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New Southern Policy Beyond the Pandemic:
**Revitalising connectivity,
 Reinvigorating
 multi-track cooperation**





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Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia

1, Persiaran Sultan Salahuddin
PO Box 12424, 50778 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

 www.isis.org.my


 603 2691 5435

 603 2693 9366

 info@isis.org.my

 Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia

 ISIS_MY

 isis_malaysia

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Editorial Team

Hoo Chiew-Ping, Korea Foundation Fellow
Joann Saw, Publications Executive
Muhammad Sinatra, Analyst

Design by Ridzwuan Rosli, Graphic Designer

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1, Persiaran Sultan Salahuddin
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Editorial Letter

By Hoo Chiew-Ping



Following the publication of *The New Southern Policy: Catalyst for Deepening ASEAN-ROK Relations* on 29 September 2020, there remained several aspects of ASEAN and Republic of Korea (ROK, hereafter South Korea) relations that were not covered in the book. This Special Edition of *ISIS Focus* aims to provoke conversations among Malaysian scholars and researchers about New Southern Policy (NSP) 2.0, especially in the non-conventional areas of environmental cooperation and South Korea's cultural soft power as well as public health diplomacy, considering its success in managing the COVID-19 pandemic.

The theme of this Special Edition reflects the changing nature of our international system wrecked by the current pandemic. The movement of goods and people, supply chains and patterns of globalisation for the past three decades have all been profoundly transformed by the pandemic. These changes affect the key pillars of People, Prosperity and Peace, which are fundamental to the NSP. Even after the eradication of COVID-19, resumption of travel and normalisation of exchanges, we will still have to live with a "new normal" and develop new ways of fostering cooperation.

Against the backdrop of the ongoing pandemic, Siti Atiqah highlights the need for two-way concrete efforts by ASEAN and South Korea to solidify their partnership by enhancing mutual acceptance, addressing human security issues in ASEAN and

pushing for closer ASEAN-ROK cooperation in public health. Farlina, Ariane and Sinatra examine the attractiveness of soft power and how it has reinvigorated South Korea's creative economy. While there are obvious challenges for ASEAN to overcome, the spirit of embracing cultural uniqueness and the soft power feature of the middle powers will help ASEAN Member States (AMS) set their long-term goals.

Elaborating on the soft power theme, Khor considers how South Korea is leading the test kit diplomacy on the world stage and why its public health model is an example that can be shared with AMS to catalyse change in the institutionalisation of Southeast Asia's public health. If ASEAN had a regional convenor for health infrastructure, it would have connected better with South Korea's information and technological expertise in healthcare.

Helena observes how South Korea's Green New Deal policy developed from the necessity to revitalise the economy and re-establish connectivity via digital and sustainable policies. This domestic post-pandemic economic recovery policy, if converged successfully with the NSP, will generate tremendous synergy in constructing an eco-friendly economic vehicle, which will also instil good practices of environmental governance that the world has long ignored.

The increased demand for digitalisation will hasten the momentum of ASEAN and South Korea's partnership in the Smart Cities Network. Moonyati and Harris identify the gaps and core areas where ASEAN needs to keep up with South Korea's smart city programmes, and the pressing

needs for realising the 2019 Busan Summit's agreement on strengthening cooperation and partnership in this area. Additionally, Harris states that there are numerous ways South Korea can provide more space for the Mekong countries to navigate the multi-pronged environmental, economic and political challenges in the face of geopolitical pressure from the great powers. However, it comes down to whether sufficient intra-ASEAN solidarity can be fostered to overcome internal divisions.

While Izzah recognises ASEAN's need to overcome its internal problems before forging a meaningful and deeper partnership with South Korea, Lee argues that – in a world where the major powers cannot or will not shape a credible global order – a coalition of such small and middle powers as ASEAN and South Korea must shape a new global order, without being entrapped by the intensifying rivalry. Arguing for a small and middle power coalition's agency, Geetha suggests Seoul-ASEAN-Pyongyang Pyramidal Cooperation as ASEAN and South Korea find their way out of the great power rivalry.

I wish to congratulate all contributors for their submissions that have made this Special Edition an exemplary one, initiating provocative and frank discussions, while projecting substantive ideas for mitigating the risks and bridging the gaps in the existing ASEAN-ROK partnership. It is clear that with intensifying great power rivalry coupled with uncertainties brought about by the pandemic, the way forward is to further deepen inter-regional cooperation on multi-tracks to ensure the success of post-pandemic recovery and to build common resilience via enhanced connectivity.

Time for New Southern Policy to Deliver



To elevate the ASEAN-ROK relations beyond the level of summits and merely signing documents, concrete cooperation between ASEAN and South Korea in three areas should be considered – culture, human security and the management of the COVID-19 pandemic.



by Siti Atiqah Mokhter

Since the announcement of the New Southern Policy (NSP) by the Moon Jae-in administration in 2017, the response from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has shifted from an initial scepticism to a positive embrace. The Republic of Korea (ROK, hereafter South Korea) has consistently demonstrated its intention to treat ASEAN on par with its other traditional partners.

After the Busan Summit in 2019, how will the second phase of the NSP look like? For the remaining two years of Moon's presidential term, it is time to deliver the promises of the NSP in the form of implementation.

South Korea has demonstrated its sincerity and seriousness in leaving a legacy in Southeast Asia, comparable to China's and Japan's grand infrastructural diplomacy. There is a need for the NSP to bring about the materialisation of the ASEAN-ROK partnership to another level, in addition to the bilateral summits and memorandums of understanding (MOUs). However, the realisation of the many promises could be dependent on the successful implementation of the NSP 2.0.

With the popularity of the Korean Wave, also known as *Hallyu*, a compelling Korean soft power is already being embedded in ASEAN Member States (AMS). To avoid the shortfall suffered by Japan's "economic giant, political pygmy" problem, South Korea urgently needs creative interventions to transform its soft power influence into substantive political influence.

The ASEAN Culture House in Busan, launched in 2017, is an initiative to make known the cultures and histories of the 10 AMS to the South Korean people. Through this platform, it is hoped that the South Koreans will be more interested and receptive to the various cultures represented in ASEAN.

A joint research project between the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies (IKMAS)

and South Korea shows that there is an opinion – among Indonesia's elite – that South Koreans are fascinated with American and European cultures, and not Southeast Asian. With the creation of the ASEAN-Korea Centre in Seoul and ASEAN Culture House in Busan, South Korea has taken proactive steps to publicise ASEAN cultures domestically.

Likewise, ASEAN should promote its cultures widely in South Korea to create awareness and attract interest. Furthermore, it should make efforts to develop a better understanding of South Korea's significance to the region. It is high time to establish ASEAN-Korea Centres in the ASEAN capitals to increase awareness and understanding of South Korea as well as ASEAN-ROK relations. The transformation of perceptions is a two-way street.

Aside from economic and traditional security cooperation, the NSP should also acknowledge the human security dimension. This aspect may be controversial, but could be fruitful and groundbreaking if pursued boldly in collaboration with regional governments.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), [about 1.1 million people from Myanmar](#) migrated to other countries (855,000 in Bangladesh, 154,000 in Malaysia and 93,000 in Thailand) in 2019. One outstanding issue in this context is the Rohingya crisis, which ASEAN has yet to resolve and remains a big concern.

The protection offered by other AMS is weak and lacking solid national legal frameworks for the protection of refugees and asylum seekers. During the 36th ASEAN Summit, Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin called the UNHCR to work closely with AMS to expedite the resettlement process of UNHCR cardholders to third countries.

South Korea's involvement in the Rohingya crisis is not widely

known. Nonetheless, since 2015, South Korea had already partnered with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UNHCR on a pilot resettlement programme. Such a step is mandated by South Korea's 2013 Refugee Act, which is the first in Asia.

In December 2019, [more than 100 Myanmar refugees](#), who came to South Korea as part of the pilot project, have been resettled in the Bupyeong district of Incheon. Even though the number is relatively small, South Korea proved its resolve to contribute to the issue of refugees. This is also an opportunity for South Korea to include the rights of immigrants and migrant workers into the People pillar of the NSP.

Through these small steps, South Korea could assist and persuade ASEAN to provide better human rights protection to vulnerable groups. South Korea could even promote the beneficial experience of establishing the legal mechanism or policy framework to manage and protect refugees and displaced peoples.

The affected AMS should start to recognise the longstanding problems and take inspiration from South Korea's model. The other AMS that are not directly affected should also offer support and join the efforts. It will require extensive development assistance and a shared resettlement scheme amongst those who take part in the framework, which ASEAN and South Korea can collaborate in. Such an initiative will not only highlight the humane element of South Korea's governance model, but may potentially offer alternatives to ASEAN to initiate a problem-solving mechanism on an intra-ASEAN transboundary issue.

When it comes to the management of the COVID-19 pandemic, South Korea also has a few lessons to share. As of mid-October 2020, South Korea has 25,275 cases of infection and 444 deaths. By late August 2020, South Korea had conducted [over 1.8 million](#)

[coronavirus tests](#), which led to its success in flattening the infection curve. While some AMS struggle to manage the pandemic and economic performance, South Korea has been successful in containing the virus without shutting down its economy.

South Korea's effective pandemic measure is a combination of technological prowess and bureaucratic acumen, according to the country's Central Disaster and Safety Countermeasure Headquarters (CDSCH). In terms of technology, the South Korean government called upon the private sector to innovate and produce the coronavirus testing kits and advance its professional healthcare.

As reported by Analytics Insight, Seoul-based Seegene utilised artificial intelligence (AI) to rapidly develop testing kits while a medical AI software firm named Lunit developed a technology to analyse lung diseases using chest X-ray images. These successes are

part of Seoul's global health diplomacy instruments. South Korea could play a leading role as a strategic partner in the area of technology transfer on the use of AI in a pandemic outbreak.

South Korea's bureaucratic effectiveness is a marvel even in comparison with other developed countries and shall be a model to be exported. Many countries struggle to contain the virus outbreak under weak governance and implementation of a public health strategy partially due to lack of resources.

The combination of transparency, aggressive education of the public and constant dissemination of information by the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency (KDCA) works well especially in suppressing misinformation, hence reinforcing South Korea's efforts at managing the pandemic. South Korea can proactively engage and help ASEAN partners to formulate effective measures, especially in such hard-hit countries as

Indonesia and the Philippines.

Indeed, South Korea is not only emerging as a leading democratic country with successes in public health, it is also setting the standard in the human security agenda. It is only natural that aspirations for the NSP take on a new meaning as well as bold approaches for both ASEAN and South Korea to jointly navigate a post-pandemic world.

Siti Atiqah Mokhter is a member of the Malaysia Scholars on Korea (MASK) Network and holds a Master of Social Sciences in Strategic and Security Analysis from the National University of Malaysia



***Hallyu* and the Creative Industry – Can ASEAN Replicate South Korea's Success?**

South Korea owes a portion of its robust soft power to the careful cultivation and development of its creative industries, which brought about the worldwide phenomenon Korean Wave or Hallyu. Can ASEAN learn from South Korea's creative industries to boost its own soft power?



by Farlina Said, Puteri Nor Ariane Yasmin
and Muhammad Sinatra



모든 게 궁금해 *how's your day*
[I'm curious about you, how's
your day]
Oh tell me (oh yeah oh yeah,
ah yeh ah yeh)
뭐가 널 행복하게 하는지
[What makes you happy?]
Oh text me (oh yeah oh yeah,
ah yeh ah yeh)

The simplicity of the above lyrics by the boyband BTS belies the extreme popularity that the group enjoys. The video clip of this song, entitled “Boy With Luv”, became the most watched video on YouTube within 24 hours upon release. The song also played heavily in Malaysia’s airwaves and inspired a series of advertisements in Bahasa Indonesia, starring the K-pop idols themselves. BTS recorded over US\$500 million in revenue last year, while its members became millionaires after the group’s parent company entered into an initial public offering (IPO) in September 2020. Their secret weapon: a massive ecosystem of loyal fans who not only generate revenue from the purchase of music, concert tickets and merchandise, but also render services to promote the band’s image and a wide array of products.

As part of the larger Korean Wave or *Hallyu* scene, BTS and other such phenomena as Crash Landing on You, Parasite and Pengsoo have generated great following in many parts of the world, including Southeast Asia.

The impact of *Hallyu* extends beyond the creative industry. The total of *Hallyu*-related exports amassed to US\$12.3 billion in 2019, involving sales of such consumer goods as tour programmes, cosmetics and groceries. In the same year, tourists seeking K-pop or the *Hallyu* experience accounted for 23.3% of tourists visiting South Korea.

These prove that *Hallyu* carries more than just entertainment value. It is a testament of South Korea’s soft power, economic might and confidence to engage

the rest of the world.

Acknowledging the size and success of South Korea’s creative industry, can the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as an organisation learn from the former in projecting soft power?

To answer this question, we need to understand that South Korea’s ability to consolidate the creative industry and national identity is not accidental, but by design of the national government.

The creative industry was consistently a feature in the policies of multiple administrations. First and foremost, it grew on the back of globalisation under the framework set by Kim Young-sam. The 1994 Presidential Advisory Board on Science and Technology then focused on the impact of the total revenue made by the film Jurassic Park, which was equivalent to 1.5 million Hyundai cars at the time. This spurred the interest to promote the creative industry.

However, it would be Kim Dae-jung’s pursuit of the self-proclaimed “President of Culture” title that actually set policy objectives in motion. This was further enhanced by the Lee Myung-bak administration’s “Global Korea” campaign on cultural diplomacy, which aimed to promote South Korea’s national brand abroad. The creative industry has since served as the basis of maintaining a strong national identity, tying cultural exports to economic gains and soft power projections.

This formula appears to be resilient, as the COVID-19 pandemic seems to enhance demand for South Korean content. One projection even estimates a 3.3% increase in export volume by the end of 2020 – if true, the pandemic’s effects appear to be bearable. Nevertheless, the resilience of the creative industry has been evident over the past 13 years, with creative goods recording 7% of growth in the midst of a downturn in global

trade.

The significance of South Korea’s success lies in the amalgamation of national identity and entrepreneurship. The Korean creative industry covers a wide range of sectors, including games, animation, broadcasting and others, aside from just music and movies. In each of these, the promotion of national identity, whether it is traditions, values, language or culture, is inherent in all content.

For instance, SuperM has released songs in English that also contain Korean words. Moreover, K-drama episodes regularly project an image of a developed, modern, traditional yet technologically advanced South Korea. Additionally, the games industry was promoted from a desire to develop Korea as a high-tech knowledge-based nation.

Creative industries have also proliferated in ASEAN Member States (AMS). The Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand, for example, have established frameworks or agencies aimed at promoting their national creative industry, drawing from a number of such cultural products as food, services and music, among others.

The question, then, is whether there is a foundation for an ASEAN attempt at replicating the South Korean model of creative industries to promote a region-wide identity and support the industries of each AMS.

Three challenges immediately arise.

One, South Korea’s approach builds on a nation-identifying and nation-building strategy that is aimed at both a domestic and international audience. This may not be convenient for ASEAN, which comprise 10 multicultural countries. Such a strategy is easier to achieve in a more homogenous environment such as South Korea.

Furthermore, AMS have also traditionally been nationalistic and

the issue of culture often struck sensitive nerves, resulting in tension among them. With the countries potentially becoming more inward-looking and protectionist during and after the pandemic, AMS might have reservations towards opening up their creative industries with each other.

Two, there are different market types and sizes in ASEAN, which then impact the various levels of development of creative industries in the region. Will a single strategy to boost ASEAN's creative economy suffice if all AMS have diverse markets and are experiencing various levels of development?

Therefore, despite there being elements of the South Korean strategy that could assist ASEAN in projecting a region-wide identity and soft power better, whose identity and soft power will it be? Will an ASEAN strategy project soft power according to each individual member state, or will it project a cohesive, regional ASEAN soft power?

There are ways for ASEAN to navigate around these challenges.

It is not necessary for ASEAN to decide between homogeneity or multiculturalism. A balance can be struck between the two. On the one hand, the bloc could use a common language as a unifying factor, particularly for gaming and broadcasting products. Given multiple ASEAN languages and the lack of a language policy in the region, English is a natural choice.

On the other hand, the strategy for an ASEAN creative industry could also celebrate its multiculturalism. Instead of it being a limitation, ASEAN's diversity could be seen as an asset that can be used to mobilise multi-dimensional cultural content across its multiple audiences. Technology and digitalisation can also support this. For example, the format of the singing competition Asia Bagus could be revived in the digital space during this pandemic,

showcasing talents from multiple AMS to anyone plugged to the Internet.

Moreover, establishing a digital single market in ASEAN could also work in favour of the creative industries. The framework adopted by the European Union in 2015 allows creators to produce, distribute and be recompensed for their content while also resolving arising intellectual property rights issues. ASEAN should consider this option if creative industries were to flourish here.

Like everything else in ASEAN, perhaps it is easier to focus on available low-hanging fruits in this context. Several specific lessons from South Korea's creative industries should be considered, especially with the pandemic in the backdrop.

First, the South Korean example shows that creative industries are resilient in times of crisis, as evidenced by acts or performers moving their concerts online or games providing an escapism outlet.

There is an opportunity to be harnessed as the "new normal" setting pushes many human activities to the digital space. With 400 million Internet users in the region, the digitalisation of industries has become a new source of economic growth in the ASEAN region, for example, telecommuting, telemedicine and e-commerce among others.

Officials responsible for the Culture and Arts sector under the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) must wrest this momentum to push AMS' creative industries further to the digital space, not only in the interest of promoting content, but also to ensure the economic survival of performers, producers and other industry players during this harsh climate.

Second, South Korea understands the potential of youths, with creative industries constantly producing contents targeting

them.

AMS seem to also understand this as evidenced by developments to include youths in creative industries. In Malaysia, for example, millennials appear to be driving the boom for the eSports industry – at the helm of which was a millennial then-Minister of Youth and Sports who fought for budget allocation to this industry.

The pandemic should be a wake-up call to further consider the potential of ASEAN youths in creative industries. There are nearly 220 million youths in ASEAN and a recent survey by the World Economic Forum found that they are resilient individuals who are able to adapt to the post-pandemic world.

Furthermore, 87% of youths recorded an increase in the usage of digital tools during the pandemic. Linked to the previous point, it seems that moving towards digitalisation is a safe bet for creative industries, considering the available talent and pool of demand that the youths can provide.

The fanfare that Southeast Asians threw when *Parasite* won the Oscar this year was a clear testament of the potent soft power that South Korea has. Despite it being the sole achievement of South Korea's creative industry, the people of this region also shared the shock, excitement and incredulity from this momentous achievement. Although it might be difficult for ASEAN to fully replicate the South Korean model of combining national identity and entrepreneurship, there are other lessons that ASEAN could learn to promote its creative industries. The *Parasite* dream might be distant, but a fellow Asian country demonstrates that it is not impossible.

Farlina Said, Puteri Nor Ariane Yasmin and Muhammad Sinatra are Analysts in Foreign Policy and Security Studies (FPSS), ISIS Malaysia

Soft Power from Test Kits

What has ASEAN learned from South Korea's robust response to COVID-19? How effective is South Korea's health diplomacy and how can we deepen the ASEAN-ROK relationship in health?



by Khor Swee Keng



The COVID-19 pandemic is unfolding against the background of a strong partnership between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Republic of Korea (ROK, hereafter South Korea). President Moon Jae-in's [New Southern Policy](#) has accelerated that partnership as South Korea diversifies its economy away from over-reliance on China, strikes out a non-aligned path as a middle power and engages in a more deliberate diplomacy with new allies.

A structural lens on South Korea's COVID-19 response provides three main lessons. One, South Korea's testing strategy and capabilities are world leading. Tests were highly accessible and free, with South Korea pioneering [drive-through testing](#). The rapid availability of test kits produced in industrial quantities was made possible by excellent scientists and researchers working closely with manufacturers capable of surge production, aided by an [accelerated regulatory approval pathway](#).

Two, South Korea [deployed](#) advanced contact tracing and public health surveillance technology. Telco data, credit card transactions and closed-circuit television (CCTV) footage combined to reconstruct a suspected patient's movements. Short message service (SMS) alerts and digital mapping allowed the public to receive highly precise information about COVID-19 hotspots and automated contact tracing. The social contract generally accepted the privacy-security trade-offs, with [laws](#) allowing the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) space to operate this system.

Three, South Korea learned from the 2003 severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and 2015 Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) epidemics. Citizens, health experts, public policy-makers and politicians were all invested in a holistic [pandemic preparedness plan](#), which laid out

the medical, scientific, public health, regulatory, legal, communication and public policy infrastructure needed for the next pandemic. This created a highly coordinated emergency response framework, with precise roles for scientists, doctors, political leaders in federal, state and city governments, industry as well as civil society groups in an extraordinarily decisive and effective response.

These lessons appear straightforward, but came at the cost of South Korean lives during the epidemics of the past two decades. Unfortunately, these lessons may not be systemically communicated to ASEAN Member States (AMS). There could be several reasons. Firstly, the ASEAN-ROK relationship was previously more transactional and is now more strategic – there were missed opportunities for mutual and structured learning in health. Secondly, ASEAN-ROK discussions are driven by economics and security, not public health – this is consistent with the *raison d'être* of ASEAN in particular and global geopolitics in general. Thirdly, initial public health responses to COVID-19 were highly focused within nation-state borders, understandably leaving little time for South Korean experts to communicate globally, even if effective channels and willing audiences were present.

Despite the structural barriers to ASEAN-ROK communication on health and COVID-19, some channels remain open. South Korean experts conducted bilateral exchanges with their counterparts in AMS. Formal and informal university networks were augmented by professional and personal links between health practitioners. Furthermore, the global media regularly featured South Korea alongside New Zealand and Taiwan as the [success stories](#) of COVID-19, allowing AMS to learn from the sidelines.

On top of technical expertise, South Korea has donated spare

capacity and funds to ASEAN. In June 2020, South Korea announced a [US\\$5 million fund](#) to boost ASEAN's COVID-19 testing capability, to be administered by the ASEAN-Korea Cooperation Fund (AKCF). This was after a separate donation to the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund. Moreover, [Indonesia](#), [the Philippines](#) and [Timor-Leste](#) are all cited as recipients of bilateral assistance from South Korea during the pandemic. A step towards this direction is in line with the [ASEAN-ROK Plan of Action 2021-2025](#) which, according to ASEAN Secretary-General Lim Jock Hoi, will focus on a major collaboration in public health and health security.

This health diplomacy (or more specifically, "test kit diplomacy") has raised South Korea's global profile and generated goodwill. In April 2020, as the world grappled with the science of testing and mass production of test kits, as many as [120 countries](#) reached out to South Korea for help. Seoul created a [task force](#) to coordinate the necessary public, private, scientific, legal and regulatory effort for this extraordinary effort, with the output from surge production sent to countries around the world, including to [Nigeria](#), [the United States](#) and even [Japan](#). In Southeast Asia, South Korea's [overall health diplomacy](#) is comparable to China, Japan and the United States – larger countries with a significant diplomatic and development assistance footprint in this region.

Sadly, Southeast Asian health professionals and the public may not be aware of South Korea's health diplomacy efforts in this region, beyond an appreciation for the excellent domestic response to COVID-19.

There could be several reasons, chiefly the absence of a media or communications narrative. Anecdotally, Southeast Asian scientists and health experts with eyes set on Northeast Asia are in general more likely to train in

Japan or China than South Korea, partially due to more opportunities, scholarships and exposure to returning senior colleagues. Therefore, COVID-19 is presenting South Korea with opportunities to incorporate health diplomacy into their broader geo-strategic goals, through stronger public messaging and enhancing their long-term scholarship and networking structure for health experts.

This pandemic shows how health security in ASEAN is interlinked with its regional economic development and physical security. Therefore, the effectiveness of the longer-term response to COVID-19 relies on greater regional cooperation, not solely on nation-state responses within domestic borders. Initiatives like a [regional travel zone](#), health capacity-sharing (for example, [mutual recognition of health professionals](#) or a [regional vaccine stockpile](#)) and an [ASEAN Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC) will add layers of protection to all AMS, though these necessitate new ways of collaboration among the states.

Currently, ASEAN lacks neutral, high stature and credible convenors for such regional integration in health. The under-staffed and under-resourced Health Division is one of 46 Divisions in the ASEAN Secretariat, indicating resource and stature gaps. Moreover, responsibility for implementing various ASEAN initiatives is delegated to member states or the rotating Chair, allowing ideology and geopolitics to play outsized roles.

In a health-ready New Southern Policy 2.0, South Korea can play the role of catalyst, convenor or technical advisor to ASEAN's health systems integration and capacity development. The technical excellence of South Korea, absence of historical baggage and neutrality in the US-China rivalry are in South Korea's favour. Moreover, the country's "[Miracle on the Han](#)

[River](#)" narrative (despite a military dictatorship as recent as the 1970s) can be instructive and inspiring to AMS. There are also strong motivations for South Korea's pivot to Southeast Asia's health in ethics, economics and geopolitics.

The ASEAN-ROK dialogue partnership relations and Plan of Action are easier entry points than the ASEAN Plus Three framework, given the relative weight of China and Japan. Realistically, AMS will have to first welcome South Korea before a multilateral agreement is reached between ASEAN and South Korea.

There are three specific low-hanging fruits to pick. One, AMS can vertically integrate their health systems to respond to pandemics more decisively. Two, AMS can build the non-health public policy framework for that health system to operate in (such as privacy laws, welfare and health insurance). Three, ASEAN can then more easily integrate their systems if they are already interoperable or have similar organising principles.

This pandemic has rightly raised the profile of the excellent South Korean public health system, providing a useful model to build on. The landscape and timing are right for greater South Korean involvement in ASEAN health security and health systems strengthening.

Khor Swee Keng reads Public Policy in University of Oxford and is Visiting Fellow in ISIS Malaysia



ASEAN-ROK Cooperation Under the Green New Deal: Reducing Emissions and Air Pollution

The Green New Deal has the potential to diversify the focus of South Korea's New Southern Policy by inserting the element of environment in a foreign policy that is thought to be too economic-centric. South Korea and ASEAN must consider greater cooperation in two areas under this element: eco-friendly vehicles and environmental governance.



by Helena Varkkey

In November 2019, the ASEAN-ROK Commemorative Summit in Busan celebrated the 30th anniversary of their dialogue relations and formalised ways forward under the Republic of Korea's (ROK, hereafter South Korea) New Southern Policy (NSP). The NSP marks South Korea's foreign policy diversification, beyond its immediate neighbours and the United States, to a more robust focus on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This refocus would seem to be a long time coming – the *Hallyu* or Korean Wave has an immense following in Southeast Asia and South Korea is a leading trade partner for most of the ASEAN Member States (AMS). The challenge now is to leverage upon this cultural and economic complementarity towards enhanced diplomatic and functional cooperation to equitably benefit South Korea, ASEAN as an organisation and the AMS.

In May 2020, South Korea announced its Green New Deal (GND) as the core of its COVID-19 recovery strategy. This would entail, among others, public investments into expanding renewable energy generation and greening the transport sector to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and generate new jobs. This, in contrast with other countries' recovery strategies bolstering [lucrative but environmentally unsustainable](#) industries, was met with much admiration worldwide.

While the NSP formally stands on the three pillars of People, Prosperity and Peace, it has remained heavily economic-focused. Indeed, beyond scientific collaborations to offset the environmental consequences of dams along the Mekong, the environment has received little attention under the NSP. As South Korea puts its GND in motion, how can this seemingly more environmentally conscious approach complement the NSP? This piece highlights two areas of mutual environmental concern, which can benefit from enhanced

ASEAN-ROK relations: eco-friendly vehicles and air pollution governance.

As a renowned innovator within the automobile industry, eco-friendly vehicles seemed an obvious starting point for South Korea's GND. Indeed, under the GND, there is a requirement for 80% of vehicles purchased by public institutions to be eco-friendly by 2021, with a goal for 90% of all public institution vehicles to be eco-friendly by 2030. South Korea will also build new hydrogen production facilities to complement the industry goal of producing 500,000 hydrogen fuel cell vehicles by 2030.

This presents interesting opportunities for the ASEAN automobile industry, a particularly important sector in [Thailand](#), [Indonesia](#), [Malaysia](#) and [Vietnam](#). While Thailand has its niche in assembling foreign brand automobiles for export, Indonesia produces the same mainly for its huge domestic market. With two national car brands, Malaysia's automobile landscape has been focused on collaborations between local and foreign brands. The newcomer, Vietnam, specialises in exporting automobile parts to neighbouring countries.

In these countries, investments and collaborations have been especially active with Japanese automobile brands and manufacturers. Today, these industries are encouraged to move in eco-friendly directions, supported by regional initiatives, such as the ASEAN Fuel Economy Roadmap for the Transport Sector 2018-2025. Thailand is offering corporate income tax exemptions for eco-friendly vehicle investments and Indonesia is giving deductible tax incentives for research and development (R&D) into domestically manufactured eco-friendly vehicles. Furthermore, during President Moon Jae-in's visit to Malaysia in March 2019, a [memorandum of understanding was signed](#) to support Korean electric and hybrid vehicle technology transfer and

investments to advance Malaysia's national car industry.

Not straying far from the NSP's economic and prosperity focus, an enhanced ASEAN-ROK collaboration within this sector would be a low-hanging fruit for both sides. It will help South Korea achieve its GND goals and position itself as a serious competitor against Japanese brands in the region while supporting AMS to more sustainably modernise their lucrative automobile sectors. The focus must now be on lowering [barriers to entry](#), including high import taxes which have delayed Korean entry into the Thai automotive market and limitations on foreign shareholdings which is a continued issue in Malaysia.

Southeast Asia and South Korea share a common environmental problem: seasonal air pollution, known as transnational haze in the former and *hwangsa* (yellow dust) in the latter. Both have regional origins (transnational haze in regional agribusiness activity while *hwangsa* in industrialisation around Northeast Asia) and far-reaching socioeconomic implications.

In the context of COVID-19, mitigating air pollution has become especially important. Studies in the United States, [Italy](#) and [the Netherlands](#) have shown a positive correlation between air pollution, COVID-19 cases, hospital emissions and deaths – not just with current pollution levels, but also [prolonged exposure to polluted air](#). Other findings highlight how particulate matter can also act as [vectors for the virus](#). These findings place the populations of ASEAN and South Korea, who have suffered severe seasonal air pollution for decades, at heightened risk.

Regional efforts for *hwangsa* have been confined to [sporadic discussions within general forums](#), such as the North-East Asian Subregional Programme for Environmental Cooperation (NEASPEC) and the Tripartite Environment Ministers Meeting

(TEMM) – both, interestingly, mooted by South Korea. Comparatively, ASEAN has a comprehensive mechanism for transnational haze mitigation built over decades. While transnational haze persists as a problem in Southeast Asia, the platform has been useful in mitigating political tensions linked to the transboundary issue, something that Northeast Asia has failed to overcome.

Recent research by Korean scientists has shown that locally produced pollution is [higher than originally thought](#). Reflecting South Korea's strong science-based policymaking tradition, the GND targets to reduce fine dust domestically by 40%, [through a combination](#) of reducing reliance on coal, industrial upgrading and urban forests. This inward focus is commendable, but the lack of regional coordination will limit the effectiveness of these efforts.

Leveraging upon the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) mechanism, South Korea could work with ASEAN to revive the APT Environment Ministers Meeting as a politically neutral forum and learning platform for regional collaboration over *hwangsa*. At the same time, AMS could learn from South Korea's science-based policymaking. A starting point could be the ongoing collaboration in the Mekong area, which has been increasingly suffering from [haze-producing agricultural fires](#). While currently focused on dams, scientific collaboration can be extended to the agribusiness sector, especially since South Korea is becoming a [more prominent agribusiness investor](#) here.

With its overwhelming focus on the Prosperity pillar, the NSP's "infrastructure diplomacy" approach risks falling into old patterns of ASEAN engagement practised by its neighbours, Japan and China. Indeed, while the Presidential Committee on NSP has the Ministry of Economy and Finance as well as the Ministry of

Trade, Industry and Energy on board, the Ministry of Environment [is tellingly absent](#). A fresh foreign policy approach needs to look beyond economics to explicitly include environmental cooperation and this committee would be a good place to start.

On the other hand, despite its novelty, the question remains if the GND is strong enough given South Korea's [role in climate change](#). South Korea was the world's [eighth-largest carbon dioxide emitter](#) overall and per capita in 2018, and a recent study concluded that South Korea's commitments under the Paris Agreement (34% reduction from business-as-usual) are highly insufficient to meet the "fair burden" standard – it should be 74% reduction.

A GND which extends into foreign policy initiatives as the NSP can significantly help South Korea strengthen its climate commitments. After all, South Korea already has a strong track record of including [specifically defined environmental provisions](#) in foreign trade agreements. The right ingredients are in place for President Moon to build a positive environmental legacy through the GND and NSP: the COVID-19 wake-up call, the President's [environmental advocacy background](#), his administration's supermajority support in the National Assembly and closely aligned environmental priorities of both parties. In short, a more environmentally balanced NSP will further strengthen ASEAN-ROK economic, diplomatic and indeed environmental ties in the short- and long-term.

Helena Varkkey is Senior Lecturer in the Department of International and Strategic Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya



Smart Cities: How Can ASEAN Keep in Step with Seoul?

As demand for the development of smart cities continues to build up, South Korea should be seriously considered as a partner in this endeavour. Although positive steps have been taken towards this direction, there are ways to further enhance the ASEAN-ROK partnership in this area.



by Moonyati Mohd Yatid and Harris Zainul



The Republic of Korea (ROK, hereafter South Korea) has been at the forefront of smart city development. Indeed, its smart cities have been ranked among the most advanced in the world. Some of its smart city initiatives include the Mobile Seoul website that provides 60 real-time services and information pertaining to transportation, employment opportunities, facilities for the disabled and cultural events; Seoul's Intelligent Traffic System (ITS), smart transportation card and Bus Information System (BIS), which collectively has improved public transportation in the capital; and the world's first 5G convergence self-driving vehicle testbed.

Further, the Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG) established the World e-Governments Organization of Cities and Local Governments (WeGO), an international organisation that aims to achieve enhanced and improved governance in light of recent technological developments, to collaborate with other cities and enterprises on the development of smart cities. These include efforts to narrow the information gap and support other cities by exporting smart city solutions. Since its founding, the organisation has assisted a number of cities to carry out e-government initiatives. Recently, WeGO launched the WeGO Smart Health Responder to provide useful information in order to combat the COVID-19 pandemic.

Meanwhile, in Southeast Asia, the few initiatives that are taking shape include Malaysia's Cyberjaya, Indonesia's Jakarta Smart City Lounge and Singapore's Smart Nation initiative – with the latter also ranked among the most advanced in the world. Similarly, other ASEAN Member States (AMS) have pushed for the rollout of smart city initiatives and goals according to their own needs and capabilities. For instance, in accordance with Thailand 4.0, the country aims to achieve 100 smart cities by 2022 while Vietnam has

plans for its four major cities to complete the first pilot phase of smart city agenda by 2030.

In 2018, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) established its Smart Cities Network (ASCN) with the objective to collaborate on creating smart, sustainable urban development as a solution to urban problems, while leveraging on urbanisation to develop a robust innovation ecosystem for businesses. As it stands, there are 26 pilot cities under the ASCN and these are welcomed developments indeed.

However, concerns remain that initiatives under the ASCN are unable to go beyond superficial programmes and to successfully catalyse tangible gains. Certainly, the high cost involved in constructing and retaining the expensive line-up of technological tools, as well as developing and keeping the talent to run them are some of the challenges faced by the ASCN. The varying levels of development, technological readiness and political will, and diverse economic systems in AMS will also influence each member's starting point and priorities.

Here is where regional collaboration with developed countries, who have had experience in developing such smart cities as South Korea, could be the key in addressing these gaps.

The ministerial-level consultative body formed by South Korea and AMS for sustainable cooperation on smart city development in 2019 looks promising. Essentially, this is aimed to increase contact-time between the respective ministers responsible for smart city development to facilitate the sharing of challenges and best practices, and to identify practical means to boost cooperation.

Besides, through its Korea Smart City Open Network (K-SCON), Seoul intends to export its smart city expertise by establishing an international cooperation system among countries that are

interested in South Korean smart city models. Here, South Korea is already planning to support four AMS through K-SCON to develop comprehensive plans and pre-feasibility studies on smart cities. Notably, South Korea has earmarked US\$250 million to invest on ASEAN smart city development projects.

Nonetheless, more can be done to further the smart city agenda and fully realise the benefits of smart cities.

Firstly, the lack of awareness and understanding of smart cities and what it entails must be addressed. Many political leaders, government officials and even experts have yet to fully comprehend and appreciate the complex and ever-expanding nature of smart cities as well as the various technologies required for a successful smart city deployment and implementation.

Here, the ASEAN-ROK collaboration on smart cities can allow countries with more extensive experience, such as South Korea, Singapore and, perhaps to a lesser extent, Malaysia, to share their experiences.

Secondly, a common policy framework on smart cities between ASEAN and South Korea should be set up. This framework, grounded on the objective of easing foreign private sector investment, should include the standardisation of market entry regulations. This would reduce the barriers and cost to entry, thus facilitating and easing private sector investment into the 11 markets. This would also help some smart city solution providers to better achieve economies of scale and, indirectly, allow smaller, less developed cities to benefit from the smart city revolution as well.

Thirdly, as data is the driver of the advanced technologies underpinning smart city solutions, a data sharing framework between ASEAN and South Korea can be introduced. As the processes and

challenges in developing economies differ from that of developed ones, the data harvested would prove to be of value due to its inherent differences. This would, hopefully, make the case towards private sector investing in a less profitable developing economy with promises to harvest data, which can then be used to refine its technology. Having said that, any arrangement as such should be complemented with thorough privacy safeguards to prevent abuse.

Fourthly, potential areas for exploration through the smart city collaboration should include the expansion of current “living labs”. Used as a testbed for new technologies, these provide innovators with real-world trials that are crucial for the iterative

refinement process of new technology prior to its full commercialisation and subsequent deployment. Should living labs across ASEAN and South Korea collaborate to test the same technology, this could allow for a faster reiterative process to refine the technology while simultaneously testing its suitability and reception in multiple markets. The latter would allow for a proof of concept without needing to engage in a relatively costlier pilot project, thus could reduce the costs for smart city technology adoption.

Beyond the potential benefits of ASEAN-ROK collaboration on smart cities is the added advantage the latter possesses in today’s geopolitical environment. With the geopolitical contestations between the United States and China

heating up and spilling over to the technological front over the past years, South Korea, a non-threatening middle power with immense soft power to boot, stands to gain. With regards to smart cities, where South Korea is an acknowledged leader, there is much room for meaningful cooperation with ASEAN to materialise potential into tangible gains for a better future.

Moonyati Mohd Yatid is Senior Analyst in Technology, Innovation, Environment and Sustainability (TIES); and Harris Zainul is Analyst in Economics, Trade and Regional Integration (ETRI), ISIS Malaysia



4 Ways South Korea Can Make A Difference in the Mekong

What are the available options that Seoul can consider to contribute in the resolution of environmental, economic and political challenges that have haunted the Mekong subregion?



by Harris Zainul

In 2019, the Republic of Korea's (ROK, hereafter South Korea) diplomatic relations with the Mekong states of Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam were elevated when the formerly ministerial-level engagement was upgraded to a full summit. This is less than a decade since Seoul had first begun engaging the Mekong subregion in 2011 with the adoption of the Han-River Declaration of Establishing the Mekong-ROK Comprehensive Partnership for Mutual Prosperity.

Among others, the Declaration had emphasised connectivity, sustainable development and people-oriented development. To that end, the Mekong-ROK Plan of Action for 2014-2017 was adopted and had prioritised six areas for cooperation, namely infrastructure, information technology, green growth, water resource development, agriculture and rural development, and human resource development. This was followed by the 2017-2020 Plan of Action that laid out a three-point vision for partnership, inclusive of connectivity, sustainable development and human-centred development.

But apart from all these – even with the Mekong-ROK Cooperation Fund (MKCF), South Korea's Official Development Assistance (ODA) and the growing trade numbers with Mekong countries – is that increasing pressure is being placed on the Mekong's resources and tensions are rising among the riparian states.

This is, however, of no surprise. Experts have been warning for years that the construction of hydropower dams along the transboundary river's upstream in China (where it is known as the Lancang) and downstream in Cambodia and Laos will come at the high price of reduced water levels, nutrient-rich silt, ecology and biodiversity. Furthermore, the damming of the Mekong mainstream reduces its natural ability to act as a flood pulse,

increasing the vulnerability of the entire Lower Mekong Basin riverine communities to floods. Meanwhile, a 2018 report by the Mekong River Commission (MRC) predicted that total fishery biomass from the Mekong will be reduced by 35-40% by 2020, and 40-80% by 2040, threatening the food security of the approximately 70 million people living in the basin area.

As a chorus of voices calling for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to treat the Mekong like the South China Sea grow louder, the South Korea-Mekong subregion relationship cannot be neatly compartmentalised and insulated from this unsettling development. Having said that, and acknowledging the inherent limitations of what Seoul could possibly do to affect the situation, the following are but a few broad areas in which it could make progress.

The first is concerning South Korea and ASEAN. Here, Seoul, together with other like-minded ASEAN Dialogue Partners, such as Japan and India, can consider raising the matter surrounding the Mekong and of tensions over resource sharing whenever possible at ASEAN-led platforms. Considering how the issue has traditionally been overlooked by the regional organisation, getting the subject matter on the agenda would demonstrate its significance. The recent Joint Communiqué of the 53rd ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting on 9 September 2020 had made four mentions of the Mekong, but none had mentioned concerns over resource sharing.

ASEAN's multilateral platforms, in theory, will give the Mekong states more options, and perhaps leverage, in resolving the issue with China, rather than through the minilateral Lancang-Mekong Commission (LMC), which the latter had set up. With the LMC being perceived as the minilateral institution of choice now due to greater funding, suspicions

abound that Beijing could sway the narrative on the transboundary resource sharing in its favour – making the shift to an ASEAN-led platform all the more attractive.

Nevertheless, maritime Southeast Asia must also do its part. Simply put, if the maritime ASEAN Member States (AMS) expect landlocked Laos, or non-claimants Cambodia and Thailand, to play a positive, supporting role for the ASEAN claimant states in negotiations surrounding the Code of Conduct for South China Sea, then the least they could do is show greater interest in the issues surrounding the Mekong and share the concerns faced by the mainland AMS.

The second, pertaining to minilateralism, concerns Seoul's MKCF and how it only provides grants for projects that are regional in nature. Tensions over resource sharing on the Mekong stems primarily from developmental plans based on narrower national interest calculations, such as decisions to build dams for hydroelectric energy. For this reason, it is hoped that by tying the grants to projects that benefit more than one country in the Mekong subregion, it can lead to mutually beneficial and equitable economic and developmental opportunities. Through this process, perhaps a paradigm shift in how investing and recipient countries view opportunities on the transboundary river and its resources can be shifted for the better.

A further area of exploration pertaining to minilateralism can include the merging of or at least a better coordination among the current "alphabet soup" of subregional cooperation mechanisms. These include the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS), Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI), Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC), Mekong-Japan Cooperation (MJC), Mekong-Republic of Korea

Cooperation (MKC), Swiss Mekong Region Cooperation Strategy (MRS), MRC and LMC. Here, where and when the areas of cooperation are overlapping, Seoul could take the lead in enhancing coordination to better achieve institutional and policy complementarity.

Thirdly, bilaterally, South Korea through its Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) remains one of the leading providers of ODA for AMS. More relevantly, in the period between 1987 and 2017, South Korea's ODA for the Mekong region accounted for 74% of the country's total ODA towards the region. With plans to increase the ODA amount by 20% annually until 2023, Seoul should consider setting a detailed plan and timeline of how it might

allocate the funds to assist Mekong states in their long-term planning. Where possible, KOICA should coordinate its ODA with the MKCF with the view of increasing synergy between the two bodies.

Fourthly, it goes without saying that Seoul must leverage on its scientific and technological prowess in its engagement with Mekong states when it comes to the agricultural and aquacultural sectors. As dam construction increases the risks associated with lower water and nutrient-rich sediment levels and the salinity rate in the Mekong, the need for higher technology and innovative practices can no longer be viewed as a luxury, but rather a necessity.

To close, it must be admitted once again that the potential role of

South Korea to influence change in the Mekong region is inherently limited by hard power considerations. Nonetheless, Seoul remains a benign power, does not seek regional hegemony and has neither historical baggage nor territorial disputes with the Mekong countries (or any AMS for that matter) – thus, placing it in a strategic position to do what it can. With the 10th anniversary of the Mekong-ROK partnership looming in 2021, the time is ripe for Seoul's contributions to bear fruit.

Harris Zainul is Analyst in Economics, Trade and Regional Integration (ETRI), ISIS Malaysia



Geopolitical Considerations for ASEAN-ROK Relations

ASEAN and South Korea should strive towards fostering cooperation in the strategic aspect of the New Southern Policy. To reach that objective, however, ASEAN needs to address some of its internal issues.



by Izzah Khairina Ibrahim



The rising authoritarianism and pressures from China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, hereafter North Korea) are among some of the growing challenges that have precipitated the Republic of Korea (ROK, hereafter South Korea) to expand its geopolitical space by diversifying its outreach to Southeast Asia.

However, South Korea has to realise that there are other countries with similar interests to expand their influence in Southeast Asia, such as Japan, India, the European Union (EU) and Australia. The interest in Southeast Asia is indicative of ongoing geopolitical developments whereby the region will become a significant factor to any countries' post-pandemic strategy in the Asia Pacific.

South Korea has attempted to make inroads through the New Southern Policy (NSP). The high-profile visits led by President Moon Jae-in publicised and emphasised Seoul's intention to cultivate relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and India as key partners in the southern hemisphere, similar to its Chinese and Japanese counterparts.

Although the pandemic has changed the patterns of physical collaboration between ASEAN and South Korea, it has not discouraged its progress, such as people-to-people engagements, nor halted the flow of goods and services.

For example, President Moon emphasised the importance of support for the region's pandemic response and medical needs at the Special ASEAN Plus Three Summit via video conference in April 2020. Additional engagements between the two include the "Enhancing the Detection Capacity for COVID-19 in ASEAN Countries" project. This joint endeavour, worth US\$5 million, includes the provision of test kits, polymerase chain reaction (PCR) equipment and personal protective equipment

(PPE) for ASEAN Member States (AMS).

While health diplomacy will be given the most attention, it is likely that there will be further post-pandemic recovery collaboration, including mid- and long-term strategies that will be mutually beneficial for the parties involved.

In a post-pandemic environment, the goals and methods to achieve the original objectives of the NSP require recalibration and systematisation before plotting the ways forward. These will include revisions of priorities and the instruments of engagement, either bilaterally or multilaterally.

The following are some of the persisting and upcoming issues that need to be addressed for a more constructive progress of ASEAN-ROK relations.

Firstly, the preference for unilateral or bilateral efforts during this pandemic raises questions over the utility of current ASEAN mechanisms and its cohesiveness. These can also pose long-term implications in the organisation's ability to mobilise proactive measures when faced with any disruptive events.

Combined with the lukewarm reception towards international organisations and multilateralism as a whole during the pandemic, it becomes more trying to convince members to commit to ASEAN's cause.

Secondly, maintaining ASEAN's centrality would be challenging if the organisation's leadership dilemma is not resolved. In the past, there were expectations for countries led by strong leaders such as Indonesia to take the reins. But does the organisation actually require a single country to take the lead?

The organisation's rotating chairmanship format has been beneficial thus far. However, it seems that ASEAN's political thrust as a moderating force in the

region requires a lot more than just passing the group's stewardship from one member to another.

Thirdly, ASEAN centrality is also challenged by certain AMS' domestic interests, which could be in opposition to regional aspirations. Some leaders might be preoccupied with the preservation of their power. Besides, there is a plethora of issues that each country is prioritising over regional interests. The pandemic management is just one example, in addition to economic development and the people's welfare, among others.

Indeed, there remains a lack of closer consultation with ASEAN on such critical issues as interstate tensions. The continued prioritisation of national sovereignty certainly hinders efforts to establish an ASEAN community. These are some of the common issues that each AMS are very protective about, which can come at the cost of sidelining ASEAN's agenda. Should there be no resolution in finding the balance between domestic and regional interests, ASEAN's position in the bigger geopolitical scheme would remain hampered.

For ASEAN to achieve more as a premier regional organisation, there is a need then to address any lingering tensions amongst AMS, preferences towards sovereignty, the penchant for bilateral over multilateral solutions and opaque neutrality.

ASEAN needs to overcome its internal challenges by strengthening intra-ASEAN solidarity before it can present itself as a desirable and credible partner to South Korea. Yet, despite its limitations, it is important to remember that ASEAN's members and mechanisms have demonstrated the platform's potential in mitigating the acute effects of geopolitical rivalry on both its member states and partners.

Additionally, there is a need to strengthen multilateralism in Southeast Asia to alleviate tensions and restore confidence in regional mechanisms and the order it creates. One of the intentions of the NSP includes leveraging towards building solidarity amongst middle powers to cope with increasing Sino-American geopolitical competition.

Currently, there is a predominance in economic-centric initiatives compared to its strategic counterparts. The lack of progress in the proposal for an annual ASEAN-ROK Defence Ministers' Meeting, despite being one of the core 16 policy tasks of the NSP, further reflects the limited attention given. Nevertheless, it should be noted that ASEAN's strategic engagements with a country closely associated with a potential flashpoint do need to proceed with caution.

A notable positive stride is South Korea's arms exports into Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam, all known claimant states in the disputed South China Sea. While South Korea has been largely driven by profit-driven calculations and refrained from making statements surrounding the matter, it may be perceived as bolstering claimant and non-claimant states' capabilities to safeguard their respective claims. To alleviate such concerns, maritime cooperation in other areas is also increasing.

Another significant dimension when considering multilateral mechanisms is ASEAN's engagements with North Korea. Indeed, ASEAN's role in matters of the Korean Peninsula has amplified since the Singapore summit in 2018 and Hanoi summit in 2019, but the extent of its role to produce tangible outcomes cannot be overestimated.

While the ASEAN-ROK Joint Vision Statement of the Commemorative Summit intertwines peace and stability in Southeast and Northeast Asia, the

heavy focus on the Korean Peninsula's security can risk undercutting the whole purpose of the NSP. It is important to emphasise that ASEAN, in spite of its peace-oriented values and mechanisms as constructive pathways for North Korea, needs to be further committed to its role as a stakeholder in the interconnected subregions.

Clear priorities and frameworks need to be implemented for the strategic planning and execution of the NSP, including what the policy does and what is needed from the governments of all states involved. However, this should not just be a rebranding of existing programmes to later be subsumed under the NSP to suit short-term needs.

The shifting geopolitical dynamics have intensified the urgency for the NSP to produce tangible results. Indeed, the NSP presents new opportunities for South Korea to engage with Southeast Asia and avoid crippling dependency on traditional partners. Yet, the NSP should not be obfuscated by old issues, such as the preoccupation with economic cooperation and the overstated potential of ASEAN as a mediating buffer against the tension between the two Koreas.

At the same time, it is also essential for ASEAN to address its internal issues. This should be done before working on overcoming its struggle to adapt to new realities, and meet the expectations and goals planned by AMS as well as those stated in the NSP. These goals should reflect the original intentions of the policy and South Korea needs to reaffirm its position as well as commitment as a reliable partner to Southeast Asia.

Izzah Khairina Ibrahim is Researcher in Foreign Policy and Security Studies (FPSS), ISIS Malaysia



New Southern Policy in G-Zero World

It is not the competition between superpowers as the concept of G2 dictates. It is a G-Zero world, where the superpowers have failed to exercise leadership and every nation must fend for itself. In this scenario, small and middle powers must enter a coalition to fill the vacuum in global power politics.



by Lee Jaehyon

At least in the past 10 years, there has been a growing trend of superpower competition between the United States and China. The two superpowers have put forward such grand visions and strategies as Pivot to Asia, [New Type of Great Power Relations](#), the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, among others.

Two things are clear. First, these are not simple foreign policies or strategies of the superpowers, but instruments of superpower competition to outwit or discredit opponents and to secure the support of other countries. Second, the main battlefield of the superpowers has invariably been Asia, particularly the Asia Pacific, East Asia or Indo-Pacific, depending on how one imagines it.

Increasingly, the concept of a [G-Zero world](#) has also gained prominence. In the past, the term “Group of Two” ([G2](#)) was used to describe the world order shaped by two great powers. With G2, the global audience expected vision and principles for a global order from the two superpowers. After all, the two countries – the United States and China – are the most powerful economically and militarily. It is debatable, however, if their leadership will be supported voluntarily by other countries.

G-Zero used to mean there was no single hegemonic or dominant power in the global order. Today, G-Zero means that neither the United States nor China can shape the world order nor assume the global leadership role based on the voluntary support from other countries.

Some have expected that China, as an emerging power, would come up with a new vision or order, but it seems that patience has worn thin as Beijing fails to suggest an alternative. Indeed, questions surrounding the Chinese blueprint for the world are growing and doubt is mounting that China will suggest an alternative global order anytime soon. China’s BRI is also

increasingly causing [negative side effects](#) in recipient countries. Recent Chinese abrasive and assertive measures, such as “[Wolf Warrior](#)” diplomacy, only magnifies suspicions that there will never be a benevolent China. In fact, it generated [negative outcomes](#) that gave the United States an opportunity to discredit China further. Besides, China’s outreach during the COVID-19 pandemic through mask diplomacy hardly earned positive responses.

At the other end of the spectrum, the United States is not any better. The United States gave up its traditional foreign policy principles and [derailed from its old strategic track](#) very quickly, showing little respect for its allies. Exploitation has replaced cooperation in its relationships with allies and partners. The United States’ exits from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Paris Agreement on climate change were indicative of its contempt for multilateralism. Its weaponization of trade does not just affect China, but its allies and partners as well. To top it all off, how the United States is managing the COVID-19 crisis has become a [global concern](#).

This is the context in which [arguments about the role of middle powers and a coalition of small and middle powers](#) have emerged in the Asia-Pacific region. The middle powers maintain that the vacuum of global leadership must be filled by a joint effort of reliable and confident middle powers. The combined force of the middle powers may not be enough to defeat a superpower. However, to fill the power void, a credible and reliable alternative of middle powers would make a difference. The emphasis here is a matter of moral persuasion, not military mobilisation.

The coalition of small and middle powers has an edge – strength in numbers. When superpowers try to amass the support of as many countries as they can, such a coalition gives small and middle

powers the leverage of [collective power](#). During the Cold War, the term “containment” was used to describe the strategy adopted by superpowers to outmanoeuvre and isolate their adversaries. However, it is not only the superpowers that can contain something. A coalition of small and medium powers with strong ties amongst themselves will also be able to “contain” and “isolate” unruly superpowers.

Such a coalition has two choices. Firstly, they can collaborate to reinforce the elements of liberal order, including rules-based order, free trade and multilateralism. These elements are presently being challenged or abandoned by superpowers. The regional order has served the interests of regional countries in the post-World War Two era, bringing about economic prosperity and stability in the region. Secondly, the coalition may work to expand the room for small and middle powers to manoeuvre in the region. The two options need not be exclusive, but can be mutually fortifying.

Whether we use the term “middle power alternative” or “small and middle powers cooperation”, the key phrase is “strong ties and close cooperation” among regional countries. There should be enormous efforts to build the coalition among regional countries and cooperation based on strategic consensus. This is the point where the Republic of Korea’s (ROK, hereafter South Korea) New Southern Policy (NSP) must engage. The policy intends to build stronger and deeper ties with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and India. The ties built should serve as a springboard for deeper strategic cooperation between ASEAN and Korea, which is [facing a similar strategic pressure and dilemma](#) in the G-Zero world.

The NSP’s goals of “valuing and connecting people” and of building “prosperity based on mutual benefits” will not be complete without strategic stability in the region. The superpower competition to maximise their

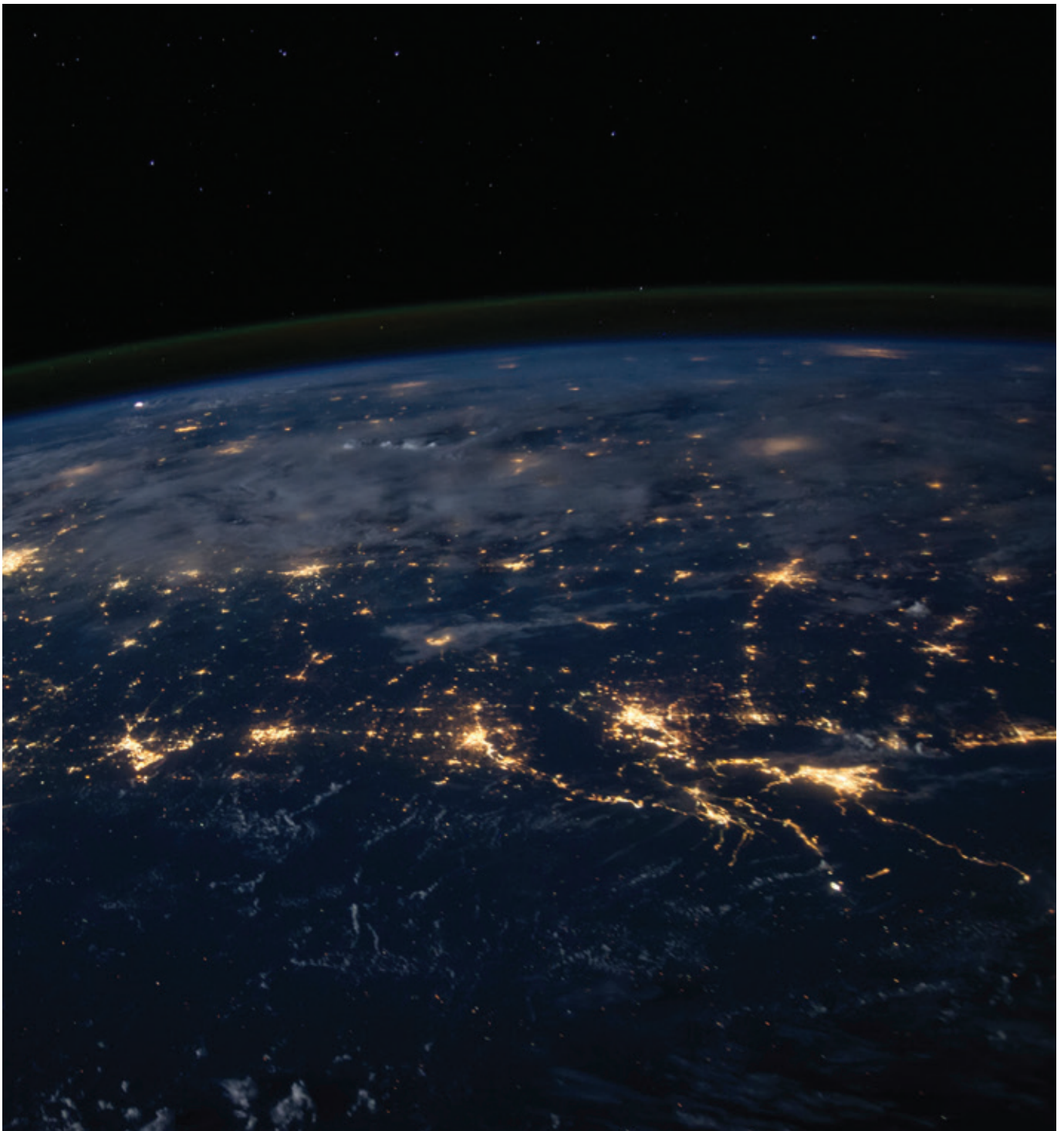
self-interests does not guarantee the interests of small and middle powers in the region; indeed, superpower competition will undermine overall regional stability.

The NSP's Peace pillar aims to build "[a community which can contribute to maintaining and stabilizing regional peace](#)". Now is the time for NSP to put more energy and resources to realise the "Peace" goal. This is a way to facilitate the attainment of goals in the other two pillars as well, namely People and Prosperity.

The first step to strengthen peace cooperation is by upgrading strategic dialogue with ASEAN Member States (AMS). It begins with understanding each other's strategic dilemmas and positions, while sharing individual strategies. The efforts will eventually lead to the building of a strategic consensus in the turbulent environment of the G-Zero world. Furthermore, the channel of strategic communication should not be confined to a particular administration whether in South Korea or in AMS. Thus, we should establish an institutional

arrangement for strategic dialogue and cooperation based on a [strategic epistemic community with a common strategic outlook](#).

Lee Jaehyon is Senior Fellow in Asan Institute for Policy Studies, Seoul



Seoul-ASEAN- Pyongyang Pyramidal Cooperation

Considering Pyongyang's relations with Seoul and Washington have deteriorated since 2019, ASEAN could play a strategic role in integrating North Korea to the wider international community.



by Geetha Govindasamy



Under the New Southern Policy (NSP), first declared by President Moon Jae-in in 2017, the Republic of Korea (ROK, hereafter South Korea) and Southeast Asian states share common interests in advancing bilateral and regional cooperation. Nonetheless, it is intriguing that the prospective role of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in inter-Korean affairs has not been explored to its fullest under the NSP.

While the world is engrossed in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, inter-Korean relations are at a stalemate. In a region known for its dynamic economic growth, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, hereafter North Korea) is the only country in East Asia that has a reputation for reclusiveness.

Despite three inter-Korean summits and two US-North Korea meetings in Singapore and Hanoi between 2018 and 2019, North Korea began to disengage itself from all forms of diplomacy in 2019. Against this backdrop of a fragile regional security outlook, ASEAN has a role to play in building trust among warring parties on the Korean Peninsula. The NSP provides a political opportunity for South Korea and ASEAN to forge inter-regional cooperation to engage Pyongyang and integrate economically into the East Asian community.

As it is well known, the NSP is underlined by "Three Ps": People, Prosperity and Peace. While the NSP has shown success in reaffirming the ASEAN-ROK relations socially and economically, the policy is quite enervated where security aspects are concerned, especially when it relates to ASEAN's role in advocating peace on the Korean Peninsula.

For decades, ASEAN has faithfully supported Seoul's position towards North Korean denuclearisation. During his visits to all 10 ASEAN Member States (AMS), President Moon repeatedly urged the

regional governments to get involved in the Korean Peninsula peace process and to integrate North Korea into regional affairs. To date, however, besides asking for support, there has not been a concrete South Korean proposal as to how else ASEAN can contribute, therefore ASEAN remains secondary to the involvement of bigger powers.

To be fair, it is also unclear the extent to which AMS will want to play a larger role in North Korean affairs. According to Toru Takahashi, the Editor-in-Chief of *Nikkei Asia*, when President Joko Widodo of Indonesia suggested North Korea be invited to the 30th anniversary of ASEAN-South Korea Summit in 2019, Singapore and Thailand opposed, resulting in only South Korea extending the invitation to Kim Jong-un.

AMS must understand that Northeast and Southeast Asia are interlinked politically, economically and socially, and any security incidents triggered by North Korea will significantly affect Southeast Asia's development. After the alleged 2017 assassination of Kim Jong-nam – the step brother of Kim Jong-un – in Kuala Lumpur, the world discovered the extent to which North Korean illicit economic and financial activities were commonplace in the region.

Equally distressing is the fact that missile experts estimate that North Korea's intermediate range ballistic missiles have a maximum range of 4,500 kilometres, which are capable of reaching Southeast Asia. Accordingly, ASEAN needs to ensure a North Korean denuclearisation or some form of security arrangement is in place. In order to do that, a stable East Asian region requires not only US and South Korean participation, but also ASEAN whose members have relatively decent relations with North Korea. ASEAN can play the role of a facilitator between the two Koreas and become an ancillary avenue for the United States and other major powers in engaging Pyongyang.

Given the fact that Kim Jong-un had chosen Singapore and Vietnam as summit locations, it is reasonable to argue that not only did he view ASEAN as a neutral entity, he also showed a keen interest in the economic development of these states. In this regard, these two Southeast Asian states are blue chips that Pyongyang can emulate in terms of understanding how to achieve economic modernisation that Kim Jong-un aspires to.

According to the 2019 ASEAN Integration Report, ASEAN is already the fifth largest economy in the world. Therefore, in the post COVID-19 era, there is ample room for the organisation to amalgamate North Korea into the regional economic expansion.

Currently, North Korea's engagement with ASEAN is limited to the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) at the Track One and Track Two levels. North Korea is not a member of other ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and ASEAN Ministerial Meetings with Dialogue Partners.

Considering that these platforms will provide a range of opportunities for North Korea to enhance cooperation and increase mutual understanding with all parties involved, it can be concluded that Pyongyang would certainly welcome an invite as a dialogue partner.

However, there is a caveat to this undertaking. ASEAN [rejected](#) North Korea's request to become a dialogue partner in 2016 due to the frequent missile tests that year, despite the fact that North Korea has acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), a prerequisite to become a dialogue partner.

Since North Korea's relations with both Seoul and Washington are in tatters, now is a good time to

reconsider inviting North Korea as a dialogue partner of ASEAN. In so doing, ASEAN can serve as an indispensable avenue for Pyongyang to directly engage with other dialogue partners regularly. In the event the dialogue partnership request is accepted, North Korea then should appoint a resident ambassador to ASEAN. Such a move would allow North Korean interests and policies to be represented in ASEAN.

Recently, North Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs admitted that it is willing to work with ASEAN through the ARF in establishing peace on the Korean Peninsula. Further, the North openly declared that ASEAN was fair when dealing with Pyongyang. Against this backdrop, there is a diplomatic opportunity for Pyongyang-Seoul relations to improve with ASEAN

playing the role of a mediator.

Admittedly, a Seoul-ASEAN-Pyongyang pyramidal cooperation is the least explored option by policymakers and scholars alike, until President Moon introduced the NSP. In comparison to other regional organisations, ASEAN is better qualified than most to keep North Korea continually engaged as well as providing a favourable setting for addressing the state's legitimate concerns.

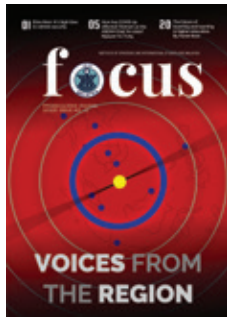
With US efforts faltering, it is time South Korea considers embracing neighbourhood partnership to maintain a peaceful security environment in the East Asian region. The NSP provides an incredible opportunity for ASEAN to become a bridge builder between the two Koreas and to

wheelde North Korea to end its isolation as well as commit to the denuclearisation process. All the policy needs are a sound strategy forward and political will from all involved. For these reasons, if the NSP's Peace pillar is going to contribute to the Korean peace agenda, South Korea needs to earmark resources and strategy that will integrate North Korea into the region through ASEAN.

Geetha Govindasamy is Senior Lecturer in Department of East Asian Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS), University of Malaya



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