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**The EU, North Korea and the Shifting Global Discourse on Human Rights**

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**Introduction**

“The European Union is founded on a shared determination to promote peace and stability and to build a world founded on respect for human rights, democracy and rule of law. These principles underpin all aspects of the internal and external policies of the European Union”.[[1]](#footnote-1) It reads in the 2012 EU Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, as endorsed by the EU member states. These mutually reinforcing principles have shaped the EU’s relations with North Korea, an opaque totalitarian regime responsible for grave and systematic violations of human rights, as the UN Commission of Inquiry established in 2014. Pyongyang’s authoritarian regime has a long history of rejecting engagement on human rights as interference in its domestic affairs, claiming that any such criticism is based on “unconfirmed information fabricated and spread by forces hostile to DPRK”.[[2]](#footnote-2) North Korea sees the development of its nuclear weapons as the sole means to guarantee its survival, at the expense of the wellbeing of its population.

This chapter argues that considering North Korea’s isolation, the absence of actual political dialogue and the partial failure of its “critical engagement”, **the EU has been limited in engaging North Korea. Yet, where the EU’s role has been important is in shaping the global human rights discourse on North Korea, including by facilitating engagement with the UN Human Rights Council mechanisms**. The ongoing geopolitical power transition is however challenging the EU’s efforts, whereby emerging countries, in particular China, North Korea’s sole ally, are promoting alternative views which is leading to an increasingly apparent divergence in the global human rights discourse, influencing the international approach to North Korea.

The chapter first outlines the status of human rights in the country, as documented by external sources, including international NGOs and organizations in South Korea, and examined by the relevant UN mechanisms, given the restrictions on access for independent human rights monitors. Second, it assesses the EU’s “critical engagement” policy on North Korea concerning human rights, in light of its inherent fragmentation and in the midst of a global power transition. Finally, it examines the implications of the global political climate divided on the concept of human rights concerning the EU’s North Korea human rights policy. Countries, such as China questioning their universality and instead promoting alternative discourses, might be contributing to the perpetuation of human rights violations in the country.

**The status of human rights in North Korea**

“In North Korea, every single article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is violated in extremity”, according to Human Rights Watch.[[3]](#footnote-3) North Korea remains the country with the world’s most isolated society, where systematic, widespread and gross human rights violations have been committed by a despotic regime, as established by the UN Commission of Inquiry in 2014.[[4]](#footnote-4) The report found that the main perpetrators of human rights violations are officials of the State Security Department, the Ministry of People’s Security, the Korean People’s Army, the Office of the Public Prosecutor, the judiciary and the Workers’ Party of Korea, all under the control of the Supreme Leader. Establishing the COI was an unprecedented initiative reflecting the longstanding international concerns about human rights violations in the country. As a result, in December 2014, for the first time, the human rights situation was officially discussed by the UN Security Council. In 2015, the United States added “human rights abuses in North Korea” to the permanent Security Council agenda, which made the subject a recurring item of discussion.[[5]](#footnote-5) With no access to North Korea, the international community has been constrained in assessing the situation first hand. Therefore, they have relied on NGOs based in South Korea as well as organizations operating in Western countries, who have done extensive investigation based on information gathered through interviews with North Korean defectors.[[6]](#endnote-1) Using satellite imagery and open-source mapping technology has also helped their efforts to record human rights violations.

**International NGOs** working on North Korea advocate for more action to address human rights violations at the hands of a leadership driven by nuclear considerations at the cost of the welfare of its own people. At the same time, paradoxically, the leadership has praised the people’s efforts to support the socialist construction inspired by self-reliance, as the “driving force for a leap forward in the whole course of the Korean revolution”.[[7]](#footnote-6) **The work of human rights organizations based in South Korea,** often run by former defectors, remains key to human rights advocacy concerning North Korea. But advocacy has been challenging in an international context whereby defusing Pyongyang’s nuclear threat has increasingly become a priority over raising human rights violations. Since the 2018 Singapore meeting between the US and North Korea, the dilemma of nuclear talks vs. human rights advocacy has persisted in the West, as well as in South Korea, just as Pyongyang has demanded lifting of all sanctions before it takes any steps toward denuclearizing.

North Korea has also repeatedly warned that if the US continues to escalate its human rights campaign against the North, this could “block the path to denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula forever – a result desired by no one”.[[8]](#footnote-7) Against this background NGOs in South Korea have continued their activities, including the rescue of and in-depth interviews with North Korean defectors to gain insight into the country. One such NGO, the **Database Center** **for** **North Korean Human Rights (NKDB**) was founded in 2003 to investigate the human rights situation, support victims’ resettlement process and prepare for transitional justice under a unified Korea.[[9]](#footnote-8) Numerous NGOs in South Korea help with the resettlement of defectors through education, such as **Now Action & Unity for Human Rights** (**NAUH**) founded by former defector Ji Seong-ho.[[10]](#footnote-9) Based on their recent assessment the human rights situation under Kim Jong-un has further deteriorated; the regime has tightened domestic restrictions on travel and punishment for unauthorized border crossings into China.[[11]](#footnote-10) The same assessment is shared by the **Citizens’ Alliance for North Korean Human Rights** (NKHR), founded in 1996 to bring the situation of the victims of North Korea’s political prison camps to the attention of the UN and the international community.[[12]](#footnote-11)

Inspired by these investigations, and following eight consecutive UN Human Rights Council resolutions and ten General Assembly resolutions adopted since 2004, the UN HR Council resolution in March 2013 co-sponsored by the EU and Japan, led to the establishment of a Commission of Inquiry.[[13]](#footnote-12) In March 2014 the COI has documented a series of violations, including arbitrary detention, torture, executions and enforced disappearance to political prison camps; violations of freedom of thought, expression and religion; discrimination on the basis of state-assigned social class, gender and disability; violations of freedom of movement and residence; violations of the right to food; and enforced disappearance of persons from others countries, including through international abductions.[[14]](#footnote-13) The report prompted anxiety and insecurity on the part of Pyongyang, but it also led Pyongyang to make several concessionary moves, such as accepting nearly half of the recommendations from the 2009 UPR, two months after the COI was released. Most importantly, the ICC referral recommendation was considered key to Pyongyang’s response; for a leader respected as a deity, the referral was received as the gravest affront. This also indicates the value North Korea attributes to its sovereign right as a country, and rejects demands for international cooperation on human rights, perceived as a foreign attempt to undermine its hold on power.[[15]](#footnote-14)

Throughout the years the human rights NGOs have maintained focus both on encouraging further **engagement** on human rights just as the nuclear talks have progressed – and stalled – and on **accountability** for the crimes committed. Ensuring justice, an essential condition for a sustainable solution on the Korean Peninsula, is a central pillar of the UN COI, of the EU’s approach to North Korea and for the NGOs who work on transitional justice. In 2019, for example, the Seoul-based **Transitional Justice Working Group** (TJWG) mapped three types of locations connected to human rights abuses in North Korea using satellite imagery during interviews with North Korean escapees. This has provided important information about patterns of killing and burial often not visible in individual testimonies, important in preparing for transitional justice, serving as historical record to support the process of recovery.[[16]](#footnote-15) With the same aim to shed light on the activities of an obscure regime, the recent report of Citizens’ Alliance for North Korean Human Rights, “Blood Coal”, is a key investigation into the exploitative economic system of North Korea. It focuses on the illegal export of minerals maintaining power structures through abuses, including forced labour, thus highlighting the intersection between human rights violations and development of weapons, a link left unexplored.[[17]](#footnote-16)

For a comprehensive picture of the efforts invested into addressing human rights violations in the country, prior to examining the EU’s role, it is important to look at **the** **efforts of the** **South Korean government** in addressing the issue, from at least three angles: 1. official policies and the consistency in their application under successive governments, 2. the provision of funds to support the relevant NGOs, and 3. South Korea’s participation in international advocacy initiatives. On the first two interconnected points, the Seoul-based NGOs have long advocated for the implementation of the **North Korea Human Rights Act**, passed in 2016 by the National Assembly under the Conservative government of Park Geun-hye, the impeached president, who has represented a tougher stance vis-à-vis the North.[[18]](#footnote-17) Succeeded by Liberal President Moon Jae-in of the Democratic Party since 2017, the official policy on North Korea has seen a significant shift, as the current administration has shown more readiness in engaging Pyongyang through a peace initiative, and less willingness to address human rights, a posture which has not received much support from the United States under President Donald Trump.[[19]](#footnote-18)

The Human Rights Act tasked the government with investigating the human rights situation in North Korea. While it prescribes the establishment of the North Korea Human Rights Foundation to provide support to NGOs engaged in projects to improve the situation, the Foundation never launched any activities, as its official establishment is conditional on the selection of its board members which is delayed by the ruling Democratic Party. In addition, the Foundation’s budget saw a cut of over 90% in 2019, which prompted critical remarks both domestically and outside South Korea. This has also attracted international criticism of the Blue House.[[20]](#footnote-19) On the third point, in November 2019, for the first time since 2008 the South Korean government declined to co-sponsor the UN General Assembly resolution condemning North Korea for its human rights abuses. Seoul defended its decision claiming this was an attempt to tamp down tensions in the Korean Peninsula.[[21]](#footnote-20) This, however, further added to the condemnation of the South Korean government’s record – whether conservative or liberal – by civil society for their lack of addressing human rights violations in the North. Accordingly, in December 2016, 67 NGOs and coalitions addressed a letter to President Moon on his government’s decision not to co-sponsor the resolution, as well as expressing concern about the government’s November 2017 deportation of two North Korean fishermen accused of murder, despite the government’s obligation to provide due process and protect anyone who would be at risk of torture.[[22]](#footnote-21)

Looking at the most recent assessments of the situation on the ground, in the perception of Seoul-based NGOs, there has been no improvement in the situation of human rights in North Korea. Since Kim Jong-un became leader, control has tightened, and punishment for North Koreans who are caught trying to escape are harsher. [[23]](#footnote-22) The 2017 report by the UN Special Rapporteur on North Korea has found that while patterns of grave violations continue to be observed and there is no progress in determining the whereabouts of foreign abductees, more sections of society seem to have access to information than in the past, despite strict government restrictions. Most importantly it argued that the rise in military tension in the Korean Peninsula has been a serious impediment to dialogue on human rights and noted that the international community should support current efforts to promote engagement and reduce hostilities. The report called for action at regional and international levels to help integrate human rights concerns in the inter-Korean dialogue for the benefit of all people on the Peninsula.[[24]](#footnote-23) In his 2019 report, the Special Rapporteur noted that “human rights considerations have not been part of the agenda in the peace talks to date”.[[25]](#footnote-24) According to Human Rights Watch, the international community must increase the flow of information into the country and increase engagement with the growing community of North Korean exiles.[[26]](#footnote-25)

In reality, North Korea continues rejecting cooperation with the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the country, who they consider “a political tool of the hostile forces, submitting annual reports to the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly that disparaged and slandered the country based on the false testimonies of defectors”. This was part of the responses Pyongyang submitted to the Human Rights Council following its Universal Periodic Review in 2019. North Korea also noted that “sanctions imposed by the Security Council hampered State efforts to protect and promote human rights”.[[27]](#footnote-26) With its support to UN sanctions and the introduction of their own sanctions, the EU’s approach to North Korea remains centered on engagement, on advocating for human rights and on accountability. Accordingly, in its 2016 Resolution, the European Parliament noted “the time has come for the international community to take action to end the perpetrators’ impunity” and demanded that “those most responsible for the crimes against humanity committed in the DPRK be held accountable, be brought before the International Criminal Court and be subjected to targeted sanctions”.[[28]](#footnote-27)

**EU human rights policy on North Korea: narrative,** **instruments and** **action**

Over the years the EU has supported the international community’s economic and financial sanctions on North Korea’s leadership for its development of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. The sanctions have been used as a punitive measure against the regime’s money laundering, cyberattacks and human rights violations with the aim to pressure Pyongyang to move towards denuclearization. The EU has reinforced these sanctions through the adoption of its own autonomous measures since 2006. In July 2019 the EU renewed its own sanctions consisting of a travel ban and asset freeze on the listed individuals (57) and entities (9), in addition to the 80 persons and 75 entities currently listed by the UN.[[29]](#footnote-28) The EU has established a policy of ‘**critical engagement’** onNorthKorea, meaning **political dialogue** with focus on human rights advocacy, humanitarian assistance and diplomatic pressure, as well as targeted **sanctions**. The effectiveness of the sanctions however remains subject to debate because of a mixed record of their enforcement by various countries who have signed up to them. Full commitment to their strict implementation at all levels is essential to ensure their credibility.[[30]](#footnote-29) Most recently in December 2019, China and Russia even proposed lifting sanctions, which the United States, France and Britain have not supported, until North Korea gives up its nuclear and ballistic missile programs.[[31]](#footnote-30)

It is within this context dominated by nuclear considerations that the EU’s human rights policy on North Korea must be assessed. It is also important to examine the EU’s identity as a global actor in order to assess its relevance within this context. The EU is an **inherently fragmented international organization** of sovereign member states and institutions, whereby shaping a common EU policy on human rights has always presented challenges. Considering that member states drive the EU’s external relations, EU policy on North Korea has entailed working together towards a set of common objectives, rather than legally binding policies. In the process of internal negotiations aimed at accommodating divergent interests, examining the EU narrative on North Korea serves to better assess the complexity of the policy-making process. The common EU objectives, as articulated in EU-level policies, include the diffusion of human rights, democracy and rule of law, interconnected and mutually reinforcing principles, to be pursued through cooperation and **engagement.** Thisisanobjectiveenshrinedin the founding treaties, echoed in trade agreements and reflected in statements as articulated by EU leaders. Accordingly, the EU’s overall goals in North Korea have been to support a lasting reduction of tensionson the Peninsula, to uphold international law, the non-proliferation regime, and to improve the situation of human rights. Thus, the pursuit of core principles is at the center of the EU’s international identity. In accordance with Ian Manners’ conceptualization of the EU as a **normative power**, in its foreign policy the EU has committed to promoting peace, liberty, democracy, the rule of law, human rights, equality, social solidarity, sustainable development and good governance.[[32]](#footnote-31) It is only by respecting these same values at home that the EU can inspire other countries to follow its example, and thus be considered a normative power.

In this spirit and in a fragmented policy-making structure, member states have maintained the prerogative to develop their own relations with Pyongyang. But while six member states have maintained embassies in the country, namely Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Poland, Romania and Sweden, this has not secured them avenues for further influence on Pyongyang’s attitude vis-à-vis human rights in line with international values. Collectively the situation has not been easier for the EU. There is no EU Delegation in Pyongyang. The member states on the ground represent the EU in a rotation system. While on a European level the EU and North Korea established bilateral diplomatic relations in 2001, **the EU’s efforts to influence the human rights situation in North Korea have remained limited**. Pyongyang suspended the Human Rights Dialogue with the EU in 2013 and the two sides held their last political dialogue round in June 2015.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, the EU has maintained a consistent, value-oriented discourse vis-à-vis North Korea, in the context of its Asia policy, aimed at closer cooperation. As former EU High Representative Federica Mogherini said in 2019, “what happens in the Korean Peninsula…matters to all of us”.[[33]](#footnote-32) The key EU-level document issued in 2012**, The Strategic Framework on Human Rights and Democracy,** highlights a number of the EU’s **priorities** thatithas committed to pursuing, such as freedom of expression, freedom of assembly; freedom of religion; the death penalty; fair and impartial administration of justice; human rights defenders and civil society. Specific Guidelines help pursue these priorities, namely the 1998 Guidelines on the death penalty, the 2004 Guidelines on human rights defenders or the 2013 Guidelines for freedom of religion to name a few. These priorities reflect the long list of grave violations of human rights that have been documented in North Korea by human rights NGOs and the UN COI. Assessing the official EU narrative on North Korea, including the Annual Human Rights reports, the Foreign Affairs Council Conclusions, or resolutions of the European Parliament, indicates that the EU has built its “critical engagement” policy around these priorities. In light of this approach, the EU has worked together with other members of the international community, namely Japan, to table resolutions on the human rights situation in North Korea at the UN General Assembly and the UN Human Rights Council, for 17 consecutive years.[[34]](#footnote-33) In its 2016 Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy, the EU has further reconfirmed its commitment to having an even stronger global role and responsibility through shared vision and common action, with human rights at the centre.[[35]](#footnote-34)

Notwithstanding its fragmentation, there is **wide agreement within the EU** that the situation in North Korea remains one of the worst human rights crises in the world. There is agreement that UN sanctions, as well as the EU’s own autonomous restrictive measures that complement and reinforce UN sanctions, must remain in place to increase pressure on North Korea to comply with its obligations and commitments. The internal consensus inside the EU has enabled its institutions – **the European Parliament (EP), the European Commission, the Council and the European External Actions Service (EEAS)** – to jointly condemn human rights violations in North Korea and support UN human rights resolutions condemning North Korea. The first Country Strategy on North Korea was issued in 2001, built on 9 October and 20 November 2000 Council Conclusions, underlining the EU’s commitment to increase assistance to the DPRK in response to progress by North Korea in addressing the concerns of the EU in human rights, non-proliferation and security issues.[[36]](#footnote-35) The 2015 EU Annual Report noted that improvements in the respect for human rights in the country remain at the centre of the EU policy towards the DPRK. In this spirit the EU continued its efforts to involve the international community at large in addressing these concerns, participating in key fora and closely cooperating with partners.[[37]](#footnote-36)

In the process of international cooperation, the EP has been the **most vocal EU institution** on human rights shaping the EU narrative. Already in July 2010 the EP called on the EU “to appoint an EU special representative on the DPRK to ensure persistent attention and coordination both with the European Union and with key partners such as the United States and the ROK”.[[38]](#footnote-37) The EP has several tools to advocate for human rights globally. In this process it provides a **platform** for NGOs to raise human rights concerns and contribute with their expertise.[[39]](#endnote-2) Some of the tools and mechanisms of the EP include resolutions and public hearings in the Committee on **Foreign Affairs** (AFET) and the subcommittee on **Human Rights** (DROI).[[40]](#footnote-38) In 2014, following the release of the COI report, AFET hosted Kang Sok Ju, the secretary and director of the Korean Workers’ Party International Affairs Department, and met with the Chairman of the EP Delegation to the Korean Peninsula, Nirj Deva, who considered the visit a “most positive development reflecting a particular desire on the part of the North Korean authorities to engage with the EU”.[[41]](#footnote-39)

The latest EP resolution was adopted in January 2016.[[42]](#footnote-40) DROI **hearings** held on North Korea have hosted defectors, academics, NGOs and experts. The **Annual Report on Democracy and Human Rights** of the EP offers another possibility for the Members of the EP to raise human rights violations in the country.[[43]](#footnote-41) The **Delegation** **for Relations with the Korean Peninsula** is a platform that encourages dialogue with North Korea through the reinforcement of the respect for human rights.[[44]](#footnote-42) Finally, the **EU-Korea** **Friendship Group,** established in 2015, brings together MEPs with an interest in strengthening relations with the Republic of Korea with the aim of promoting deeper understanding on issues of common interest such as trade, research and development (R&D), environment, human rights and security, and it also facilitates discussions on North Korea.[[45]](#footnote-43)

The EU has reinforced its advocacy on human rights also in the context of humanitarian action. Humanitarian organizations can act as bridge builders with the authorities and use these as entry point to improve the rights of beneficiaries. The EU has been a provider of assistance – humanitarian and food aid – since 1995. In 2018, the EU provided assistance to North Korea in the area of food security, it also addressed the social inclusion of people with disabilities and the elderly, and disaster preparedness in rural communities, impacting the most vulnerable, as it reads in its 2018 Annual Report.[[46]](#footnote-44) Most of the projects it funds, under the responsibility of the European Commission, relate to food security, health, water and sanitation. These projects have been carried out by various partners, such as **Handicap International** or **Action Against Hunger** who have since decided to withdraw from the country.[[47]](#footnote-45) The German NGO **World Hunger Aid** (Welthungerhilfe) has been present on the ground since 1997, but has had its chief expelled in 2015.[[48]](#footnote-46) **Médecins Sans Frontières** closed its projects in North Korea in 2015, after 20 years of working there.

Assessing the impact of individual actions by the different EU institutions remains difficult, in particular because security considerations have increasingly overshadowed human rights advocacy in the international efforts. The different actions undertaken by the institutions have nevertheless ensured a consistent, value-driven EU-level approach towards North Korea, a long-term enterprise that has maintained awareness raising at the centre. This has been most visible in the focus of the European Parliament, as seen via its resolutions. Yet, these efforts must be assessed in the larger global context shaping the EU’s relevance as a normative power.

**The EU’s policy on North Korea in a world in transition**

The scholarly interest in the EU’s identity as an international actor and the role of its institutions, norms and discursive practices in projecting its influence as a globally relevant power, has produced vast research on its **capacity to act** and **shape** **international** **developments**.[[49]](#footnote-47) This research has extended into its effectiveness to shape the human rights discourse concerning North Korea. The strong interest in assessing the EU’s effectiveness to shape the global political narrative has been further driven by the EU’s **mixed performance** to live up to its own commitments to pursue both its values and interests through its external policy. In a world in transition the EU’s capacity to champion human rights has attracted further attention. In this context the concept of power and influence are being redefined by emerging global economies, such as China and Russia, who are challenging the established global order centered on economic and political openness, instead presenting alternative views.

In particular China, as North Korea’s biggest trade partner and sole ally, and therefore vital in addressing the human rights situation in the country, is shaping the global narrative on human rights and undermining the United Nations’ human rights mechanisms more broadly.[[50]](#footnote-48) **This alternative model encourages** **strong state involvement and less support for civil society actors, such as NGOs,** both in the political and economic aspects of development. Considering the closed nature of North Korea, where unearthing reliable information about human rights is already difficult, **shifting the attention away from government accountability to favor national sovereignty, as encouraged by China**, brings further difficulties to addressing human rights violations in the country. This challenge is closely linked to China’s support for other core conservative elements of global governance, such as the principle of non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, in line with the Five Principles on Peaceful Coexistence.[[51]](#footnote-49)

Beijing has regularly evoked these principles to discard international criticism of its human rights record, claiming human rights are its domestic affairs. China, in fact, is increasingly shaping the global discourse on human rights, calling for “mutually beneficial cooperation” between states on human rights issues.[[52]](#endnote-3) This approach of rejecting human rights criticism is highly relevant in Pyongyang’s attitude towards the international community. In fact, in 2014 North Korea’s DPRK Association for Human Rights Studies published a report in which it defined three key features of its interpretation of human rights: 1. human rights are conditional and shaped by the demand and reality of the nation-state; 2. collective rights are above individual rights, and 3. welfare and subsistence rights have special importance.[[53]](#footnote-50) Also, in December 2019 North Korea warned the UN Security Council that it would consider any discussion of the country’s human rights record a “serious provocation”.[[54]](#footnote-51) It is through the lens of these developments that the EU’s human rights policy on North Korea is being currently shaped.

China’s growing regional relevance has brought further momentum to maintain its influence over North Korea, just as the regime in Pyongyang has continued its provocations, including conducting its largest nuclear test to date in 2017. Notwithstanding traditional solidarity and warmth at the source of their ties, long called as “close as lips and teeth”, these provocations have also complicated the China-North Korea alliance. Beijing has signaled a shift in tone from diplomatic support to punishment following the 2017 provocations, indicating that North Korea has become an asset and a liability at once for Beijing.[[55]](#endnote-4) While China has long opposed harsh international sanctions on North Korea in the hope of avoiding a regime collapse, and has thus helped maintain Kim Jong-un’s regime, China’s punitive steps have nevertheless been restrained. These developments have also helped shift the international focus away from the widely documented human rights violations onto the nuclear issue. According to human rights activists, the question “how do you solve a problem like North Korea” can only be tackled if the “problem” is defined as the threat the state poses to its own people.[[56]](#footnote-52) Recently, the UN’s High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet also expressed concerns that “the constant focus on the nuclear issue continues to divert attention from the terrible state of human rights for many millions of North Koreans”.[[57]](#footnote-53)

The growing **divergence in perceptions of human rights protection in the international community** has further challenged the efforts to address human rights violations in parallel with nuclear talks. The EU upholds that human rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated, and human dignity is the essence of human rights protection. This is an aspect overarching cultural differences that should provide the foundation of all human rights claims irrespective of culture and political system, as enshrined in the 2012 EU Strategic Framework and Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy.[[58]](#footnote-54) Emerging countries, on the other hand, question universality to the benefit of a relativist approach, which has been regularly addressed in EU discourse. In 2015 for example the EP noted “that in the official Chinese view universality is questioned on grounds of cultural differences, and that this has been an important source of conceptual differences leading to lack of understanding and distrust in EU-China relations”. It called on the Chinese leadership “to respect the universality of human rights consistent with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights”.[[59]](#footnote-55) Such differences in views have challenged efforts to work together in addressing human rights violations in North Korea.

Notwithstanding these challenges limiting the EU’s capacity to influence the international agenda on North Korea, there is a **perception** in Seoul that no international actor has shown as much consistency as the EU in addressing human rights violations in North Korea. Perceptions on the other stakeholders appear rather gloomy. Concerning South Korea, the political process of alternating governments – between the Conservatives and the Democratic Party – has failed in upholding a consistent official human rights policy, and has highly polarized public opinion. On the United States, while people in South Korea welcomed the US passing of its North Korea Human Rights Act in 2004, doing so right after Iraq’s invasion has led many in Seoul to doubt Washington’s true intentions, considering it as a politically motivated act. Finally, Japan’s 2019 decision to stop co-sponsoring the Human Rights Council resolution on North Korea has shed a bad light on the country’s international commitments on North Korea. Thus, as seen in Seoul, the EU’s remoteness has in fact ensured its impartiality, consistency and credibility, which in the midst of the global transition, has not been duly recognized. The EU has never received enough credit for the key role it has played, and the long-standing influence it has projected in the decades of dealing with an increasingly defiant Pyongyang.[[60]](#footnote-56)

**Conclusion**

For decades the EU has remained a distant global actor with limited strategic interest and no hard power implications in Asia and, as a result, limited avenues to influence the human rights crisis in North Korea. Yet, the EU has proved to be an impartial and consistent driver of international human rights advocacy efforts concerning North Korea. As a normative power with an engagement-driven foreign policy, the EU has been the leading voice in shaping these efforts. Assessing the broader context in its political and security dimensions has helped examine the EU’s role in North Korea, still maintaining its illicit nuclear weapons program. In fact, making the link between the two dimensions and adequately understanding these dynamics is crucial to reflect on North Korea’s future re-integration in the international community. On the political front, the ongoing transition in global power is weakening human rights advocacy through a state-centric approach to human rights, prioritizing sovereignty and non-interference, at the expense of the protection of these values as universal, a position the EU has pursued in North Korea. It is by promoting this alternative approach that China, North Korea’s main trade partner and with a legitimate role in the peace process on the Peninsula, has become increasingly skilled to shape talks on North Korea. China’s emergence as a regional and global power has reinforced its capacity to influence developments, in line with its own interests.

Against this background, international efforts on North Korea remain dominated by security considerations, whereby the EU’s human rights approach is being challenged. Notwithstanding these challenges, the EU has remained a **consistent voice in shaping international human rights advocacy**. This has included raising awareness both within the UN and the general public, essential to demanding accountability for crimes committed by the regime. The EU has facilitated engagement with the mechanisms of the UN Human Rights Council, including co-sponsoring resolutions since 2003. One such joint initiative with Japan in 2013 has led to the establishment of the COI, the first concrete step in challenging North Korea on its human rights record. Human rights advocacy therefore remains a core element of the EU’s “critical engagement” policy, and it is the approach that should further guide international efforts forward on North Korea.

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5. Sarah A. Son, “North Korea’s Human Rights Insecurity: State Image Management in the Post-UN COI Era”, *Asia & the Pacific Studies* 5, no. 1 (January 2018): 138-149. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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