

30 years of ASEAN-Korea partnership: From prosperity to peace with people

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The third ASEAN-Korea Commemorative Summit is being held from Monday to Wednesday this week in Busan. The summit of national leaders of the 10 Association of Southeast Asian Nations and South Korea celebrates the 30th anniversary of a partnership between the ASEAN bloc and Korea.

Korea is the first dialogue partner of ASEAN to hold a special summit three times. It is a chance for leaders to review the past achievements of the ASEAN-Korea partnership and to envision the future of the bilateral relations. A key point to be discussed is Moon Jae-in Government's initiative toward ASEAN countries, the New Southern Policy. Taking this opportunity, the Korean government is expected to roll out the vision and initiatives of the New Southern Policy's next phase after two years of implementation.

The track record of ASEAN-Korea cooperation in the past three decade is remarkable. Today, ASEAN combined makes up Korea's second-biggest trading partner, recording trade volume of \$160 billion in 2018. The region is also a major destination of Korean foreign investment and the second-biggest overseas construction market for Korea. Mutual visits between the two chalked up more than 10 million people in 2018. While the Korean Wave contributes to the growing Korean soft power in the ASEAN region, ASEAN countries' culture is increasingly being introduced to Korean society. Southeast Asia absorbs the lion's share, around 30 percent, of Korea's development assistance to the global community.

ASEAN-Korea relations have gone through several stages of development. The early relationship was rather modest. Korea was initially a sectoral dialogue partner of ASEAN. This is a term designed only for Korea, which was a developing country then. Other full dialogue partners were either advanced countries or superpowers. Throughout the 1990s, the relation did not really take off, barring two events – upgrading Korea's status from a sectoral dialogue partner to a full dialogue partner in 1991 and Korea's joining the ASEAN-led ASEAN Regional Forum in 1994.

The second stage came with the Asian financial crisis. ASEAN countries and their counterparts in Northeast Asia -- Korea, Japan and China -- established the ASEAN Plus Three multilateral framework around the financial crisis. Regional countries gathered to overcome the crisis through joint efforts. The development of ASEAN-Korea relations sped up in this multilateral context, as the two parties had more chances to meet and discuss common concerns. By the late 2000s, the two

parties signed a free trade agreement and agreed to upgrade bilateral relations to a strategic partnership.

Bilateral relations entered a new era with the Moon Jae-in government's New Southern Policy. What is significant about the policy is that it is Korea's first policy initiative toward ASEAN with a definitive title. There have been policies and initiatives toward ASEAN before, but they were without a specific title or name. The degree of political will to implement and to follow up the policy are quite different when an initiative has a name.

Indeed, the New Southern Policy has been quite steadfast despite some developments that could have derailed the pursuit of the policy. This includes all the progress and setbacks in the Korean Peninsula issue, growing strategic competition between China and the US, and a trade dispute between Korea and Japan. Institutional innovations such as Presidential Committee on New Southern Policy, the new ASEAN Bureau in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and an upgraded Korean representative to ASEAN are major achievements of the New Southern Policy. President Moon, displaying his commitment to the policy, fulfilled his promise to visit all 10 ASEAN countries while in office earlier than expected.

Looking back, the development of ASEAN-Korea relations was led by economic cooperation and backed up by sociocultural and people-to-people exchanges. From simple trade and investment, economic cooperation now expands to diverse areas including high technology and new frontiers of the economy such as "the fourth industrial revolution." Sociocultural cooperation also made substantial progresses not just in quantity but also in quality. Once the government paves the way for cooperation in these areas, the private sector of firms, associations and civil society push the cooperation forward. Achievements are highly visible in the form of numbers such as trade and investment volumes and the number of exchanges.

The story, however, is different in political-security cooperation -- the "peace" component of the New Southern Policy. Among three pillars of cooperation, peace cooperation is lagging far behind other areas. Political-security cooperation is government's job from the beginning to the end. It is time for government to allocate more energy and resources to this field of cooperation to deepen strategic cooperation. The balanced growth of three economic, sociocultural and political-security pillars is needed to put the ASEAN-Korea cooperation on a rock-solid foundation. A stronger political-security and strategic cooperation is a way to overcome strategic uncertainty that both ASEAN and Korea are facing and is a way to expand our strategic room for maneuver.

Korea should not forget the "people" part of the New Southern Policy's 3P principle (people, prosperity, peace). The people element also resonates with ASEAN's "people-centered community" vision. All cooperation between the two parties has to put ordinary people's prosperity and peace at the center. It is the very foundation of a community's peace and prosperity and further of a nation's peace and prosperity. Cooperation caring for ordinary people's interests is the best way to differentiate Korea's approach to ASEAN countries from those of other more powerful and richer countries. Without this element, Korea will remain as one of cooperation partners of ASEAN along with the US, China, Japan, India or Australia, but with a smaller pocket.

Last but not least, the future of ASEAN-Korea relations in general, and the success of the New Southern Policy specifically, depends on how much Korean people and society appreciate the importance of ASEAN for the interests of Korea. Despite the substantial strategic, economic and sociocultural potential of ASEAN for the interest of Korea, the value of ASEAN is not widely and deeply recognized among the general public here. A successful diplomatic initiative needs the support and consensus of a society. Therefore, the New Southern Policy, other than its messages and initiatives toward ASEAN countries and people, has to keep an eye on how to elevate Korean society's awareness of ASEAN's importance.

* The view expressed herein was published on November 24 in the Korea Herald and does not necessarily reflect the views of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies