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## ASEAN-Korea Comprehensive Strategic Partnership: Background, Meaning and the Way Forward

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### Introduction

At the ASEAN-Korea Summit held in October 2024, ASEAN and South Korea elevated their partnership to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP). The upgrade marks the highest level of bilateral relations short of an alliance, achieved 35 years after the two sides first established their first bilateral tie—the Sectoral Dialogue Partnership—in 1989. The CSP represents another significant milestone in the ASEAN-Korea bilateral relations, symbolizing the deepening and widening of their cooperation in the past 14 years since the Strategic Partnership was established. Furthermore, it signals that the cooperative partnership will make even further progress in the years to come.

### Key Aspects of the ASEAN-ROK CSP

The joint statement of CSP establishment is guided by three principles, each representing a key area of cooperation: **advancing** peace and security for all; **building** a smarter, more sustainable, resilient, and connected future; and **creating** a socio-cultural platform for young and future generations. These principles respectively represent visions for political-security cooperation, economic cooperation, and socio-cultural cooperation.

Among the ABC principles of ASEAN-Korea CSP (AK CSP), the political-security vision emphasizes inclusivity in peace and security cooperation. It aligns with the inclusivity principle outlined in South Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy, which ensures that no regional countries are excluded. This principle also expands its focus to include not only national security but also individual security, as well as non-traditional and human security matters, which is at the heart of achieving peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region and are in the top priority of cooperation. The economic cooperation principle highlights priorities such as connectivity, digital transformation, and climate change that are the areas for ASEAN countries in shaping their economic future. The socio-cultural principle, as emphasized in Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI) places particular emphasis on to the capacity building and future generation exchanges.

## **The Background of Korea-ASEAN CSP**

### The Need for a New Framework to Reflect Deepened Bilateral Cooperation

Many years have passed since the last upgrade of ASEAN-South Korea relations, during which the two parties have built a more robust partnership. The previous upgrade occurred in 2010, when ASEAN and South Korea established a Strategic Partnership. Formal relations between the two began in 1989 when South Korea was admitted as a sectoral dialogue partner of ASEAN, and within two years, in 1991, its status was elevated to a Full Dialogue Partner. Although bilateral relations saw limited progress in the 1990s, the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis marked a turning point, prompting increased cooperation within ASEAN-led regional multilateral frameworks. The partnership was subsequently upgraded to a Comprehensive Partnership in 2004 and then to a Strategic Partnership in 2010. However, despite 14 years of deepening cooperation, no further formal recognition of this progress had been made—until the 2024 establishment of ASEAN-Korea Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) in light of these developments.

### Instrument for Deeper Strategic Cooperation in the Context of Intensified U.S.-China Competition

The strategic environment surrounding ASEAN and South Korea has shifted dramatically over the past decade. When ASEAN and South Korea signed a Strategic Partnership in 2010, the U.S.-China strategic competition was in its early stages. Today, this rivalry between the two superpowers has become the most significant strategic concern for both ASEAN and South Korea, introducing substantial uncertainties for them and the region as a whole. The competition between the two great powers is no longer limited to simply rivalry but has now expanded across all fronts, including military, diplomacy, trade, investment, supply chains, and technology. While many Southeast Asian countries find themselves increasingly linked to China economically, particularly in infrastructure development, access to the U.S. market and U.S. investment remains essential for ASEAN's economic prosperity.

To manage the strategic risks posed by great power competition, each country's individual strategies are important. However, coordinated efforts among countries with similar strategic outlooks and interests are equally, if not more, crucial. Both ASEAN and South Korea find themselves caught between the competing interests of the United States and China. Although ASEAN and South Korea cannot fully address nor resolve U.S.-China tensions, their cooperation remains important. By joining forces, they can expand the strategic room for maneuver for regional small and medium-sized countries, safeguarding their interests and enhancing their leverage with larger powers. The ASEAN-South Korea strategic cooperation through the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) should aim to fulfill this objective.

### AK CSP Reflecting the New Nature of ASEAN as a Regional Organisation

Over the past 14 years since the establishment of the ASEAN-Korea Strategic Partnership, ASEAN has undergone fundamental changes. Following the adoption of the ASEAN Charter

in 2008, ASEAN declared the establishment of the ASEAN Community in 2015. This declaration did not signify the completion of the ASEAN Community but marked the beginning of ASEAN's efforts to build a community among Southeast Asian nations. Prior to 2015, ASEAN functioned as a relatively loose cooperative framework among its member states. However, the 2015 declaration provided ASEAN members with a clearer mandate to work toward creating a regional community.

While working toward internal community-building, ASEAN adopted its own Indo-Pacific vision, the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). This has since become a central framework for cooperation with ASEAN's Dialogue Partners. Since 2020, ASEAN and key partners—including Japan, India, Australia, South Korea, the United States, and China—have signed agreements that place the AOIP at the core of their collaboration. Through these initiatives, ASEAN aims to reinforce its “centrality” in the region. The ASEAN-South Korea Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) reflects both ASEAN's evolution as a regional community and its strategic approach to engaging with Dialogue Partners.

### Mirroring Heightened Importance of ASEAN in South Korea's Foreign Policy

The South Korean government's ASEAN strategy has evolved significantly over the past decade. With this shift, the need for a new cooperation framework between South Korea and ASEAN has emerged to reflect the South Korean government's growing political commitment to ASEAN. The previous Moon administration, for the first time in South Korean history, introduced a policy initiative specifically focused on ASEAN, known as the *New Southern Policy*. This policy was subsequently succeeded by the current government's *Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative* (KASI). Additionally, the South Korean government announced its Indo-Pacific strategy, which geographically encompasses the North Pacific, ASEAN, Oceania, South Asia, Africa, and even parts of Europe. This intensified interest and commitment of the South Korean government towards Southeast Asian countries and ASEAN forms one of the foundational drivers behind the ASEAN-South Korea Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP).

## **Suggestions for the Plan of Action for ASEAN-Korea CSP**

### Guaranteeing Consistency and Continuity of ASEAN-Korea Cooperation

The remaining task is to establish a Plan of Action (PoA) for implementing the CSP. The PoA, above all, serves as a vital mechanism to ensure continuity and consistency in Korea-ASEAN cooperation. Regardless of changes in government or shifts in interest toward ASEAN, the PoA functions as an invisible engine sustaining ASEAN-Korea collaboration. Each PoA has historically spanned across two administrations, not confined to any single one. For example, the PoA created to implement the joint declaration from the 9th ASEAN-Korea Summit in 2005 covered both the Roh Moo-hyun and Lee Myung-bak administrations. Likewise, the PoA developed in 2025 will extend to 2030, bridging into the next

administration. This mechanism enables the PoA to secure the continuity and consistency of ASEAN-Korea cooperation beyond individual administrations.

### Key Considerations for Developing the Plan of Action in the ASEAN-Korea CSP

To develop a PoA that not only strengthens Korea-ASEAN cooperation over the next five years but also ensures continuity into the next administration, several key considerations should be addressed.

First, it is essential to align with the principles that ASEAN emphasizes in its Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships (CSPs). ASEAN places strong emphasis on making each CSP “meaningful, substantive, and mutually beneficial (MSMB).” In this spirit, the PoA should thoroughly reflect ASEAN’s practical interests, including maritime cooperation, connectivity, infrastructure, and other areas of economic and other areas such as science and technology, digital transformation, and aging society as indicated in the AOIP.

Second, this Action Plan must also meet Korea’s strategic objectives as well. It should appropriately incorporate areas emphasized in Korea’s Indo-Pacific Strategy and KASI, such as peace and stability in regional seas (maritime security), cooperation in digital areas like cybersecurity, and youth collaboration, which are focal points of KASI.

Third, the PoA should work to strengthen Southeast Asian countries’ confidence in KASI. With the current administration’s focus on the Indo-Pacific Strategy, particularly in collaboration with the United States and Japan, defined within the strategy’s North Pacific scope, there have been concerns among ASEAN countries that Korea’s interest in ASEAN may have waned compared to the previous administration’s New Southern Policy. The CSP PoA should dispel such perceptions and reaffirm the continuity of Korea’s ASEAN policies and cooperation with ASEAN beyond changes in administration.

Lastly, Korea should draw lessons from other countries’ experiences with CSPs. By analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of other countries’ PoAs, Korea can identify priority areas of cooperation that align with both Korea’s strengths and ASEAN’s acknowledged areas of need.

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