

FRS - KF KOREA PROGRAM ON SECURITY AND DIPLOMACY

“President Moon promised he would visit all ten ASEAN countries within his term”

A conversation with Lee Jaehyon, April 2019



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Q1: To the surprise of most Europeans, ASEAN is Korea’s second largest trading partner, behind China, but ahead of the EU and the US. Could you briefly present the impressive track-record of ASEAN-Korea relations on both the economic and the people-to-people (P2P) levels?

The impressive economic and socio-cultural bilateral relations between ASEAN and Korea is not well known in Korea either. Nevertheless, the records show that ASEAN is one of the most important cooperative partners of Korea. On the economic level, bilateral trade between the two has grown from 10 billion USD in 1990 to almost 200 billion USD nowadays, making ASEAN the second biggest trading partner of Korea. Among ASEAN countries, Vietnam is by far the most important trading partner, accounting for around 40% of the total. Also, Korean investments to ASEAN are substantial. In 2016, Korea invested 5.3 billion USD in the ASEAN, the second biggest Korean investment destination after the United States. If we use another important economic indicator, overseas construction orders, ASEAN is our second market. In 2017, Korean construction companies received 6.3 billion USD worth of orders from ASEAN, behind the Middle East.

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As the bilateral partnership between Korea and ASEAN grows, so do socio-cultural relations and P2P exchange. The popularity of Korean songs, dramas, and movies contributed a lot to the expansion of P2P exchange between the two. The number of mutual visitors between Korea and ASEAN in 2018 is more than 10 million a year. Around 8,200,000 Korea visited ASEAN countries while 260,000 ASEAN nationals visited Korea in 2018. Among ASEAN countries, Vietnam is the No. 1 destination for Koreans while the Philippines and Thailand are ranked 2nd and 3rd.

More than 50,000 Malaysians and Thais visited Korea last year, No.1 No.2 ASEAN countries to visit Korea. The number of ASEAN nationals residing in Korea by 2018 is around 600,000, of which 47% are temporary visitors, 34% migrant works, while students and marriage migrants represent 9 and 10% of the total. Eventually, Thais and Vietnamese are the most frequent residents (around 200,000 people respectively).

Q2: 2019 marks the 30th anniversary of the establishment of dialogue relations between ASEAN and Korea. Yet, you recently stated President Moon is “the first Korean president who put ASEAN as one of the most important diplomatic priorities of Korea”. What has been the

place dedicated to Southeast Asia in Korea's foreign policy since 1989?

The official partnership between ASEAN and Korea began in 1989 when Korea was accepted as a "sectoral dialogue partner" by ASEAN. It was not easy at all to become so. Since the early 1980s, Korea had attempted to become a dialogue partner what was not accepted by ASEAN. Eventually, ASEAN invented a new term "sectoral dialogue partner" to make a tie with Korea that was still a developing country. The relation was upgraded to "full partnership" in 1991. During the 1990s, there were not many new developments in the bilateral relation except for Korea's membership at the ASEAN Regional Forum.

An important turning point in the rather sluggish relations came after the Asian Financial Crisis. ASEAN countries proposed an informal summit with Korea, Japan and China in 1997. After the first summit, East Asian countries acknowledged the usefulness the ASEAN+3 multilateral cooperation format, through which they could make a joint effort to overcome the economic crisis. Korea has been quite active within this framework – President Kim Dae-jung proposed an East Asian Vision Group (EAVG) and an East Asia Study Group (EASG) which were both quite instrumental in laying solid foundations of this multilateral cooperation format. In this multilateral context, Korea-ASEAN bilateral cooperation grew.

Korean policy towards ASEAN after Kim administration was a bit disappointing due to the lack of a clear political will from successive leaders. President Roh was more concerned with the Korean Peninsula and Korea's role in the Northeast Asian region. President Lee announced a New Asia Initiative but was more interested in Korea's economic interests rather than political cooperation. President Park also turned her focus to the Korean Peninsula and the Northeast Asian region.

During these 15 or so years, Korea's approach to ASEAN was inconsistent, a criticism raised by our counterparts when they assess our policy towards ASEAN. Interesting enough, despite this lack of a clear political will, the bilateral economic and socio-cultural relations further expanded, mainly due to private business and associations. The business community found numerous opportunities for trade and investment in the ASEAN countries. Entertainment industry and non-governmental associations also pushed P2P exchange forward.

Q3: While in Jakarta, President Moon launched a "New Southern policy" (NSP), complementary to a "New Northern policy". A Presidential Committee on NSP, made up of various government ministries and agencies, was even set up. How would you describe that specific diplomatic initiative?

Let me come back to the criticism on our Korea's policy towards the ASEAN. As mentioned, one of the main criticism is Korea's inconsistency. Different administrations have had different approaches and different levels of political will. Even in the same administration, the policy experienced many ups and downs as time went by. Korean government needed two things to address these issues: political will and institutionalization.

There is, first, a clear political will in Moon Jae-in administration. President Moon was the first presidential candidate to ever mention ASEAN in his election promises. Unlike other presidents, Moon had a clear goal and direction towards ASEAN countries at the early stage of his administration. That is why his NSP could be announced so early. President Moon has already made trips to ASEAN countries, covering 7 countries – Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Cambodia, and Brunei. It is

his promise that he would visit all 10 ASEAN countries within his term, and he has got 3 countries left to visit – Thailand, Laos and Myanmar, which will be duly achieved.

Second, institutionalization is important since it will resolve the inconsistency issue, a frequent criticism from ASEAN countries. A presidential committee to implement the NSP was set up in 2018. It is tasked to develop ASEAN policy, implement it and coordinate policies of individual ministries, agencies and local government towards ASEAN countries. The Presidential Committee for NSP is an important development since such an institution could guarantee a more effective and efficient cooperation, and more importantly better continuity and consistency in Korea's approach toward ASEAN countries.

Q4: The NSP follows three major principles or so-called 3Ps - People, Prosperity and Peace. Why is Korea's people-centered approach so important? Is there a will to directly address the status of the 600,000 people from ASEAN, including migrant workers, marriage migrants, as well as businessmen and students, who live in Korea?

Different administrations have had different approaches and different levels of political will. The Korean government needs two elements to address this issue: a strong political will and the institutionalization of our policy.

Let me first explain what the NSP means by “people”. People is one of three main principles along with Peace and Prosperity – so-called 3Ps. The word “people” has two meanings. First, it means all cooperation between ASEAN and Korea should put people first. A cooperation between governments must prioritize people’s interest and justice rather than the interests of the government. This reflects President Moon’s personal philosophy.

Second, it means socio-cultural cooperation and P2P exchange should be promoted as a principle guiding cooperation projects. The goal is to “increase mutual understanding through greater exchange”. Then, the policy says it would promote “rights of Indian and ASEAN people staying in Korea”. Currently, more specific measures in this area are not clear but they could focus on helping multicultural families in Korea, families who are socioeconomically disadvantaged.

Q5: North Korea-ASEAN relations are quite comprehensive. The DPRK has embassies in eight out of ten ASEAN member states, except for Brunei and the Philippines. Meanwhile, the ASEAN Regional Forum is one of the few multilateral channels for the country to engage with the outside world, and the two U.S./DPRK summits were held in Singapore and Hanoi. What role could ASEAN play in case of a process of North Korea’s denuclearization and opening?

First, Korea’s strategy to get ASEAN countries involved in the Korean peninsula has not been effective, and even counterproductive so far. Korea approached ASEAN countries asking for an unequivocal and unanimous support for our position when North and South had tense relations. Of course, ASEAN was not willing to take side during these troubled times. It could have been a burden to take a side since it is not just a matter of choice between North and South, but also an issue in which major powers, the US and China, are involved with conflicting interests. On the opposite, when there was a dialogue going on between North and South, Korea was too busy cooperating with major power rather than asking a constructive contribution from ASEAN, which could have been more than willing to play such a role. The Moon Jae-in administration should break from this past mismatch .

Second, when we discuss ASEAN’s potential contribution to the Korean Peninsula, we can have two different time-frames in mind – pre-denuclearization and post-denuclearization. Pre-denuclearization,

When there was a dialogue going on between North and South, South Korea was busy working on major power fronts rather than asking a constructive contribution from ASEAN, which in this context was more than ready to play such a role.

ASEAN’s role is rather limited since denuclearization is more about a deal between North Korea and the US. Still, ASEAN countries could support and pressure the two parties to engage into a constructive dialogue. ASEAN countries, given their past relations with North Korea and their position as non-threatening countries to the North Korean regime, could give friendly advice to Pyongyang on the future benefits of denuclearization and opening. ASEAN countries also have adopted a Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (SEANWFZ) Treaty, successfully ironing out their differences during the negotiation process. They could share that experience.

Post-denuclearization or after substantial denuclearization steps are undertaken, ASEAN countries can play a key role. First, ASEAN countries are better positioned to invest in North Korea due to their own level of development and industrialization, between advanced economies and North Korea. Indeed, more advanced economies may be dragging their feet given the high risk of investing and the poor condition of infrastructures in the country. ASEAN countries and companies would be more flexible and adventurous. Investment could be an engine of future economic growth to help them overcome the middle-income trap.

ASEAN countries also share their experiences during their own economic transitions. Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar all have gone through the transition. If an economy opens to outside world , it needs a lot of preparation – laws and institutions for foreign investment, trade etc. There are countries other than ASEAN that could give advice and guidance. Nevertheless, the experience of ASEAN is closer to the North Korean situation and, more importantly, the regime would be more comfortable with advice and help from ASEAN countries than from Western countries.

Last but not the least, North Korea should be part of a regional community, and could be part of regional multilateral frameworks such as ASEAN+3 or the East Asia Summit (EAS) to normalize. It could even contribute to make North Korea’s opening irreversible. ASEAN countries hold the key and the final decision to North Korea’s membership.

Q6: In 2017, President Moon visited Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines. In 2018, he visited Vietnam, Singapore and Papua New Guinea. He just visited Brunei, Malaysia and Cambodia. What have been the main achievements of his latest visit?

With Thailand, Myanmar and Laos still on the list, is it more than symbolic for him to become the first Korean president to visit all 10 ASEAN member states?

First, each country that President Moon has visited is meaningful. Vietnam is Korea's No.1 trading and P2P exchange partner in the region. During his trip to Indonesia, President Moon unveiled his NSP. Both the Philippines and Singapore were chair countries of ASEAN in 2017 and 2018. This year's visit to Brunei was significant since the country is, on behalf of ASEAN, the coordinating country between ASEAN and Korea from 2018 to 2021, and then plays a crucial role for conveying Korea's message to ASEAN and facilitating communication. Cambodia is a Mekong country that will hold an important role in the upcoming Mekong-Korea Summit at the end of 2019. Eventually, President Moon's visit to Malaysia heralded Korea was serious to diversify its relations, cooperation and partnership with all ASEAN countries..

Then, a presidential visit to all 10 ASEAN countries would have a great symbolic importance. No other Korean president has ever done it. It would display Korea's determination to deepen cooperative relations with ASEAN countries, reaffirming that Korea will remain consistent in its policy. Eventually, let's not forget the message given to our domestic audience. Visiting 10 countries would raise awareness on the importance of ASEAN for our interests, and that awareness would translate into domestic support for the NSP.

Q7: In 2018, bilateral trade with Vietnam reached a \$70 billion threshold, making Vietnam Korea's fourth-largest trading partner after China, the U.S. and Japan. How come Vietnam is Korea's key partner in the region? During the Vietnam war, Seoul provided direct material and manpower support to Saigon. What is the weight of history on the current bilateral relations?

It is indeed interesting to note that Korea has the most extensive and intensive relations with Vietnam among ASEAN countries given the two countries unfortunate historical memories from the Vietnam War. The extensive relationship between Korea and Vietnam began in the early 1990s when Vietnam opened to the outside world, adopting a capitalist economic system. That was when Korea's economic growth allowed Korean companies to start investing overseas. ASEAN countries were of course interested to become such destinations for Korean investment. And Japan and

other advanced economies already loomed large in the most developed ASEAN countries such as Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. Korean companies made a key decision to focus on Vietnam and were pioneers on the Vietnamese market in the early 1990's. Once it started, it snowballed.

About our past unfortunate memories during the Vietnam War, both Korea and Vietnam are not forgetful of what happened. However, the Vietnamese government is pragmatic enough to focus on economic cooperation, what is crucial for the country's economic development. Korea is pragmatic as well. When Vietnam is ready to receive apologies, Korea is more than willing to provide them. Both governments are not discussing the issue openly, yet have not forgotten. Mutually benefitting cooperation remains the top priority for both governments.

Q8: As mentioned before, Korea will host its first Korea-Mekong summit, inviting representatives from Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam and Thailand to Seoul. How similar or different is it from the Lower Mekong Initiative initiated in 2009 by then U.S. Secretary of State Clinton?

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Korea has been holding Mekong-Korea Foreign Ministers meetings since 2011. The 2019 summit highlights our government's commitment to upgrade its cooperation with Mekong countries. So far, Korea's approach to the Mekong area was mainly about development cooperation, targeting Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and

Myanmar bilaterally on public health, women and child protection, or education. The summit is expected to serve as a turning point to expand Korea's development cooperation to these countries in a multilateral setting.

The US, China or Japan are developing substantial cooperation with Mekong countries. Korea's projects are much smaller mostly due to our economic constraints. Nevertheless, Korea is keen to do whatever it can, as far as its resources allow it. What Korea should do is find a niche neglected by the American Lower Mekong Initiative, the Chinese Lancang-Mekong Initiative or the Japanese initiatives. I am confident it will be unveiled soon before the summit.

Also, Korea does not intend to compete against other countries that mobilize more resources in the Mekong area. Development cooperation is not a competition and the Korean government has no hidden agenda or ulterior motives. Korea's initiative is open to any joint

efforts from countries genuinely concerned with the development of the Mekong region.

Q9: Korea and ASEAN are facing the growing competition between China and the United States. The South China Sea being one of the regional hot-spots and maritime trade being vital to Korean interests, what is Seoul's stance on the situation in the South China Sea? Did Korea officially support its U.S. ally's freedom of navigation operations in the region? Could Korea join the Quad, along with the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia?

Korea has been clear about its position on the South China Sea issue. To a certain degree, Korea has a strategic dilemma between China and the US. Of course, Korea is not a claimant country and therefore does not have a say in the territorial dispute in the South China Sea. Nevertheless, making our voice known on the freedom of navigation and international law is a separate matter. What is clear is that Korea has argued the freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea is important and that concerned parties should respect international law. Korea unequivocally supports the rule of law and a rule-based order. Korea is not supporting the "US freedom of navigation" in the South China Sea. Freedom of navigation is not about the US, it is a norm upheld by many countries in the region that support international law and a rule-based order.

The Quad is another issue, different from Korea's support for freedom of navigation or the emerging concept of Indo-Pacific. It is unlikely for Korea to join the Quad. Regarding the Indo-Pacific concept, Korea is not against the concept. If a broader geographical concept is beneficial to maintaining peace, stability and prosperity, then Korea supports it. What Korea has some strategic reserves on is about the US Indo-Pacific initiative as the American prime strategy towards Asia. It does not make sense for Korea to unconditionally support the US foreign policy in Asia, although we do not exclude possibility of joint efforts. Let's keep in mind Korea has its own initiatives in Asia. If the American and Korean strategy overlap, we can work together. But supporting another country's foreign policy unconditionally is a different matter.

Q10: In 2013, Korea and Australia held their first 2+2 meeting (Ministers of foreign affairs and defense). Meanwhile, Korea and Australia are both parties of the MIKTA informal gathering. Why do

Seoul and Canberra nurture such a close relationship? Is it mostly because they experience a similar strategic dilemmas of security dependence on the U.S. and deep economic ties with China?

Australia and Korea have been holding 2+2 meetings since 2013. This year, the two countries will hold their 4th 2+2 meeting. Meanwhile, our two countries, along with Indonesia, Turkey and Mexico, formed the so-called MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, Korea, Turkey and Australia). Korea's cooperation with Australia or the MIKTA initiative is not a strategic move. It highlights cooperation between middle powers in the region and globally.

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In the case of MIKTA, those middle powers intend to make a positive and constructive contribution to the international community in many issues of global concern such as climate change, terrorism and energy security. Australia-Korea 2+2 meetings, likewise, underline the cooperation between regional middle powers. Through 2+2 meetings, both countries can build stronger foundations for bilateral cooperation. Based on this, they can make a more meaningful contribution to peace, security, and prosperity in the region.

Of course, it does not exclude the chance to expand our diplomatic leverage in the region, but that is not the number one priority.

Q11: Korea is a dialogue partner of the Pacific Islands Forum, just like China, Canada, Cuba, or Turkey. Is there a specific Korean policy towards the countries and territories of the Pacific Ocean? Since France is a Pacific power with three territories in the South Pacific - New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, and French Polynesia - is there any opportunity for dialogue and cooperation?

The South Pacific is on the agenda of our Australia-Korea 2+2 meetings. Moreover, NSP, although it initially targets ASEAN and India, has a potential to expand its scope to include other South Asian and Pacific island countries.

It is true that the Korean presence in the South Pacific is not that visible. Yet, the South Pacific's importance for Korea's interests is growing. Korea is present as a country operating a substantial number of fishing vessels in nearby waters. Korea is also interested in

conducting scientific research as well as exploiting undersea mineral resources in the South Pacific.

It is certain that the presence of Korea in the South Pacific will grow further in the coming years as well as Korea will deepen cooperation with regional countries. Keeping that in mind, Korea is open to any opportunity of cooperation with countries that already have a substantial presence in the region. France is one of them.

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Interview conducted in April 2019 by Antoine Bondaz, Ph.D.

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