

A Need to Rethink Peace Cooperation in Korea's New Southern Policy

By Jaehyon Lee

In November 2019, the leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and South Korea gathered in Busan, South Korea to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the ASEAN-South Korea relationship. The summit not only reflected on ASEAN-South Korea cooperation over the past three decades, but also highlighted achievements over the past two years of Korea's New Southern Policy (NSP) launched in November 2017. The Korean government is now preparing the second stage of the NSP, which will guide its approach to so-called 'new southern countries,' ASEAN and India, in the second half of Moon Jae-in's government.

Despite all the ups and downs between North and South Korea and the U.S.-North Korea summits, the NSP has been steadily followed through on by the South Korean government. There was widespread scepticism regarding the policy among ASEAN countries at the beginning. They expected the Moon government would repeat the past governments' mistakes in ASEAN policy – inconsistency and poor follow-up. Historically, approaches to and interests in ASEAN have faded quickly when the South Korean government faced a sudden change – either positive or negative – in its relations with North Korea or with major powers.

However, the NSP has turned ASEAN scepticism around with consistent policy implementation and follow-through. The commitment of the Moon administration to the policy was best displayed by the president visiting all ten ASEAN countries and India within two years. He is the first Korean president to visit all ASEAN countries while in office. Institutionalization is the basis of consistency. The Presidential Committee on the New Southern Policy was established in 2018 to push forward the whole of the government toward implementation of the NSP. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs separated ASEAN affairs from wider Asia-Pacific affairs and set up the Bureau of ASEAN Affairs, wholly dedicated to Korea-ASEAN and Korea-Southeast Asia affairs.

The NSP is now entering into a new phase. Presently, the biggest challenge to NSP is its regional scope and approach. First, as its visibility grows, other regional initiatives increasingly show interest in the NSP. South Korea and the United States reached an agreement on cooperation and coordination between NSP and the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy last year. China pushes for closer cooperation between NSP and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Australia has also expressed interest in cooperation between the NSP and its Indo-Pacific policy. Furthermore, there is potential for a cooperation between the NSP, the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), and India's Act East Policy.

Second, despite the performance of the NSP so far, it is too early to say whether ASEAN countries are strategically confident in South Korea as a partner on regional issues. *The State of Southeast Asia: 2020*

Jaehyon Lee, Senior Fellow at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, explains that "The NSP is now entering into a new phase. Presently, the biggest challenge to NSP is its regional scope and approach. First, as its visibility grows, other regional initiatives increasingly show interest in the NSP."

Survey Report by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies held significant implications that the NSP should consider. In a few items assessing the leadership and influence of regional countries, South Korea performed poorly compared to other regional powers. For example, only 0.9% of respondents were confident that Korea is able to provide leadership to maintain the rules-based order and uphold international law, while Australia (5.7%), EU (33%), India (1.4%), Japan (20%), New Zealand (6.7%) and Russia (2.5%) exceeded Korea. The NSP's performance in bilateral relationships simply failed to translate into confidence in Korea as a regional player.

This polling reveals a critical weakness of the NSP despite its impressive achievements in bilateral relations. The NSP needs to expand its regional scope and strengthen its regional perspective. The NSP must incorporate Korea's view and strategy on regional issues. The policy has three pillars or 3Ps — People, Prosperity, and Peace — which respectively correspond to socio-cultural, economic, and political-security cooperation. The lack of regional perspectives should be addressed in the peace cooperation of NSP. The cooperation in people and prosperity can remain bilateral, still generating enough mutual benefits. Peace cooperation, however, needs to go beyond bilateral relations and must integrate a wider perspective, including issues like multilateral cooperation, regional order, regional security, and more.

The NSP's peace cooperation must clarify South Korea's vision for the region. It may need to answer questions such as, what kind of a regional community does Korea want to build with ASEAN and other regional countries. Seoul must offer views on pressing strategic questions: What is Korea's perception on the U.S.-China strategic competition? What is the NSP's stance towards the Free-and-Open Indo-Pacific, BRI, AOIP and other strategic visions? These questions will have substantial implications for emerging order in the region.

Additionally, it is time for South Korea and the NSP to clarify its position in major regional matters. With the US-China trade war and growing protectionism, free trade is under threat. What is South Korea's view on this and what is Korea's potential role and contribution in sustaining the free trade order? What is South Korea's stance on major non-Korean Peninsular security and strategic issues such as the South China Sea dispute? Clarifying Korea's position, stance, and strategy toward these issues is the first step for Korea to be a reliable strategic partner in the region and for deeper strategic cooperation between ASEAN and South Korea who face similar challenges.

Last but not the least, South Korea needs to invest more into re-strengthening regional multilateral institutions such as ASEAN+3, East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) as a part of the NSP's peace cooperation. The region has been plagued by many human security issues including Covid-19. The transnational human security issues require transnational and multilateral coordination. South Korea's leadership in multilateral efforts against Covid-19 and other regional pandemics would be a good starting point to upgrade South Korea's commitment in regional multilateral cooperation.

Existing multilateral institutions in the region have adopted ASEAN centrality as a core principles. Fortifying regional multilateral frameworks, thus, is a good opportunity for NSP. In the age of superpower rivalry and strategic uncertainty, regional small and medium powers like South Korea and ASEAN depend on multilateral norms rather than on bilateral ties with superpowers. The latter means choosing sides while the former is a way to enlarge small and medium powers' room for strategic maneuvering.

Jaehyon Lee is a Senior Fellow at the Asan institute for Policy Studies. He can be contacted at jaelee@asaninst.org.

APB Series Founding Editor: Dr. Satu Limaye | APB Series Coordinator: Peter Valente

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of the East-West Center or any organization with which the author is affiliated.

The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.

“The NSP’s peace cooperation must clarify South Korea’s vision for the region. It may need to answer questions such as, what kind of a regional community does Korea want to build with ASEAN and other regional countries.”