

The New Southern Policy and ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific: A Convergence?

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Both ASEAN and the Republic of Korea (ROK) are now living under an era of new geopolitics in the making. There is growing discussion about the changing regional order where ASEAN and ROK live today. Major powers in the region have increasingly adopted new geopolitical terms in describing their foreign policy today. ROK has adopted its “New Southern Policy (NSP),” India has come up with their “Look East Policy,” while China outlines its vision of the new order under their “Belt and Road Initiatives.”

Japan and the United States share the same construct of “Indo-Pacific” to point toward a new region of influence as well as a new expanded strategic theater. As the answer of these competing outlook, ASEAN has launched its own version of an “ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP).” What do these mean for the region we are living now?

First, it means that geopolitics are not objective realities. It is a reality in the making. A virtual reality where vision, statement, and depiction go hand-in-hand with action, reflecting about who we are and where we are going to. We have various conversation and debates about whether our theatre should be extended from merely Asia Pacific, or it should be extended to include new powers and to connect two vast ocean – Indian and Pacific Ocean – into a single regional picture.

Second, as it tends to become a major narrative, it will always risk becoming an oversimplification, where major narrative sometimes dictates what counts as real issues and not real issues. Some geopolitical outlook may clash between one and another, but there are some good reasons to expect that the NSP and AOIP have some significant convergence.

They look converged at some different levels. Korean developmental state model has always been closely observed and compared both by officials and scholars in Southeast Asia. ROK’s economic development has shown some significant promise: ASEAN has become ROK’s second-largest trading partner after China while Korean Companies are now expected to exponentially increase their investment in different ASEAN countries. Korean Pop Culture are widely accepted and emulated in different ASEAN countries.

ROK’s economic resilience as well as state infrastructure – physical, digital, and bureaucratic – to deal with the threat of Covid 19 pandemic have been intensively observed as one of the models where a polity can mobilize various national elements to keep its citizen healthy and its economy



sustained. These series of images have shown that Korea can indeed become a more important power for ASEAN.

As we can see, people in ASEAN countries might associated ROK's increasing role predominantly with its economic pillar. Many experts have questioned whether its role can be expanded to higher political issues – security – or even to real issues that touch life of people at grassroots level. These questions are even more relevant if we consider that many ASEAN countries share similar history with ROK: past colonial experience, post-war economic development, and in some cases, transition from authoritarianism to democratic government.

There has been no major demonstration against various Korean project in Southeast Asia, as compared to Japanese and Chinese. The fact that ROK can maintain steady balance between becoming U.S. allies and becoming close partner with China, while not being a member of Quad alliance, has somewhat put ROK on a better position in the eyes of ASEAN whose objective is to maintain centrality and unity of the region under the relevance of ASEAN as regional organization and anchor to multiple wider regional mechanisms – the so-called ASEAN-led mechanism such as ASEAN Regional Forum, ADMM+, or East Asia Summit.

Economic pillar of the NSP has been very much welcomed by ASEAN, despite some question, such as whether it will stay only as series of bilateral ties between ASEAN Member States and whether it can do more in the area of security and socio-culture. As the main narrative of geopolitics revolve around the question of intensifying great power competition, a question remains: can geopolitical convergence between NSP and AOIP which has been perceived as only occur in economic field be extended to other fields?

To answer this question, there have been some recent initiatives to better equipped and add new issues to the NSP. During the commemoration of the 30th Anniversary of the dialogue relationship between the ASEAN and ROK, President Moon Jae-in administration has shown greater commitment to the Mekong Sub-Region, addressing their developmental needs and challenges as well as envisaging better cooperation. ROK now is expected to extend the NSP to include more agendas on maritime cooperation that include several issues such as marine connectivity, addressing marine pollution and marine debris.

ROK seems to explore various projects to feed into the AOIP, further substantiating its maritime pillar. There has been some serious talk in Korea to revitalize existing BIMP-EAGA cooperation to address needs from maritime ASEAN countries in complementary with Seoul Sub-Mekong initiatives. At the same time, Covid 19 Pandemic has also made some modification of the NSP which include plans to foster wider sharing of best practices, distribution of test kits and PPEs, cooperation on vaccines along with plan to ensure better development and distribution, improving people to people exchange, especially medical students and public health officials, and tapping into bilateral travel bubble arrangement including with Indonesia.



Both maritime security and public health issues are two areas where convergence between NSP and AOIP might be increased. On the maritime security front, Korea can also engage ASEAN on multiple areas from naval shipyard development, joint patrol, and joint exercise to other institutional areas such as cooperation in regional efforts in reforming coast guard bureaucracy. Korea and ASEAN should engage deeper in maritime law enforcement, safe and rescue, maritime safety (regarding to improving ship standards, marine human resources, navigation, etc), humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Korea and ASEAN can work together to establish the first-ever regional coast guard academy to help reform coast guards in the region or to build an executive-level training and modules on maritime security and safety.

Public health policy can now also be mixed with ROK's long vision on smart city development and technological advancement. Korea can utilize its cutting-edge technology on health and information technology to promote effective, transparent, and efficient measures to deal with rapidly spreading communicable diseases.

The area is definitely linked to various sectors of sustainable development such as health care, intersection with environmental issues and climate change, smart and green city development planning, as well as good governance. It is also pretty much linked to various dimensions of cyber-security, especially since it touches some issues such as the uses of big data, data protection, and the uses of medical information which by now become new demands of norms and governance.

It is not entirely mistaken to rely on economic convergence since AOIP itself seem to rest on the long-standing belief in ASEAN that if we focus on other issues such as economic development security might be eventually achieved since nations are entangled in various technical and functional ties and cooperation. Such belief is even more relevant since various talks on "Indo-Pacific" in the past has seemed to forget that this is not only a region where big powers strategically compete to exert their influence.

This is also a region where states is still struggling to improve its institutions and to expand both market economy and modern bureaucracy to better enhance the quality of their citizen, where radicals can anytime disrupt life by committing random attacks to innocent citizens, where a virus can easily travel across border and start multiple outbreaks that lead to global pandemic, where land and ocean can shift anytime creating major natural disaster to human's life, and where biodiversity as well as natural conservation demand more serious attention from different level of governance. These are the agenda that begs better convergence between both NSP and AOIP in the future. []