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ASEAN-Korea Commemorative Summit 2014: Towards an “Asian Community”?

By Sukjoon Yoon

Synopsis

ASEAN and South Korea recently held a summit to mark 25 years of partnership. President Park Geun-hye spoke confidently of ASEAN and South Korea working together to build a multilateral “Asian Community”.

Commentary

ASEAN and South Korea held their commemorative summit in Busan on 11-12 December 2014, seeking to strengthen their increasingly important partnership amid growing uncertainties in the region. The 21st century is predicted to be an Asian century, so can ASEAN and South Korea help to realise an “Asian Community”?

What steps can they take to leverage their middle-power status to promote economic, cultural and security integration in the region? Can they become the bridge between Northeast and Southeast Asia?

Why an “Asian Community”

Under the theme of “Building Trust and Bringing Happiness”, the Commemorative Summit celebrated the growing economic significance of the region. Asian nations recorded GDP growth exceeding five percent between 2007 and 2013, and the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) is being launched next year. South Korea also presented its vision for the future with President Park’s Northeast Asian Peace and Cooperation Initiative, which is based on the foreign policy philosophy of *trustpolitik*.

In line with this, there is growing enthusiasm for the proposed Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) which Seoul hopes can lead to an “East Asian Economic Community”. With the US’ pivot to Asia strategy and China’s assertive behaviour, ASEAN and South Korea have acquired increasing geostrategic importance. Both have been seeking to build networks with other middle powers – with India, Australia, and perhaps Japan. Can this be a step towards developing an “Asian Security Community” based on mutual economic interdependence?

South Korea and several ASEAN members are former colonies, and this experience of dealing with

great powers should prove useful in confronting the rise of China. There is also great potential for socio-cultural exchanges, for example South Korea is promoting its Saemaul Undong rural development programme, and the Korean Wave is popular throughout ASEAN. Similar middle classes are beginning to emerge throughout the Asia-Pacific, and frequent person-to-person interchanges through business and tourism are building a resource of soft power.

Cornerstones of an "Asian Community"

Two-way trade between ASEAN and South Korea went from US\$8.2 billion in 1989 to US\$135 billion in 2013. ASEAN has rich natural resources and an increasingly educated labour force while South Korea can provide technology and manufacturing investment.

Even more important than these economic interactions is the vision shared by ASEAN and South Korea for an Asian Community comparable with the European Union but with values based on the "Asian Way". ASEAN is an established centre for multilateral integration, responsible for initiating the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the East Asia Summit, the Asia-Europe Meeting (AEM), and the ASEAN+3 involving China, Japan and South Korea.

Seoul can also play an important role in binding the North and South sub-regions into the kind of future Asian Community implied by the "Vision Statement" of the Busan summit. As the two great powers – China and the US - struggle for hegemony, ASEAN and South Korea are seeking to set an example of prosperous and peaceful cooperation: South Korea has established a reputation as the reliable security partner, and ASEAN has a population of 640 million and a GDP of US\$3 trillion.

Although South Korea cannot offer the large-scale contributions or financial investments which China and Japan supply to the 10 members of ASEAN, it is still an appealing partner. ASEAN is currently heavily dependent upon the Chinese market, which is showing signs of an economic downturn, and South Korean trade and investment provides a useful diversification. Moreover, these emerging (ASEAN) and established (South Korean) middle powers enjoy dynamic and promising economic and trade opportunities with all the nations of the region.

Enhanced security cooperation

South Korea and ASEAN are targeting US\$200 billion in two-way trade by 2020, but a closer partnership can also tackle regional security issues. In the closing joint statement of the Commemorative Summit, the 11 leaders of South Korea and ASEAN agreed to strengthen their mutual security cooperation on various regional challenges, including maritime security and Korean affairs.

The ARF is the only multilateral security platform which North Korea is a member of, so ASEAN is a valuable intermediary between the Asia-Pacific region and the wider world. They can help to manage tensions not only for the Cold-War hangover on the Korean Peninsula, but also among the Northeast Asian countries. However, three members of the ARF – Myanmar, Vietnam and Laos – voted against the recent UN resolution condemning North Korean human rights violations, and this should remind South Korea of the importance of securing ASEAN's support on North Korean issues.

Moreover, the South China Sea issues between China and some ASEAN members are also significant for South Korea and Japan, since they threaten the freedom of the seas upon which Northeast Asian economies depend. In fact, the South China Sea is both economically and geostrategically essential for the whole of East Asia, yet it remains a very dangerous flashpoint in which a catastrophic physical confrontation could erupt at any time. Ultimately such disputes must be resolved through a law-based framework.

Bridging Northeast and Southeast Asia

ASEAN and South Korea should utilise their multi-faceted relationship to promote a vision of the future in which the Asian Community is united economically, strategically and culturally.

In recent years Southeast Asia has become the strategic space in which the regional great powers, the US and China, compete, with Japan and India also vying to expand their economic and political influence.

Meanwhile, less attention has been paid to the geostrategic importance of Northeast Asia. Arguably, the single most important outcome of the 2014 ASEAN-South Korea Commemorative Summit was the articulation of a firm intention to bridge the gaps between Northeast and Southeast Asia, and to initiate a new regional order of prosperous and peaceful cooperation.

Captain (ROK Navy Ret.) Sukjoon Yoon is a Senior Research Fellow at the Korea Institute for Maritime Strategy and a visiting Professor at the Department of Defense Systems Engineering, Sejong University, Seoul.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg