



2024-08(S)

## **Korea-ASEAN Defence Cooperation, focusing on the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting: What to do and where to start?**

**Lee Jaehyon**, Principal Fellow  
The Asan Institute for Policy Studies  
2024.3.29

While ASEAN-ROK political and economic cooperation has expanded, defence and security cooperation has often lagged behind. As a result, there has been a growing interest in ASEAN-ROK policy on this issue. The Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI), Korea's strategy for ASEAN within its Indo-Pacific strategy that is the basis of South Korea's foreign policy, has emphasised defence and security cooperation. For the ASEAN-ROK relationship to develop in a sustainable manner, collaboration on political, security, economic, and socio-cultural issues must be developed evenly. In reality, however, the extent of defence and security cooperation, including defence industry cooperation, is lower than in other areas. Therefore, there is great potential to enhance the ASEAN-ROK partnership further in this area.

### **Structure and Contents of ASEAN Defence Cooperation**

When it comes to strengthening defence cooperation with ASEAN, the first step is understanding ASEAN defence cooperation structures and institutions. Undoubtedly, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) is at the centre of defence cooperation among ASEAN member states. The ADMM is the highest decision-making body for all defence and military-related cooperation within ASEAN and reports directly to the ASEAN Summit. In addition, all ASEAN-level military and defence-related consultative bodies that existed until 2006, when the ADMM was created, as well as all those created in the future, are under the purview of the ADMM.<sup>1</sup>

Below the ADMM is the ADMM Senior Officials' Meeting (ADSOM), which in turn supervises ADSOM-Working Groups (ADSOM-WGs) to carry out their duties. Furthermore, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus or ADMM+, in which all 10 ASEAN countries, Korea, the United States, China, Japan, Australia, Russia, India and New Zealand participate, is designed to put ADMM at the helm of the defence cooperation of 18 countries.

The content of ASEAN defence cooperation under the ADMM can be understood in two ways: the ADMM's Working Groups (WGs) and the ADMM Three Year Work Programme. At the ADMM, only one WG meets regularly in an official capacity, the ADSOM-WG. In practice, the topics covered by the ADMM are very broad, and most topics are initiated in the form of

ad hoc meetings, workshops, etc. These groups meet regularly and are named after the topics they deal with. Still, they do not form separate working groups, unlike the working groups of ADMM+, which in fact reflect the major security cooperation topics of the ADMM. The ADMM publishes the ADMM Three-Year Work Programme on an ongoing basis. These reports outline the content and areas of focus for ADMM collaboration, along with specific action plans. The most recent Work Programme, 2023-2026, contains plans for 10 specific issues, such as maritime security, HADR, and counterterrorism.<sup>2</sup>

### **Korea's Proactive Participation is Required**

After understanding the workings of the ADMM, what matters is what contribution Korea can make for the defence cooperation among ASEAN member states or for the ADMM. As South Korea is not a member of ASEAN, it cannot participate in the ADMM, so its cooperation with the ADMM comes indirectly in the form of the ADMM+ cooperation. South Korea has hosted a total of six ADMM+ related meetings since 2014, but its role is not as significant as those of its neighbouring middle powers.<sup>3</sup> For example, Australia has played a leading role in ADMM+ since 2011, earlier than South Korea. It has hosted a total of 12 meetings, and Australia's contributions have covered many different topics of AMDD+ cooperation. New Zealand has also hosted a total of nine meetings between 2011 and 2019. Japan has hosted the same number of meetings as Korea, but the country's active role started earlier. Japan's contribution is also more comprehensive than Korea's in terms of the topics covered in cooperation.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, South Korea's contribution to ADMM+, and indirectly to ADMM, is not as substantial as that of its neighbouring middle powers. Given its expertise and capabilities, South Korea should consider taking a more proactive role in ADMM+ and, indirectly, raise the level of defence cooperation with the ADMM and ASEAN.

### **Areas of Meaningful Korean Contributions for ASEAN Defence Cooperation**

In addition to Korea's proactive role in the ADMM+ and ADMM, there are some specific areas of cooperation covered by the 2023-2026 ADMM Three-Year Work Programme that Korea can make a significant contribution. These are where Korea can make a meaningful contribution in the following areas of cooperation, given Korea's capabilities, ASEAN's expectations, and the strategic circumstances of the Indo-Pacific region.

**Maritime Security Cooperation:** The Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI) emphasises maritime cooperation with ASEAN in the defence, security, and strategic sectors.<sup>5</sup> For maritime Southeast Asian countries, which form the backbone of ASEAN, maritime issues are of vital importance, not only for security but also for economic growth,<sup>6</sup> as well as for non-traditional security and socio-cultural issues such as marine environmental and ecological preservation. Therefore, special attention and resources should be devoted to maritime security cooperation, which is one of the central components of the ADMM's three-year plan.

**Digital and cyber defence:** The second intersection of South Korea's and the ADMM's interests is cyber security. South Korea prides itself on being ahead of the curve on digital and cyber issues regionally and globally. This is well recognised by ASEAN countries, and they are keen to strengthen digital cooperation with South Korea.<sup>7</sup> This is a promising area where South Korea can be of practical help to ASEAN. Moreover, there are synergies between cyber security cooperation and digital transformation for economic growth and the socio-cultural development of ASEAN countries. Beyond responding to direct cyber threats, there are also areas where South Korea can provide technical assistance for basic digital connectivity, not just among Southeast Asian countries but also among the militaries of ASEAN member states.

**Defence industry:** Thirdly, cooperation in the defence industry is another field in which Korea is well positioned. ASEAN countries seek to develop their own defence industries and cooperate through the ASEAN Defence Industry Collaboration (ADIC) scheme. This initiative presents several dilemmas. The sophistication of the defence industries in individual ASEAN countries is not high, making it difficult to make solid progress on cooperation. ASEAN can work with superpowers with advanced technologies, such as the United States or China, to address this issue. Defence cooperation with these counterparts, however, could lead to dependence on a particular power and weaken ASEAN's neutrality and autonomy. In addition, the defence industry that ASEAN countries want to develop is not a high-tech one based on advanced technology. ASEAN countries want to develop defence capabilities for minimal deterrence, and they also want to develop their own defence industry technology through technology transfer, which helps their economies grow through spillover effects.

Given this, the support and cooperation by Korea, a non-superpower and a relatively neutral country, is an ideal option for ASEAN countries to develop defence industry cooperation. Korea can also supply ASEAN countries with the level of defence equipment that ASEAN needs at an affordable price. Korea is more open to technology transfer than other partners, which is a big factor in the eyes of ASEAN's defence industry. With these strengths, South Korea can be a strong backstop for intra-ASEAN defence cooperation.

**Peacekeeping:** The fourth area of ASEAN's recent interest in defence is peacekeeping. This is another area where South Korea would be well-suited to work with ASEAN. The backdrop of ASEAN's recent references to peacekeeping and increased cooperation is that peacekeeping is an area where ASEAN countries can contribute at the global level despite their limited defence capabilities.<sup>8</sup> South Korea has gained a lot of experience in UN peacekeeping operations and has performed well in many of them. The good image of the ROK's Evergreen Force in East Timor in 1999 is still talked about in Southeast Asia. Based on this experience and image, South Korea can support ASEAN's cooperation in peacekeeping operations by sharing its expertise.

This article is an English Summary of Asan Issue Brief (2024-08).

(‘한국의 대 아세안 국방협력, 어디서 시작하고 무엇을 해야 하나?: ADMM을 중심으로’,

<https://www.asaninst.org/?p=92946>)

<sup>1</sup> ASEAN Defence Minister's Meeting. 2007. “Protocol to the Concept Paper for the Establishment of the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting (ADMM).” Adopted the 2nd ADMM, Singapore. November 13 (<https://admm.asean.org/dmdocuments/2. Protocol to the Concept Paper for the Establishment of the ADMM.pdf>).

<sup>2</sup> Refer to ASEAN Defence Minister's Meeting. 2023. “ADMM Work Programme 2023-2026.” Adopted by the 17th ADMM, Jakarta, Indonesia. November 15 ([https://admm.asean.org/dmdocuments/2023\\_Nov\\_17th ADMM\\_Jakarta\\_15 Nov 2023\\_ADMM Work Programme 2023-2026.docx](https://admm.asean.org/dmdocuments/2023_Nov_17th ADMM_Jakarta_15 Nov 2023_ADMM Work Programme 2023-2026.docx)).

<sup>3</sup> In 2014 and 2015, South Korea hosted workshops on peacekeeping operations and meetings to plan peacekeeping-related field exercises. In 2018, it hosted an expert working group on maritime security and in 2019, an expert working group on maritime security field exercises. In the same year, it held the Maritime Security Next Generation Leaders Programme in Seoul and Busan. In 2023, the Expert Working Group on Cyber Training and Exercise (CYTREX), a cyber security exercise, was held in Seoul.

<sup>4</sup> Refer to ADMM Website. “Past Meetings and Events (2006-2023)” (<https://admm.asean.org/index.php/events/past-meetings-and-events.html>).

<sup>5</sup> KASI, Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative ([https://mys.mofa.go.kr/www/brd/m\\_3924/down.do?brd\\_id=13007&seq=363570&data\\_tp=A&file\\_seq=1](https://mys.mofa.go.kr/www/brd/m_3924/down.do?brd_id=13007&seq=363570&data_tp=A&file_seq=1)).

<sup>6</sup> ASEAN. 2023. “ASEAN Blue Economy Framework.” (<https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/ASEAN-Blue-Economy-Framework.pdf>).; ASEAN. 2019. “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific.” ([https://asean.org/asean2020/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific\\_FINAL\\_22062019.pdf](https://asean.org/asean2020/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf)).

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia. 2023. “ASEAN-Korea Partnership Vital for Regional Digital Transformation.” *Indonesian Way*. July 13. (<https://kemlu.go.id/portal/en/read/4962/berita/asean-korea-partnership-vital-for-regional-digital-transformation>).

<sup>8</sup> Carl Thayer. 2014. “ASEAN and UN Peacekeeping.” *The Diplomat*. April 25 (<https://thediplomat.com/2014/04/asean-and-un-peacekeeping/>).; Victor Bernard. 2016. “Is it time for a peacekeeping force for ASEAN?” *The Asia Foundation*. February 3 (<https://asiafoundation.org/2016/02/03/is-it-time-for-a-peacekeeping-force-for-asean/>).



## Lee Jaehyon

Center for Regional Studies ; Publication and Communications Department

Dr. LEE Jaehyon is a Principal Fellow of the Center for ASEAN and Oceanian Studies at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. Previously, Dr. Lee was a research fellow at the Korean Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (KISEAS) and a visiting professor at the Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security (IFANS), Korean National Diplomatic Academy (KNDA). Dr. Lee’s research focuses on Southeast Asian politics and international relations, East Asian regional cooperation, and non-traditional and human security issues. His recent publications include “Transnational Natural Disasters and Environmental Issues in East Asia,” *IFANS Review* (2011), “Political Crises after Democratization in South Korea and Thailand: Comparative Perspectives of Democratic Consolidation,” *Korea Observer* (2008), “A 2+2 for the Future: The First Korea-Australia Foreign and Defence Ministers’ Meeting,” (2013), “Identifying South Korea’s Regional Partners: On the Environment, Family Values, Politics and Society,” (2015). Dr. Lee received a B.A. and M.A. from Yonsei University and his Ph.D. in politics from Murdoch University, Australia.