

[ASEAN 50th Anniversary Special Session II]

ASEAN Think Tank Summit: Korea-ASEAN Cooperation and the Role of Think Tanks in the Region



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— **SUH Chung-ha** The Association of Southeast Asian Nations(ASEAN) is playing a pivotal role in regional politics and economy in East Asia. Particularly, we need to take note of ASEAN centrality in regional bodies such as the East Asia Summit(EAS) and ASEAN Regional Forum(ARF). Likewise, ASEAN is in the center of the multilateral diplomacy in East Asia. Also, we need to take note that ASEAN as a regional association is evolving despite some skeptical views on ASEAN's future. The launching of ASEAN Economic Community epitomizes this progress.

There is a critical view that the Korean government and the Korean people have yet to recognize the importance of ASEAN to Korea. According to this view, the Korean government has not made efforts commensurate with the status of ASEAN. And the Korean people are short of understanding the importance of ASEAN fully.

— **SUH Jeong-in** In the political-security aspect, one of the ASEAN's greatest achievements is that since 1967, Southeast Asia has not witnessed any conven-

tional inter-state wars among its ten member states. Beyond the Southeast Asian region, ASEAN has also been the initiator of diplomatic and security cooperation in the wider Asia-Pacific region by launching the ARF in 1994 and ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus(ADMM-Plus) in 2010. In terms of achievements in the political-security dimension for Korea-ASEAN relations, Korea was given the status of ASEAN's Sectoral Dialogue Partner in 1989 and then Korea was elevated to a full Dialogue Partner by 1991. In 2010, both agreed to upgrade their cooperative partnership to the Strategic Partnership. Since 1989, Korea has hosted two Korea-ASEAN Commemorative Summits in 2009 and 2014 respectively. In 2012, Korea opened a dedicated diplomatic mission to ASEAN in Jakarta, Indonesia.

In the economic aspect, ASEAN formed the ASEAN Free Trade Area(AFTA) in 1992. By the end of 2015, the ASEAN Economic Community(AEC) was launched. ASEAN is now the sixth largest economy in the world with an estimated GDP of US dollar

\$2.6 trillion. ASEAN has been the main initiator of a broader regional economic integration agreement known as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership(RCEP). As for the economic dimension of the Korea-ASEAN relationship, the Korea-ASEAN Free Trade-in-Goods Agreement was concluded in 2007 and this year will be the tenth year anniversary of this Free Trade Agreement. Furthermore, the ASEAN-Korea Center(AKC) was founded in 2009 to promote trade facilitation and investment between Korea and ASEAN. In addition, there are negotiations to further liberalize the existing Korea-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement.

In the socio-cultural aspect, ASEAN has also made tremendous progress. For instance, one in eight persons in ASEAN are now living under the poverty line of US dollar \$1.25 per day. ASEAN states have also attained literacy rates of more than 90 percent. People-to-People exchanges have significantly increased as well. ASEAN has become the number one foreign destination for Koreans. The number of ASEAN citizens who are living, working, and studying in Korea is the largest among the registered foreigners in Korea. In addition, Korea is planning to open up a dedicated ASEAN Culture House in September 2017 to raise Koreans' awareness of ASEAN's diverse cultures and heritages.

Regarding the future of Korea-ASEAN relations, ASEAN's experiences and knowledge on dialogue and cooperation will be very useful to Korea in maintaining peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia. At the same time, Korea and ASEAN will also be able to enhance their collaboration on non-traditional security challenges. As for economic cooperation, Korea and ASEAN can join hands to establish a global value-chain as a way to grow their economies together. The future-oriented partnership will also help Korea and ASEAN prepare for the widespread technological disruption and the Fourth Industrial Revolution. On the topic of common challenges facing Korea and ASEAN, these include the challenges posed by rapidly aging societies and low birth rates. Looking

ahead, there is also a need to strengthen cultural bonds between the people of Korea and ASEAN and promote greater People-to-People exchanges.

Think tanks in Korea and ASEAN can work together to play a constructive role and contribute to policy-making. The formation of the ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies(ASEAN-ISIS) is a clear recognition of the important tasks and contributions that think tanks in the region have made so far. As ASEAN strives to reach its goal of becoming a "People-centered, People-oriented" community, it must earnestly reflect on its diverse communities' ideas and opinions. To do so, ASEAN's Track 1 must continue its close working relationship with Track 2 groups like ASEAN-ISIS. Some suggestions for the Track 2 entities of Korea and ASEAN to consider working together on are regarding the future of peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia as well as the creation of a Track 2 association for the EAS mechanism.

— **Ralf EMMERS** The major achievement of ASEAN would be conflict avoidance as there has not been an inter-state conflict in Southeast Asia since its founding. Another achievement is ASEAN's unique diplomatic culture of consensus and non-interference in internal affairs of each ASEAN member state as well as the centrality of ASEAN to the wider regional architecture.

As for the challenges, ASEAN has not done well in conflict resolution as it does not have the institutional capacity to resolve any kinds of controversial disputes. Although ASEAN is trying to make some progress in its political-security community, the glass is arguably "half-empty" in this regard. Despite 50 years of collaboration, there is still a significant trust deficit amongst Southeast Asian states. Another challenge is that ASEAN centrality should not be taken for granted as it is facing many challenges from both within and outside of ASEAN.

Regarding the implications of Brexit on the region, there are actually only a few implications for East Asia, especially since the processes of integra-

tion are so different between the EU and ASEAN. It may not be appropriate to compare the EU with ASEAN – the EU is about sharing sovereignty, whereas ASEAN does not involve any sharing of sovereignty. It is also very unlikely for any state in ASEAN to call for an exit from ASEAN despite the supposed momentum brought about in Europe by the United Kingdom(UK)'s exit from the EU. As the EU will be more inward looking over the next few years, this will mean less attention being paid by the EU to Southeast Asia.

— **NGUYEN Duc Hung** There are three opportunities of development that Korea could take advantage of to promote partnership with ASEAN: 1) “world manufacturing” is shifting from China to ASEAN; 2) the potential of ASEAN’s retail market with an expected population of 700 million and a GDP target of US dollar \$9,000 billion by 2030; 3) increasing economic integration of the AEC and the ongoing talks on RCEP which pave the way for new excellent business openings for all states in the region.

Despite there not being a mechanism in ASEAN to solve disputes, there are ways in ASEAN to prevent tensions from escalating. ASEAN centrality should also not be taken for granted. To maintain ASEAN centrality, ASEAN should be more innovative and creative in its approaches to Asia-Pacific issues to prove that it is an irreplaceable mechanism. To do so, it requires a leader and Indonesia should be ASEAN’s leader to better coordinate things.

— **LEE Sun-jin** The regional integration of ASEAN should also be cited as one of its achievements. Laos, despite having a GDP per capita of US dollar \$1700 and being one of the poorest states in ASEAN, had one third of its population across the border into Thailand in 2015 for business, travel, etc. It is also worth pointing out that Korea has invested more in ASEAN than in China since 2009. Korea’s biggest trading partner is China, followed by ASEAN.

Countries should work together and unite against the manipulation by major powers. For instance, there should be an early conclusion of the RCEP – Korea and ASEAN should take the lead in this and

bring other parties into the RCEP. Over ten years ago, ASEAN had played the role of the “honest broker” to bring the two Koreas closer together. Now is the time for ASEAN to renew this role, especially since the current domestic political climate in South Korea does not yet allow for dialogue with North Korea. According to ASEAN Secretariat statistics, intra-ASEAN trade and investment(Foreign Direct Investment and outflows) is increasing. Moreover, there is a much unregistered trade taking place in the border regions between ASEAN countries, only approximately ten percent of trade is registered.

— **TAN See Seng** Some of the advances in connectivity in the region are made due to contributions of ASEAN’s dialogue partners. A more dynamic and innovative ASEAN is required, especially if ASEAN wants to preserve its centrality in the region. Ironically, ASEAN centrality is defined in terms of its interactions with the wider world beyond ASEAN and not based on ASEAN’s own unity. ASEAN has done very well in its interactions with countries and regions outside of ASEAN.

There is a need for ASEAN economies to de-emphasize its trade links with outside powers and instead stress more on intra-ASEAN trade, especially since U.S. President Trump has an “America First” policy. Some questions that should be pondered include: What can ASEAN and Korea do and how can they strengthen ASEAN’s centrality in the face of China’s rise and greater central role in the region? On the other hand, if such Chinese dominance is good, how can Korea and ASEAN ensure that it brings prosperity to the region? Can the emergence of new networks and activities in the region contribute positively to ASEAN regionalism or will they undermine ASEAN in some ways?

— **Carolina HERNANDEZ** What was the role of think tanks in the development of ASEAN?

— **Rahimah ABDULRAHIM** The Habibie Center is not part of the ASEAN-ISIS network. As it is run independently, it is able to do more and push the boundaries to challenge issues such as the ASEAN Way and other sovereignty related issues. Besides Track

2 groups like the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific(CSCAP) and the ASEAN-ISIS which have been pushing forward recommendations to governments, new think tanks and networks are also being formed nowadays as various states begin to open up. Implementable recommendations are always welcome by ASEAN.

Since the information is transmitted to the masses in different ways nowadays with the relative decline of the newspaper, think tanks have also gone into new media such as video blogs, YouTube channels, etc. There is therefore a need to look beyond the traditional avenues of organizing roundtables and to look at more targeted and strategic activities to engage with a wider audience. Korea’s interest to enhance Korea-ASEAN relations through the promotion of cultures is commendable. Think tanks also need to join this movement, learn more from Korea about cultural promotion, and do more to promote regional integration. Think tanks need to make themselves more relevant and enhance the awareness of ASEAN even with the ASEAN region – people in the region need to be made aware of what is ASEAN and what ASEAN means for them as an individual.

The emergence of new networks and activities in the region do not actually contribute much to ASEAN regionalism. This is because these think tanks operate outside of the formal ASEAN structure and the ASEAN Secretariat does not allow them to penetrate it.

Keywords

ASEAN, Korea, Think Tank



Policy Implications

- Think tanks in Korea and ASEAN need to do more to raise awareness of ASEAN and the role that ASEAN plays in the region.
- ASEAN has several achievements over the last 50 years, but it still has to deal with many challenges now and in the years ahead both from within the ASEAN and from external powers.
- ASEAN centrality cannot be taken for granted. ASEAN needs to do more to make itself relevant to the other major powers in the region so that they see the benefits of being involved in ASEAN-led mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus etc.
- Korea and ASEAN face similar geopolitical challenges vis-à-vis the great powers. Both parties can learn much from each other if there is more dialogue and effort made by governments and think tanks to enhance this relationship.