



# POINTS OF VIEW

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## **Making ASEAN-ROK Partnership More Strategic<sup>1</sup>**

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The relationship between ASEAN and the Republic of Korea (ROK) was upgraded to “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP)” in 2024. The two sides adopted the Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-ROK CSP 2026-2030, which covers a wide range of issues from fostering institutional development of ASEAN Community to functional cooperation to cope with challenges, including transnational crime, cyber threats, nuclear energy, digital economy, people-to-people engagements and media. In 2024, ASEAN was the most preferable tourist destination for South Koreans and the ROK’s third largest trading partner and foreign direct investment destination.

In my opinion, the partnership between ASEAN and the ROK has been comprehensive, but not yet strategic. It is important to set priorities for future cooperation to make the ASEAN-ROK

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<sup>1</sup> This article was developed from author's presentation and personal observations at the ASEAN-Korea Forum, organised by Geopolitics Insight in cooperation with Korea University ASEAN Centre (KUAC), Stratbase and University of Philippines Korea Research Center (UPKRC) at Admiral Hotel Manila – MGallery Collection on 5 December 2025.

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partnership more strategic. At the 26th ASEAN-ROK Summit on 27 October in Kuala Lumpur, President Lee Jae Myung proposed his re-branding of CSP as Contributor for Dreams and Hope focusing on the enhancement of ASEAN-ROK people-to-people connectivity, Springboard for Growth and Innovation and Partnership for Peace and Stability.

On socio-cultural and people-to-people relations, the ROK will provide technical support for ASEAN young generation by lifting obstacles for talent mobilisation between the two sides, setting up institutional framework and enhancing capacity-building programmes to make ASEAN-ROK relations “people-centred”. Until now, the ASEAN-Korea Cooperation Fund (AKCF) has supported several programmes, such as the ASEAN-Korea Music Festival (ROUND), the Film Community Programme (FLY) and the Global Korea Scholarship (GKS). Located in Busan, the first ASEAN Culture House outside the ASEAN region was opened in 2017, which was followed by the opening of Jeju ASEAN Hall in 2022 and Seoul ASEAN Hall at Press Center Building on the ASEAN Day 2025. President Lee pledged that his administration will increase two-way people flow to 15 million annually and provide more scholarship schemes for ASEAN and South Korean young generation. The ASEAN-Korea Platform for Great Minds (AKPGM) aiming at promoting academic collaboration to create future Southeast Asianists is a concrete example.

From my perspective, Seoul’s focus has been relevant to future development of ASEAN. However, there are rooms for improvement at the operational level. First, the ROK should create a database of ASEAN-ROK people exchange programmes as there are various organisations working on projects with label of “ASEAN-Korea/ASEAN-ROK”. The purpose of this database is not for approval or endorsement, but for data collection to guarantee that these programmes are genuine so that they will not be used for any online fraud activities. Second, the ROK government should create a more synergistic approach between the ASEAN-Korea Centre (AKC), the Korea

International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) and the Korea Foundation (KF) in planning and implementing people-to-people exchange programmes to avoid duplication and maximise benefits of resources. The ROK government should invest in creating a database of “Friends of ROK” who are active in promoting ASEAN-ROK relations that is accessible to all relevant organisations in the ROK and all ROK embassies in ASEAN. Third, a scholar at the ASEAN-Korea Forum in Manila interestingly pointed out that the focus of ASEAN-ROK people-to-people exchanges is mostly for youth and people working in creative industries. There is a need to find possible areas of cooperation and engagements among people in the private sector and the civil society under the ASEAN-ROK framework.

On economic dimension, the ROK seeks to work on joint development programme for fostering new growth engines and expanding trade volume by developing five projects to support ASEAN’s AI and digital transformation, the Digital Economy Agreement Leadership (DEAL) and Digital Economy Participation for ASEAN Women Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (IDEAS). Schemes of ongoing cooperation to strengthen trade and investment in the pipeline include the negotiations to upgrade the ASEAN-Korea Free Trade Area (AKFTA), the development of an interface among e-customs systems and support for the implementation of the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA).

In my view, an important strategic cooperation that is not mentioned explicitly is climate adaptation. The ROK is a dialogue partner who has been proactive in promoting cooperation on Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) since 2022. The AKC published a guidebook entitled ESG Practices in ASEAN & Korea: Pathways Towards Sustainability that recommends promotion of ASEAN-wide ESG standards and frameworks, ESG standards for small and medium enterprises, ESG in public procurement, capacity-building programmes and mobilisation of

stakeholders. In September 2025, the AKC organised a workshop to explore a synergy between ESG compliance and Artificial Intelligence (AI) – a key agenda under the ROK’s APEC Host. In addition, the ROK should maximise the benefits of ASEAN-Korea Standards Cooperation Network (AKSCN), Green Climate Fund (GCF), Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI) and National Institute of Green Technology (NIGT) to foster its support for green transition in the ASEAN region, particularly capacity-building programme on climate technology transfer.

In term of supply chain resilience, the current ROK’s strategy is dualisation – develop core technology in the ROK and build mass production base in ASEAN for global markets through digital development. Various Korean speakers pointed out that Korean investors require a diversification strategy to go beyond some specific markets in ASEAN. They also reflected that there is a gap between ASEAN governments’ policies on paper and deliverables taken place in the real world. A recommendation is to develop skilled workforce should ASEAN governments wish to champion green and digital transition.

On peace and security, the ROK wishes to build a more “resilient” ASEAN to cope with emerging security challenges, especially disaster management and cybersecurity. Some ongoing programmes include the development of ASEAN Standards and Certification for Experts in Disaster Management (ASCEND), Disaster Risk Reduction Capacity Building Project for ASEAN Member States (D-CAB), ASEAN Cyber Shield, the enhancement of the ASEAN Secretariat’s IT and network infrastructure, etc. The ROK plans to establish Maritime Security Academy (KAMSA) and conduct a training programme to cope with cryptocurrency heist. An issue discussed during the ASEAN-Korea Forum in Manila was a joint initiative to combat online scam with the ASEAN National Police (ASEANAPOL). This idea matches with recent Thailand’s initiative on the organisation of the International Conference on the Global Partnership Against Online Scams

on 17 December. As the country coordinator of ASEAN-ROK relations (2024-2027), I am confident that Thailand will find ways to synergise the Bangkok Joint Statement by the Global Partnership against Online Scams with the ROK's efforts.

Apart from these programmes, there was a discussion during the Forum in Manila that the ROK should increase its engagements in defense cooperation beyond arms sale. I suggested that Seoul should consider providing official security assistance to ASEAN countries and exploring possibility in cooperation on emerging issues, including AI governance, disinformation/misinformation, maritime security and energy-food-health security. On the Korean Peninsula issue, I argued in 2018 that the role of ASEAN was limited but constructive. Although the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)'s ministerial participation in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) has been absent since 2018, it is possible to test the idea of ASEAN+2 (Track 1, 1.5 or 2) mechanism by bringing together scholars and practitioners to discuss creative entry points to engage with the DPRK. Possible points of discussion cover climate adaptation, disaster management, humanitarian assistance and sustainable development.

2029 is an essential milestone for ASEAN and the ROK as they will celebrate their 40th anniversary. It is necessary for the two sides to set priorities that respond to emerging challenges and evolving opportunities to make the region more resilient, innovative and people-centred.

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