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ASEAN – THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA RELATIONS AND THE ASEAN SOCIO-CULTURAL COMMUNITY: A DIGITAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: The article specifies the potential contribution of the Republic of Korea (ROK) to the establishment of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) amidst ASEAN deepening vulnerability as an implication of ever-increasing digital transformation. Starting from a general outline of relations between ASEAN and the ROK, the paper proceeds to pointing out salient features of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community and its digitalization-related agenda. Then the authors turn to exploring the potential of ASEAN-ROK cooperation for overcoming the existing digital ASCC-related obstacles. The authors argue that ASEAN can obtain many components of South Korean experience, to the collective advantage of the ROK, ASEAN member states and the association as an international actor. While there are plenty of studies that focus on ASEAN-ROK relations, as well as on the ASCC achievements and failures, the digital aspects of this project, seen through the prism of dialogue between the association and South Korea, have not been explored in detail. If so, both ASEAN-ROK cooperation and ASCC are subjects to a fundamental reassessment. Though less noticed, there is also a task to generalize on the ASCC experience as an individual track of cooperation between the association and its external partners. The study aims to eliminate the aforementioned research gaps, which accounts for its academic novelty, originality and practical relevance.

Keywords: ASEAN, Republic of Korea, ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, digital transformation, limitations, cooperation, prospects

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Научная статья. Исторические науки

ОТНОШЕНИЯ АСЕАН С РЕСПУБЛИКОЙ КОРЕЯ И СОЦИОКУЛЬТУРНОЕ СООБЩЕСТВО АСЕАН: ЦИФРОВОЕ ИЗМЕРЕНИЕ

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Аннотация: В статье уточнен потенциальный вклад Республики Корея (РК) в формирование Социокультурного Сообщества АСЕАН на фоне нарастающей уязвимости АСЕАН перед вызовами прогрессирующей цифровой трансформации. Проведен общий обзор отношений между АСЕАН и РК, выявлены особенности Социокультурного Сообщества АСЕАН и его цифровой повестки. Определен потенциал сотрудничества Ассоциации и РК с точки зрения возможностей преодолеть цифровые ограничители формирования Социокультурного Сообщества АСЕАН. С точки зрения авторов, АСЕАН может взять на вооружение множество компонентов южнокорейского опыта, что положительно скажется на РК, странах-членах АСЕАН и Ассоциации как международном акторе. Хотя существует достаточное количество научных трудов, рассматривающих отношения АСЕАН и РК, равно как достижения и провалы в формировании Социокультурного Сообщества АСЕАН, цифровые аспекты этого проекта сквозь призму асеановско-южнокорейского диалога не были предметом комплексного анализа. Это объективно подталкивает к комплексной переоценке как отношений АСЕАН и РК, так и формирования Социокультурного Сообщества АСЕАН. Еще одна остающаяся без должного внимания задача состоит в обобщении опыта АСЕАН в формировании Социокультурного Сообщества как отдельного направления сотрудничества Ассоциации с внерегиональными партнерами. Настоящее исследование нацелено на устранение указанных выше исследовательских лакун, что определяет его научную новизну, оригинальность и практическую значимость.

Ключевые слова: АСЕАН, Республика Корея, Социокультурное Сообщество АСЕАН, цифровая трансформация, сдерживающие факторы, сотрудничество, перспективы

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In 2025, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) will finalize its pivotal project, namely, the ASEAN Community. The project aims to considerably increase ASEAN's competitiveness across the economic, the political-security and the socio-cultural track. The latter direction is especially noteworthy, as the ASEAN Community is regarded as a project with a strong social component.

The association has to tackle many challenges, among which the ongoing digital transformation is a special point of vulnerability. As ASEAN and its member states lack necessary resources, logically, assistance from external partners becomes a crucially important factor. Arguably, the Republic of Korea (ROK) is one of the partners that the association greatly appreciates.

From this perspective, to trace how ASEAN develops cooperation with the Republic of Korea specifically to meet the demands of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community with a special focus on the digital area is a timely and relevant exercise.

ASEAN-ROK: Evolution and Interim Results

Relations between ASEAN and South Korea are premised on a long-term and diversified foundation. The parties have tackled the same historical task, namely, coping with the "red danger" in cooperation with the United States. Specifically, South Korea has to respond to the threat presented by North Korea, while ASEAN was established as an anti-communist platform. During the Cold War, South Korea presented the ASEAN member states with an impressive example of how to "learn from Japan" while performing economic and business miracles. Lastly, the parties lack negative historical experience, exemplified, for instance by memory wars or territorial disputes.

In these circumstances, reasons behind ASEAN's decision to attach the ROK the status of ASEAN Sectoral Dialogue Partner and Full Dialogue partner in 1989 and 1991 respectively were perfectly logical. Notably, South Korea was the first developing country to receive this status.

In the early-mid 1990s, relations between ASEAN and South Korea were free from serious disagreements. Seoul did not criticize ASEAN member states for issues related to their internal policies. Instead, it welcomed the establishment of the ASEAN Regional Forum and the CSCAP, as it expected these multilateral venues to influence on the North Korean nuclear issue. Most importantly, in 1996, the ASEAN-ROK Future-Oriented Cooperation Project Fund aimed at promoting youth, cultural and sport exchanges, as well as science and technology cooperation, was estab-

lished. Those factors, both individually and collectively, laid the groundwork for relations between ASEAN and the Republic of Korea as premised upon mutual sustainable interest.

Remarkably, trade between ASEAN and South Korea was ahead of trade between ASEAN and China. In 1996, the ASEAN-ROK trade accounted for US\$31.5 billion¹, while the ASEAN-PRC trade slightly exceeded US\$ 20 billion².

The Asian financial and economic crisis 1997-1998 opened a new page in ASEAN-ROK relations. Both parties suffered from the aftereffects of the crisis with profound internal economic and social implications. More than that, both parties turned to East Asian big powers – China and Japan – for assistance. Lastly, both ASEAN and South Korea initiated policies aimed at synergizing advantages offered by globalization and regionalism, as well as coping with their inevitable threats. The convergence of external circumstances and internal motivations incentivized the association and South Korea to strengthen ties.

This shared vision was substantiated by practical steps. In the late 1990s, the dialogue between ASEAN and the Republic of Korea was held mostly in the ASEAN+3 format. Remarkably, while ASEAN established ASEAN+3, South Korea became a de-facto driver of East Asian regionalism. This is exemplified by Kim Dae-Jung's idea to explore new areas of cooperation between ASEAN+3 member states, which added an impetus to regional institution-building.

In the late 1990s – early 2000s, emerging multilateralism in North-east Asia played an essential supplementary role. In 1998 and 2002, Japan and South Korea signed *Japan-Republic of Korea Joint Declaration: a New Japan-Republic of Korea Partnership towards the Twenty-first Century* and *Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Korea and the Government of Japan for the Liberalization, Promotion and Protection of Investment* respectively. This factor incentivized ASEAN to increase efforts in developing its own dialogue frameworks, including those in which South Korea participates.

The mid-2000s saw further upward trends in ASEAN-ROK relations. In 2004, South Korea joined the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. More notably, the basic parameters of ASEAN-Korea FTA (AKFTA), with a different tempo for various ASEAN member states, were agreed upon. Six ASEAN states were scheduled to join AKFTA in 2010 or even in 2012. The target date was 2016 for Vietnam and 2018 for Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia respectively.

A milestone event in ASEAN-ROK relations took place in 2006, when Singapore-ROK FTA came into force. Seen from an ASEAN perspective, the FTA created a notable precedent: the production of Kaesong special economic zone was given the same status as that of South Korean enterprises. It suggested that similar practices could be applied to the ASEAN-ROK trade cooperation.

The events that followed further strengthened ASEAN-ROK ties. In 2009, Lee Meung Bak announced the New Asia Initiative that focused on developing relations between South Korea and regional middle powers and small states, as well as on moving beyond economic cooperation. Getting to specifics, Seoul planned to increase cultural and humanitarian exchanges, as well as encourage labor migration from Southeast Asia. It paved the way for the establishment of Strategic Partnership between ASEAN and the Republic of Korea at the Thirteenth ASEAN-ROK Summit in 2010.

In 2017, South Korea announced its New Southern Policy. Remarkably, Moon Jae-in recognized ASEAN as the ROK's partner equal to the US, the PRC and Japan. The reasons included Seoul's intention to diversify its foreign policy directions after the THAAD system had been installed and the ROK-PRC relations deteriorated. An additional reason accounted for the unfolding US-China controversy over trade and technological issues that undermined regional GVC in which South Korean enterprises are involved. To cope with these challenges, in 2020, the ROK announced its New Southern Policy Plus that includes seven resourceful initiatives with a crucial social dimension. Seen from an ASEAN perspective, the Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative, launched in 2022, with a clear focus on strengthening the ROK-ASEAN defense ties, is of special significance³.

The developments discussed above by no means suggest that relations between ASEAN and the ROK are completely problem-free. The history of South Korean economic presence in Southeast Asia, as compared to that of Japan, is relatively short. Take, for instance, the GVC in the automobile sector. While Japanese automobile producers entered the Southeast Asian market in 1960s, as exemplified by Toyota, Nissan and Honda, the Korean automobile giant Hyundai established its assembling factory only in 2022. The same assessment is relevant to the consumer electronics sector. In the political-security realm, the ROK's policy towards ASEAN is closely linked to the "Strategy for a Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region", and, by extension, a highly politicized Indo-Pacific narrative. Lastly, the public perception of South Korea in Southeast Asia demonstrates that its economic influence is far from very significant⁴.

A factor that must be discussed individually relates to ASEAN's policy towards North Korea. As stated above, the DPRK has been the ARF participant since 2001. In 2008, Pyongyang signed the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. Arguably, there are strong consolidating factors in relations between ASEAN and the DPRK.

By holding a dialogue with North Korea, ASEAN aims to raise its global status, as the DPRK nuclear issue has outgrown the subregional (Northeast Asia) and even the regional (Asia-Pacific) dimension. As the ARF is the only Asia-Pacific multilateral dialogue platform in which North Korea participates, the association enjoys the reputation premium. This is all the more important since the ARF includes all the participants of the suspended Six-Party Talks, and its discussions have been held regularly for nearly three decades. The fact that in 2018-2019 inter-Korean negotiations were conducted in Singapore and Vietnam demonstrates that both ASEAN and its member states loom large in the ROK's and the DPRK's priorities.

Remarkably, the ASEAN countries do not regard North Korea as a pariah state. Chains of "Pyongyang restaurants" are popular across Southeast Asia. Plus to that, Vietnam and North Korea have a shared history of revolutionary struggle and resistance to the US. In their turn, Malaysia and Singapore that are critical about Western liberal democracy favorably see the DPRK's emphasis upon non-interference in its internal affairs. The combination of the afore-mentioned factors suggests that positive perceptions of North Korea across Southeast Asia will remain in place.

In its turn, the DPRK finds relations with ASEAN, as well as the ARF discussions, attractive and rewarding. North Korea would prefer to develop its external ties on principles close to the ASEAN Way with its emphasis on non-interference and gradualism. North Korea realizes the importance of having a permanent channel of multilateral communication with its partners. Pyongyang aims to decrease its dependence upon China and diversify its external relations, because of which ASEAN is seen as an attractive alternative policy direction. Lastly, dialogue with ASEAN allows North Korea to demonstrate that its policy is not aggressive in case it does not encounter any pressure.

Arguably, although ASEAN cannot strongly influence upon the DPRK nuclear developments, any calming effect on the issue, however modest it might be, is appreciated by Seoul.

The factors discussed above suggest that prospects of cooperation between ASEAN and South Korea are generally bright. Although shortcomings exist and will probably remain in place, upward trends prevail, as both ASEAN and the ROK find their relations mutually beneficial.

The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community: How to Make It “Dynamic” by Means of Digital Instruments?

The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) is one of the pillars of the ASEAN Community. The ASCC aims mainly to develop intra-ASEAN “unity in diversity” by means of undertaking socially important tasks. The latter include protection of Southeast Asian citizens, responding to disaster-related and environmental challenges, promoting equitable participation opportunities etc.⁵

The ASCC-related expectations, however, often fall short of the results obtained. Take, for instance, disagreements on labor migration issues between the donor (Indonesia, the Philippines, Myanmar) and the recipient countries (Malaysia and Singapore). Although the association adopted the ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers (2007), the ASEAN Declaration on the Protection of Migrant Workers and Family Members in Crisis Situations (2023) and other documents focusing on labor migration, progress has been slow to date. The same assessment relates to environmental issues. Although the association adopted a great number of environment-focused declarations, deforestation, pollution and transboundary haze across Southeast Asia remain major challenges to economic and social development of ASEAN member states. Regarding ASEAN identity, people of Southeast Asia take the view that they are citizens of their respective states rather than of ASEAN.

Part of ASEAN’s efforts to develop the ASCC, as outlined in the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025, relates to making ASEAN dynamic. Specifically, it means exploiting three strategically important niches: an open and adaptive ASEAN, a creative, innovative and responsive ASEAN, and a culture of entrepreneurship in ASEAN. More specifically, key measures include encouraging universal access to information, lifelong learning, socially and environmentally responsible entrepreneurship, institutional and technical innovations in the provision of social services and health care etc.⁶ In order to perform this task, the association must have effective, including digitally enabling instruments, while ASEAN-led formats and initiatives of economic regionalism, both in Southeast Asia and beyond, must gain increasing digital support.

Discouragingly, the digital component of ASEAN integration instruments remains underdeveloped. Major reasons range from lack of visionary clarity to imbalances in digital infrastructure, legal patchwork and insufficient competences across Southeast Asia.

Getting to specifics, ASEAN is encountering several types of challenges. Its non-digital integration instruments had underperformed long before the digitalization started. According to Logistics Performance Index 2023, the places occupied by ASEAN member states ranged from first and 26th (Singapore and Malaysia, with scores 4.3 and 3.6 out of 5) to 115th (Cambodia and Laos, both have scores 2.4 out of 5)⁷. This factor overlaps with intra-ASEAN digital infrastructure gaps. In 2021 (the most recent information provided by the ASEAN Secretariat), the access to Internet across Southeast Asia ranged from 100% (Brunei Darussalam and Myanmar) to 49.0% (Laos)⁸. The number of regional data centers ranges from 59, 41 and 33 (Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia) to one (Brunei, Laos, Myanmar)⁹. For obvious reasons, it undermines the digital transformation of trans-boundary GVC in Southeast Asian states, with negative implications for ASEAN's overall competitiveness.

Another obstacle accounts for the legal dimension of intra-ASEAN digital activity. Specifically, the regulation of data localization practices across Southeast Asia varies significantly. More specifically, Indonesia, Vietnam and Cambodia take a strict approach to data localization (all the data must be stored and processed within the national borders of these states). In contrast, Singapore and the Philippines introduced more liberal regimes concerning data localization¹⁰. This factor does not contribute to an increase in legal support for ASEAN-led formats and initiatives of economic regionalism. The problem is further aggravated by the CBDC factor, as China aims to synergize the digital renminbi with its e-commerce-related and the 5G Internet-related assets under the auspices of the Digital Silk Road.

Finally, ASEAN is sandwiched between the American and the Chinese digital ecosystems. The 5G internet infrastructure is developed by American (Altiostar, Cisco, Qualcomm), Chinese (Datang Telecom, Huawei, ZTE), Finnish (Nokia), Swedish (Ericsson) and South Korean (Samsung) companies¹¹. Notably, the 5G internet incurs risks to data confidentiality¹² with serious implications for the government and the corporate sector. As the significance of digital infrastructure as part of the worldwide digital transformation will remain considerable, ASEAN-led multilateral projects and initiatives are prone to increasing vulnerability.

To effectively respond to the afore-mentioned challenges, ASEAN needs to diversify its policy instruments. As the association and its member states are not properly equipped with them, ASEAN has no other choice than to promote cooperation with its extra-regional partners, including the Republic of Korea.

The ROK's Contribution to the ASCC: a Broad Assessment

Cooperation in the digital field looms large in the priorities of both ASEAN and the Republic of Korea. In order to promote digital cooperation with ASEAN, the ROK's government organizes professional events of all sorts. According to the Korea-ASEAN Future Community ODA Strategy Implementation Plan (2019-2023) published by the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) in 2019, the "Digital Partnership for Inclusive Development" is one of five focus areas. Specifically, Seoul aims to encourage selected ASEAN countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines) to increase access to public information by disclosing state goals, develop digital infrastructure, and promote the use of digital technologies at the grass-root level.¹³

The project Korea-ASEAN Future Community ODA Strategy Implementation Plan (2019-2023) focuses on developing digital infrastructure and expanding the use of digital technologies. The ROK's government supported the establishment of e-government systems and communication networks in ASEAN countries as part of their IT-related modernization.

Getting to specifics, the following directions are of immense significance. The Republic of Korea can contribute to upgrading digital infrastructure in ASEAN member states. LineApp is a good example of implementing platforms made in South Korea across Southeast Asia. As fintech-related applications are developed in ASEAN member states, South Korean experience can be of particular relevance.

Another area of cooperation is presented by the project ASEAN Cyber Shield (ACS) launched by the Korea Internet & Security Agency (KISA) in January 2023.¹⁴ Its main directions include online professional education in the field of cybersecurity, student exchanges and joint cybersecurity-related educational programs.

Within the framework of the ASEAN Cyber Shield (ACS) project, the following higher educational institutions were selected: Kangwon National University, Gangneung–Wonju National University and Brunei University of Technology. Based on their resources, exchange programmes between the ASEAN countries and the Republic of Korea in the field of cybersecurity are developed. In particular, the Kangwon National University received more than \$ 1 million for the development of talents in the field of IT. In the next three years, the university plans to train 60 students from ASEAN states. Lee Chanwoo, head of the affiliated with the University "ACS-ESP Project Group" specified that the curriculum includes classes

with invited entrepreneurs in the field of ICT, corporate internships, events focusing on Korean culture and the culture of Southeast Asian states. Gangwon-do National University trains global cyber security specialists by conducting various educational courses including academic and student exchange programmes.¹⁵

For ASEAN countries, the ROK's highly competitive e-government system is another example to study and eventually to follow. In a long-term perspective, it might be an appropriate instrument for solving social problems, including poverty and unemployment. A UN comparison of the e-government development is presented below.

Comparison of ASEAN and the ROK's E-Government Index (2022)¹⁶

Place	Country	E-Government Index
3	Republic of Korea	0.95
12	Singapore	0.91
53	Malaysia	0.77
55	Thailand	0.77
68	Brunei	0.73
77	Indonesia	0.72
86	Vietnam	0.68
89	Philippines	0.65
127	Cambodia	0.51
134	Myanmar	0.50
159	Laos	0.38

As follows from those figures, the ROK outperforms all ASEAN member states. Moreover, intra-ASEAN gaps are evident. To bridge them, South Korean assistance is valuable.

Specifically, the ROK can share its experience with ASEAN countries in developing e-government services. The Electronic Government of Korea (www.egov.go.kr) was launched on November 1, 2002. The site provides information on more than 4,000 types of civil complaints via the Internet. During the first day, Korean experts noted a sharp increase in access. More than 300 thousand connections were made in just ten hours of operation. Despite various access-related problems, by 2010, the Korean e-government had managed to take the 1st place in the UN ranking. The ROK maintained the top position for 3 years.¹⁷ The ROK's relevant agencies continue to analyze and improve the government digital systems, which allows the country to remain at the top three positions for more than 10 years.

For the government and the corporate sector of ASEAN countries, skill training is timely and rewarding. Promising directions include, but are not limited to, improving the qualifications of teachers, bridging the gap in digital education, and developing relevant infrastructure¹⁸.

The Government of the Republic of Korea allocates considerable financial resources person-power training in the field of digitalization. The experience of the Kangwon National University is not unique in the country. Seoul Women's University implements curriculum reforms, establishes new departments and launches educational programmes, as well as expands cooperation between industry and academia. The university became the first women's educational organization to open an IT college, as well as the first information security faculty in the metropolitan region to expand digital education opportunities¹⁹.

Revealingly, the ROK Government organizes various events with a focus on social aspects of digital transformation. In November 2023, a digital talent festival supported by the Ministry of Science and ICT took place. The event was organized along two main tracks: talents and education. The Korean Digital Talent Festival 2023 aims not only to increase the popularity of relevant training, but also to encourage talented specialists with various awards.²⁰ The ROK leadership sees nurturing national talents for the good of the country as a top priority²¹.

In November 2023, the Government of the Republic of Korea became a co-organizer of various events at which competitions between Southeast Asian talents in the ICT field took place. The ASEAN Cyber Shield 2023 hacking contest is of special note²². The winners received cash prizes and were invited to participate in the ASEAN Digital Shield project.

The afore-presented examples correspond not only to the national objectives of the Republic of Korea and ASEAN member states, but also to ASEAN's prospective planning. Higher education programmes launched by South Korean universities contribute to closer interaction of talents between ASEAN and the ROK. Many of them aim to train specialists in the ICT field. Apart from university management and exchanges, this policy, namely, increasing general awareness in the socio-cultural characteristics of partner nations. As a chain effect, this contributes increasing the human potential of ASEAN countries.

To sum up, several assessments are relevant. As the ICT leader in the Asia-Pacific region, the ROK may offer ASEAN and its member states a wide range of advantageous digital solutions. The more so since Southeast Asia is a promising market in which large-scale digital initiatives are implemented. The convergence of these factors ASEAN-ROK cooperation in the digital field, including as part of the ASCC agenda, has high changes to remain dynamic and multi-directional.

Conclusion

ASEAN-ROK relations are premised on unique advantages that other Asia-Pacific actors do not possess. Among them, a high level of trust is the most valuable asset. Arguably, both the association and South Korea are eager to develop mutually beneficial ties across many direction, as their major international priorities are very close. No less importantly, the parties have necessary instrumental resources to practically substantiate their trust-based dialogue.

So far, the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community has been developing unevenly, as ASEAN's vision has not been sufficiently supported with relevant, including digitalization-related, instruments. In these circumstances, the association may fall into a strategic trap, since it is extraordinarily difficult to obtain necessary resources in time-pressing conditions.

To avoid deepening vulnerability, a timely step for the association is to intensify cooperation with the ROK. Ample evidence suggests that it would resonate well with Seoul's own priorities, which is exemplified by the substance of its digitalization-related initiatives. Judging by long-term trends in ASEAN-ROK cooperation, mutual projects and initiatives in the ICT field will be multi-directional and mutually beneficial.

ИНФОРМАЦИЯ ОБ АВТОРАХ

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