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No. 065/2023 dated 15 September 2023

ASEAN-ROK Relations in the Indo-Pacific: Comprehensiveness and Competitiveness

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SYNOPSIS

*As ASEAN-ROK ties approach their 35th anniversary in 2024, **SARAH TEO** and **LOUIS TION** suggest that a focus on comprehensiveness and competitiveness would contribute towards shoring up their relations in the Indo-Pacific.*

COMMENTARY

The 24th ASEAN-Republic of Korea (ROK) Summit, convened on 6 September 2023 in Jakarta, Indonesia, highlighted key advancements in ASEAN-ROK relations made under President Yoon Suk-yeol's administration thus far. Beyond the usual affirmations of furthering collaboration and joint efforts towards regional capacity building, ASEAN and the ROK also issued a [Joint Statement](#) on Cooperation on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), which briefly mentioned commonalities between the AOIP and the ROK's Indo-Pacific Strategy.

If successful and sustained in the longer term, these initiatives would likely go some way towards addressing the image problem surrounding the ROK's (lack of) strategic profile in the Indo-Pacific. As reflected in recent editions of the annual [The State of Southeast Asia surveys](#), there is a tendency for the ROK to fall behind other regional actors when it comes to perceptions about influence and leadership in regional political and economic agendas. To some extent, the ROK's Indo-Pacific Strategy and the accompanying Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI) aim to rectify such perceptions.

As ASEAN-ROK ties approach their 35th anniversary in 2024, a focus on comprehensiveness and competitiveness would contribute towards shoring up relations in the longer term. Considering ASEAN's importance in the regional multilateral architecture – notwithstanding the current [challenges](#) it [faces](#) – stronger ASEAN-ROK relations would also help buttress the ROK's Indo-Pacific Strategy.



ASEAN-Republic of Korea (ROK) relations would benefit from a comprehensive and competitive approach. This includes paying attention to the strategic aspects of the ASEAN-ROK partnership amid an evolving Indo-Pacific and leveraging the ROK's strengths vis-à-vis the region. *Image from the ASEAN Secretariat.*

Comprehensiveness

Alongside the 35th anniversary of ASEAN-ROK diplomatic relations, Seoul and ASEAN intend to establish a comprehensive strategic partnership (CSP) next year. This would build on the expansion and deepening of ASEAN-ROK ties over the past few decades, including the ASEAN-Korea Free Trade Agreement (AKFTA) launched in the late 2000s; the elevation of relations to a strategic partnership in 2010; former President Moon Jae-in's New Southern Policy introduced in 2017; and now, President Yoon's KASI unveiled in 2022. For the CSP to be meaningful, however, it would have to reflect a significant step-up from existing ASEAN-ROK relations.

One way to proceed would be the proposed strengthening of defence and strategic aspects of the ASEAN-ROK partnership. Among other initiatives, KASI's eight core lines of effort seek to enhance exchanges with ASEAN in defence consultations and engagement, expand maritime and cybersecurity cooperation, as well as broaden defence industrial cooperation with individual ASEAN member states.

The challenge here would be to ensure the sustainability of these efforts and their role in supporting the overarching objectives of the ASEAN-ROK partnership. After all, the New Southern Policy had a "peace" pillar targeted at political and security cooperation, but ultimately was regarded to have [fallen short](#) of responding to the shifting geopolitical dynamics in the region. This has reinforced the view that the ROK has largely been absent from the regional geostrategic calculus. For KASI and the CSP to make a substantive difference in the tenor of ASEAN-ROK relations, the pursuit of

strengthened strategic and security cooperation within the Indo-Pacific context would have to be consistent.

Comprehensiveness also calls for the ROK to engage more equally with all ASEAN member states. As several [observers](#) have noted, Seoul's relations with Vietnam have largely [outweighed](#) its ties with other ASEAN member states in the recent past. This is mainly driven by economic reasons and the potential to expand cooperation with Vietnam in the [defence industry](#). While acknowledging that the progress and state of the ROK's relations with individual ASEAN countries are ultimately a function of shared interests and political will, a more balanced engagement with all ASEAN member states would help reinforce Seoul's presence in the region.

Competitiveness

The ROK's Indo-Pacific Strategy and KASI also underscore Seoul's competitive strengths among regional actors. Amidst major power rivalry threatening to disrupt cooperation across a range of issues and deepening divisions within the region, the ROK's initiatives could present a compelling alternative for ASEAN member states seeking to diversify their foreign relations beyond the major powers. The [initiatives](#) proposed by the ROK include bolstering the resilience of supply chains, narrowing the digital gap, as well as leading regional cooperation on climate change.

As a middle power with limited resources and diplomatic sway, it is all the more important for the ROK to leverage its competitive advantages. This will serve to differentiate it from its regional counterparts and consequently maximise its value to its partners.

In the areas of digitalisation and technological innovation, for instance, the ROK is a leading player. According to the 2022 Global Innovation Index, the ROK is [ranked](#) sixth amongst high-income countries and first amongst the 17 economies in Southeast Asia, East Asia, and Oceania, based on indicators such as technological outputs, research and development, as well as human capital. By adopting a forward-looking approach, the ROK has been able to make headway in the digital space, with a well-established digital infrastructure to fuel business activities.

These attributes and assets provide the ROK with opportunities to boost collaboration with regional actors on digitalisation and technology. The ROK could continue to share its technical know-how and best practices to assist Southeast Asia's emerging economies embarking on digitalisation as well as to narrow the digital and development gaps in the region. These would be pertinent tasks for ASEAN, particularly with its recent announcement to launch negotiations on the Digital Economy Framework Agreement.

ASEAN-ROK Relations: Looking Ahead

As the ROK and ASEAN work towards the CSP's establishment in 2024 and more consistent engagement over the longer term, Seoul's approach towards the Southeast Asian grouping would benefit from the guiding principles of comprehensiveness and competitiveness. The two principles may sound mutually exclusive, but they are fundamentally complementary. Comprehensiveness is targeted towards a more

balanced and wide-ranging engagement between the ROK and ASEAN, while competitiveness emphasises the distinctive contributions that the ROK can make to those balanced and wide-ranging relations. An approach grounded in competitiveness would likely help the ROK achieve more comprehensive relations with ASEAN and its member states.

The ROK's Indo-Pacific Strategy and KASI offer opportunities for Seoul to enhance its profile and take on a more active role in the region. Amid the evolving regional order and geopolitical shifts in the Indo-Pacific, a stable and resilient ASEAN-ROK partnership would be instrumental towards fulfilling the ROK's foreign policy goals in the Indo-Pacific.

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