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What ASEAN Means for South Korea’s New Government



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Earlier this year, the South Korean public voted in their new leader, President Yoon Suk-yeol of the largely right-leaning People Power Party (PPP). The election was conducted in the backdrop of general apathy towards both candidates, including the President’s opponent, Lee Jae-myung. The election only exacerbated the socio-economic divisions within the population, making it a challenge for the newly-elected President to bring into effect his promised changes to the corruption within the system to preserve the sanctity of democracy.

While South Korean politics configures its internal dynamics, the leader’s focus on ASEAN and its relevance in his current administration is one to explore. While he has drawn considerable criticism for his statements on his intended policies relating to China and North Korea, the new President has been on a mission to restore and reaffirm ties with America, during President Biden’s visit in May. This newly-established relationship could be indicative of the President’s support to the United States of America in its budding trade war with China. However, is it safe to assume that under Suk-yeol’s regime, his predecessor’s foreign policies will undergo a total renovation?

Over the course of his term, President Moon Jae-in adopted the New Southern Policy (NSP) in 2017, which was designed to bridge the gap between Northeast and Southeast Asian countries. The primary aim of the new approach was to promote and instill a sense of Asian pride and togetherness amongst the various nations, and a crucial element of this policy was to redirect the focus on the ASEAN-bloc. The NSP was based on the three cornerstones of — people, prosperity and peace, signaling to the 10-member bloc its commitment to prioritizing Southeast Asia. This policy also underwent a significant upgradation in the light of the pandemic, which persuaded South Korea to include ‘Combating Covid-19’ as one of its seven initiatives under the NSP-Plus programme.

Although the conservative Suk-yeol may want to completely demarcate his policies from the former President, it seems unlikely that he will detract from or fundamentally alter the tenets of the New Southern Policy. At a point in his highly publicized campaign, he announced his desire to continuously engage with the ASEAN, and in fact, professed his intentions to institute an allyship with the grouping. While he commented that he was unsure of the NSP’s effectiveness in redressing the lacuna between South Korea’s vision for its relationship with the ASEAN and the ground reality, he did wish to implement a similar model within his own foreign policy framework.

The President also added that though he regarded his predecessor’s NSP legacy with slight suspicion, he aims to continue dialogue with the ASEAN especially in the backdrop of the building tensions between the US and China. However, Suk-yeol has retained other aspects of the previous administration as well, such as disbursing more funds to the Official Development Assistance (ODA), which aligns itself with Moon Jae-in’s promise to provide close to \$150 million of financial assistance to members of the bloc, in the next few years.

While South Korea has been hesitant to commit to President Biden’s plans to create a “free and fair” Indo-Pacific, it would be interesting to note if this outlook changes under the new administration. The country has indirectly displayed its enthusiasm to include itself in the QUAD, and has also participated in several related military and dialogue engagements. RoK’s inclusion into the four-member bloc may not bode well for the ASEAN, as there might be a possibility that the country may redirect its priorities. Alternatively, RoK’s member-status may also help facilitate cooperation between the two blocs and may also promote the ASEAN Outlook within the Indo-Pacific.

South Korea’s middle-power diplomacy, may only grow under President Suk-yeol’s ambitious foreign policy projects. The Global Korea policy programme initiated by the former Conservative President Myung-bak, firmly established the RoK’s arrival as a middle-power. But the vital question is whether the ASEAN will be pivotal in shaping a new South Korean future under President Suk-yeol?

The answer lies in the trade levels of South Korea and the ASEAN, with the former having struck multiple treaties and agreements with ASEAN, most significantly the Asean-Korea Free Trade Agreement (AKFTA). Additionally, Indonesia, Cambodia, India are RoK’s crucial trade partners; the nation is also currently in talks with Malaysia and the Philippines to negotiate a Free Trade Agreement. Recently, in the 26th ASEAN-RoK meet at Seoul, earlier this month, the nation reassured the grouping of its status as a strategic partner in the new administration. RoK praised the ASEAN’s commitment to peace, stability and equity and also recognised its status as the bloc’s fourth-largest trading partner with a revenue generation of close to \$180 billion USD, in the previous fiscal year.

The ASEAN representative, Ambassador Vu Ho, of Vietnam appreciated the nation’s support of close to \$140 million USD to the joint Cooperation Fund, along with the RoK’s cooperation with the bloc in the stressful times of the pandemic. Additionally, the ambassador was grateful for South Korea’s vocal support of the ASEAN viewpoint relating to the East Sea. The Deputy Foreign Minister, Yeo Seung-bae reaffirmed the need for the implementation of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties and Code of Conduct in the region and also called for the effective instrumentation of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

Only time will tell whether the ASEAN will find itself as a vital element in the legacy President Suk-yeol will leave behind. As matters take shape within his first year as leader, it is evident that he does not intend to fully shift from his predecessors’ policies of preserving ties with the ASEAN. Perhaps it is this commitment to the bloc, along with the growing cooperation with the QUAD and the United States, in particular, that will prove to be transformative for the Republic of Korea as a formidable middle power.

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