

ASEAN-ROK Partnership: What's Next after the New Southern Policy?



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The New Southern Policy (NSP) – President Moon Jae-In's flagship foreign policy initiative – marked a turning point for ASEAN-ROK relations. Korea had already developed close ties with ASEAN since 1989, but the NSP was Korea's first foreign policy that pledged to elevate its ties with ASEAN on par with its four traditional main diplomatic partners. What is particularly notable is that the NSP set down a comprehensive vision for the ASEAN-ROK partnership, deviating from the previously economy-oriented cooperation. The three pillars of the NSP (People, Prosperity and Peace) – which dovetail with ASEAN's Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC), Economic Community (AEC) and Political-Security Community (APSC) – resonated well in ASEAN countries. By holding the third ASEAN-ROK Commemorative Summit in 2019, Korea became the first dialogue partner of ASEAN to host the special summit on its own soil three times. President Moon's visit to all ASEAN member states during the first half of his term was also well-received by ASEAN countries, which place a high value on "showing-up" of foreign leaders in the regional bloc.

In practice, the Moon administration took a whole-of-government approach to strengthen the ASEAN-ROK partnership. The Presidential Committee on the NSP was created to coordinate all ASEAN-related projects implemented by each ministry and agency. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) set up a new bureau solely dedicated to ASEAN and Southeast Asian affairs and upgraded the rank of ambassador to ASEAN to the vice-foreign minister level. The Mekong-ROK Cooperation, previously a foreign minister-level meeting, was elevated to the summit level in 2019 and Korea lifted its relations with the Mekong nations to a “strategic partnership” in 2021. The Korean government declared a double increase on the volume of ODA to ASEAN by 2023 compared to that of 2019, while the annual ASEAN-Korea Cooperation Fund (AKCF) was also increased from 7 million USD in 2019 to 16 million USD in 2022.¹ Of particular importance is the consistency of policy implementation. Contrary to previous administrations, President Moon continued to step up efforts to enhance the ASEAN-ROK partnership throughout his entire term in office. The launch of the NSP-Plus in 2020, in particular, demonstrated the government's resolve to bolster ties with ASEAN even in the unprecedented situation of Covid-19 pandemic. It is open for debate whether the NSP fully lived up to ASEAN's expectations, but the NSP was undoubtedly a major turning point in Korea's policy towards the ASEAN.

Given the drumbeat of Korea's policy commitment to ASEAN over the past four years, a question arises of whether the ASEAN-centered policy stance will carry over into the new administration. As President Yoon Suk-Yeol places a high priority on the ROK-US alliance,² the diplomatic community in Southeast Asia is wondering if ASEAN may lose its relevance to Korea's foreign policy. However, President Yoon has made it clear that the strong ASEAN-ROK relations will be sustained, proposing the so-called “ABCD strategy” (advance human capital, build health security, connect cultures, and digitize Asian infrastructure) during his presidential campaign.³ Although it is unclear yet whether the new administration will push ahead with the ABCD strategy or other policies specifically targeted at ASEAN, Southeast Asia appears to be the centerpiece of President Yoon's Indo-Pacific initiative.⁴ ASEAN, Korea's second-largest

¹ MOFA (2022), Press release, 21 January, <https://www.korea.kr/news/pressReleaseView.do?newsId=156492680> (accessed on 4 August 2022).

² “Yoon's foreign policy agenda prioritizes ties with US, sows seeds of conflict with N. Korea, China,” *Hankyoreh*, 14 March 2022, https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_international/1034792.html (accessed on 4 August 2022).

³ “South Korean President-Elect Yoon Suk-Yeol's Early Foreign Policy Challenges,” *Forbes*, 24 March 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/scottasnyder/2022/03/24/south-korean-president-elect-yoon-suk-yeols-early-foreign-policy-challenges/?sh=61d6d2bf656d> (accessed on 4 August 2022).

⁴ At the US-ROK summit in 21 May, President Yoon announced that Korea will map out its own Indo-Pacific strategy framework. See “Korea to unveil own Indo-Pacific strategy,” *The Korea Times*, 22 May 2022, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2022/06/120_329600.html (accessed on 4 August 2022).

trading partner, has long been considered a primary partner to diversify Korea's economic portfolio. Given that the Yoon administration seeks to address Korea's heavy economic dependence on China, developing closer ties with ASEAN is particularly important. The already well-established ASEAN-ROK security cooperation mechanisms and the shared views on how to manage the evolving regional order also highlight the value of ASEAN as a strategic partner in navigating the growing geopolitical tension in the Indo-Pacific region. If nothing else, given the geographical location of Southeast Asia sitting in the center of the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN is unlikely to be put on the back burner in mapping out Korea's own Indo-Pacific initiative.

Indeed, at the recent ASEAN-ROK foreign ministerial meeting on 4 August, Korean Foreign Minister Park Jin reaffirmed the will to further bolster ties with ASEAN countries building upon the achievements of the NSP.⁵ The question, however, is how effectively Seoul's commitment to ASEAN-ROK partnership can be delivered to ASEAN countries without proposing a signature policy towards ASEAN. As pointed out earlier, what distinguishes the NSP from Korea's previous ASEAN policies is that the NSP was solely targeted at Southeast Asia (albeit with India). More importantly, President Moon's ASEAN-centered policy extended beyond a mere rhetorical declaration. Considerable diplomatic engagements and institutional arrangements have been made to convince ASEAN countries of Korea's determination to elevate the ASEAN-ROK relations. Considering that Korea's previous ASEAN policies lacked consistency for years, it is no wonder that overseas experts advise not to change the name of the NSP.⁶ In this regard, to ensure that the new government will continue the legacy of the NSP, more diplomatic efforts are required to strengthen engagement with ASEAN countries.

Another challenge for the ASEAN-ROK partnership is how Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy will be received by ASEAN countries. While ASEAN is wary of intensifying tensions in the Sino-US relations, Korea's embrace of Indo-Pacific strategy may send a wrong signal that Korea is siding with the US at the expense of its relations with China. This concern is further amplified in light of President Yoon's foreign policy that places the ROK-US alliance at the center of priorities. This could also cast doubts that Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy could be used to beef up the ROK-US alliance rather than enhancing ties with countries in the Indo-Pacific region. It is still early to tell how Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy will unfold. However, as the ASEAN pronounced its own vision on Indo-Pacific regional cooperation through the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP), Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy is likely to include Korea's own vision and

⁵ "Park Jin, Resume the ROK-China-Japan trilateral summit," *Hankyung*, 4 August 2022, <https://www.hankyung.com/politics/article/2022080480031> (accessed on 11 August 2022).

⁶ Mishra, Sandip Kumar (2022), "'ABCD strategy' or New Southern Policy," *The Korea Times*, 30 June, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/opinion/2022/08/799_331896.html (accessed on 6 August 2022).

strategy towards Indo-Pacific. The aim of launching its own Indo-Pacific strategy is to strengthen Korea's foothold as a "global pivotal state" that contributes to the peace and prosperity of the region, which is essentially equivalent to that of the NSP. What matters to ASEAN, though, is where ASEAN stands in Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy and whether Korea can reach out enough to ASEAN in formulating its regional strategy. More diplomatic outreach and consultation with ASEAN are needed to expound Korea's vision on Indo-Pacific regional order.

It remains to be seen how Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy will evolve, but what is certain is that Korea's new regional strategy will be closely watched by ASEAN countries whose hope is that the ASEAN-centric approach will continue. **KIEP**