exchange of views [...]'.

**Table 3** Member states' presence in DPRK and their MEP share in the composition of DKOR

EU member states (with embassies in DPRK)	Share of MEPs in DKOR during 2004–2024 (in per cent)
Bulgaria	4
Germany	21
Poland	4
Romania	5
Sweden	2
UK	11
<i>Total</i>	47
<i>+ Italy</i>	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>58</b>

and as shown in Table 4, the majority of the DKOR Interparliamentary meetings (IPM) have been organised with the RoK counterparts.

Four main items are usually always present on the agenda in the IPM discussions between EP and RoK:

- Security and inter-Korean relations
- Economic and trade matters
- Political issues
- Social issues

The chronological order of appearance of the items in the documents and the length of the paragraphs dedicated to a specific item could reflect the importance of the latter, which also needs to be contextualised in the specific timeframe and on the parliamentary term from which the delegation meeting's minutes correspond. In order to analyse this evolution in greater detail, the following sections look at developments in each parliamentary term of the EP, providing insights into the shifting focus of EU parliamentary engagement with Korea over time.

### **2004–2009: the role of DKOR as delegation for inter-Korean relations**

During the first DKOR mandate, the focus on the inter-Korean relations and on security issues is evident, also because of the progress of the Six-Party Talks multilateral forum, established in 2003. Most of the EP/DPRK IPM, with additional working group visits and ad hoc delegations to North Korea, are taking place within this timeframe. The delegation of the EP is often reduced to an 'extension branch' of the EU since; in many statements, the EP and the EU are overlapping. The suppose

**Table 4** DKOR activities in chronological order (2004–2024)

DKOR activities	Meetings	Date	Location
2004–2009 (6th term) <sup>6</sup>	1st EP/DPRK & 8th EP/RoK	Apr. 2003	Pyongyang, Seoul
	2nd EP/DPRK	Oct. 2006	Brussels
	9th EP/RoK	Nov. 2006	Seoul
	WG visit to DPRK and RoK	Jun. 2007	Pyongyang, Seoul
	WG visit to DPRK and RoK	Oct. 2007	Pyongyang, Seoul
	Ad hoc delegation to DPRK	Jun. 2008	Beijing, Pyongyang
	11th EP/RoK	Oct. 2008	Seoul
2009–2014 (7th term) <sup>7</sup>	WG visit to Beijing & Seoul	Apr. 2009	Beijing, Seoul
	12th EP/RoK	Jan. 2010	Brussels
	13th EP/RoK	Jun. 2010	Seoul
	14th EP/RoK	Jan. 2011	Brussels
	3rd EP/DPRK & 15th EP/RoK	Nov. 2011	Pyongyang, Seoul
	16th EP/RoK	Jan. 2013	Brussels
	4th EP/DPRK and visit to RoK <sup>8</sup>	July 2013	Pyongyang, Seoul
2014–2019 (8th term) <sup>9</sup>	17th EP/RoK	Jan. 2014	Strasbourg
	18th EP/RoK	Jan. 2015	Brussels
	19th EP/RoK	Jun. 2015	Seoul
	20th EP/RoK	Mar. 2018	Brussels
	5th EP/DPRK	Oct. 2018	Beijing, Pyongyang
2019–2024 (9th term)	21st EP/RoK	Nov. 2019	Brussels
	22nd EP/RoK	Sept. 2022	Seoul

<sup>6</sup>Tenth EP/RoK not available

<sup>7</sup>No meetings in 2012 because of presidential elections in South Korea

<sup>8</sup>Minutes not available

<sup>9</sup>Nineteenth/20th EP/RoK

neutrality of the EU, and thus of the EP, is regularly mentioned by the North Korean counterparts,<sup>7</sup> and the willingness of the EU to maintain dialogue with the DPRK is also one of the main appreciating points communicated by the RoK parliamentarians (European Parliament Delegation for Relations with the Korean Peninsula (DKOR) 2006; RoK-EU Interparliamentary Council 10th Joint Meeting and Official Visit to the Swiss Parliament Delegation Report on Diplomatic Activities 2007). Economic and trade issues started to emerge in 2006. From this point onwards, they became increasingly present in the discussions, preparing the ground for the comprehensive EU–RoK FTA that will be signed in Oct. 2009 and entered into force in Dec. 2015.

<sup>7</sup> This is not always the case. In fact, in few documents analysed, the DPRK perception of the EU is somehow changing depending on who is interacting with the MEP and on the context. For example, in European Parliament Delegation for Relations with the Korean Peninsula (DKOR) (2006), we can read that ‘the DPRK has raised doubts about the EU sincerity and its independence of US views and strategies’ when referring to the UN Human rights commission’s agenda.

With the context of the Global Financial Crisis of 2007–2008, in the 11th EP/RoK IPM, the parliamentarians considered the FTA almost as a done deal with ‘small issues’ to be tackled to also ‘mitigate the disasters from the world financial crisis’ (European Parliament Delegation for Relations with the Korean Peninsula (DKOR) 2008). One observable aspect of the EP diplomacy, particularly during the last 2 years, is the pressure that the MEPs are putting on the KNA counterparts to foster, promote, and support the idea that the EU–RoK FTA should be signed as soon as possible<sup>8</sup> (European Parliament Delegation for Relations with the Korean Peninsula (DKOR) 2008), despite the Korean desire of taking it slowly also following the obstacles and difficulties they encountered while drafting and discussing the possibility of an FTA with the USA (signed in 2007 and entered into force in 2012). However, the DKOR’s idea of ‘Korean desire of taking it slowly’ has not been particularly noticed in the KNA’s 10th and 11th meeting reports, as the South Korean side was in any case more concerned with the interactions of the RoK with the USA and the EU and the ratification process of the FTAs with these partners in the National Assembly (RoK-EU Interparliamentary Council 10th Joint Meeting and Official Visit to the Swiss Parliament Delegation Report on Diplomatic Activities 2007 & 2008).

### 2009–2014: promoting EU–RoK FTA

In the second DKOR term, the focus shifted towards items related to EP/RoK FTA. The inter-Korean relations, although always present in the debates, lost the momentum they reached with the Six-Party talks process, which froze precisely in 2009 with the Obama Administration. The order of the items presented in the documents, which always had security issues and DPRK-related items, changes from the 12th IPM EP/RoK, and the ramification process of the FTA becomes the focal point. Between these 5 years, the number of IPMs between EP/RoK increased, and it counts six total meetings, which until now is the higher number of DKOR IPMs. Conversely, only one interparliamentary meeting with the DPRK counterparts is organised in concomitance with the 15th IPM EP/RoK in Seoul.

With the advent of the FTA, it is evident that the EP delegation needs to address some of the few most pressing issues that the EU could encounter with the enforcement of the comprehensive free trade agreement with the Republic of Korea, namely, the legality of the capital punishment in Penal Code of South Korea and other technical issues such as the ‘safeguard clause’. Therefore, while the two are exploring new ways of cooperation to improve their bilateral relationship, the members of the delegation are bringing the human rights issues on many occasions and trying to also influence government executive leaders.<sup>9</sup> Another interesting development observable in the

<sup>8</sup> In European Parliament Delegation for Relations with the Korean Peninsula (DKOR) 2008, we read ‘It is important to proceed with the FTA quickly as it would be more difficult to do so in the face of a world-wide recession’.

<sup>9</sup> Such as the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade YU Myung-hwan (DKOR, 2010.2).

minutes of the third EP/DPRK is that for the first time, a direct call to action explicitly addressed to the EP and to the MEPs, rather than generally talking about the EU, is made<sup>10</sup> (European Parliament Delegation for Relations with the Korean Peninsula (DKOR) 2011). Finally, between 2013 and 2014, a misalignment, due to worrying Korea about the ‘nationalistic tone of Japan’, between the EU and RoK is visible in the documents. While Korean parliamentarians are explicitly exposing their concerns, European representatives are dismissing them as ‘not as important as the role of China’ (European Parliament Delegation for Relations with the Korean Peninsula (DKOR) 2013; RoK-EU Interparliamentary Council and 16th Joint Meeting Report 2013).

### 2014–2019: domestic politics matter — losing focus

For the third term of the DKOR, only two documents are available in the EP Delegation portal: the minutes for the 18th EP/RoK IPM and the minutes of the 5th (and last) EP/DPRK IPM. Although other meetings (and related documents, reports, and minutes) are not mentioned on the DKOR official website, between 2016 and 2018, three other IPMs have supposedly occurred: the 19th and 20th EP/RoK IPM and the 4th EP/DPRK. Two logical assumptions could be argued. The first option is that the two counterparts did not want to disclose the information discussed during the meetings, while the second one is that the delegation members took their role less seriously than the two previous ones, also because they might have been more focused on the 2014 EP elections and its outcome. Even the structure of the minutes looks more like two monologues from the EP and secondly from the Republic of Korea counterparts, in which both parties announce their main general concerns. For the EP delegation, items such as Ukraine and the South Mediterranean situation are widely discussed (European Parliament Delegation for Relations with the Korean Peninsula (DKOR) 2015). In contrast, the main concerns for the Korean delegation are still the Japanese revisionist revival, the lower birth rate, and its demographic implications (*ibid* 2015). While the Six-Party talks and the EU–RoK FTA were the two most salient and vital issues to discuss and in which the exchange between the two parliamentary delegations was indeed essential, the feeling is that in this third term, the momentum to foster exchange is a bit lost, by the lack of a robust common debate.

The RoK-EU Interparliamentary Council side of the 17th (2014) joint meeting report clarified the discussion points that included the ‘strengthening the cooperation between the KNA and EP’, the ‘continuation of the EP’s involvement on the DPRK’ and the desire to ‘promote South Korea’s position in Northeast Asian affairs’, for example, concerning the Japanese revisionist issue. As a matter of fact, the meeting contents appears to be repetitive compared to previous years, and as it occurred almost at the end of the 7th EP term, it is not clear what the benefit of this visit

<sup>10</sup> ‘On another issue, Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Kung reiterated the call to the EP Delegation to contribute to the upgrading of diplomatic relations with the EU, stressing that [...] ‘as MEPs, it is your task to contribute to an end of this situation’ [referring to the absence of the DPRK delegation in Brussels] (European Parliament Delegation for Relations with the Korean Peninsula (DKOR) 2011).

was for the KNA side. However, the KNA always combined the Interparliamentary Council visit with bilateral European countries visits, as with France and UK on this occasion (RoK-EU Interparliamentary Council 17th Joint Meeting Report 2014).

The 19th joint meeting was held in June 2015 in Seoul (RoK-EU Interparliamentary Council 21st Meeting Report 2019). After that, the 20th joint meeting was held in Brussels in March 2018, and it is noticeable that there has been a long pause between EP and KNA delegation visits after June 2015 to March 2018. A various reason can be estimated but first there was the 20th Korean Assembly election was held in April 2016 and soon after that by-then President Park Guen-hye's scandal broke out and Korean domestic politics went into turmoil, eventually leading to an impeachment process in December 2016. The impeachment finally ended with new Presidential elections, which were held in May 2017. Consequently, the KNA Interparliamentary Council members did not make any foreign visits between January 2016 and March 2018 (NAS 2 N/D).

### **2019–2024: parliamentary diplomacy — gaining or losing momentum?**

At the time of writing, the most recent DKOR delegation organised an IPM right before the COVID-19 pandemic hit (the 21st EP/RoK IPM in November 2019), and one right after the emergency was passed (the 22nd EP/RoK IPM in September 2022). Despite the low number of documents connected to this delegation term, an interesting interpretation of the main items that emerge from the text analysis: Firstly, the topical issue of climate change is included in the main topics to be discussed. This could represent a significant turning point in the parliamentary diplomacy activities between EU and Korea because by reinforcing the idea that the fight against climate change is a common challenge, the DKOR is identifying a new topical debate in which the exchange by the two parties is required, as it was previously for the Six-Party talks and the ratification of the FTA (RoK-EU Interparliamentary Council 21st Meeting Report 2019). Secondly, there was an administrative change from the KNA side in 2019. It launched a new parliamentary diplomacy group that called Parliamentary Diplomacy Forum in June 2019. One of these subgroups, the RoK-EU parliamentary Diplomacy Forum, gradually took over the task of the RoK-EU Interparliamentary Council as of 21st KNA (2020–2024). In the 22nd EP/RoK, the fight against climate change comes back with the mentioning of the energy transition, as a local but also a global solution that the representatives of both delegations should push for (European Parliament Delegation for Relations with the Korean Peninsula (DKOR) 2022; RoK-EU Parliamentary Diplomacy Forum 22nd Interparliamentary Council Meeting Report 2022).

Moreover, a strong emphasis is dedicated to the role of parliamentary diplomacy, in which the members of the delegation explain in a very much autoreferential way why delegations and parliamentary diplomacy are needed. This is the first time the DKOR is explicitly talking about the importance of EP diplomacy in the EU, and this attitude is also visible in the talk given by the current DKOR Chair, Lukas Mandl (EPP), at the event 'What Role for the European Parliamentary

Diplomacy on the Korean Peninsula', organised by the Institute of Korean Studies at Freie Universität Berlin in 2021. MEP Mandl focuses his talk on the praises of parliamentary diplomacy, particularly for the modalities in which these activities are done and on the legitimacy that an EP delegation represents compared to the EU Commission, the EU Council, and the EEAS.<sup>11</sup> The question that could arise from this emphasis on the importance of parliamentary diplomacy is whether there is more significant momentum for this type of diplomatic activity or, on the contrary, if there is a decreasing interest in it at the European Union level, and thus, MEP are trying to highlight this practice for their own ends.

## Conclusion

This paper explored the evolution of relations between EU and the Republic of Korea which started from January 1994. The focus has been on the role of parliamentary diplomacy and assessed how parliamentary involvement from either side strengthened their bilateral relations over these three decades.

With the proliferation of EP Delegations to third regions, third countries, and international organisations, the EP has firmly stated its willingness to play a more critical role in international politics through parliamentary diplomacy activities. In the case of the Korean Peninsula with the establishment of DKOR in 2004, the EP and the MEPs were able to kill two birds with a stone by having an ambivalent diplomatic goal: to keep fostering dialogue with the DPRK and to strengthen and improve the already strong bilateral relations with one of the most important Asian EU allies, the Republic of Korea. The DKOR activities have been following the global trends, shifting the focus depending on the delegation term by pushing more for different issues at different times, partially mirroring the efforts of the executive bodies. Since its establishment, the DKOR has used its 'legitimacy card' to work better and faster on more sensitive issues in which soft power and lower-profile diplomatic activities can produce some momentum for certain desired outcomes.

Through the textual analysis of the official documents provided in this paper, evidence showed how each time, both parliaments focused their diplomatic activities on different issues. Between 2004 and 2009, the topical issue was the Six-Party talks and the security and defence of the Korean Peninsula, thus mainly focusing on intra-Korean relations and engagement with the DPRK. In the following period, the FTA was at the centre of the debates and discussions, and the diplomatic work of actively promoting the agreement made by the parliamentarians from both sides may have sped up the signing process. Later, with the EP elections of 2014 and the 20th Korean Assembly election, followed by the impeachment of President Park Guen-hye, the parliamentary diplomacy between the two sides experienced a

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<sup>11</sup> Quoting him, 'The language is clearer. Usually, the talks are more related to practical issues, less related to ideologies or nationalism or ethical tensions or whatever it might be because usually the vast majority of the people we have the privilege to represent expect practical solutions for proper living, peace, freedom and mutual relations' (Lukas Mandl intervention at Freie Universität Berlin, 2021).



long pause and, thus, a loss of focus, indicating how electoral cycles and domestic politics matter. Finally, in the current term, despite the second significant pause caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, both parliaments are trying to gain momentum by identifying global and shared challenges, such as climate change, that could benefit from discussions, sharing of knowledge, and peer-to-peer exchange that parliamentary diplomacy activities can provide. The question that arises, and that future research should try to answer, is if these parliamentary diplomacy efforts will keep gaining momentum, and thus, more interparliamentary cooperation will be institutionalised between the EP and the Republic of Korea, or if, by contrast, both sides will focus on the more traditional state bilateral diplomacy by decreasing the interparliamentary activities or focusing on regional partners that are currently more relevant, such as Ukraine for the European Parliament and Taiwan for the Korean National Assembly.

Based on the observations of these two parliaments and their diplomatic relations over several decades, we can also draw some general conclusions at the end of this paper. First, we have seen how the electoral cycle matters for the conduct of exchange of the parliamentary diplomacy. It is understood that the conduct of public diplomacy — the manner in which MPs carry out their initiatives and bilateral agreements — depends also on the election result and that therefore there is a pause around the electoral cycle from both sides. Second, we have seen the impact of domestic politics. At the outset of this paper, we defined parliamentary diplomacy as ‘a strategic tool employed by parliamentarians for increasing cooperation between countries, regional organizations or international organizations, and for fostering dialogue in sensitive situations where state (and traditional) diplomacy might not be able to deploy’. In this definition, there is an implicit assumption that domestic politics and the society are stable. However, if there is a critical disruption in the internal politics of the polity, we can expect a reduction in the activity in the area of parliamentary diplomacy. In reverse, we can assume — based on the experience of EU–Korea relations — that parliamentary diplomacy works best on the basis of stable internal politics on both sides.

**Abbreviations** *ASEAN*: Association of Southeast Asian Nations; *DKOR*: EU Delegation for the Korean Peninsula; *DPRK*: Democratic People’s Republic of Korea; *EU*: European Union; *EP*: European Parliament; *FTA*: Free trade agreement; *KNA*: Korean National Assembly (National Assembly of Republic of Korea); *NATO*: North Atlantic Treaty Organization; *RoK*: Republic of Korea; *TLD*: Transatlantic Legislators’ Dialogue

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