

[ASEAN 50th Anniversary Special Session I]

ASEAN Journalist Roundtable: The Future of ASEAN-Korea Cooperation



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— **SHIN Yoon Hwan** It is time for regional cooperation between the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to be further expanded beyond economic engagement to include political, security and other aspects. While governments certainly play an important role in facilitating ASEAN-Korean economic cooperation, this cooperation is nonetheless driven by the private sector. The main economic link is in the area of trade and investment. For instance, since 2010, ASEAN has been Korea's second largest trade partner. For ASEAN, Korea has been its sixth largest trading partner.

The Korean Peninsula remains one of the tensest areas in the world due to North Korean threats and provocations. For the past few decades, the two Koreas have had occasional dialogues, but these tended to be temporary. It is now time to look to ASEAN to provide an alternative solution to help build peace on the Korean Peninsula together. For instance, ASEAN can play an active role in promoting peace in the region by emphasizing neutrality and a zone that is free from nuclear weapons. In the past, any type of

military and security cooperation between the ROK and ASEAN could not even have been envisioned. However, after Kim Jong-Un came into power he has ignored international opinion and provoked neighboring countries, inadvertently encouraging unity in the region.

Korea and ASEAN are now strategic partners. In fact, Korea has 19 additional strategic partnerships, however, these strategic partnerships by themselves do not mean much. There is a need to go beyond the current framework for Korea's external relations which are still focused on relations with the U.S., China, Japan, and Russia. Korea and ASEAN can build an equal relationship and a friendship for the common good. Enhancing relations with ASEAN will also increase Korea's bargaining power with the other major powers. Korea needs to break away from its traditional reliance on the U.S. for its security and could consider joining ASEAN as a member.

Despite both Korea and ASEAN recognizing the importance of solidarity, there remain some obstacles which might be difficult to overcome. For instance, there remains a geographical divide between

Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia, with few overlapping interests between these two sub-regions.

There is also much to be gained from greater Korea-ASEAN cooperation in the technology and socio-cultural sectors. Greater cooperation in the technology and socio-cultural sectors between Korea and ASEAN can certainly be further deepened, leading to a win-win outcome for both sides. The technology gap between ASEAN and Korea is just about the optimal amount to allow both sides to complement each other's weaknesses and tap on each other's strengths. For instance, the capital that Korea possesses can be combined with the labor of Southeast Asia to help create more jobs, lower production costs, and promote economic growth. In the socio-cultural sector, there is no doubt that the Korean wave has played an important role in enhancing Korea-ASEAN exchanges. For instance, ASEAN has been the most popular tourist destination for Koreans since 2010 with more than six million Koreans visiting ASEAN countries annually. Additionally, the number of Southeast Asian students studying in Korea ranked number two in the world after the number of Chinese students.

— **Ravi VELLOOR** It is good that the ASEAN Economic Community has gotten off the ground after its launch in 2015. It has been positive so far, but there are still some important things that have yet to be done. The free movement of labor is not an easy thing, but that should not stop attempts to implement it. There is also a need to move things at a sustainable pace that is acceptable to the people of ASEAN.

The prospect and likelihood of Korea joining ASEAN is uncertain. This is because ASEAN likes to put contentious issues aside. If Korea joins ASEAN, it will bring the Korea-Japan historical issue into ASEAN. While ASEAN countries can forgive, but cannot forget what Japan did during its colonization of Southeast Asia during the World War II, Korea adopts a different approach vis-à-vis Japan on this issue.

The perception of Korean products in Southeast Asia differs depending on the industry and time. In

the past, it was generally perceived as inferior to Japanese products. However, the quality of Korean cars nowadays is just as good as Japanese ones, although in terms of branding, Japanese cars still have a slight edge in Southeast Asia. As shown by a Bloomberg index, however, Korea is definitely the leading country in terms of innovation. In light of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, Korea's innovative nature is going to be an important asset.

Korea can do more to be involved in ASEAN and create personal links with Southeast Asian people. For instance, there should be a Korean technology center set up in ASEAN where Korean and ASEAN students can interact and develop networks. Another example is that of the Samsung Innovation Center located outside of Seoul. There are 35,000 engineers employed there, of which 1,400 are foreigners, with a majority of these foreigners coming from India. More Southeast Asian engineers and other types of professionals should be encouraged to work in Korea. In terms of mind space, China and Japan still dominate in Southeast Asia, but Korea can certainly do a lot more in the Southeast Asian region.

It may also be timely for Korea to talk more with ASEAN about strategic issues. In 2010, when former President Lee Myung-bak spoke at the Shangri-la Dialogue in Singapore, he spoke about moving the Korea's focus away from Northeast Asia. However, this did not exactly materialize the continuous demand for the South Korean government to give continued attention on the issues of the Korean Peninsula.

In terms of people-to-people exchanges, while about 12 percent of Korea's population visits ASEAN countries each year, the reverse figure for Southeast Asians visiting Korea is much lower. To increase these numbers, Korea could work on promoting its Buddhist heritage to ASEAN, especially since there is a large Buddhist population in ASEAN and there are many historical Buddhist sites in Korea. More can also be done to improve connectivity between ASEAN cities and Korea. For instance, there is no direct flight between Singapore and Jeju.

Asia is currently going through a period of deep uncertainty and flux. Korea can contribute to the process of keeping the momentum of globalization going, especially given the global trends against it. Korea should work on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership(RCEP) and with a minus one formula if necessary. Last week in Hanoi, there have also been talks about reviving the Trans-Pacific Partnership(TPP) even without the U.S. Korea should look at the TPP and join it, too, in the interests of globalized economies.

In response to Ambassador Lee Sun Jin's question about whether ASEAN can once again play the role of an "honest broker" between North and South Korea, ASEAN was able to do so back then since it had more bandwidth and it was not caught up over the South China Sea disputes yet. Back then, China had yet to get seriously involved in the South China Sea disputes. Nowadays, ASEAN is very caught up in its own issues so there is little energy or interests to go beyond the Southeast Asian region since these issues are already causing divisions within ASEAN.

— **Philip GOLINGAI** Malaysians can sometimes be living in their own "coconut shell" without knowing enough about what is happening in the outside world and about ASEAN "coconut shell" that they are supposed to be living in. From the viewpoint of an average ASEAN citizen, ASEAN only seems to be for the elites who attend the Leaders and Foreign Ministers meetings of ASEAN. There is a lack of awareness and thought to ASEAN integration among normal people in Southeast Asia.

The Korean engineering prowess in Malaysia has declined over the past few decades. For instance, in the 1980s, Hyundai had built the longest bridge in Malaysia and Samsung built one of the Petronas twin towers in Kuala Lumpur. However, in recent times, it feels like Korea has moved away from Malaysia, and instead China has increased its presence in the country. With regard to security issues, Korea can become a security ally of ASEAN to perhaps balance China's power in the region. Sometimes Malaysia is worried about China's behavior in the South

China Sea and it is becoming a big bully in general.

Regarding the Korean Wave, Korean dramas are very popular in Malaysia because the themes in Korean dramas about relationships and corporate life are universal. However, it is uncertain how long this Korean Wave will last as it may decline just as the Japanese and Hong Kong waves did. The next big thing to look out for is the Chinese Wave.

Regarding the media, both Korea and ASEAN should move away from print media, which belong to yesterday. A focus on online and social media as well as light-hearted stories is the way forward for media in the region.

One way to get ASEAN people more interested in ASEAN and Korea is perhaps to have a *Running Man* type program, a popular Korean TV program involving celebrities in ASEAN which features a famous Korean icon who travels across ASEAN.

— **Doreen YU** Regarding the South China Sea disputes, each ASEAN member is looking at it from their own interests and perspective. Therefore, ASEAN has not been able to come up with a common ASEAN statement which the G7 was able to do. ASEAN countries may be competing for Korean investments and grants. Korea's largest investments in ASEAN are currently in Vietnam and Indonesia. Korea's presence in the ten ASEAN countries is different. For instance, Hanjin is very big in the Philippines where it has two large shipyards, whereas its presence in some other ASEAN countries may be smaller.

While China and Japan are huge powers, Korea can offer some things that those two countries cannot. For instance, people in the Philippines are now very suspicious about China, whereas ASEAN might feel more comfortable with Korea. Moreover, Korea can also take the lead in many economic affairs such as the TPP.

Although the shared concerns of Korea and ASEAN are few and far between, there are some areas where there is definitely the need for cooperation in particular in the areas of transnational crime and cybercrime. There is already a great amount of cooper-

ation between the Philippines and Korea in dealing with transnational crime, but this can be further developed.

More can also be done to make it easier for ASEAN citizens to visit Korea. Although ASEAN citizens can access Jeju without a visa, it remains difficult for Indonesians and Filipinos to get visas to go to mainland Korea. There is also still a lack of direct flight from ASEAN countries to Jeju. The media tends to report on stories that capture the attention of readers. When it comes to Korea-related issues, the focus of the media is therefore still on North Korea. As such, a deliberate effort must be made to focus on South Korea-ASEAN relations and the possible areas of cooperation. Admittedly, a lot more can be done in this regard. For the Philippines STAR, there will be a greater push for more coverage on the South Korea-ASEAN relationship, especially since the two countries go a long way back in their bilateral relations. There should be more collaboration in media affairs within ASEAN and between Korea and ASEAN.

Keywords

ASEAN, Korea, Journalists, Media, Economic engagement



Policy Implications

- Korea and ASEAN should look beyond economic engagement and cooperate more on political, military and security issues.
- Despite being regions that are adjacent to each other, North-east Asia and Southeast Asia lack a deep understanding of each other's region which should be addressed.
- Deliberate efforts need to be made to highlight the South Korea-ASEAN relationship in the media since the focus of the media on the Korean Peninsula issues tends to be first and foremost about North Korea.
- Korea should leverage on the positive image that Southeast Asian people generally have of Korea due to the Korean Wave.
- ASEAN needs to do more to change its image away from an elite-driven one to one that the masses in Southeast Asia can identify with.