

ASEAN-ROK Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

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Introduction

Strategic cooperation in the Indo-Pacific has taken centre stage in today's global geopolitical and economic landscape, with key players across the region now increasingly strengthening maritime cooperation with each other to uphold regional peace and economic stability. After all, the Indo-Pacific region hosts critical sea lines of communication (SLOCs) instrumental to international trade, with vital yet precarious maritime corridors, such as the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea (SCS). In response to this importance, two key players of the region, the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), have both reaffirmed commitments to increase maritime cooperation through the ASEAN-ROK Plan of Action (POA) 2021–2025 and the Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI).

Both the POA and KASI outlined an ambitious and broad scope of maritime cooperation to be achieved. Within the grand scheme of things, Track Two discussion plays a pivotal role as one of the many instruments to foster this cooperation, hence serving as an informal yet influential platform to build trust, exchange knowledge, and explore practical solutions on issues ranging from maritime security to sustainable ocean governance between ASEAN and ROK maritime experts.

KASI and ASEAN-ROK Maritime Cooperation

Recognising the importance of ASEAN as a key partner in building peace and shared prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region, KASI emerged as an ASEAN-specific policy framework within the larger ROK's Indo-Pacific Strategy. KASI aims to foster more strategic partnerships between the ROK and ASEAN member countries in security, inter alia, maritime security, which includes connectivity, law enforcement, and climate change response in the maritime domain. Foundationally, KASI is the continuation of the New Southern Policy (NSP), previously espoused by the Moon Jae-In administration. However, KASI is regarded as the more comprehensive of the two policies, as it expands beyond the limited scope of the NSP, which primarily focused on economic cooperation, constraining the ROK from engaging more actively in the regional security domain of the Indo-Pacific.

Maritime cooperation, a core priority under KASI, has paved the way for various potential collaborations between the ROK and ASEAN member states across a diverse range

of maritime issues in the region. To begin with, the ROK are actively collaborating with ASEAN member states to enhance the maritime connectivity of the region, especially in underexplored areas of cooperation, such as cybersecurity and maritime technology. Aside from that, both ASEAN and the ROK are now moving towards assuming a more proactive role in maritime law enforcement cooperation given the ever-increasing maritime security threats, such as maritime crimes and illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, as well as issues pertaining to the safety of navigation. In addition, the ROK has demonstrated strong commitment to regional maritime information-sharing initiatives, particularly leveraging its robust information technology sector. As such, it is well-placed to work with ASEAN member states to establish a comprehensive maritime database to enhance information sharing and strengthen maritime governance in the region.

Despite the many opportunities for maritime cooperation between ASEAN and the ROK under KASI, concerns remain regarding how such cooperation aligns with ASEAN's principles. Since KASI is embedded within the ROK's broader Indo-Pacific Strategy, it is crucial that engagements with ASEAN uphold the concept of ASEAN Centrality and respect its neutral posture amidst the ongoing rivalry between the United States (US) and China. These sensitivities were particularly concerning from ASEAN's perspective, especially considering that in 2023, the then-administration of the ROK under Yoon Suk Yeol had drawn closer relations with the US and Japan while simultaneously signalling a more cautious approach towards China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

Nonetheless, it is also important to note that the ROK's Indo-Pacific Strategy and KASI have both emphasised the importance of inclusivity in regional cooperation, notably refraining from distinguishing China as a threat in these frameworks, unlike Japan and the US. Regardless, a more comprehensive ASEAN-ROK maritime cooperation, such as the one endorsed under KASI, remains necessary for the shared peace and prosperity of the region.

Rules-Based Order at Sea: Elevating Maritime Law Enforcement Cooperation

Both ASEAN and the ROK acknowledge the importance of upholding a rules-based order at sea in managing regional maritime disputes, such as in the SCS and the Yellow Sea. To ensure stability in these strategically important waters, it is crucial for all parties to adhere to international legal frameworks like the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) as well as to strengthen maritime law enforcement cooperation in addressing the evolving maritime security challenges of the region.

It is important to understand that the political realities in the SCS and the Yellow Sea are non-parallel. As such, operationalising maritime law enforcement cooperation between ASEAN member states and the ROK must consider the dominant presence of China, as well as the asymmetric policies and capabilities of the littoral states in the SCS. Nevertheless, maritime law enforcement cooperation, such as capacity building and technology sharing between ASEAN and the ROK, should still be pursued as practical steps towards enhancing mutual trust, improving interoperability, and the end goal of reinforcing a rules-based order in the region.

To conclude, enhancing ASEAN-ROK maritime cooperation is not only a statement of policy commitments like KASI and the POA but also based on the sustained momentum of Track Two platforms that allow for informal yet substantive engagement among leading maritime academics and officials alike. With Malaysia assuming the ASEAN Chairmanship in 2025, the country is well-positioned to continue advancing dialogue and fostering deeper cooperation between ASEAN and the ROK. As dialogue between ASEAN and the ROK continues to deepen, its role in shaping a more prosperous and peaceful Indo-Pacific will be ever more vital, thus offering hope that this effort can be sustained and strengthened moving forward.