

PERSPECTIVE

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New Emphasis Needed: South Korea's New Southern Policy and ASEAN

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Although South Korea's New Southern Policy (NSP) has made some initial progress in developing ties with ASEAN, more still needs to be done.
- The South Korean government is expected to launch phase II of the NSP once the COVID-19 pandemic recedes.
- To make the NSP more comprehensive, Seoul needs to further develop its Peace pillar of strategic and security cooperation between ASEAN and South Korea. This lags behind the other two pillars of Prosperity (economic) and People (socio-cultural) cooperation.
- The Peace pillar needs to assist ASEAN and South Korea to work together to cope with the competition between the two superpowers and to respond to a broader range of issues beyond their usual bilateral agendas.
- ASEAN and South Korea should start by building an intellectual community of Track II or 1.5 experts to discuss and conduct research on these issues to foster a long-term vision and basis for strategic and security cooperation.

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INTRODUCTION

The New Southern Policy (NSP), a key foreign policy initiative of the Moon Jae-In administration directed towards ASEAN and India, has scored a few ‘firsts’. Firstly, ASEAN was mentioned in Moon’s presidential election campaign as one of the main thrusts of his administration’s foreign policy should he be elected. This was the first time ever that the regional grouping was afforded significant attention in a South Korean presidential election. Secondly, after he took office, Moon sent a special envoy to ASEAN. Traditionally, special envoys were sent only to the four major powers—United States, Russia, China and Japan. Thirdly, Moon became the first South Korean president to visit all 10 ASEAN countries during his first term of office. In fact, he had already accomplished this feat mid-way in office, by end 2019.¹ Fourthly, South Korea and ASEAN successfully held the 3rd ASEAN-Korea Commemorative Summit in 2019 to celebrate the 30th anniversary of their dialogue partnership, making South Korea the first dialogue partner to host three special summits with ASEAN on its soil.²

Despite the early successes of the NSP, there is room for improvement in some aspects of the policy and South Korea’s approach to ASEAN in general. At the beginning of 2020, the Korean government was ready to push ahead with the second phase of the NSP, but the disruption caused by COVID-19 put this on hold. No doubt, the political will, instruments, and material resources to enhance ASEAN-Korea cooperation through the NSP is still available and can be mobilised once the countries have weathered the worst impacts of COVID-19.

What is more challenging is the uneven development of the three different pillars of the NSP, i.e. Peace, Prosperity and People. At the moment, Peace (political-security) cooperation lags far behind the other two pillars – Prosperity (economic cooperation) and People (socio-cultural cooperation and people-to-people exchange). This uneven development is best observed in the fact that ASEAN’s strategic confidence in Korea is low; this will be elaborated in the coming section. While economic and socio-cultural cooperation and people-to-people exchange have brought ASEAN and South Korea closer together and resulted in mutual benefits, it does not provide a solid basis on which to build mutual trust and strategic cooperation. In other words, economic and socio-cultural cooperation does not automatically translate into strategic confidence upon which political-security cooperation between ASEAN and South Korea can be built. The limits of the NSP should be properly addressed to build deeper cooperative relations between ASEAN and South Korea.

POLITICAL-SECURITY COOPERATION LAGGING BEHIND

Details of the NSP have been extensively covered by many ASEAN and Korean experts.³ My main contention here is that despite overall progress made under the umbrella of the NSP, there is clear evidence of the three pillars’ uneven development.

For one, the initiatives under the Peace pillar are more abstract than those of the Prosperity and People pillars. The Prosperity and People pillars have concrete projects and institutions to show, while the Peace pillar consists of only abstract directions (see table below). Out of NSP’s 16 tasks, the Peace and Prosperity pillars have five tasks each while the People pillar has six. Among the five tasks of the Peace pillar, at least two – more frequent summits and

high-level exchange and enhancing the NSP target countries’ emergency response capabilities – are miscategorized. The task of more frequent summits and high-level exchange is not about political-security cooperation per se but is more about laying a foundation for political-security cooperation. The task of enhancing emergency response capabilities more appropriately should belong under the People pillar, given that ASEAN has identified human security and social resilience under the rubric of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community.

In terms of the nature and number of tasks, the Peace pillar appears weaker than the other two pillars. It is only through having concrete and ongoing items of cooperation that countries can achieve greater things. However, the existing foundation for political-security cooperation between ASEAN-Korea is weaker than those for the other two pillars, which makes it inherently difficult to come up with practical and concrete ideas for political-security cooperation. More fundamentally, ASEAN and South Korea do not share many common (traditional) security threats – ASEAN is understandably preoccupied with Southeast Asian affairs while South Korea’s attention is drawn to developments on the Korean Peninsula. An innovative path towards political-security cooperation is therefore needed.

Table 1: The Three Pillars and 16 Tasks⁴

3Ps	Tasks
People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Increasing the number of people traveling between Korea and the NSP countries ii. Expanding two-way cultural exchanges iii. Providing support to build human resources capacity iv. Providing support to strengthen public administrative capacity and governance v. Advancing the rights of immigrants (workers) through enhanced protection vi. Improving the quality of life
Prosperity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Enhancing institutional frameworks for promoting trade and investment ii. Participating in infrastructure projects to improve the region’s connectivity iii. Providing support for SMEs to make inroads into overseas markets iv. Enhancing the capacity for growth through “smart” technologies and new industries v. Developing customized cooperative models serving the needs of the partner country
Peace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Increasing the number of summits and high-level exchange ii. Boosting cooperation to bring peace and prosperity to the Korean Peninsula iii. Strengthening cooperation in national defense and the defense industry iv. Jointly responding to terrorism, cyber and maritime security threats in the region v. Enhancing the NSP target countries’ emergency response capabilities

The cumulative effect of the lack of political-security and strategic cooperation with ASEAN is illustrated in the annual survey conducted by the Institute of Southeast Asian

Studies (ISEAS) in 2019.⁵ The result of the survey shows that ASEAN's strategic trust in Korea, despite progress in bilateral economic and socio-cultural partnership, is still shallow.⁶ Only 2.7 per cent of the respondents have confidence in South Korea as a force to lead the global free trade agenda (Q.16 of the survey). South Korea performed much poorer than other regional powers such as Australia (6.7 per cent) and New Zealand (5.8 per cent). South Korea only beat Russia (1.0 per cent) and India (1.5 per cent). What is more intriguing is that only 0.9 per cent of ASEAN respondents displayed trust in South Korea's performance in maintaining the rules-based order and upholding international law (Q.17). Other regional powers, Australia (5.7 per cent), India (1.4 per cent), New Zealand (6.7 per cent), and Russia (2.5 per cent) performed much better.

When asked for their preference of a 'third party' that ASEAN could hedge onto against US-China rivalry (Q.27), only 3 per cent of ASEAN respondents choose South Korea as their "most preferred and trusted" third party, a lower score compared to Australia (8.8 per cent), India (7.5 per cent), New Zealand (4.7 per cent) and Russia (6.1 per cent). Respondents were also asked to identify their country's preferred strategic partner in the event that the United States is perceived as unreliable (Q.40), and only 1.8 per cent of ASEAN respondents chose South Korea, which pales in comparison to Australia (9.5 per cent), India (4.7 per cent), New Zealand (3.7 per cent) and Russia (7.8 per cent).

The above suggests that deeper economic and people-to-people relations alone do not guarantee that South Korea will be viewed as a strategic partner of ASEAN. An obvious example is Vietnam which is by far the biggest economic partner of South Korea among the ASEAN member states. Vietnam's positive view, however, on South Korea's strategic importance was below the ASEAN average.⁷ More particularly, no Vietnamese respondents showed trust in South Korea's role in maintaining the rules-based order and upholding international law.

LONG NEGLECTED STRATEGIC-SECURITY COOPERATION

The question thus arises: What went wrong with ASEAN-South Korea cooperation? Firstly, South Korea has consistently put political-security cooperation with ASEAN on the backburner while devoting much more attention and resources to economic and socio-cultural cooperation. Economic and socio-cultural cooperation is more attractive to decision-makers and policy implementors. Economic cooperation is interest driven and sustainable as long as it serves the economic interests of the parties involved. Security and strategic cooperation, on the other hand, requires substantial mutual trust since it deals with issues closely related to sovereignty. This is why the deep and substantial economic and socio-cultural cooperation between ASEAN and South Korea does not automatically translate into security and strategic cooperation. A separate and conscious effort is needed to enhance the political and security cooperation between ASEAN and South Korea over and above their existing economic and socio-cultural connectedness.

In many countries including South Korea, domestic politics are generally more receptive to the pursuit of economic and socio-cultural cooperation with other countries. The results from economic and socio-cultural cooperation are more tangible than those from security and strategic cooperation. They can easily be reflected in trade and investment figures, trade surplus, and visitor arrivals and departures. Consequently, economic and socio-cultural cooperation can more easily amass domestic acceptance and support. In contrast, the

consequence of security and strategic cooperation can be very abstract and far distanced from the daily life of the domestic audience. It also takes a long time for security and strategic cooperation to bear fruit. Given their limited time in office, leaders are thus more prone to focus on economic and socio-cultural cooperation that promises quicker returns on investment.

Secondly, both ASEAN member states and South Korea have long been cautious about security, defence and strategic cooperation, given the implications on national sovereignty in general. Their reluctance to make any concessions on sovereignty-related issues means that these countries tend to shun away from in-depth security cooperation with one another. At the same time, these countries are more open to security and strategic cooperation with superpowers such as the United States and China, since such a collaboration may bring benefits that offset concessions made on sovereignty and autonomy. In contrast, the benefits of security cooperation between regional small and medium-size countries are unlikely to offset the costs involved in them coming together.⁸ On its part, South Korea, given the threats emanating from North Korea, has long believed that there is not much room or need to build strategic networks beyond the four major powers surrounding the Korean Peninsula, a view that NSP is trying to challenge. This partly explains why South Korea has been lukewarm in developing security and strategic cooperation with neighbouring ASEAN countries.

Thirdly, the lack of strategic and security cooperation can be attributed to South Korea's reluctance to make clear its stance on major regional security and strategic issues. This ambiguity has hindered regional countries including ASEAN from having strategic confidence in South Korea. In the meantime, South Korea's hard (economic and military) and soft (diplomatic and cultural) powers have grown significantly over the years. Consequently, South Korea is increasingly expected to play a role in regional security and strategic issues as a middle power. This development is a phenomenon that has come about only in the past 10 years or so. Before that, South Korea was regarded as a developing country, and this limited the strategic burden it had to carry. It could remain silent on major regional issues such as a rising China and the South China Sea dispute, while paying most of its attention on developments on the Korean Peninsula.

After the mid-2000s, South Korea suddenly found itself caught by a mounting pressure to make its position clear on major regional issues, something the country had hardly faced before. Even more, the number of questions that it has to address has expanded beyond the usual topics like China and the South China Sea issue to include topics such as the freedom of navigation, US-China competition, regional order, and non-traditional and human security issues. The regional strategic landscape has indeed become more complicated. Hence, its failure to make its strategic stance clear has prevented regional countries from developing strategic confidence and a deeper strategic partnership with Seoul. This is a dilemma that South Korea, as an emerging middle power, has to contend with.

TOWARDS AN EPISTEMIC COMMUNITY

To address this uneven development, South Korea first has to shore up the low level of strategic confidence that ASEAN has in it. There is no easy short cut. South Korea has to continuously make its strategic stance clear to regional countries. It has to decide on the principles that it will observe in dealing with regional security issues, and work out concrete

positions guided by these principles. Moreover, to secure ASEAN confidence, South Korea has to go beyond merely clarifying its strategic stance over a year or two. The effort has to be sustained over many years if it is to create a lasting impression of a predictable and reliable South Korea. This will lay a foundation for strategic and military cooperation with ASEAN countries. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the South Korean government recognises the importance of building up the country's strategic credibility, and is in fact trying to address the problem. We could see this reflected in phase two of the NSP.

Second, South Korea can better position itself amid the ongoing US-China rivalry. This rivalry, which includes disputes in the South China Sea (including freedom of navigation operations conducted by the United States), the trade war, and mutual accusations over culpability for the COVID-19 pandemic, poses a great strategic burden for regional countries. While a stable regional environment and healthy superpower competition help maintain regional peace and prosperity, the converse undermines the region's hard-won economic prosperity and stability. The rise of a stronger and assertive China intent on creating a China-led regional order is of great concern to the regional countries. Meanwhile, the United States under President Trump is prone to act unilaterally, often in ways that break US foreign policy conventions. Such strategic developments have made the regional order unstable. With the two superpowers led by strong-willed leaders, and increasingly locked in disputes, countries in the region including South Korea and ASEAN are finding themselves under greater pressure to choose between the United States and China.⁹

While this situation poses a grave threat to small and medium-size countries in the region, it does open the possibility for these countries to undertake joint actions to manage the threat. These countries can cooperate to mitigate the pressures imposed by the superpowers; to ensure their relevance in shaping the regional and global orders together with the superpowers; and to safeguard their own strategic interests. There is a growing argument in support of this, i.e. building a coalition among middle powers in the region or small and medium-size powers.¹⁰ In order to do so, these countries would have to fully utilize their power in numbers, and preferably in multilateral forums.¹¹ Such a coalition of regional small and middle powers can secure their interests and influence the regional order by constraining the superpowers' unilateral tendencies through the norms and rules of multilateral institutions. In the second phase of the NSP, this idea should be pursued. The Peace pillar of the NSP has to accommodate the region's strategic dynamics as well as the multilateral issues affecting the region beyond the narrower bilateral agendas between ASEAN and South Korea.

Lastly, security and strategic cooperation will not progress if it is solely initiated and implemented by the policy decisions of leaders or governments. A wider, broad-based consensus for security and strategic cooperation has to be developed. Dialogue channels to discuss security and strategic matters, drawing on experts from civil society and government sectors, can enhance political-security and strategic cooperation between ASEAN and South Korea. These Track 2 or 1.5 channels can build an intellectual community of concerned ASEAN and South Korea experts and officials, enabling them to exchange views, expand common understanding, build consensus and develop a joint strategy. The consensus reached at these Track 2 or Track 1.5 platforms can then facilitate government-to-government dialogue and cooperation on security and strategic matters.

Last year, ASEAN and South Korea launched a dialogue between the ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) and Korea National Diplomatic Academy

(KNDA).¹² This Track 1.5 dialogue should go beyond being an annual expert-to-expert dialogue. Instead, on top of the annual meeting, there should be more opportunities for researchers and experts to collaborate. This could include joint research projects that draw relevant experts from the countries involved and widen the coverage of security and strategic issues that are of interest to ASEAN and South Korea. Doing so will help expand and consolidate an epistemic community of security and strategy experts on ASEAN-South Korea relations, thus laying a strong foundation for security and strategic cooperation between ASEAN and South Korea.

¹ “Moon set for trips to Thailand, Myanmar, Laos” *Yonhap News*, 1 September 2019. President Moon Jae-In made a promise that he would visit all ASEAN countries in his first term and kept the promise earlier than expected. He officially visited Indonesia and the Philippines in November 2017, Vietnam in March 2018, Singapore in July 2018, Brunei, Malaysia and Cambodia in March 2019 and finally Thailand, Myanmar and Laos in September 2019.

² The other dialogue partners of ASEAN have so far held special summits twice at most. The first ASEAN-South Korea special summit was held on Jeju Island in 2019 to celebrate the 20th anniversary of partnership. The second such summit was held in Busan in 2014 on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the partnership.

³ The main theme of ASEANFocus Issue 6/2019 was “Taking Stock of ASEAN-ROK Relations.” Experts from both Korea (Choe Wongi, Han Intaek, Sohn Hyuk-Sang and Lee Jinyoung) and ASEAN (Hoo Chiew-Ping, Shawn Ho, Samantha Ho and Hoang Thi Ha) covered the NSP expensively. In addition, Kavi Chongkittavorn, “Embedding S Korea in Southeast Asia” *Bangkok Post*. 19 November 2019; Khalid A. Majid, “In new policy, Seoul puts Asean on a par with superpowers” *New Straits Times*. 24 November; Kuik Cheng-Chew and Chiew-Ping Hoo, “National Commentary - A View From Southeast Asia” *The Asan Forum*. 7 January; Hoang Thi Ha and Glenn Ong, “Assessing the ROK’s New Southern Policy towards ASEAN” *ISEAS Perspective*. No. 2020-7, 30 January 2020 provide excellent analyses of the NSP.

⁴ Presidential Committee on New Southern Policy. *Policy Information Brochure*.

(http://www.nsp.go.kr/news/news_view.do?post_id=176&board_id=4&)

⁵ Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. 2020. *The State of Southeast Asia: 2020 Survey Report*. ISEAS: Singapore.

⁶ This is not about the NSP but a consequence of South Korea’s long-term neglect of political-security cooperation with ASEAN countries. One may point to the fact that Russia and India are bigger in size and have been major international and regional players, but this does not explain the positive image that smaller countries like Australia and New Zealand enjoy.

⁷ Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. 2020. *The State of Southeast Asia: 2020 Survey Report*. ISEAS: Singapore, pp. 19, 20, 30 and 42. In the survey, there were four questions related to perceptions of regional countries. In three, (page 19, 20 and 30), Vietnam’s positive perception on South Korea was below the ASEAN average. Only on one particular question (Q 40. If the US is perceived as unreliable, who would you look to as your country’s preferred strategic partner?), Vietnam’s perception on Korea (2.3%) was better than the ASEAN average (1.8%).

⁸ For example, if South Korea, a military ally of the United States, takes a more neutral posture vis-a-vis the United States and China or attempts to build or join a coalition of small and medium-size countries in pursuit of more strategic autonomy from the two superpowers, a cost, real or imagined, is likely to be expected –, i.e. loosening security ties with the United States, mounting pressure from China etc. Based on this, more established strategic thinkers and decision-makers calculate that the benefits to be gleaned from forming a coalition of small and medium-size powers does not make up for what can be lost in terms of its relations with the superpower.

⁹ Lee Hsien Loong, “The Endangered Asian Century: America, China, and the Perils of Confrontation” *Foreign Affairs*. July/August 2020.

(<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2020-06-04/lee-hsien-loong-endangered-asian-century>)

¹⁰ A similar argument was made by Ralf Emmers and Sarah Teo. 2015. “Regional security strategies of middle powers in the Asia-Pacific” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*. 15: 2.; Tanguy Struye de Swielande. 2019. “Middle Powers in the Indo-Pacific: Potential Pacifiers Guaranteeing Stability in the Indo-Pacific?” *Asian Politics & Policy*. 11:2.; Mark Beeson and Lee W. 2015. “The Middle Power Moment: A New Basis for Cooperation between Indonesia and Australia?” in C. B. Roberts, A. D. Habir and L. C. Sebastian eds. *Indonesia’s Ascent*. Palgrave Macmillan: London.; Ali Wyne and Bonnie Glaser. 2019. “A New Phase in Middle-Power Adjustment to U.S.-China Competition?” *The National Interests*. November 5.; Roland Paris. 2019. “Can Middle Powers Save the Liberal World Order?” *Chatham House Briefing*. June.; and Rory Medcalf and C. Raja Mohan, “The U.S.-China Rivalry Has Asia on Edge: Can Middle Powers Create Stability?” *The National Interest*. 15 August 2014.

¹¹ This does not necessarily mean new institutions. Already, the region has a number of multilateral institutions for cooperation such as ASEAN+3, East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM+), etc. The real question is how to better utilise these existing institutions.

¹² Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “2019 ASEAN-ROK Think Tank Strategic Dialogue to Take Place” Press Statement. 23 November 2019.

(http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=320773&srchFr=&srchTo=&srchWord=&srchTp=&multi_itm_seq=0&itm_seq_1=0&itm_seq_2=0&company_cd=&company_nm=&page=37&titleNm=)

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