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ASEAN-ROK at 35: Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and the Way Forward

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The year 2024 marks the 35th anniversary of dialogue partner relationship between ASEAN and the Republic of Korea. On 10 October 2024, at the 25th ASEAN-ROK Summit in Vientiane, ASEAN and the Republic of Korea agreed to establish a “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP)”. I have two observations on the characteristics of CSP and the development of ASEAN-ROK relations.

First, the joint statement to establish the CSP clearly stated that both ASEAN and the ROK wish to achieve a partnership that is “meaningful, substantive and mutually beneficial”. This aspiration is relevant and reflects the past and future of the relationship. The institutionalisation of the relationship between ASEAN and the ROK has been progressive. Various mechanisms were initiated apart from the annual meeting at the ASEAN-ROK Summit, including the ASEAN

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Economic Ministers-ROK Consultation and the ASEAN-ROK Health Ministers' Meeting. ASEAN Culture House in Busan, opened in 2017, is the first ASEAN Culture House outside the ASEAN region.

In 2022, ASEAN is the ROK's second largest trading partner, with total trade value of USD 207.46 billion. ASEAN is also the second largest investment destination (USD 10.81 billion) and largest construction market for South Korea. On people-to-people exchanges, ASEAN is the most popular travel destinations for Koreans. Similarly, the Republic of Korea is one of the most preferred countries for ASEAN students to pursue their master and doctoral degrees.

Second, the ROK's approach in enhancing the dialogue partnership is practical. An example is the country's commitment to provide financial and technical support to ASEAN-led sub-regional mechanisms. Seoul plans to increase its contribution to ASEAN-related cooperation funds to USD 48 million annually by 2027 to support the implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). The country also expressed interest in partnering with the Ayeyawady-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS) and provided USD 1 million financial support to the ACMECS Development Fund.

The ASEAN-Korea Cooperation Fund (AKCF) has supported various policy research projects tackling ongoing and emerging challenges. These projects are proposed by Korean universities to connect with institutional partners in ASEAN. The first example is the Clean Air for Sustainable ASEAN (CASA) project, led by Seoul National University for the period 2022-2026. The project aims to "mitigate air pollution and its negative impact on health through political, scientific and technical measures" by identifying sources of air pollution and developing tools to assess the real-time air pollution.

Another project is the ASEAN Cyber Shield (ACS) Project run by the Korea Internet Security Agency (KISA). This project focuses on three main areas: education, competition and scholastic exchange with the main objective to nurture the best cybersecurity experts and contributes to the development of the ASEAN Member States' cyber security response capabilities and related industries”.

On socio-cultural dimension, the ASEAN Foundation implemented the KONNECT ASEAN programme in 6 countries and engaged with 309 artists and professionals from ASEAN and the ROK. Over the four years of project implementation in 2020-2024, the programme delivered 24 outputs, 2 publications and 6 on-site and online exhibitions.

Thailand, as country coordinator of the ASEAN-ROK relations, has been active in enhancing the partnership and raising awareness among the public. The Korea Research Initiatives at the University of New South Wales (KRI@UNSW) in collaboration with the Office of the Public Sector Development Commission (OPDC) and the International Studies Center (ISC), jointly organised the Korea-ASEAN Community on Policy Exchange (KACPE) International Public Policy Symposium 2024, sponsored by the Korea Foundation and the ASEAN Foundation, on 29-30 August 2024 at Radisson Blu Plaza Hotel. The Symposium had three main themes, namely “Key Issues for the CSP between ASEAN and the Republic of Korea”, “Collaboration of Higher Educational Exchange between ASEAN and the Republic of Korea”, and “Sharing Knowledge in the Area of Digital Transformation for National Development”. Approximately 100 participants, including international speakers, senior and mid-level officials from government agencies in Thailand and scholars from think tanks and educational institutions attended the event.

In November, the ASEAN-ROK Day was organised for the first time in Bangkok to commemorate the 35th anniversary of the dialogue partner relationship. The theme was “Towards

Enhanced ASEAN-ROK Partnership in Creative Economy”. At the event, scholars and practitioners in the creative economy circle shared their views on the success of ROK’s policy and lessons learned for ASEAN. From my perspective, continuity in policy implementation is the key. In South Korea, the private sector leads in opening and entering new markets. The government provides financial and technical support in building the ecosystem such as human resources development and training. This model lays the groundwork for continuity as the private sector does not change in the same way as the government. Compared to other dialogue partners, South Korea has a strength in targeting mass audience.

At the 25th ASEAN-ROK Summit, Thailand’s Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra proposed the “ABC Vision” to develop CSP between ASEAN and the ROK. The vision derives from Advanced Technology-Balanced development-Creative economy. The vision matches with the ROK’s priorities and strength. As an advanced country in economic and digital development, South Korea has various valuable lessons to share with ASEAN.

With regard to CSP, there are several opportunities that both sides may explore. An area of cooperation could be the Korean Peninsula issue. At the international conference organised at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in 2018, I proposed the idea of having ASEAN+2 Korea mechanism that engages scholars and policymakers to discuss the developments and prospects for the future of the Peninsula.

ASEAN matters to the ROK as the ROK matters to ASEAN. Despite ongoing developments on the Korean Peninsula, ASEAN is still and will be a key strategic partner for the ROK. With mutual trust, mutual respect and mutual benefit, the ASEAN-ROK CSP will be meaningful and substantive as the leaders desire.

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