



*Viewpoints* contain background analyses and comments on critical global and regional trends, issues and developments. *Viewpoints* also occasionally include analytical reviews of ISEAS books. The responsibility for facts and opinions expressed rests exclusively with the authors and their interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views or policy of ISEAS.

**Key role for South Korea in East Asian security**  
**By Edy Prasetyono**

**For the Straits Times**  
**Monday 19 Sep 2005**

DESPITE increasing economic interdependence, security cooperation within East Asia remains patchy. Tensions remain, rooted in questions over the rise of China, Sino-US rivalry for regional hegemony, Japan's foreign and defence policy, and the North Korea nuclear issue. Overlaying these tensions are territorial conflicts, historical resentment and the home dynamics of the individual countries.

At the moment, the United States is the most important factor in East Asian security. It maintains a military alliance with Japan and South Korea, and seems to want Japan to take a more active stance in foreign security policies.

Apart from fighting terrorism and preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, a more fundamental and long-term strategic interest of the US in East Asia is to prevent China and Russia from challenging American hegemony in the region.

The second factor in the region's security is Japan. Given its past behaviour, technological and economic strength and potential military build-up, fears and suspicion towards Japan remain, especially in South Korea and China.

Japan-China rivalry is resulting in offensive diplomacy towards countries in the region, seen for instance in competition to negotiate free trade arrangements with Asean states.

China itself is a major factor affecting security in East Asia. Predicted to displace Japan as the world's second-largest economy, its political and strategic weight has increased correspondingly, leading to a redistribution of global interests and resources in the region and in the world.

On the Korean Peninsula, the security situation is no less complicated. Despite increased social, cultural and family contacts between the two Koreas, a sustainable peace remains elusive. The problems facing the North Korean regime go far beyond the nuclear issue: They are about survival of the regime and bringing into being an economy that can feed its millions.

Given the above, it is not surprising that the East Asian region has failed to develop any meaningful form of regional security cooperation, except those anchored in bilateral agreements with the US and those developed and initiated by Asean.

### **Changing calculations**

AGAINST this backdrop, Asean has taken some fundamental measures based on the following calculations.

First, regional stability based on bilateral ties with the US is not enough. This is not only because the new security issues require multilateral cooperation, but also because the ability of the US to commit to the region may be in doubt, given its commitments elsewhere in the world. This consideration paved the way for the establishment of the Asean Regional Forum.

Second, Asean needs more political and economic interaction with external powers, recognising their interests in the region. This will contribute to equilibrium in the power structure among major powers outside South-east Asia.

Third, China's rise is a reality, and Asean should engage the country. This will lead to more intensive interactions between China and other major powers with Asean at the centre of this picture.

Overall, Asean has proven itself a benign regional organisation, not bound by narrow interests when promoting security relations with external major powers. It has often provided a bridge for external powers to meet.

North-east Asia, in contrast, lacks regional leadership that can spearhead integration. Japan has economic power but lacks the ability to exercise regional political leadership. China has tried to expand its political and diplomatic clout but remains unacceptable to many neighbouring states. Even worse, Japan and China contest each other for regional hegemony.

It is in this particular context that South Korea and Asean share a unique and advantageous position - to lay a bridge for major powers in East and South-east Asia.

Asean has been active in enhancing security interaction among East Asian countries, giving it a unique geopolitical position in North-east Asia. Seoul should tap into this, to help East Asia maintain a balance of power in the region between Japan and China.

The most strategic way of doing this is to approach Asean. Doing so would neutralise fear on the part of China that South Korea acts for US interests. South Korea would also be able to show Japan that it has no reason to suspect Seoul's initiatives on regional cooperation, particularly East Asian integration.

Where should Seoul and Asean position themselves in the debate on the East Asian Summit? The summit, to be held in Kuala Lumpur in December, remains problematic in terms of agenda, membership and modalities - such as, what makes it different from Asean+3? When some Asean countries demonstrated reluctance for the EAS to be held this year, what was in their minds was the fear

that the association could be diluted by the big powers in the north, particularly China.

Given suspicion towards China's offensive diplomacy, Asean and Seoul would find that Asean+3 should be the basis for regional integration in East Asia, one that can be developed in stages comfortable to the member states.

Asean has yet to consolidate efforts towards an Asean Community as outlined in the Bali Concorde II. An EAS can only drift some Asean member states away from achieving an Asean Community.

Another advantage of the Asean+3 format is that it could ease US concerns about being marginalised in East Asia. A China-dominated East Asia would never be acceptable to the US. Washington understands that a key motive in Beijing's assertive diplomacy in East Asian regionalism is to reduce US influence in the region. By approaching Asean, Seoul would be able to prevent a setting in which Washington has to rely solely on Tokyo to be involved in East Asian affairs.

South Korea is well-positioned to play a more leading role in East Asia. With its economic power and its strategic location between Japan and China that makes it acceptable to other nations, cooperation with Asean will increase Seoul's strategic weight.

*- The writer heads the international relations department at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Jakarta. The article is adapted from a paper presented at the Asean-Korea Conference organised by Singapore's Institute of South-east Asian Studies and South Korea's Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security and held in Seoul last Thursday.*