

US-China Rivalry and Korea-ASEAN Strategic Cooperation: What Next?

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1. As the US and China failed to reach an agreement on the tariff issues, the situation has been deteriorated into an open trade war. Such US-China confrontation not only damages their economies, but also has a negative impact on the global economy. Moreover, it is likely to heighten the uncertainty and unpredictability of the overall international situation.

We seem to have entered a period of strong and long-term rivalry between the US and China. The US government considers China as a strategic competitor or revisionist, and intends to counterbalance its growing influence. Responding to China's Belt and Road Initiative, the Trump administration puts forward 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy' and does not hide that the strategy aims to counter China.

Therefore, the current trade dispute between the US and China ought to be seen as a result of US-China strategic rivalry. In the long-term, US-China rivalry and strategic competition will continue to accelerate.

2. US-China strategic competition, a push factor or pull factor for ASEAN-Korea strategic cooperation?

If US-China competition deepens further, Korea and other small countries might be forced to make a choice between the two. This is the situation that we would most like to avoid. ASEAN member states are worried about the likely internal division, and if that is the case, ASEAN centrality cannot but be weakened consequently(*PM Lee Hsien Loong of Singapore made clear at the ASEAN Summit last November that it is very desirable for ASEAN not to have to take sides). Korea is no exception to be faced with the same strategic dilemma.

Encouragingly enough, ASEAN has been discussing the Indo-Pacific concept in a proactive way to work out its collective position. In particular, Indonesia took the initiative to invite high-level policy-makers from 18 countries of EAS and engaged in intensive discussions on the Indo-Pacific cooperation on March 20 this year. It is appropriate and desirable that a middle power like ASEAN seeks ways for a new regional order, not leaving the matter just to major powers. In that regard, Korea shares the strategic interests of ASEAN and supports ASEAN endeavors. ASEAN and Korea can work together with like-minded countries to persuade the US and China to develop a new regional architecture based on the key principles of openness, transparency, inclusiveness, respect for international law and ASEAN centrality. The US and China on their part would also welcome this approach as they could avoid the face-to-face confrontation.

3. What can ASEAN and Korea do together, bilaterally or collectively, to cope with the risks, uncertainties and constraints stemming from US-China strategic competition?

In light of growing strategic importance of ASEAN and India, Korean government has actively pursued the New Southern Policy to strengthen its relations with those countries since the inauguration of Moon Jae-in administration. Some progress has been made for the last two years, but to achieve more effective results, ASEAN's keen interest and more efforts are also necessary. ASEAN-Korea relations should not be one-way but reciprocal and interactive. In that regard, ASEAN-Korea strategic dialogue should be strengthened in various areas as well as in a multi-faceted way. The background of the New Southern Policy was to reduce heavy dependency on major powers and expand autonomous space in our diplomacy by pursuing diversification. In that process, Korea perceives ASEAN as a core partner. We hope the vice versa. As ASEAN and Korea have no history or territory-related dispute and no hegemonic intention in

the region, ASEAN and Korea can develop a true and lasting partnership.

Then, how does the New Southern Policy differ from the previous ones? Most importantly, our policy toward ASEAN is now a priority agenda in our foreign policy. Higher priorities are placed on our relations with ASEAN. Also, the New Southern Policy characterizes itself as action-oriented with its implementation mechanisms. The Presidential Committee on the New Southern Policy, the control tower of the Policy, recently unveiled 50 specific projects based on the policy visions of people, co-prosperity and peace.

Amid growing uncertainties, how can ASEAN and Korea work together as a middle power? I would like to make 3 points.

First, ASEAN and Korea need to work toward a multipolar system in this region instead of 2G system of the US and China since 2G system might bring about more competition and confrontation. ASEAN has successfully played a central role in achieving peace and prosperity, and contributed to institutionalizing regional cooperation mechanisms such as ASEAN+1, ASEAN+3, EAS, ARF and ADMM+. ASEAN can also play a leading role in shaping a new regional architecture in an extended area of the Indo-Pacific as it maintains good relations with major actors including the US and China. The ASEAN-led mechanisms can continue to serve as a valuable platform for cooperation where all the countries concerned are represented, ensuring that they are on the same page. Korea can be a benign and close partner in the process.

Second, the US-China trade war will definitely affect ASEAN and Korea in many negative ways, for instance causing a decrease in export and investment. Therefore, ASEAN and Korea should jointly deal with the new geo-economic landscape such as the changing of global value chain. ASEAN and Korea should find the ways for developing mutually beneficial partnership by strengthening industrial cooperation and division of work.

Last but not least, what makes ASEAN-Korea partnership sustainable is our trust and respect based on mutual understanding.

To this end, close communication and frequent exchange of visits are essential on various levels like government officials, business persons, academia, civil society, the youth and so on. We can build a true partnership only when we understand each other well.

This year offers an excellent opportunities to make significant developments in ASEAN-Korea relations. The 3rd ASEAN-ROK Commemorative Summit and the 1st Mekong-ROK Summit will be held in Busan late this year. Amid growing uncertainties of geo-strategic developments, I hope that ASEAN and Korea can present their shared vision and strategy, and specific cooperation projects to overcome the challenges ahead. End