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## ***KASI and Korea-Indonesia Middle Power Interests: Converging the Differences?***

**Resi Qurrata Aini.<sup>1</sup>**

### **Summary**

After deferring its support for the US terminology of Free and Indo-Pacific Initiative (FOIP) during the past Moon Jae-in administration, Korea is getting bolder by launching its own conception of Indo-Pacific strategy in the current Yoon Suk-yeol rule. Yoon first disclosed it at the ASEAN-Korea Summit on 11 November 2022. He complemented it by launching the Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI), reiterated a few days later at a side event of the G20 Meeting in Bali. This diplomatic gesture reflects the acknowledgment of ASEAN and Indonesia as prominent for Korea Indo-Pacific Strategy. As the facto key driver of ASEAN and the chairman of ASEAN in 2023, Indonesia's response to Korea's Indo-Pacific conception and KASI will significantly influence how ASEAN bring it on and determine the implementation of KASI. This commentary will discuss how Indonesia perceives KASI and whether it would be a pathway to elevate Indonesia-Korea middle power strategy in dealing with geopolitical turbulences in the region. They will be assessed from Indonesia's development priorities, geopolitical dynamics, and Korea-Indonesia middle-power interests.

**Keywords:** *KASI, Power Interest, FOIP, Indonesia-Korea, ASEAN.*

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## **Korea-Indonesia Bilateral Relations: Rapid growth and the priorities**

This year, Indonesia and South Korea commemorate their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic ties. Even though South Korea-Indonesia relations are younger than North Korea (Indonesia and South Korea committed to diplomatic relations twelve years after Indonesia tied relations with North Korea in 1961), they managed robust and rapid growth of bilateral ties (Yeremia & Arif, 2022). Their partnership has grown significantly to the level of a special strategic partner since 2017, which means the cooperation has been translated into tangible actions in various aspects such as security, maritime, tourism, health, infrastructure, education, and many others. At the beginning of 2023, Indonesia and Korea wrapped their Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (IK-CEPA). This is the quickest negotiation successfully wrapped in the long history of Indonesia's economic partnership agreement (Septiari, 2019).

## **Indonesia's Perspective on KASI**

### **Domestic Sources: Jokowi's Development Priorities**

Partnerships with Korea are in line with 2 out of 5 aspects of Jokowi's working priority agendas, namely boosting infrastructure development and attracting investment.<sup>2</sup> Indonesia warmly welcomes infrastructure partnership with South Korea as it helps to widen Indonesia's options, especially in securing better deals amid business competition between the Japanese and Chinese consortiums in Light Rail Transit (LRT) construction projects in Indonesia (Aini & Kurniawan, 2023). Since taking office, Jokowi has visited Seoul for five times with investment and economic talks dominating his agenda. Korea ranked seventh as the source of Foreign Direct Investment in Indonesia. The amount of trade and investment kept going upward since their status elevation into a special strategic partnership in 2017 (Indonesia Embassy at Seoul, 2020).

Another mutually beneficial strategic sector of the Indonesia-Korea partnership is in the acquisition and co-production of defence and military equipment. South Korea is among Asia's top tiers in military submarine construction in Asia, the third largest arms exporter in the Third World Countries, and aiming to be the 7th greatest world aircraft manufacturer (Korea Aerospace Industries Association, 2015). While, Indonesia is one of the biggest importers of ROK-produced military equipment and has agenda to strengthen defence sector through military procurement and develop the domestic defense industry. Indonesia and Korea currently have at least two current projects of submarine construction and fighter aircraft procurement.

Linked it with KASI, by putting forward the commitment to build "a prosperous" Indo-Pacific through greater mutually beneficial substantive and strategic cooperation with ASEAN as part of Korea Indo-Pacific strategy embedded with KASI, Korea has brought the economic goals. The other two pillars, "free and freedom" Indo-Pacific are no less interlinked. They are the perquisite conditions that allow economic goals to be achieved. Therefore, those convergent economic-related interests between Jakarta and Seoul create greater room for collaboration that shall boost up their partnership through KASI.

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<sup>2</sup> Five Jokowi's priorities agenda for his second term (2019-2024) are infrastructure development, human resources improvement, attracting investments, bureaucratic reform, Effective budgeting

## **Dealing with Geopolitical Tensions**

South Korea and Indonesia deal with a similar strategic dilemma due to the heightened tension of the United States and China. Although Korea is a traditional ally of the United States in Asia, Korea retained actions that would trigger China's antagonism. It is widely known during Moon Jae-in presidency, that South Korea maintained its strategic ambiguity in dealing with great power politics. Aside from its politic domestics at that time, South Korea needs to maintain cordial relations with China for at least for two reasons: economic interests and North Korea-related issues.

This geopolitical dilemma continues. Even though President Yun Suk Yeol comes from right wing party, he restraints from straightforwardly alienate China. At the beginning of its launching, many were sceptical of South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy, which was seen as Korea's bold alignment with the United States' Indo-Pacific strategy. Many assumed that Korea seems to be starting to show its position and KASI was considered to "neutralize" this assumption by engaging with ASEAN which has a neutral image. Nonetheless, if we have a closer look at the Korea Indo-Pacific Strategy, the idea is quite normative by highlighting the commitment to build free, peace, and prosperous Indo-Pacific, and encompassing the principles of freedom, trust and reciprocity. Other than that, the predominant difference with the previous Moon-Jae in initiatives is the aspect of security that is explicitly embodied in KASI.

Despite different perspectives among scholars on Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy, one thing for sure, KASI is middle-power diplomacy of South Korea. Rather than abandoned in futile hope of the conducive East Asia, it is rational for South Korea to pivot to the South. However, we still have to wait how they implement KASI since to be effective, KASI should be translated into specific and tangible actions. Otherwise, it will remain an abstract narrative that is (miss)interpreted as Korea's attempt to neutralize its policy of being bold in its alignment toward the U.S Indo-Pacific Strategy

## **Korea-Indonesia Middle Power Strategy**

South Korea and Indonesia are two middle powers in East and Southeast Asia. Both have interlinking interests, at least in two facets, namely safeguarding the regional stability and status-seeking as middle powers which try to expand their influence through cooperation with other countries and regions. Regional stability is the strategic pre-requirement for a country to accommodate its national interests at the regional level. Meanwhile, fostering multilateralism is essential for middle power to leverage their positions.

As part of their middle power strategy, it is crucial for South Korea and Indonesia to boost their engagement at the global stage. For the middle power, it is impossible to change the prevailing constellation in the international system by themselves since they do not have as much power and influence as great powers (Jordaan, 2017). Thus, they both performs active roles in various multilateral forum. South Korea aims higher by branding itself as "Global Pivotal Power" in its Indo-Pacific blueprint. Indonesia is de facto leader of ASEAN, the only regional institution that is able to engage all level of powers including the competing actors. ASEAN is the promotor of the regional arrangements in East Asia almost in all aspects through multiple ASEAN-led mechanisms, including the ASEAN+1, ASEAN+3, EAS (East Asia Summit), ARF (ASEAN Regional Forum), ADMM-Plus (ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus), etc.

Active engagement in ASEAN might be the standout alternative for the two. Aside of G20, ASEAN has been the main diplomacy vehicle for Indonesia. For Korea, ASEAN is not only a significant dialogue partner - that is missing in East Asia - but also a safe platform to hedge between the US and China. The political and economic impacts caused by China's reaction in the THAAD dispute taught Korea a lesson all its own. Thus, the availability of such a neutral platform was crucial in enabling Korea to engage in passive hedging that minimize the risk of being antagonized by China (Lee, 2021, p. 2). This also might be the main reason for South Korea to specifically engage ASEAN through KASI to “soften” its Indo-Pacific strategy.

After arguably successfully chaired the G20 last year, Indonesia’s chairmanship of ASEAN this year is the playground to showcase Indonesia’s leadership and middle power diplomacy. Conveying The theme of “ASEAN Matters”, Jakarta emphasizes the urgency of ASEAN to be the navigator of its own region amid the great power politics in Indo-Pacific and “Epicentrum of Growth” to work on resiliency and connectivity to get recover from post-COVID-19 economic turbulence. However, there are many homework and pessimistic about ASEAN. ASEAN continuous challenge-from-within due to its lack of consensus, implementation gaps, and competing interests among ASEAN members are undeniable (Muhibat, 2023).

Jakarta looks favourably on KASI as its principles are fit in with Jokowi priority development agenda and Indonesia’s middle power diplomacy. It is noteworthy that Indonesia’s typical international manoeuvres strongly refer to its domestic political dynamics. As long as Korea’s initiative does not contradict with Indonesia's domestic interests, Jakarta will likely to perform a positive gesture. These domestic sources tend not to shift too much even after the president election next year. In addition, South Korea will always perceive the stability of the Korean peninsula as priority that affects any decision taken related to geopolitical tensions, while Indonesia - through ASEAN – confirms ASEAN centrality as priority in dealing with geopolitical tension. Being aware of those similarities and difference, Indonesia and Korea should be able to optimize their partnership to accommodate their middle power interests. The regional endeavour like KASI is one option, while pursuing the best-fit middle power strategy for Indonesia and Korea will require a long, ongoing quest.

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