

Proposing Membership of South Korea in ASEAN

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Can the Republic of Korea and ASEAN indeed set up a special relationship for sharing their fate and prosperity in the future?

Over the last 30 years, Korea and ASEAN have rapidly developed and deepened their relationship through several stages. The establishment of a dialogue partnership on specific matters in November, 1989 was the starting point for the institutionalization of their ties. Amid growing investments overseas following the democratization of Korea, South Korean companies started to invest in labor-intensive markets, mostly in Southeast Asian countries. The year 1997 brought a dramatic turning point in ROK-ASEAN relations with the ASEAN Plus Three (China, Japan and ROK) summit, which sought a wider range of regional cooperation and integration in East Asia. Along with the ASEAN Plus Three, they started to operate the ASEAN Plus One (Korea) process, in which the heads of South Korea held direct talks with their counterparts in ASEAN countries, further developing bilateral ties. For the following 20 years, their relationship developed substantially and continually to deserve the slogan, “Partnership for Real, Friendship for Good,” that I proposed for the first Korea-ASEAN Commemorative Summit in 2009.

Korea and ASEAN now have an official relationship called “strategic partnership.” The value and importance of Korea-ASEAN ties are recognized by all of those in business, experts and the government in South Korea, but the diplomacy and foreign policies of Seoul still seem to remain fettered by conventional frameworks and thinking, with no efforts made to break this. Koreans are preoccupied with the outdated notion of security and foreign policies based on the old belief that

Korea has nothing more to do with ASEAN than economic cooperation; it cannot build a “regional community” with ASEAN belonging to a different civilization; and the alliance with the U.S. in security and military affairs is the “only determinant” of its security. Since the establishment of the ROK (Republic of Korea) government, administrations have tried everything, ranging from inter-Korean summits and diplomacy with their four neighboring powers to the six-party talks, the solicitation of U.S. intervention in inter-Korean affairs and Chinese pressure on North Korea; but inter-Korean relations are now just headed for a catastrophe amid the growing risk of nuclear war, to say nothing of a lack in improvement of ties. The unification of the two Koreas and a peace regime on the Korean peninsula undoubtedly remain as national tasks, but while successive Korean governments worked hard to solve the inter-Korean problem with just the answer sheet for Northeast Asia for decades, the sheet now has few blanks to fill in the answer. It is now time to think about alternatives. Would it be really impossible to find an answer with ASEAN?

At this point, I would like to apply the concept of “complementarity” in Korea-ASEAN economic cooperation to non-economic fields. Complementarity can be sought not only in economic affairs but also in cooperation in the socio-cultural, and political and security domains. Korea and ASEAN can sympathize with each other as they have both experienced colonial rule by world powers, have been victimized by the East-West Cold War, and share distrust in China and Japan as well as feeling threats from these two countries. Except for the Second World War and the Vietnam War, which Korea and ASEAN countries joined under pressure from the U.S. and Japan, they have never been involved in armed conflicts, and have no reason to harbor animosity toward each other, either. As the East China Sea, Taiwan and South China Sea stand between them, there is no possibility of a territorial dispute or armed clash. The fact that Korea and ASEAN countries have never suffered serious conflict nor tension between them brightens the prospects for cooperation in military and security affairs. They can build a friendship for good, based on an equal, friendly partnership, not tribute, patronage relations, or any form of unequal ties.

Based on this shared sentiment of solidarity, Korea and ASEAN can develop a more institutionalized or a higher level of cooperation in such sensitive affairs as politics, military security and international politics. These kinds of cooperative ties would have so many advantages that it may require more research on them. What is certain about the ties with ASEAN is that they would bring more influence and negotiating powers to each other, rather than that which the mere sum of one-plus-one or one-plus-11 could bring, as the complementarity would produce synergy effects. First, new ties with ASEAN are expected to bring more benefits to Korea than to ASEAN. Now dwarfed by the four major powers of China, Japan, the U.S. and Russia, Korea cannot balance the regional order but could emerge as an undeniable power, at least, if it is supported by the 10 ASEAN countries. The

ROK-ASEAN cooperative body would contribute to stabilizing the East Asian region by forming a tripod along with China and Japan. In addition, if the founding principles of ASEAN to pursue peace, freedom, neutrality and denuclearization are accommodated in ROK-ASEAN ties, they may provide a clue to solving Korea's national division and the nuclear issue.

However, it should be noted that substantial obstacles stand in the way of upgrading and institutionalizing ROK-ASEAN ties. First of all, both sides should recognize the need for solidarity and form a consensus among their people. The geographical division into Northeast and Southeast Asia, the Northeast Asia-centrism among Koreans and the Southeast Asian identity built for half a century may make it difficult for them to sympathize or identify with each other. There should be a turning point for Korean leaders, decision-makers and intellectuals to break away from the old framework involving the ROK-U.S. alliance, the reliance upon superpowers or a balancing role in order to explore new strategies for future. Even if Koreans agree with solidarity with ASEAN in a change of their perceptions, it would be a daunting task for Korea to persuade ASEAN and Southeast Asians. Because of its formidable military forces and alliance with the U.S., Korea may be required to meet harsh preconditions to be accepted by ASEAN which pursues peace and neutrality.

Another task to be studied is about the level and form of the cooperative ties to be newly sought. If Korea seeks a higher level of cooperation than the current strategic partnership based on economic cooperation, it would be one of the following three: an "upgraded" or "special" partnership; a "community of practice" or "peace league" almost emulating an alliance; and becoming a "member of ASEAN." A special partnership would mean the establishment of a cooperative system over a comprehensive range, including international political disputes and military security issues, which might lead to a friendly peace league with the agreement on the principles of peace, freedom, neutrality and denuclearization and the ASEAN charter. If Korea seeks to solve the most challenging issue of how to guarantee peace on the peninsula all at once, it may consider "joining ASEAN."

It is an outdated, wrongful notion that only Southeast Asian countries can join ASEAN. The Southeast Asian region is an "artificial" concept subject to change, and ASEAN as such an organization, may also redefine the requirements for membership at any time. The time has come for us to seriously discuss Korean membership of ASEAN.

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