

# **ROK's New Southern Policy and ASEAN Expectation amidst rivalries between the US and China: A new Meaning of Peace Cooperation in time of Pandemic<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Introduction**

Republic of Korea relation with ASEAN countries has been increased strategically since President Moon Jae-in commenced his policy of New Southern Policy. Since its commencement in 2017, the NSP has focused on 3 Ps (People, Prosperity and Peace) and along with the policy strengthening institutionalization of ASEAN under the foreign ministry and government branch under his government. Despite the novelty and focusing on the “down to earth” aspect of relation between ROK and South East Asian countries, there are greater challenges for both sides in the region. The rivalries of the US and China have affected the regional order. The balance and nexus between economic and security issues remains contested and debated among the two great powers and countries in the region. It is an imminent issue for ROK and ASEAN to face the challenges, especially in keeping the voice of small and medium players in the region afloat. This brief article aims to address those challenges as the cooperation that has been created by the NSP between ROK and ASEAN.

Rivalries between the US and China indicates that the region is in danger of being divided between the two camps. However, since ASEAN has publicly announced its position through ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP), the narratives of regional architecture should not be left to the hands of the two. It is imperative to see the narrative of regional order be seen as keeping the voice of the resident power to be heard. It will be the second issue of this article on how the NSP and AOIP become a strategic narrative of local power in managing inclusive regional architecture. The article addresses the issue by looking at the opportunity of middle power cooperation between ROK and ASEAN as a provider of regional public goods especially on the meaning of peace cooperation between ROK and ASEAN amidst the rivalry of the US and China in time of Covid-19.

This article is followed by discussion of compatibility of the NSP and AOIP as two initiatives that defend the interest of small and middle power in the region especially in creating people and developmental issues as main issues in the region rather than strategic rivalry that divides the region. After the compatibility, the impact of the US and China rivalries, especially during the recent pandemic is discussed in order to see the

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prospect of middle power activism between ROK and ASEAN countries. This article will be concluded by looking at the future prospect of cooperation especially on delineating the new meaning of peace cooperation in time of pandemic.

### **The NSP and AOIP: Existing Compatibility and Challenges**

The New Southern Policy and the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific have in common the vision of a “down to earth diplomacy” orientation which voices the interests of countries in the midst of rivalries of great power countries. Although ASEAN can be said to have relatively an established "strategic trust" since its establishment in 1967, the competition between the United States and China, especially since the global financial crisis in 2008, appears to have affected ASEAN centrality and challenged its great power management.<sup>3</sup> South Korea, which is located in a region where the intensity of security issues is so dominant, is caught in the hostile behavior of North Korea and guarantees of support from major countries such as China, the US, Russia and Japan.<sup>4</sup> The South Korean Government's efforts to strengthen and institutionalize a foreign policy that strengthens relations with Southeast Asian countries and India through the NSP is a strategic policy to get out of these geopolitical limitations and traps. The two parties, ROK and ASEAN, in this case have a vision of maintaining the manoeuvres and voices of non-great power countries in the midst of competition from great power countries.

ASEAN and ROK relations have been established since 1989 when South Korea became ASEAN dialogue partner. This relationship intensified during the Asian Financial Crisis which also hit South Korea and a number of ASEAN countries, including Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia. The cooperation which was later institutionalized in Chiang Mai Initiatives and ASEAN Plus Three (APT). ASEAN and ROK are present together in a number of collaborations such as ARF (ASEAN Regional Forum), East Asian Summit, and ASEAN-ROK Summit. At the ministerial level, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Economy between ASEAN and South Korea regularly coordinate policies that support the intensity of communication between the two parties.<sup>5</sup>

The New Southern Policy provides fresh air with an emphasis on 3 Ps (People, Prosperity and Peace) and also institutionalization that allows coordination between agencies both the foreign ministry and other government agencies in South Korea. The 3 Ps framework which emphasizes the interaction of people diplomacy, prosperity and development cooperation and peace which does not only emphasize security emphasizes South Korea's efforts to find a diplomacy niche through geo-economics in the middle of a geopolitical and geostrategic trap. Of the three P's, the first two pillars become an important foundation by encouraging interaction at the community level and the business sector of the two countries. The exchange of students who are present in South Korea from ASEAN countries and vice versa is an important benchmark. The development of K-Pop which is widely accepted and great number of enthusiasts in Korean language studies in ASEAN countries are indications of the strong cultural relations between the two parties. The issue of economic cooperation by looking at the norms of the role of the state in economic

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<sup>3</sup> Marty Natalegawa. *Does ASEAN Matter?: A View from Within*. ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Yul Sohn. "South Korea under the United States–China rivalry: dynamics of the economic-security nexus in trade policymaking." *The Pacific Review* 32.6 (2019).

<sup>5</sup> Brendan Howe & Min Joung Park. "South Korea's (Incomplete) Middle-Power Diplomacy Toward ASEAN." *International Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies* 15.2 (2019).



development, especially the developmental state model, and the spirit of infrastructure development which is a strategic factor in the Prosperity pillar are important aspects that can be well accepted by ASEAN countries.<sup>6</sup>

The Peace aspect, which is the last pillar of the 3rd Ps, indicates that South Korea sees ASEAN as an important partner in maintaining strategic autonomy opportunities in the midst of US and Chinese rivalries. The NSP announced by President Moon Jae-in in November 2017 cannot be separated from South Korea's dilemma between its security interests and its geostrategic position which are in conflict with the interests of the US and China. The issue of building the THAAD missile defense against China is an important background in the NSP.<sup>7</sup> However, the emphasis on peace also shows the nexus economic and security dilemma in South Korea's foreign policy.

The emphasis on peace cooperation is interesting to underline. The issue of peace instead of the security issue which is the choice for South Korea shows that the choice to build regional orders and the spirit of multilateralism is rather than bilateral cooperation which is the main strategy of major powers in the region. In this case, the choice of South Korea's hedging strategy is a breakthrough to find a "shared narrative" with like-minded countries, most of which are local powers consisting of small and middle power countries. Even so, these precise strategic considerations are still relatively left behind compared to the other 2 Ps (people and prosperity).

On the other hand, when the competition for strategic narratives in the region is dominated by the narrative of big country competition. ASEAN announced the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP) in June 2019 which emphasizes the principles of "ASEAN Centrality, openness, inclusivity, transparency and respect for international law. "More sharply AOIP encourages initiatives that emphasize " connectivity, maritime affairs, the economy and sustainable development "have been selected as the priority areas for cooperation. "The joint statement shows ASEAN's strategic narratives amid the rivalry between the US and China.<sup>8</sup>

AOIP's shared vision emphasizes ASEAN Centrality, which means encouraging the spirit of multilateralism that is inclusive of all parties who have the spirit of encouraging the existence of multilateral institutions in the region. In the midst of big power competition that has an impact on multilateral institutions so that "institutional balancing" has become a great power strategy by excluding parties that are considered opposites,<sup>9</sup> ASEAN firmly places inclusiveness as the main element in regional architectural management. Emphasis on issues of connectivity, maritime cooperation, and sustainable economic development also shows the aspirations of local forces in seeing development issues as an important part of regional security issues. The interests of economic progress and regional security stability cannot be

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<sup>6</sup> Lee Jaehyon, d"Korea's New Southern Policy: Motivations of 'Peace Cooperation'and Implications for the Korean Peninsula." *The Asianist* (2019).

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Yeo, "South Korea's New Southern Policy and ASEAN-ROK Relations: What role does Southeast Asia play in Moon's foreign policy?" *The Diplomat* 28 July 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/south-koreas-new-southern-policy-and-asean-rok-relations/>

<sup>8</sup> ASEAN Secretariat, (2019). "ASEAN OUTLOOK ON THE INDO-PACIFIC" accessed through [https://asean.org/storage/2019/06/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific\\_FINAL\\_22062019.pdf](https://asean.org/storage/2019/06/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Kai He. "Institutional balancing and international relations theory: Economic interdependence and balance of power strategies in Southeast Asia." *European Journal of International Relations* 14.3 (2008): 489-518.

separated. Therefore, ASEAN positions itself as an “honest broker” actor in responding to the latest regional challenges in terms of the emergence of the Indo-Pacific mega-region.<sup>10</sup>

In this context, AOIP and NSP appear as strategic initiatives from middle and small power countries to manoeuvre amidst the rivalries between the US and China. The emphasis on economic and development aspects which according to some experts is considered "low politics" in both statements and initiatives is irrelevant. In fact, development and prosperity as well as trade and human connectivity are important centralities that become alternative strategic narratives in the midst of competition between the US and China. President Moon's warm remarks to AOIP at the East Asian Summit in November 2019 shows a shared vision of the importance of voicing these common interests.<sup>11</sup>

### **The US and China Rivalries during Pandemic: Challenge and Opportunity for middle power as public goods provider**

The competition between the US and China in the region is increasing along with the discourse of the Indo-Pacific region. As a developing region the Indo-Pacific itself is not yet clearly defined. The countries that came up with their respective ideas for a region that combines countries that are on the coast of the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean.<sup>12</sup> The United States has evolving ideas, from the Asia Rebalance in the Obama era to the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (FOIPS) in the era of President Trump.<sup>13</sup> A number of other countries came up with intersecting ideas such as Australia, India, and Japan.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, China has concerns over the Indo-Pacific discourse which it sees as merely a containment strategy over its rise, which mainly has great interests in access to maritime areas in the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean.<sup>15</sup> China itself has put forward the Belt Road Initiatives program which seeks to unite the maritime and continental faces of its geopolitics and geo-economics.<sup>16</sup>

The competition, which is no longer solely about debating ideas and discourses, has dragged other countries in the region to choose between the two countries. At its extreme, it seems as if countries in the region are required to choose between balancing and bandwagoning as a strategic choice. The room for foreign policy manoeuvre for other countries is getting thinner as the US and China are increasingly aggressive in negating their opponents in the choice of international order in the region. The choice between China and the US is becoming increasingly difficult for many countries in the region.

The United States, which in the era of President Trump, renegotiated its policies to both opponents and its traditional allies, made either / or an inevitable choice. Quad consisting of the US, Australia, Japan and India

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<sup>10</sup> Asean Secretariat (2019)

<sup>11</sup> Moon Jae-in, “Opening Remarks by President Moon Jae-in at 14th East Asia Summit November 04, 2019” [http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m\\_5674/view.do?seq=319976](http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5674/view.do?seq=319976)

<sup>12</sup> Dewi Fortuna Anwar. "Indonesia and the ASEAN outlook on the Indo-Pacific." *International Affairs* 96.1 (2020): 111-129.

<sup>13</sup> Scott, David. "US strategic re-positioning to the “Indo-Pacific”: A paradigm shift." In Ash Rossiter and Brendon J. Cannon (Eds). *Conflict and Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*. Routledge, 2020. 55-77.

<sup>14</sup> Ash Rossiter and Brendon J. Cannon. *Conflict and Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: New Geopolitical Realities*. Routledge, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Chengxin Pan. "The ‘Indo-Pacific’ and geopolitical anxieties about China's rise in the Asian regional order." *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 68.4 (2014): 453-469.

<sup>16</sup> Saul Bernard Cohen. *Geopolitics: The geography of international relations*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.

suggests the success of the US containment strategy in the region. However, with the changing image of US leadership in the Trump era, the solidity of the Quad itself is still being debated. India has its own perception of the Quad which in one of its alternative versions involves the power of the countries in the region rather than relying solely on US power as a guarantor. Australia has a dilemma between independence and its position as a junior partner in the region.<sup>17</sup> Likewise with Japan, which first presented its Indo-Pacific ideas as a “confluence of two seas” by PM Abe in August 2007 in New Delhi,<sup>18</sup> the Indo-Pacific can be enforced with democratic diamonds based on freedom and prosperity.<sup>19</sup> The four countries that are members of this Quad, although they share a common vision, still have a dilemma of anxiety about US security guarantees in the region and an emphasis on the economic side and the involvement of countries in the region.<sup>20</sup>

China itself, which actively promotes BRI, which seems to promote economic cooperation, is still troubled by the issue of the "sense of belonging" of other countries to the programs it offers. The issue of the sustainability of the program and the pattern of development cooperation it offers are still fraught with problems and concerns from local countries. Its presence in the maritime region of South Asia has led to the perception of "string of pearls" by India, which feels surrounded by China's dominant power. ASEAN countries that previously accept China as an important part of Chiang Mai Initiatives' as a "responsible international actor" gradually cannot ignore the "divisive impact" of China's domination that arises from maritime disputes in the South China Sea.<sup>21</sup> It seems that the guarantee for the settlement of multilateral institutions does not exist in the China's foreign policy frame of reference. This reinforces the narrative of the importance of freedom of navigation, which is an issue of public goods in the region. The tendency to put forward a "cabbage strategy" in the settlement of South China Sea disputes reduces the confidence in China from the countries involved or other interested parties. The discourse of China's assertiveness that has increased after the global financial crisis of 2008/9 has strengthened to replace the message of "peaceful rise" that China has raised since the early 2000s.<sup>22</sup>

The Covid-19 pandemic that has erupted since early 2020 has further strengthened US and Chinese competition. The two major countries are increasingly expanding their "institutional balancing" strategy to the WTO as a global institution that is responsible for coordinating world health issues. The two countries are trapped in a political scapegoat (*blame game*) with each of them prioritizing nationalism on issues that require global leadership. The challenge of multilateral cooperation is at its lowest point with the narratives of the middle and small power countries increasingly marginalized in a number of debates both at the UN and other multilateral frameworks.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Rory Medcalf. "Australia's Foreign Policy White Paper: Navigating Uncertainty in the Indo-Pacific." *Security Challenges* 14.1 (2018): 33-39.

<sup>18</sup> H.E.Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan, "Confluence of the Two Seas", Speech at the Parliament of the Republic of India, accessed through <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>

<sup>19</sup> Hidetaka Yoshimatsu. "The Indo-Pacific in Japan's strategy towards India." *Contemporary Politics* 25.4 (2019): 438-456.

<sup>20</sup> Ash Rossiter and Brendon J. Cannon. *Conflict and Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: New Geopolitical Realities*. Routledge, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas J Pempel. "Soft balancing, hedging, and institutional Darwinism: The economic-security nexus and East Asian regionalism." *Journal of East Asian Studies* 10.2 (2010): 209-238.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Q. Turcsányi. *Chinese Assertiveness in the South China Sea: Power Sources, Domestic Politics, and Reactive Foreign Policy*. (Cham: Springer International Publishing: 2017).

<sup>23</sup> Nanto Sriyanto, "Lembaga Internasional dan Politik Kambing Hitam di Tengah Pandemi COVID-19 (I)" Pusat Penelitian Politik LIPI 18 Mei 2020, <http://www.politik.lipi.go.id/kolom/kolom-1/politik-internasional/1399-lembaga-internasional-dan-politik-kambing-hitam-di-tengah-pandemi-covid-19-i>



The Covid-19 pandemic itself and the US-China rivalry show a world that cannot be assumed as the Cold War took place. The condition of complex interdependence and a shift in the meaning of high versus low politics shows that the world is increasingly becoming multiplex.<sup>24</sup> The Covid-19 pandemic validates this argument.

The indication can be seen in a number of collaborations which, although they still place great power as the main actor, but the involvement and support of middle-class countries that have a pivotal position is crucial. In vaccine procurement, although big corporate players from developed countries are central, multilateral initiatives are an alternative solution to the pandemic. Coordination of the movement of people and goods requires the involvement of many parties rather than being determined by a few large countries. The meaning of peace is no longer determined by the strength of hard power but the ability to coordinate policies and mobilize norms that become common references. On this side, the hope for ASEAN and South Korea as like-minded actors become important. The cooperation of the two parties can minimize the impact of the fail states affected by Covid-19 and encourage economic acceleration amid the uncertainty caused by the pandemic. In the midst of the pandemic, the rivalry between the US and China cannot ignore the existence of other countries to find a niche for cooperation.

### **Tentative Conclusion: New Meaning of Peace Cooperation in time of Pandemy**

This article indicates that NSP and AOIP are a starting point that brings South Korea and ASEAN together on the importance of strategic autonomy. Both parties assess the importance of opening up the space for foreign policy maneuver amidst limited space due to big power competition which has an impact on the transformation of the global order. Both parties see that the domination of great power does not mean that their narrative and interests must be caught up in the issue of rivalry between the US and China.

Both the NSP and AOIP emphasize the economic-security aspects of nexus by emphasizing the development and welfare narrative as the voice of small and medium-sized countries. In addition, ASEAN, which encourages the centrality of regional organizations and multilateralism, places the issue of peace not only by hard power and security assurance. For this reason, from 3 Ps to become the focus of the NSP, peace cooperation by encouraging multilateralism and middle power activism must get priority in the future.<sup>25</sup> The issue of a pandemic opens a new understanding, strategic security issues can be triggered by issues outside of political-security issues, but also health issues. At this point, cooperation and coordination between countries in the region should be a priority. The elaboration of the meaning of peace cooperation must pay attention to global health issues where the voices of small and medium-sized countries have an equal place. In this case, both South Korea and ASEAN should give emphasize and promote “developmental and healthy peace diplomacy” along with the development of mega-region of Indo-Pacific.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Anwar (2020)

<sup>26</sup> Ling Wei. "Developmental peace in east Asia and its implications for the Indo-Pacific." *International Affairs* 96.1 (2020): 189-209.

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