

ADVANCING SOUTH KOREA-SOUTHEAST ASIA SECURITY TIES: BETWEEN OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been much attention devoted to South Korean President Moon Jae-in's New Southern Policy (NSP)—the most recent effort by Seoul to boost relations with Southeast Asian countries and India and diversify its relationships beyond four major powers: China, Japan, Russia, and the United States. Yet, at the same time, less of a focus has been placed on how to advance the security aspect of the NSP despite some of the inroads that have been made, as well as the underlying convergences of concerns and interests between South Korea and the countries of Southeast Asia.

This paper addresses this gap by providing insights into South Korea's security ties with Southeast Asia, based on a close analysis of South Korean and Southeast Asian accounts as well as conversations with officials and scholars on both sides. It makes three arguments. First, while South Korea's efforts to advance security ties with Southeast Asian states as well as with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a bloc may have been met with mixed results so far, the inroads made still deserve attention and are rooted in several domestic, regional, and global drivers. Second, though these security ties create opportunities for Seoul's relations with ASEAN countries, they also pose challenges

that should not be ignored. Third and finally, advancing security relations between South Korea and Southeast Asian countries will require actions not just on the part of Seoul or ASEAN nations, but also other actors.

Key Words: ASEAN-South Korea; New Southern Policy; middle power; ASEAN-ROK; Southeast Asia

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, there has been much attention devoted to South Korean President Moon Jae-in's New Southern Policy (NSP)—a signature effort to boost South Korea's relations with Southeast Asian countries and India and diversify Seoul's relationships beyond four major powers: China, Japan, Russia, and the United States.¹ But while there has been attention to the economic and people-to-people aspects of the policy as it evolves—including the rollout of the New Southern Policy PLUS blueprint at the ASEAN-Korea Summit meeting last November—the security dimension has been less emphasized.² This report addresses this gap by providing insights into South Korea's security ties with Southeast Asia, based on a close analysis of South Korean and Southeast Asian accounts as well as conversations with officials and scholars on both sides.

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This paper makes three main arguments. First, despite some mixed results, South Korea has been intensifying its efforts to build out aspects of security partnerships with the countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) over the past few years, and this is motivated by interests on both sides. Second, though these security ties create opportunities for Seoul's relations with ASEAN countries, they also pose challenges. Third and finally, advancing security relations between South Korea and Southeast Asian countries will require actions not just on the part of Seoul or ASEAN nations, but also other actors.

THE CONTEXT FOR SOUTH KOREA-SOUTHEAST ASIA SECURITY TIES

South Korea's initial relationships with Southeast Asian countries were focused more on economics and diplomacy rather than explicit security issues, with an emphasis on winning the legitimacy competition with North Korea during the height of the Cold War and showcasing its development model to developing countries in the 1970s.³ Yet, in reality, security and geopolitics were never really absent from Seoul's ties with regional countries given its status as a U.S. treaty ally, and the link between Southeast Asia and broader priorities such as the management of Pyongyang or alignment diversification.⁴ Starting in the 1990s in particular, four principal drivers have led both sides to boost collaboration with respect to security and broader geopolitical considerations.

The first driver has been South Korea's growing middlepowermanship, which has seen it participate actively in regional institutions and propose solutions to global problems.⁵ Amid this middlepowermanship, Southeast Asian countries have been logical partners to advance security and geopolitical collaboration as the hosts of ASEAN-led institutions such as the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus). They are also beneficiaries of Seoul's outreach in areas including overseas development assistance (ODA), particularly in mainland Southeast Asia.⁶ Though this can be traced back to the 1990s when Kim Dae-jung sought to advance ideas for East Asian multilateralism, it has been subsequently reinforced during the leadership of Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye. Though neither had an explicit Southeast Asia strategy, there were piecemeal developments under their leadership such as the expansion of defense exports or the formation of the informal middle power partnership MIKTA grouping with Indonesia, Australia, Mexico and Turkey in 2013.⁷

The second driver is the heightening of certain common security challenges, which has strengthened the case for collaboration. In particular, the growing attention given to rising non-traditional security challenges by both South Korea and Southeast Asian states in recent years, as reflected in both recent official documents as well as state behavior, have provided a catalyst for wider defense cooperation in areas such as countering transnational crimes and disaster management and relief, beyond the more traditional challenges faced such as the military threat posed by North Korea.⁸ A case in point is disaster relief, where South Korea has emerged as being among the key countries helping advance ASEAN capabilities in areas such as capacity-building, risk governance and information sharing in what is one of the world's most disaster-prone regions.⁹

The third driver is the growing security needs of Southeast Asian countries. As Southeast Asian countries have become developed, they have naturally become more attentive to the necessity of managing both longstanding security issues with their neighbors as well as addressing newer defense challenges. One byproduct of this has been their greater pursuit of defense capabilities from partner countries, and data confirm that there have been increased investments in military spending and arms acquisitions over the past decade or so.¹⁰ While Seoul may have traditionally been seen as less of a security player than powers such as Japan or Australia, Southeast Asian countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia have turned to South Korean defense companies for their needs since the 2000s, with recent deals involving fighter jets, naval vessels and even submarines.¹¹

The fourth and final driver has been a set of changes in the geopolitical environment. In particular, the twin challenges of the rise of a more assertive China as well as a more unpredictable United States have highlighted Seoul's overdependence on both countries and reinforced the case for new regional partners, as has been reinforced by official documents such as its 2020 defense white paper released in February.¹² This has intersected with the desire among some Southeast Asian states to diversify their relationships as well, due to their own concerns with Washington and Beijing, even though this has not necessarily corresponded with greater alignment with Seoul.¹³ Notable developments along the way in recent years, including China's punitive reaction to Seoul's deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense anti-missile system (THAAD) in 2017 and the U.S.-China trade war that erupted under U.S. President Donald Trump, have only reinforced this tendency on the part of Seoul.¹⁴

The confluence of these trends has led to a gradual intensification by South Korea on developing aspects of security collaboration in the region, even though the scope of this is quite broad and still limited.¹⁵ The NSP has attempted to build on some of these components (see Tables 1 and 2). The three-pronged policy first focused on five areas on the “peace” side: 1) increasing the number of summits and high-level exchanges; 2) boosting cooperation to bring security to the Korean Peninsula; 3) strengthening cooperation on defense and defense industry through

exchanges, transfer of technology and localized production; 4) joint responses to terrorism, maritime security, and cyber as well as nontraditional security and environmental issues such as marine litter; and 5) enhancing emergency response capabilities and resilience to natural disasters and climate change and advancing cooperation in infrastructure and climate technology.¹⁶ And when South Korea put forward a vision for upgrading the NSP to the next stage—the so-called New Southern Policy PLUS—one of the areas included was strengthened collaboration in non-traditional security.¹⁷

Table 1. Select Issue Areas and Initiatives in ASEAN-ROK Security Ties

Functional Issue Area	Outreach/Initiative	Example Countries
Transnational crimes	Korean National Police Agency K-Cop Wave Program assistance to law enforcement agencies	Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam
Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief	Support for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief	ASEAN-wide
Maritime Security	ADMM-Plus Maritime Security Field Training Exercise and Future Leaders’ Program (2019)	ASEAN-wide
Water Security	Satellite-based weather resource data and training in the Mekong	Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam
Peacekeeping	Support for peacekeeping operations	Vietnam
Cybersecurity	Signing of MOU on cooperation and information sharing	Singapore

Table 2. Select Defense Areas and Country Examples in ASEAN-ROK Security Ties

Area	Example	Year
Dialogues	South Korea-Vietnam Defense Policy Dialogue	2011 -
Intelligence-Sharing Agreements	South Korea-Thailand General Security of Military Information Agreement	2019 -
Defense MOU	Brunei-South Korea Defense MOU	2018 -
Defense Sales	Sale of military vehicles to Cambodia	2010 -
Co-Production & Co-Development	South Korea-Indonesia KAI KF-X/IF-X joint fighter aircraft development program	2010 -
Exercises and training	South Korea-Philippines Passing Exercise (PASSEX)	2020

Source: Author analysis based on open-source information

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Further strengthening South Korea's security cooperation with Southeast Asian states creates a mix of opportunities and challenges for the countries involved as well as for other interested actors. On the opportunities side, first, such partnerships can contribute to the management of actual security challenges that occur. A case in point is the increased attention to secure medical supply chains emerging out of the Covid-19 context.¹⁸ While the scope of collaboration thus far has been within the context of ASEAN+3 and measures such as strengthening early pandemic warning and real-time information exchanges, there is also a security dimension to some of the areas discussed, including the setting up of medical supply stockpiles.¹⁹

Second, aspects of security collaboration can also offer some Southeast Asian countries an additional option for their needs given the lack of other choices available to them or perceived comparative advantages on their own terms. For instance, in the area of 5G, though Southeast Asia's choices have at times been framed from a narrow U.S.-China lens, South Korean firms have played an important role in helping some of these countries assess how to address both commercial and security considerations as they make their decisions.²⁰ Indeed, one notable think tank survey found that Samsung was the telecommunication provider of choice to build 5G networks in ASEAN member states as a whole, with 38.5% of respondents selecting it as the top choice and it emerging in the first spot in seven of ten Southeast Asian countries—Brunei, Indonesia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.²¹

Third, security collaboration between South Korea and Southeast Asian nations can also provide platforms for wider collaboration, particularly as more convergences are being struck within the context of the Indo-Pacific. A case in point is South Korea's engagement in the Mekong subregion, which has been elevated under the Moon administration through various means including the holding of the first summit in 2019 and the establishment of the Mekong-ROK comprehensive partnership.²² Seoul's efforts have helped catalyze wider discussions about how other like-minded powers with an interest in the Mekong can collaborate in functional areas, including the sharing of water data and the synergies with subregional and global mechanisms such as the Ayeyarwady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) as well as global frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals.²³

But advancing South Korea's security cooperation with Southeast Asian states also comes with challenges. The first relates to messaging. Though South Korea's outreach to Southeast Asia involves aspects of defense collaboration, there has tended to be some hesitancy on the part of Seoul to emphasize these relative to the economic and people-to-people aspects, in part due to strategic dilemmas about balancing its relationships as a U.S. treaty ally with growing economic ties to China.²⁴ We have seen this with respect to the NSP as well, with the Moon government casting it as being more "gloeconomics" or "development-focused" in the wake of anxieties of being drawn into U.S.-China rivalry and the fallout of aligning too closely to the Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision outlined under the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump.²⁵

The second challenge relates to prioritization. Though there are certainly some general convergences between South Korea and Southeast Asian states in functional areas such as advancing maritime security and countering illegal drug trafficking, there are also some differences in specific priorities. For instance, on the Southeast Asia side, despite some previous efforts at harmonization by officials, including leveraging multilateral security institutions such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), some countries do not accord the same level of importance to the North Korea challenge as South Korea does and there is a tendency to see Seoul as being too preoccupied by Pyongyang that continue to color policies such as the NSP.²⁶ Similarly, on the South Korea side, though certain Southeast Asian countries prioritize challenges such as terrorism or the South China Sea, these issues do not typically receive as much direct attention from Seoul, relatively speaking.²⁷

The third challenge relates to operationalization. At times, even when South Korea has attempted to make inroads in the security realm, it has faced issues in terms of advancing that collaboration. At a general level, some of the strategic priorities within the NSP, including the proposal for an annual ASEAN-South Korea Defense Ministers Meeting which is listed as one of the five security-oriented policy tasks, have yet to be advanced.²⁸ More specifically, some defense deals that had initial promise have yet to materialize but have served as wider points of convergence, with a case in point being the jet fighter joint development project between South Korea and Indonesia known as the Korean Fighter Xperiment/Indonesia Fighter Xperiment (KFX/IFX), which was mired for years in delays and cost issues.²⁹ Though this may be offset by gains in other projects and with other

countries, it nonetheless reinforces the challenges of making quick gains that can provide the necessary momentum to advance the agenda on the security side.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

In order to realize the full promise of ASEAN-South Korea security ties, policymakers from South Korea, Southeast Asia, and other interested parties will have to manage a mix of opportunities, and challenges that arise from them. This is especially the case given wider trends at play in Asian security, including China's growing role, concerns about governance challenges in Southeast Asia itself, and uncertainties about the future of the regional security architecture, including the role of ASEAN, and intensifying U.S.-China competition.

First, South Korea and ASEAN states need to sustain attention to the security domain of the relationship to ensure that it catches up with other aspects. Despite the efforts of both sides, some indicators reinforce the sense that South Korea is still not viewed as a security partner even among Southeast Asian elites. For instance, ISEAS polling data from 2020 indicate that few perceive Seoul as being a reliable strategic partner, and it also ranked last among ASEAN's seven external partners to hedge against the uncertainties of rising U.S.-China rivalry.³⁰ There also continue to be doubts about how ASEAN-ROK security ties can be advanced beyond the NSP, especially if the next South Korean president is not as focused as Moon was on Southeast Asia as a region.

South Korean officials understand that some of this is an awareness challenge that will take time to be mitigated, and the investment in institutions such as the ASEAN-Korea Center in Seoul and ASEAN Culture House in Busan offer a foundation to build upon.³¹ But there are additional actions that governments on both sides can take on the security side to move things along. On the South Korean side, some of this can simply involve pointedly emphasizing some of the work already ongoing on the security side leveraging existing institutions. An example is the Seoul Defense Dialogue, where efforts can be made to cultivate young Southeast Asian leaders to advance work on certain defense areas, as has been done in other such fora like the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore.³²

Second, South Korea and Southeast Asian states should continue to reinforce comprehensive notions of security as they advance the defense aspect of their ties. While there will be episodic upcoming opportunities for collaboration in functional areas like peacekeeping and cybersecurity or individual arms deals and exercises, advancing these can pose challenges of their own. Additionally, comprehensive notions of security can also help both sides manage some of the legacy concerns that have existed as both sides pursue greater defense ties. This includes anxieties by some on the South Korean side about making the approach to Southeast Asia "oversecuritized," or, on the other hand, concerns in some ASEAN countries about the "understrategic" nature of Seoul's engagement as it engages selectively in specific domains such as technology rather than being a comprehensive strategic partner.³³

The shared challenge of transitioning to a post-pandemic future while managing the lingering effects of Covid-19 presents an opportunity to reinforce this notion of comprehensive security. As several practitioners have already pointed out, the security-related aspects of South Korea's competent response to the pandemic, including its handling of fake news and disinformation and management of challenges in the deployment of advanced technologies during the pandemic, can offer some useful lessons for the Southeast Asian countries struggling with Covid-19, from Myanmar to Indonesia.³⁴ There are also opportunities for the sharing of experiences on broader security-related issues, including the pursuit of secure supply chains and the management of data privacy issues that are shared concerns across countries.

Third, South Korea and Southeast Asian countries should work together to manage the differences in prioritization in their security outlooks to the greatest extent possible. To be sure, differences in national interests mean that it is unreasonable to expect Southeast Asian countries to give as much of a focus to North Korea as South Korea would, or for Seoul to be as worried about the South China Sea issue as individual ASEAN claimant states are. The focus should instead be on the need for more give and take in order to at least bridge some of the gaps between both sides so that security collaboration is not impaired. Doing so would at least reduce the likelihood of the periodically frustrating efforts to advance the NSP and similar future initiatives, as we saw with the reaction among some in Southeast Asia when Moon considered inviting North Korean leader Kim Jong-un to the Busan Summit.³⁵

Doing so is obviously easier said than done and will require tradeoffs between the two sides. For Southeast Asian countries, there needs to be more of a unified understanding that playing more of a role on the North Korea issue individually and collectively is not only a way to signal to South Korea that its concerns are acknowledged, but also critical to earning ASEAN the centrality it craves in the management of regional security challenges. And on the South Korean side, beyond the increased diplomatic engagement of ASEAN and support of initiatives such as the ASEAN Outlook for the Indo-Pacific, there needs to be a growing willingness to engage ASEAN collectively on security issues that we have seen with other Asian powers such as Australia, India and Japan.³⁶ While this may take the form of newer initiatives, it can also be accomplished by rebranding some of Seoul's existing efforts as part of broader multilateral engagement, as we saw Tokyo do with the Vientiane Vision as a new ASEAN-Japan security mechanism.³⁷

Fourth, turning to the role of other interested parties, they should reinforce efforts by South Korea and Southeast Asian states to facilitate the integration of security partnerships into wider, existing regional and subregional arrangements. Doing so will not only increase collaboration, but also advance an integrated notion of the Indo-Pacific rather than more siloed notions that emphasize the differences of subregions.

The United States has an important role to play in this as a treaty ally and key regional agenda-setter. Though some work has already been ongoing on this score including consultations about the integration of the Indo-Pacific Strategy with the New Southern Policy despite lingering differences, there is a need to build out some of the functional areas in the peace and security pillar that leverages existing mechanisms, be it the International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA) in Bangkok when it comes to countering transnational crimes, or the 17-member Friends of the Mekong with respect to transboundary governance.³⁸ Beyond the United States, other key Asian players can

also serve an important role, with India being particularly significant given its role in the Indo-Pacific conception. Given some intersections between the NSP and India's Look East Policy as well as Seoul's recent joining of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), there could be areas of convergence where both could work together.³⁹

Fifth and finally, interested parties need to work on their own and with other like-minded countries, including South Korea, to ensure that they continue to do their best to provide Southeast Asian states with adequate choices when pursuing forms of security collaboration. While Southeast Asian countries understandably seek greater autonomy and may be unwilling to choose between powers, the reality is that they are already being presented with a series of individual choices in policy realms including the defense domain, with countries such as China and Russia pursuing their own security partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region as well and some countries engaging in this at times at least partly due to a perceived lack of alternatives or cost-benefit analysis.⁴⁰

To be sure, the current and future governments in Seoul may not want to be as involved in the decisions of individual South Korean defense companies with respect to Southeast Asian countries, and there could be some hesitancy with linking South Korea's own security-related pursuits with Southeast Asian countries or with those made by wider alignments such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (or "Quad") grouping together Australia, the United States, India, and Japan. Nonetheless, South Korean governments can coordinate with other like-minded partners and work with their own companies where it makes sense to tailor more strategic arrangements in ways that do not undermine their profitability, and that also address the geopolitical considerations of Southeast Asian countries, whether it be on costs, related components such as training, or domestic defense industry considerations that come as part of package deals. This would help advance South Korea's own interests in a way that is also cognizant of strategic realities in the region.

CONCLUSION

A series of drivers over the past few years have spotlighted the logic of greater security collaboration between South Korea and Southeast Asian states, including within the NSP, being pursued by the Moon government. While this is not entirely new and is to be expected given South Korea's growing role as a major power and Southeast Asia's increasing significance as a subregion, it also presents opportunities and challenges that these countries as well as other interested actors need to manage by themselves and in collaboration with other entities both at home and abroad if this is to be advanced under the Moon government and its successors.

Doing so will not be easy—it will require both South Korea and Southeast Asian states compromising in certain areas, managing differences where they exist, and working within various bilateral, regional, and global channels. But it is far from an impossible task either given the drivers that have been propelling collaboration thus far, the convergences in interests in certain areas, and the political will that exists in Seoul and ASEAN capitals to engage more on the security side as part of a wider relationship. And it is an important one as well, as like-minded countries work to promote a more peaceful, prosperous, and people-centered Indo-Pacific region.

ENDNOTES

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