

ROK's Indo-Pacific Strategy and Its Commitment to Cooperation with ASEAN



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The Republic of Korea (ROK) unveiled its Strategy for Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific region, an ROK version of Indo-Pacific strategy, at the end of December last year. The strategy emphasizes that ROK, as a global pivot state, prioritizes building a multi-layered and comprehensive network of cooperation with the Indo-Pacific region. The inclusion of six regions in ROK's Indo-Pacific strategy - the North Pacific, Southeast Asia and ASEAN, South Asia, Oceania, the African East and Indian Ocean, Europe, and South America - raised concerns about ROK's commitment to enhancing cooperation specifically with Southeast Asia and ASEAN. Nevertheless, when examining the ties between ASEAN Member States (AMS) and ROK, it is improbable that ROK-ASEAN cooperation, along with cooperation with the other five regions, will take a backseat. This is due to the introduction of the Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI), a sub-regional policy under ROK's Indo-Pacific strategy that specifically focuses on enhancing cooperation with Southeast Asia. The Ministry of Foreign

Affairs of ROK made this announcement, further solidifying the commitment to ROK-ASEAN cooperation within the broader framework of the six regions. Moreover, KASI carries forward the principles of the New Southern Policy (NSP) emphasizing cooperation with Southeast Asia and India.

ROK's Indo-Pacific Strategy, in fact, prioritizes cooperation with Southeast Asia and ASEAN. Within ROK's Indo-Pacific strategy the cooperation is addressed immediately after the North Pacific region. Furthermore, the inclusion of the Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI) as a sub-regional policy within ROK's Indo-Pacific strategy, as we mentioned above, suggests that ROK's diplomatic approach still regards Southeast Asia and ASEAN as crucial partners for cooperation.

In addition, the priority areas of KASI consist of "eight core lines of effort" in line with the three visions of ROK's Indo-Pacific Strategy, namely, freedom, peace and prosperity. In terms of freedom there are two core lines: ① upgrading the ASEAN-ROK partnership and strengthen bilateral relations with ASEAN Member States (AMS), ② enhancing ASEAN-ROK cooperation within ASEAN-led mechanisms. In terms of peace, there is two core lines as well: expanding ASEAN-ROK strategic coordination, promoting ASEAN-ROK strategic coordination. As for prosperity, four core lines are identified: ① expanding cooperation in future and emerging areas for shared prosperity and development, ② jointly addressing and responding to regional and global challenges, ③ promoting future generation exchanges as drivers of future prosperity, ④ increasing ASEAN-ROK Cooperation resources including the doubling of the three ASEAN-related cooperation funds. It is also noteworthy that among the three visions there are the largest number of the core lines matched with prosperity, but unlike in the past there exist the core lines matched with freedom and peace.

Historically, ROK has primarily focused on economic and social sectors in cooperation with Southeast Asia and ASEAN. However, KASI prioritizes ASEAN-ROK cooperation in various aspects including political, cultural, security sectors in line with ROK's Indo-pacific strategy. Furthermore, in addition to functional cooperation in established economic and social sectors, KASI emphasizes comprehensive cooperation, including strategic areas like security and defense, with AMS in response to the rapidly evolving regional and international landscape. This indicates that ROK's ASEAN-oriented policy remains robust.

Meanwhile, when selecting "eight core lines of effect," major ASEAN initiatives such as ASEAN Community Vision 2025, ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), and ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF) were thoroughly assessed and thoughtfully incorporated, taking into account the needs and aspirations of ASEAN. In particular, considering that AOIP

is AMS' first official response to the US-China strategic competition, AOIP is worth referring to when ROK pursues its Indo-Pacific strategy and KASI. In essence, ROK still considers Southeast Asia and ASEAN as crucial strategic partners.

Furthermore, KASI includes plentiful cooperation resources to promote its eight core lines of effort and demonstrates a commitment to enhancing the institutions for future cooperation such as bilateral FTA. First, ROK will increase the annual volume of the ASEAN–Korea Cooperation Fund (AKCF) to 32 million USD, the Mekong-Korea Cooperation Fund (MKCF) to 10 million USD, and the BIMP-EAGA-ROK Cooperation Fund (BKCF) to 6 million USD by 2027 respectively. It also plans to actively identify and support landmark projects on infrastructure, digital, and green sectors by continuously expanding EDCF and KOICA's grant for ASEAN member states. Secondly, KASI includes upgrading the ASEAN-Korea Free Trade Agreement (AKFTA) to promote digital trade. Digital trade supports the expansion of digital infrastructure and strengthens cooperation on e-government infrastructure. It will also cooperate to cultivate a skilled workforce in digital-related fields and strengthen digital trade cooperation through bilateral FTAs or RCEP.

Further evidence of ROK's prioritization of cooperation with Southeast Asia and ASEAN lies in the alignment of the philosophies underlying its Indo-Pacific Strategy and KASI with that of the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP). Firstly, AOIP adopts the principle of ASEAN centrality as a core tenet for promoting regional cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. Similarly, KASI firmly supports the concept of ASEAN centrality. Thus, there is relatively little room for conflict when ROK cooperates with ASEAN because KASI and AOIP can operate in a complementary way. Secondly, given the fact that ROK's Indo-Pacific strategy and KASI articulate the establishment of an economic security network, AOIP, interpreted as a regional connectivity initiative, can coordinate regional cooperation initiatives competing in the Southeast Asia along with KASI. Thirdly, there is no contradiction between AOIP and ROK's Indo-Pacific Strategy and KASI on the geopolitical concept of the Indo-Pacific. While Southeast Asia and ASEAN has adopted the hedging strategy as a significant response to the U.S.-China strategic competition, AOIP can be interpreted as ASEAN's recognition of the geopolitical concept of 'Indo-Pacific' promoted by the U.S., and ROK has similarly embraced this geopolitical concept. Lastly, given that both ROK's Indo-Pacific strategy and AOIP do not exclude certain countries such as China, they have a similar stance on the U.S.-China competition. Moreover, AOIP emphasizes the Indo-Pacific region as a space for dialogue and cooperation, which is in line with ROK's Indo-Pacific strategy that emphasizes the principles of transparency, a rule-based order, and international law. [KIEP](#)