



연구논문

## Navigating Association of Southeast Asian Nations–Republic of Korea (ASEAN–ROK)’s Development Cooperation Agenda in Post-2030 Dialogue: Potentials and Challenges

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### Abstract

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Southeast Asian countries have been engaging more visibly and actively in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) dialogue than the millennium development goals domain. However, ASEAN has not been observed championing Agenda 2030 and retaining the SDGs on the global development policy agenda like the European Union. Hence, this study explores the possible roles played by and strategic interactions of ASEAN with the Republic of Korea (ROK) in the

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development cooperation domain. Specifically, this study clarifies available options to develop a unifying framework after 2030 and highlights ASEAN's roles and Korea's contributions in terms of the countries' competing geopolitical global development paradigms. Moreover, this study examines ASEAN's role and positionality as a global development policy actor and a regional multilateral actor by indicating the regional division of development needs and priorities and negotiating the changes in global geopolitical contexts. Finally, the article suggests three strategic recommendations for ASEAN-ROK's joint initiatives for development cooperation: Focus on development and humanitarian gaps, assist the development of national development plans and post-2030 plans in core contribution areas, and overcome social and environmental sustainability challenges.

**Key words:** Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Korea, International Development Cooperation, Post 2030 Agenda, Post Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Agenda

# I. INTRODUCTION: THE ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS (ASEAN) AND THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGS)

What has so far been the contribution of the Regional Organizations to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) worldwide? A recent external evaluation report published by the EU Directorate-General International Partnerships addressed a question. It focused on the period after the agreed SDGs, 2016-2021, and 146 countries (INTPA, 2024). A further layer of complexities is that a recent review, conducted by Munro of the national development plans of more than 140 countries found the SDGs framing was clear in plans submitted by Low-Income Countries and High-Income Countries, but less evident in Middle-Income Countries' plans, suggesting that Agenda 2030 seems to be losing traction among in Middle-Income Countries (Munro, 2023). Summer & Klingebiel (2024) evaluated the EU's role points to three major contributions of the SDGs and they are high-level political influence, financial commitments, and a set of policy tools. One of the better-known contributions by the EU to the development could be developing a suite of SDG policy tools, such as the SDG mapper and the Global ASEAN Results Framework, to integrate and monitor progress towards the SDGs.

Although the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has not been the most active champion of SDG agenda-making and implementation, it has played a more visible voice in the global, high-level SDGs dialogue, compared to its participation in the period of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). However, the ASEAN's impact on the high-level participation was much less evident in terms of national political influence in comparison to the active political and policy roles of the EU. By reflecting the same external evaluation's recommendations, the ASEAN needs to focus on the following three aspects. The first aspect that ASEAN should focus on is enhancing its global influence by strengthening partnerships with other international actors and extending influence mapping to national ASEAN delegations can amplify its impact. Second, it is critical for ASEAN to clarify ITS policy positions. Developing a clearer outline of policies on how each SDG should be pursued. Third, developing an understanding of what the causal chain is assumed to be due to the ASEAN activities to meet the

target SDG outcomes: deepening understanding of how ASEAN activities contribute to SDG attainment by delineating causal chains – also known as a 'theory of change'.

In this regard, this article focuses on two key policy and strategic issues: first, the repositioning of ASEAN's role in global development cooperation policy for the post-2030 agenda, and second, ASEAN's role in relation to its Asia-only ASEAN+3 framework, with regards to the Republic of Korea. While ASEAN+3 has often been criticized as a shallowly institutionalized grouping with weak enforcement compliance mechanisms (Heng, 2012), the application of open regionalism, and the benefits of competitive liberalization among various regional agreements seem promising. In these multiple political and development dynamics are being influencing the post 2030 agenda setting process, therefore, this article highlights three major considerations for ASEAN's repositioning in the global development agenda under the shifting Geo-political Paradigms. Then, it suggests three strategic recommendations for ASEAN-ROK's joint initiatives for development cooperation – namely focusing on disparities and development gaps among Southeast countries, and social and environmental sustainability challenges.

## II. ASEAN'S OLD AND NEW THINKING ABOUT THE ASEAN'S POST-2030 ERA

There is generally widespread support for the 2030 Agenda, at the very least in the sense that there is no global anti-SDG sentiment, though these are starting to appear in some populist parties in several countries around the world (Summer & Klingebiel, 2024). The general global support is due to the countries that participated in the negotiation and agreed on the SDGs unlike its predecessors, the MDGs and precursor agenda, the OECD-DAC goals (Summer & Klingebiel, 2024). As the 2030 deadline approaches, the question of what next will inevitably arise. In this sense, there are some positive observations in regard to SDGs reviews. First, global support for Agenda 2030 has not yet eroded: in general, in most countries governments and Civil Society Organizations appear to be supportive of the 2030 Agenda. This cannot be taken for granted of course especially as failure looms on the horizon (Gilroy et al., 2024).

Second, significant progress has been made globally in areas such as poverty reduction, hunger alleviation, education, and healthcare, indicating the feasibility of achieving SDGs at least up to when the pandemic hit. Third, international actors were able to agree at the 27th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP27) on a new fund that will assist developing countries offset the damage from natural disasters caused by climate change - often called "Loss and Damage Fund" and to attract significant initial budget.

There are a several challenging issues facing ASEAN within the region and more severely among the least developed countries in Southeast Asia. First, the pandemic setback was problematic among almost all ASEAN member states. The COVID-19 pandemic and even more importantly the consequences of the Russian aggression in Ukraine have stalled SDG progress and been the subject of discussion. Second, the poly-stressors and crisis context have been discussed more seriously among developing countries such as Lao PDR and Timor Leste and conflict-affected countries like Myanmar. The convergence of multiple stressors and crises poses a significant threat to what has been achieved on the SDGs. Over a billion people live just above extreme poverty and are at risk of sliding back into poverty amidst economic and geo-political shocks, and climate-related shocks as well.

Third, old and new complexity and polarization in the ASEAN's developmental gaps. Kwon et al. (2013) have pointed out common development challenges within the region such as development including income gaps, human development, industrialization, and expansion of infrastructure. Many also have called attention to that one of the greatest challenges for ASEAN is the most notably on the reduction of the development gap between Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (CLMV) countries and the other member states. Regarding the Official Development Assistance (ODA), in particular, the gaps are more apparent. In a several countries among the ASEAN member states such as the Lao PDR, ODA matters a lot for the functioning of the state and delivery of basic services versus countries. Economically and politically leading countries like Singapore as well as the majority number of countries in the region - seen in the amid of the "Middle Incomes Trap (MIT)" have shown also a completely different context in the ODA cooperation with the ASEAN +3 countries (Masatoshi, 2023). These significant differences in development outcomes between countries, and within countries, underscore the vulnerability of those who have participated fully in the develop-

ment process (UN ESCAP, 2020). For instance, the MIT states that have middle-income economies have found it challenging to upgrade, and reach the high-income stage over an extended period. Overcoming the MIT has long been discussed as an essential social issue that is caused in part by fewer job opportunities and unstable income, notably in Southeast Asia. Previous studies demonstrated several factors contributing to MIT, including governance, infrastructure, and the labor market.

### **III. BEYOND 2030: ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS (ASEAN), ASEAN +3 AND KOREA**

Three main aspects need attention by ASEAN as well as by other international actors. First, political sensitivity should be further examined. Given the time and effort invested in crafting the SDGs, discussions about the post-2030 era need to navigate political sensitivities. In short, talking about after 2030 does not mean giving up on the SDGs between now and 2030. Poverty, inequality, and global cooperation are long-run policy issues. Second, ASEAN Decision Points can be developed before 2027-2028. The new Commission, once appointed, faces the task of determining the ASEAN's stance on any post-2030 frameworks and thinking through how to facilitate the high-level political process as well. As mentioned earlier, it is fair to evaluate that the ASEAN has played a more visible voice in the process of SDGs agenda formulation, compared to the times of the MDGs. However, the ASEAN's global and national political influence for including the regional priorities within the UN-OECD process was limited.

Furthermore, relating to the second preparation point, ASEAN leadership will matter. As we observed that the regional bodies' role such as the EU as a global leader could remain essential in keeping the SDGs alive even up to 2030, the ASEAN can contribute a bit earlier in the process of the Post 2030 process. Establishing political processes involving high-level forums and engagement with CSOs is important, although can be seen as not necessarily a natural policy process for the ASEAN. Given the SDGs took four to five years to negotiate and agree upon, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand – which recently established government departments or teams to coordinate development/ODA policy and coordination – can start initiating such agenda-setting processes.

There are three ways of consideration for the forthcoming ASEAN Commission in dealing with the Post 2030 agenda. The first ASEAN 'contribution scenario' can be named as 'keep it simple' approach. This ASEAN's approach entails extending the SDGs to 2040. This simple solution may still be politically arduous. It has the advantage of not needing any changes or perhaps a few minor tweaks. The problem is, as often mentioned in the currently EU-UN dialogue: can something fail and be extended and blamed on the tense geopolitical context (Esteves & Klingebiel, 2021)? It could also be a pragmatic approach in the case of the US presidential elections in 2024 leading to a more populist environment for global affairs.

The second consideration for the ASEAN can be the 'go ambitious' scenario. The second option can be the 'go ambitious' scenario. Malaysia as the next ASEAN Chair could lead the formulation of an ambitious new framework aligned with the contemporary poly-stressors of Japan and the crisis context facing several ASEAN member states, with a few other ASEAN +3-member states such as Korea. The new post 2030 framework would presumably align with a broadly defined human security policy meaning ensuring countries and people do not fall into poverty or back into poverty by reducing risk exposure and insuring against risk. Such thinking seems fitting to these contemporary times though it is hard to imagine almost 200 countries at the UN negotiating again, given the state of enthusiasm in the multilateral system.

It is critical to note that with Southeast Asia's economy growing rapidly and tied into all parts of the global economy and the region geopolitically important to the world's major powers - Korea, China, and Japan, how ASEAN manages its internal affairs and East Asian relations is crucial (Stubbs, 2019). The framework would presumably align with human security broadly defined, meaning ensuring countries and people do not fall into or return to poverty by reducing risk exposure and insuring against risk. Such thinking seems fitting to contemporary times, though it is hard to imagine a negotiation again between almost 200 countries at the UN, given the state of enthusiasm in the multilateral system.

The third consideration for the ASEAN can be a sort of a 'default scenario'. This option could be seen or could happen more by default than a thought decision. If there were no post-2030 framework, then nothing and twenty years of a broadly accepted framing would be over. As Several EU specialists have argued that there would be the absence of a guide to the multilateral system - better or probably worse.

## IV. COMPLEXITIES OF ASEAN-KOREAN COOPERATION UNDER THE GEO-POLITICAL PARADIGMS

When the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs were agreed upon, the global community could take advantage of a 'window of opportunity' to make some global progress (Allen et al., 2024). Since then, international relations have been characterized by profound geopolitical upheavals. The systemic confrontation between China and Western countries, especially the USA, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and related consequences, the escalation of violence in the Gaza Strip, and the complete takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban make it clear that the environment for global cooperation efforts has become much more difficult (Summer & Klingebiel, 2024).

In recent months and years, there have been considerable concerns that global cooperation has taken significant steps backward. Populism and autocratic trends in all regions of the world are also seriously damaging efforts towards global cooperation (SDG Knowledge Hub, 2021). The scope for finding joint solutions, particularly in the fight against climate change, has become difficult or even impossible and is itself becoming part of international conflict lines. One important aspect is that of competing geo-paradigms and how the SDGs/Agenda 2030 will be 'co-opted, adapted, or sidelined between or within competing worldviews on global development' (Klingebiel, 2022; Ranjan, 202). The Millennium Declaration and the 2030 Agenda were drafted and developed as meta-development paradigms under little pressure from geopolitics in the past. This is likely to be largely different for a post-2030 agenda.

The ASEAN, the USA, and other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) actors, as well as China, most likely supported by Russia, but also southern actors beyond China, are likely to take a geopolitical view of a new global development agenda. It is yet uncertain which narrative is supposedly a Western perspective and characterized by the value system of one actor or group of actors. Also, it is uncertain how strongly can China or India present themselves as opinion leaders of the Global South. All these questions are likely to dominate the discussions in the run-up to 2030.

Klingebiel (2023), Ranjan (2021), and Wang et al. (2024) among others argued that

there is an increasingly relevant geopolitical dimension of development topics over the past decade, not at least development paradigms. In addition, critics of multilateralism have commonly agreed upon the shifting context that there is a crucial turning point. That has been and is the use of the development initiatives initiated by China for offensive geopolitics in the Global South, especially since the 2017 Communist Party Congress. The Belt and Road Initiative, which has been implemented since 2013, has set new standards for how an infrastructure initiative can massively change countries such as Pakistan. Incidentally, this is an initiative that is not only aimed at developing countries but encompasses a total of 180 countries and institutions. Other Chinese initiatives have been added in recent years, including the Global Development Initiative (GDI) in 2021, which is valued by many developing countries. At the beginning of 2023, the Global Security Initiative agreed on by the group of Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates (BRICS) countries – the Federative Republic of Brazil, the Russian Federation, the Republic of India, the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of South Africa – was added. The Global Civilization Initiative published in March 2023 shows the range of the initiatives and the close links between them. China's development initiatives have significantly enhanced its soft power capacity (Summer & Klingebiel, 2024). The GDI meetings, for instance, draw notable high-level participants from Global South countries, garnering close attention in EU capitals and Washington DC alike. These initiatives have prompted various responses from Western actors, exemplified by the EU Global Gateway initiative and analogous approaches from other G7 members. India's G20 Presidency in 2023 illustrated the nation's readiness to propose its own development paradigms as well as assert a crucial leadership role for Global South actors. These recent developments suggest that geopolitics will likely shape discussions surrounding any Post-2030 Agenda, as well as the ROK-ASEAN relations.

## V. KOREA’S POSSIBLE STRATEGIES AND PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT FOR ASEAN IN THE POST 2030

Based on the past three decades of deepening relations between ASEAN Member States and Korea and striking outcomes (see the <Table 1>). ODA with the partner countries in Southeast Asia is now facing the next stage of development.

**〈Table 1〉 Progress between ROK and Korea between 2010 and current**

Categories	2010	Current	Growth (%)
Trade	USD 89,294 million (2010)	USD 207,438 million (2022)	213.2
Acc. Investment	USD 22,907 million (2010)	USD 97,737 million (2022)	426.67
Acc. Number of companies	7,199 (2010)	16,988 (2022)	235.98
ODA	USD 234 million (2010)	USD 591 million (2021)	252.56
Mutual visitors	3,980,071 (2010)	12,803,843 (2019)	321.7
ASEAN population in Korea	286,330 (2009)	362,257 (2019)	126.52
Korean in AMS	193,001 (2009)	394,536 (2022)	204.42
ASEAN students in Korea	4,208 (2009)	72,535 (2021)	1,723.74
Aus connectivity (yearly)	34,401 flights (2010)	103,986 flights (2019)	302.28
K-culture export	USD 642 million (2010)	USD 241,700 million (2020)	376.48

Source: Lee (2022). revised by Author (2024).

Note: ROK, Republic of Korea; ODA, Official Development Assistance; ASEAN, Association of Southeast Asian Nations; AMS, Automated Manifest System.

To mark the 35th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations with ASEAN in 2024, the establishment of the ASEAN-Republic of Korea Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) was proposed and clearly welcomed by ASEAN leaders. CSP is now the highest level of partnership that ASEAN has with its dialogue partners and has already established such relationships with Australia (2021), China (2021), the United States (2022), India (2022), and Japan (2023), and the CP provide clear strategic foundations for Korea's ODA with Southeast Asian partner countries. The establishment of Korea's CSP relationship will serve as an opportunity to materialize the Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASD) announced in 2022. In a situation where major ASEAN dialogue partners have already established CSP relations, it is difficult to attach special significance to Korea by upgrading relations. However, as seen in the case of Australia and China, the establishment of a CSP relationship can be expected to strengthen practical cooperation, including ODA and development cooperation in a border sense.

At the 2023 Korea-ASEAN Summit, it was decided to support the construction of ultra-high-performance computers through the Korea-ASEAN Digital Innovation Flagship Project for economic cooperation. It was announced that it would donate

\$1 million to the Mekong River Commission in 2024. They expressed their intention to strengthen the Methane Action Partnership and cooperate in vaccine production and treatment development. Overall, he emphasized the importance of partnership with ASEAN and proposed support programs. In addition, the 'ASEAN Leaders' Joint Statement on ASEAN-Occupational Prospect (AOIP) Cooperation' was adopted and ways to contribute to the realization of the ASEAN Solidarity Initiative were discussed.

In consideration of the unique roles of ODA Korea's approach to grant ODA strategy and programs for ASEAN or Southeast Asian countries, in particular, there are three track strategic approaches that can be considered. First, adopting the 'minilateralistic' approach to Southeast Asian ODA. Promoting ODA based in the minilateralistic independence in a direction, that strengthens ASEAN centrality (Kim, 2024). By strengthening ASEAN-led multilateralism through small-scale cooperation - minilateralism - with ASEAN, Korea can expand its range of diplomatic maneuvers in the field of strategic competition between the United States and China, and can expand its range of diplomatic maneuvers with ASEAN in the broader diplomatic field of the Indo-Pacific Partnerships can be further strengthened (Kim, 2024). As it is clearly seen in the ASEAN-Republic of Korea CSP, the relations with the ASEAN will continue to be deepened. The challenges for ODA are how to navigate the development-specific agenda under the shifting political pressures, and ensure space of ODA while addressing the urgent development needs of the least developed countries and Middle-Income Countries (MICS) in Southeast Asia.

The strategically feasible starting point is for the ASEAN-ROK's development cooperation arena to assist Korea's strategic partners' development plans and Post 2030 plans such as Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Timor Leste. Their development needs and priorities can often not be highlighted in the ASEAN documents. The ASEAN's upcoming ASEAN Community Vision 2045, New Plan of Action (2026-2030), and the following Cooperation Programmes/projects are the key documents for Korea's core strategic partner countries' development needs to be included.

Secondly, focusing on the LDCs is critical for ODA strategy. Maintaining the country-specific, locally rooted programs and projects using various modalities should be continued. As the ROK's contribution to ASEAN-related cooperation funds would be increased to USD 48 million by 2027, the ROK can cooperate with Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Timor Leste to highlight their main development

challenges and the three main areas are as below. Highlighting disparities in SEA is the starting point. Notable slow progress is observed in broadband subscriptions, digital divide, and digital skills, pointing to challenges in achieving digital inclusivity. Next, country-based development Gaps need to be highlighted. Gaps in innovation, entrepreneurship, digital skills, and talents, especially if compared to dialogue partners. Third, social and environmental sustainability challenges need to be enlisted as top priorities for the Least-Developed Countries (LDCs). For instance, compounding the region's problems from climate change to food insecurity, natural disasters, and disruption of supply chains and vital infrastructure. Both focusing on disparities and development gaps for the Least Development Countries should be accompanied by capacity development - education, training, and circular migration for human talents - should underpin all of the areas of contribution. Further, increasing the necessity of tackling humanitarian and climate crises as well as working with education and human resources development in countries such as Myanmar could be considered in the next phase of the ASEAN-ROK cooperation strategy and programs. Upgrading and formulating new programs for the MICS is urgent.

## VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, renewing the mission of ASEAN development policy amidst global poly-crisis requires charting a multilateral course beyond 2030. As the world grapples with complex interconnected stressors and crises, the ASEAN's leadership and commitment to the SDGs will remain important in what happens up to and beyond 2030. One aspect likely to determine the outcome is whether the ASEAN's worldview and Agenda 2030 increasingly compete, lose out, or somehow merge into other worldviews or not. The article suggested three key approaches for the ASEAN-ROK strategic directions for the Post 2030 process.

ASEAN, with its 'geopolitical commission' faces numerous challenges in a complex global landscape. However, ASEAN's commitment to global sustainability stands to benefit greatly if it endeavors to foster consensus on a future sustainability agenda. To achieve this, ASEAN and its member states ought to explore various avenues for informal consultations to initiate a new global agenda debate more actively. ASEAN may be aware that Korea as ASEAN's key development partner is likely to be in line

with the emerging Post 2030 agenda discussions with major actors such as the US, UK, Japan, and more broadly UN and EU. Such consultations should involve key stakeholders from the Global South within ASEAN member states and their issues, encompassing less powerful actors but also superpowers, including China.

Navigating in this manner does not imply naivety on the part of the ASEAN amidst geopolitical complexities. Rather, it underscores the ASEAN's commitment to promoting investment in de-escalation efforts within critical global and regional discussions, and Korea as a comprehensive strategic partner could have a lot more 'strategic' roles to play in the Post 2030 agenda and ensure space for development cooperation and humanitarian assistance.

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