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## ***ASEAN and RoK : More Than Just Alternative Partnership***

**Wildan Faisol.<sup>1</sup>**

### **Summary**

The region of Southeast Asia and Korea is bound by historical ties of Japanese colonialism in the mid-20th century. Currently the two regions are again bound in more strategic aspects such as aspects of economic cooperation and defense technology through the multilateral cooperation framework of ASEAN and the Republic of Korea or bilaterally, involving each of the ASEAN member countries. In a political context, Southeast Asian countries are in the midst of a sovereignty dispute with China, establishing deeper relations with the Republic of Korea as a strategic partner is ideal. From an economic aspect, in the shadow of the threat of debt trap diplomacy practiced by China, building a strategic economic cooperation framework with the Republic of Korea is an ideal solution. According to the author, this collaboration should receive serious attention from policy makers because the Republic of Korea does not have hegemonic interests in the Southeast Asia region.

**Keywords:** *ASEAN, Southeast Asia, Korea, Defense, Economy*

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Historically before the arrival of western colonialism, Southeast Asia and Korea were part of the East Asia region. Allies in post-World War II were responsible for creating a differentiation between East Asia countries (two Korea, China, Japan) and Southeast Asia countries. Complex relations in Asia Pacific during the Cold War often produced zero sum game relationships. Southeast Asia countries have already built relationships with the Republic of Korea (RoK) since the height of the Cold War. As David Koh writes in 2020, RoK and Southeast Asia countries have active interaction, but their relations are dominated by economic interests.<sup>2</sup> Despite RoK being viewed as a latecomer in terms of establishing relations with Southeast Asia countries than other East Asia countries, RoK actively became a dialogue partner of ASEAN. So, in this article I would explore my opinion from ASEAN position on why constructing a relationship with the RoK should be regarded as important like with China or Japan.

### Security Interest

Despite no major wars between countries in Asia since 1979, Asia still faces numerous international security disputes that potentially use military force. As Muthiah Alagappa wrote in 2014, the decline of intra-state wars in Asia since 1979 is mainly because of growing nationalism and success in terms of creating massive economic growth. Both points are responsible for the reduced role of force in Asia political security.<sup>3</sup> In terms of ASEAN role to maintain peace not only in Southeast Asia but also the whole Asia as a continent. Timo Kivimäki wrote in 2011, ASEAN approach to security with “ASEAN Way” cooperating with East Asian like RoK will form a new model of peace.<sup>4</sup> “ASEAN way” is regarded as a successful approach in terms of conflict prevention.

At this point, I assume RoK is regarded as the perfect counterpart to ASEAN in its mission to implement “ASEAN way” values. ASEAN countries are already involved in bilateral and multilateral cooperation/forums with RoK such as ASEAN+3, ASEM, Bali Democracy Forum or G20. RoK upholds its relationship with ASEAN by sending a special Ambassador to ASEAN and opening its office in Jakarta in 2012. In terms of military cooperation between RoK and ASEAN member countries, it can be seen from its activities in cooperation with Indonesia such as in the development of the KFX/IFX jet fighter in 2010. It only took a year and then Indonesia re-signed a contract to buy 3 submarines from Daewoo Shipbuilding and Marine Engineering (DSME).<sup>5</sup> In 2015, Indonesia and RoK also agreed to jointly invest USD 6.2 Billion to develop the KF-21 with Indonesia paying a 20% need of development cost in terms of access to technologies, expertise, and options to operate the fighter jet. ASEAN and RoK currently have common challenges in regard to peace and security issues in their region. In 2017, RoK launched their New Southern Policy to give ASEAN glimmer hopes and opportunities to address common security issues in the Asia Pacific region.

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<sup>2</sup> Koh, D. (2010). 3 South Korea and Southeast Asia: Ideas for Deepening the Partnership. In D. Steinberg (Ed.), *Korea's Changing Roles in Southeast Asia: Expanding Influence and Relations* (pp. 31-47). Singapore: ISEAS Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1355/9789812309709-008>

<sup>3</sup> ALAGAPPA, M. (1991). Regional Arrangements and International Security in Southeast Asia: Going Beyond ZOPFAN. *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 12(4), 269–305. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42707631>

<sup>4</sup> Kivimäki, T. (2011). East Asian relative peace and the ASEAN Way. *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 11(1), 57–85. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26159401>

<sup>5</sup> Darmawan, Wawan Budi.(2020). Kerjasama Kementerian Pertahanan Republik Indonesia Daewoo Shipbuilding Marine Engineering dalam Pengadaan Kapal Selam sebagai Upaya Pemenuhan Minimum Essential Force Militer Republik Indonesia. *Padjajaran Journal of International Relations*. Vol. 1. No. 3

## **Economic Interest**

From 1989 to 2019, trade relations between RoK and ASEAN countries actively increased from USD 8 billion to USD 151 billion. Before Covid-19 hampered Southeast Asia, ASEAN countries were the third largest source of RoK imports and also ASEAN countries as the second largest market for RoK export goods. Thanks to Vietnam since their Doi Moi reforms, Vietnam has become the third largest export market for RoK goods. In recent months, deeper relations between RoK and ASEAN countries also showed when Indonesia ratified Indonesia-Korea Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (IK-CEPA) in 2022.

In my opinion, in terms of economic ties between ASEAN and RoK, ASEAN countries need to empower free and open trade to build interconnectedness at multiple levels. In 2005, RoK and ASEAN signed the Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Cooperation to create a free trade mechanism between two parties. Normally, exports of developed countries like RoK include a large quantity and quality of high technological items that would boost values for these economies. Korea's highly technological industry is famous for its semiconductor industry. From the beginning, semiconductor and other highly technological products were developed as a main export for many countries especially Southeast Asia regions. Korean companies that also build semiconductor industry in Southeast Asia are highly possibly to transfer production technology to their host country.<sup>6</sup> This scheme greatly boosts the manufacturers industry in Southeast Asia countries. Korea's companies like Samsung and LG are leading Indonesia for products like Television and refrigerators. For ASEAN countries, if the economy is to thrive, the semiconductor industry and other highly technological products like Korea should continue to grow. Current situation shows, Japan and Korea's electronics industry often produce expensive products that are not affordable by most low-income levels in Southeast Asia. And then the trend is already related to the rise of China in the same industry which produces cheaper products. Not to deny China economic powerhouse but deeper relations with China even in the economic aspect would disturb ASEAN efforts to settle the dispute in South China Sea. By creating stronger economic ties between ASEAN and RoK would create highly interdependent relations between two entities not the asymmetrical relations like the other economic agreement.

## **Social Interest**

As a one of the strategic partners for ASEAN, RoK opened the sectoral dialogue with ASEAN in the late 80's (ASEAN+3, East Asia Summit). Hatice Celik in 2020 reckon ASEAN and RoK have lot similarities aspect in terms ideas and norms that continuously give positive impacts on both sides. Both ASEAN and RoK also build partnerships that avoid many controversial issues, especially internal affairs of ASEAN countries. Because both ASEAN and RoK showed their nonintervention aspect in foreign policy values. Despite the RoK government usually prefers to stay silent when human right violations happen in ASEAN countries, RoK plays a vital role when conducting workshops related to human rights value created by ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) and ASEAN Convention against trafficking in persons (ACTIP). Both workshops were funded from ASEAN-Korea Cooperation Fund that was launched in 1990. ASEAN

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<sup>6</sup> Prabbesh, K.P. (2023). Interconnected Horizons: ASEAN's Journey in the Global Semiconductor Trade Network Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic. *ERIA Discussion Paper Series No. 504*

also should involve RoK in environmental issues that were already proven in 2012 when ASEAN-RoK Forest Cooperation (AFoCo) signed.<sup>7</sup> And then AFoCo became a vital step in the establishment of the Asian Forest Cooperation Organization (AFoCO) in 2018. Initiative from both sides gives the positive fact that a common vision to protect the environment becomes a shared value that is worth fighting for in the region.

In my opinion, ASEAN should put RoK as a strategic partner on par with China and Japan because RoK involvement and support in materials and non-material aspects really make ASEAN more relevant to address regional and global issues. ASEAN countries don't have any historical or cultural dispute with RoK, even more both sides have similarity memory of colonization. ASEAN also need not be afraid of RoK motives which have no hegemonic interests in Southeast Asia.

## **Conclusion**

Through several interests, cooperation between ASEAN as a regional institution and the Republic of Korea has become a strategic value that can be developed on a par with similar cooperation such as with China or Japan. Especially in the midst of the chaos of sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea, the potential for cooperation with the Republic of Korea is something that is very possible to achieve. With the positive achievements of the Republic of Korea in various fields, especially defense technology, it can provide ASEAN countries with alternative partners in technology transfer. Moreover, the Republic of Korea does not have high political problems with ASEAN member countries, this is clearly an advantage in itself. Without any motivation to become a hegemonic country in the region, cooperation with the Republic of Korea is an ideal alternative solution for ASEAN countries.

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<sup>7</sup> Pradityo, Ramandanu.(2022) South Korea's Interest in ASEAN+1: New Southern Policy and Peacebuilding. *Sospol: Jurnal Sosial Politik* Vol 8 No 1 (2022), pp.134-149

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