

What's in the New Southern Policy Plus? An ASEAN Perspective on Building Niche-based Pragmatic Cooperation with South Korea

Chiew-Ping HOO Senior Lecturer, National University of Malaysia (hoo@ukm.edu.my)

I. Introduction and Overview of NSP's Achievement in Southeast ASIA

Other than the inter-Korean peace process that began in 2018, the New Southern Policy (NSP) will mostly likely be among the top legacies left by Moon Jae-in. The 2019 Busan Summit, which was held to commemorate the 30th anniversary of ASEAN-ROK Dialogue partnership, successfully consolidated the growing relationship and further institutionalized ASEAN-Republic of Korea (ROK) cooperation. The Summit reaffirmed the Southeast Asian leaders' beliefs that South Korea is a reliable strategic partner of ASEAN and its member states.

The tradition of overtly focusing on North Korea and other major powers in the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) has now been supplemented and diversified, by a more devoted attention to ASEAN, Southeast Asia, and India. The NSP suggests that South Korea could be a constructive actor contributing in many ar-

reas beyond the North Korean issues. Increasingly seeing itself (and being seen) as a middle power, South Korea actively seeks a niche area where it can fully leverage its strengths and advantages regionally and globally. South Korea seeks to emulate other middle powers, such as Canada and Australia, which have emphasized both the values of international cooperation and value-based cooperation. For South Korea, it is about pragmatic cooperation, based on its unique strength, in particular the appeal of its soft power and its modernized economic sectors and industrial strengths.

The NSP has a three-pillar framework, namely People, Prosperity, and Peace, signifying a very comprehensive agenda of cooperation. Mechanisms of promoting the exchanges, interactions, and cooperation along the three Ps have been reinforced, multiplied and enhanced, coordinated through the Presidential Committee on the NSP, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Korean missions in NSP countries.

The progress in implementing the NSP blueprint however was stalled in 2020 due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many MOUs signed during the 2019 Summit would now be more difficult to implement. Almost all governments are now prioritizing combating and containing the pandemic, rather than forging new multilateral cooperation in the non-public health domains.

But the pandemic also brought new opportunity for cooperation. The pandemic has not lessened but intensified the geopolitical uncertainties arising from great power rivalries. South Korea and ASEAN share the same strategic concerns, and under this context, ASEAN countries can and will look to South Korea for leadership in public health cooperation and forging more areas of pragmatic cooperation under the NSP umbrella. Therefore, the pandemic crisis is also an opportunity for South Korea and ASEAN to further enhance cooperation in niche areas that could build stronger regional resilience against global shocks. The recently revealed New Southern Policy Plus (NSP Plus) is geared towards this policy trajectory.

II. High Priority and Low-Hanging Fruits for NSP Plus

Since the introduction of the NSP in 2017, both Korean and Southeast Asian businesses and trade-related agencies have welcomed the initiative. But at the governmental level, there has always been reservation and suspicions of whether NSP will sustain after the end of the

Moon Jae-in administration. Institutionalization of cooperation henceforth is a priority. Niche areas of cooperation, at both the bilateral and multilateral levels, also need to be identified, with programs designed for mid- and long-term purposes. NSP Plus serves to reinforce the “anchoring” of two-way exchanges, deepening mutual understanding, and drawing concrete benefits from the convergence of common interests.

In the context of a global pandemic that has yet to recede, from an ASEAN and Southeast Asia’s perspective, there are three major areas of cooperation that the NSP Plus has outlined and to be pursued vigorously: firstly, to strengthen public health infrastructure capacity building; secondly, to revamp supply chains to promote connectivity; and thirdly, to jointly strengthen East Asian regional architecture.

A. Public health infrastructure capacity building

Public health partnership is one of the priority areas and also part of the low-hanging fruits that can be actualized under the NSP Plus. Packaged as “Comprehensive Healthcare Cooperation,” this could and would be the most attractive initiative in the immediate term. South Korea has emerged as a success story in this public health crisis. Its high-quality test kits and health governance have enabled South Korea to pursue a public health diplomacy such as exporting test kits to the countries with demand for high-testing capacity and sharing best practices in public health governance.

However, what is beyond the immediate terms is to leverage on the ROK's excellent science and medical research, which so far has received underrated attention in comparison to other vaccine-developing countries and corporations. Media coverage of the race to produce vaccine has rarely featured South Korea. In fact, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has invested not only in the South Korean Ministry of Health, but also in the major science and medical labs in Korean universities, research and development (R&D) labs, Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency (KDCA), and the International Vaccine Institute, which is headquartered in Seoul. South Korea is cautious not to hastily produce a vaccine and wants to ensure good quality control of its vaccine development program. As South Korea has already pledged to the Gavi COVAX Advance Market Commitment (AMC), the eventual introduction of the Korean-made vaccine will also be part of the global commons, ensuring fair access to vaccines among the developing countries, most notably ASEAN member states.

So far, Indonesia has been the greatest beneficiary of South Korea's COVID-19 medical aid compared to other Southeast Asian countries but the NSP Plus has pledged to establish "permanent channels for healthcare communication between Korea and ASEAN" that will expand healthcare cooperation. Singapore is a leading ASEAN country in terms of medical health exchanges and biomedical industry cooperation with South Korea. The author learned from field interviews that health cooperation is often impeded by difficulties such as different medical standards and licenses, (it was noted as

"more difficult than brick-building" to the author). Thus, ASEAN-Korea standardization will help a long way in building cooperation in public health.

B. Strengthening infrastructure connectivity

Despite the middle power ambition, South Korea is still sometimes caught in an "inferiority complex" that hinders its officials from more proactive engagements and involvements in Southeast Asia, such as infrastructure development. In the context of growing geopolitical and geoeconomic competitions in the Indo-Pacific domain, the NSP fits right in, in terms of providing alternatives and options for the smaller states in Southeast Asia to cope with their developmental needs and economic integration.

For example, South Korea's support for the ASEAN Smart Cities Network (ASCN) could help create a smart and digitalized infrastructure bridging the rural and the urban areas. Digital infrastructure, of course, has now become even more pressing under the physical lockdowns caused by the COVID-19 virus. In addition, South Korea has been an early and consistent supporter of the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC), established in 2010 to accelerate the realization of ASEAN Economic, Political-Security, and Socio-Cultural Community. The Plan of Action (POA) of MPAC is issued and updated every five years and South Korea has committed to support each POA, the latest being the POA 2021-2025 adopted in Hanoi. It is crucial for South Korea to continue

this support with more involvements in strengthening infrastructure connectivity both intra-ASEAN and between ASEAN and Korea.

Furthermore, synergizing the NSP Plus and the “Korea New Deal,” with its two main components “Green Deal” and “Digital Deal,” would have long-term beneficial consequences. Through this Korean modal of post-pandemic recovery plans, countries will have to learn to adopt sustainable economic practices. The NSP Plus can integrate and promote policy actions that contribute to the “greening of the economy” and digitalizing core hard and soft infrastructure. The digitalization of hard infrastructure such as port management is a critical priority area with the Malacca Strait and Singapore facing “chokepoint” marine traffics due to the shift of land to maritime transportation during the pandemic. Whereas, the digitalization of soft infrastructure will serve the national and transnational education, human resource development, trade, investment, future industries, and connecting rural-urban development. These are all vital issues for Southeast Asian countries regardless of their state of development. The “future-oriented economic cooperation” outlined in the original NSP hence would have a great potential to be realized under the NSP Plus blueprint.

C. Deepening of cooperation on East Asian regional architecture

East Asian regional architecture, with ASEAN as the core platform bringing all middle and major powers together. Various regional initiatives

have been materialized since the Asian Financial Crisis in the late 1990s, with the goals of mitigating regional financial liquidity problems and avoiding reliance on the International Monetary Fund. Following the proposal by former South Korean President Kim Dae-jung, an East Asian Study Group was formed and later transformed by the Southeast Asian leaders into the East Asian Vision Group, which led to the institutionalization of ASEAN Plus Three (plus China, Japan, and South Korea) cooperation and the establishment of the East Asian Summit. In most of the region-wide and global crises, Northeast Asian and Southeast Asian countries would always come together to formalize further regional cooperation, which includes the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic in 2001 and Global Financial Crisis 2008. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, ASEAN Plus Three further institutionalized regional pandemic response by endorsing the “Hanoi Plan of Action on Strengthening ASEAN Economic Cooperation and Supply Chain Connectivity in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic,” and South Korea in particular contributed to ASEAN Plus Three’s rice reserves in cases of food crises.

South Korea has played a significant role in promoting multilateralism and the construction of regional architecture in Asia both in the past and the present. The NSP Plus can reinforce the multilateral structure and further entrench the vital participation of the ROK in it. ASEAN member states will continue to welcome South Korea deepening engagement in regional multilateralism. By aligning the NSP’s three main pillars (People, Prosperity and Peace) to correspond to

ASEAN's Social-Cultural, Economic, and Political Communities, South Korea has oriented its future strategic outlook as one that is of complementary nature with ASEAN. Engagements with the NSP countries bilaterally and with ASEAN multilaterally will enhance the bilateral-multilateral nexus in ASEAN-Korea strategic partnership. This will also further enhance reciprocal connections in different domains of cooperation. Strong bilateral relations augmented by equally strong and robust Korea's participation in the regional multilateral structure will ultimately bring together the expertises, resources, and connections that have been built up over the years, in different sectors such as economic development, education, entertainment, environmental, and advanced technologies; while involving various actors from governmental, private, and civil society sectors. This will truly ensure sustainable ASEAN-Korea ties in the years and even decades to come.

III. Conclusion

It is clear that the NSP started off with the right messages and many Southeast Asian countries have been receptive to the initiatives. Despite the pandemic bringing a lot more challenges in implementing the policy initiatives, the NSP Plus has envisioned an innovation-oriented cooperation by transforming the traditional face-to-face operations to electronic and digitalized management. Public health cooperation is understandably the immediate focus, but such cooperation should be also seen as long-term fulfillment of the cooperation on the People pillar in

the NSP. Infrastructure connectivity and South Korea's cooperation in the building of an evolving East Asian regional architecture respectively enhance the Prosperity and Peace pillars. With patience, dedication, and commitment, the NSP Plus will be a long-lasting foreign policy legacy of Moon that brings benefits to Korea, ASEAN, and regional stability. **KIEP**