

South Korea's Engagement with ASEAN: A Study of Foreign Policy Initiatives

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Abstract: The rise of interest in the Indo-Pacific region has coincided with the shifts in the foreign policy strategies of several major powers. The Indo-Pacific strategies of countries including the United States, Japan, Australia, and China are competing for influence in Southeast Asia. In response to which, ASEAN has announced its ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). This study aimed to analyze the cooperative relationship of South Korea with ASEAN that has developed under the South Korean government's foreign policy initiatives. To reveal the differences in the South Korean government's foreign policy toward Southeast Asian, this study analyzed relevant texts with Atlas.ti software, which is useful for analyzing presidential speeches and newspaper articles. Previous studies have analyzed the South Korean government's relations with Southeast Asia focusing on economic and North Korean security issues. This study identified the main factors affecting cooperation between ASEAN and South Korea's previous administrations of Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun, Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye. Based on this critical comparative analysis, three points were advanced. First, South Korea's policy toward ASEAN is not sustainable as its planning has largely lacked accumulated data that could serve as a firm foundations for closer international relations. Second, South Korea uses ASEAN as leverage on North Korean issues. Third, South Korea's interests in ASEAN are still markedly less important than those between South Korea and the United States, China, and Japan. Although Korea's ASEAN policy is weak, development cooperation is seeking a good trust among the ASEAN Member States (AMS). This study reaffirms the importance of economic interests and the North Korean issue for each successive government. It also reveals differences in the focus of cooperation partners depending on the policies emphasized by each government in proposing policy linkages.

Keywords: ASEAN, Content Analysis, Foreign Policy Initiative, KASI, New Southern Policy

1. Introduction

With regard to the Republic of Korea's (henceforth 'Korea') New Southern Policy, Tommy Koh and other experts on Southeast Asian have noted that despite the high interest of in Southeast Asia, relations between Southeast Asian countries and Korea have been relatively slow to develop[1-3]. Korea's foreign policy is focused on the United States, China, Japan, Russia, and on economic cooperation with Southeast Asian countries. They pointed out are not really new. However, the reasons they mentioned are significant considerations in relation to the "New Southern policy" established by the Moon government as one of the national tasks in the diplomatic sector.

The difference then between the current government's foreign policy toward Southeast Asia, and the

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factor that distinguishes it from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (henceforth ASEAN) policies of previous administrations such as that of 'Korea ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI)' in Yoon's administration is of important matter[4]. KASI, in line with Korea's Strategy for a 'Free, Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region', initially announced on 11 November 2022, was suggested as a regional policy specifically tailored to Asean Member States (AMS)[5]. KASI is defined in terms of "eight core lines of effort" in line with the three visions of ROK's Indo-Pacific Strategy, namely, freedom, peace and prosperity. From this background, this study pursued a comparative analysis of the key features of Korea's foreign policy toward Southeast Asia under successive governments. The central research question here is: What are the key differences between the foreign policies of successive South Korean governments in Southeast Asia?

Korea established a dialogue relationship with the ASEAN in 1989. At that time, the ASEAN consisted of Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam, and later expanded with the addition of Cambodia in 1999. In this paper the analysis will focus on Korea's cooperative relationship with ASEAN since 1999. The following is a breakdown of the ASEAN policies of the Korean government from 1999 to 2016. Compared to other governments in Southeast Asia, the administration of Kim Dae-jung (February 25, 1998-February 24, 2003) marked a period of heightened interest in Southeast Asia. In particular, the Commission promoted regional cooperation and multilateral cooperation, including the proposal of an East Asia Vision Group (EAVG), which was a one of the first blueprint and statement of the vision aimed at constructing an East Asia region's free trade, investment area[6][7].

While the administrations of Roh Moo-hyun (February 25, 2003-February 24, 2008), Lee Myung-bak (February 25, 2008-February 24, 2013), and Park Geun-hye (February 25, 2013-March, 2017) did formulate new visions of relations to neighbouring countries in Asia, they never truly made Southeast Asia a priority. Rather, their foreign policy was one of regional divisions within a more comprehensive regional diplomatic strategy. Such earlier initiatives included aspects of Roh Moo-hyun's projects of East Asian diplomacy, Lee Myung-bak's efforts to establish a framework of bilateral relationships aimed at economic benefits, and the Eurasian Initiative for Northeast Asian Policy of the Park Geun-hye government, as a foreign policy tools derive in part from an ambitious effort to build a new foundation for Korea's regional diplomacy[8]. The Lee Myung-bak government established the Korea-ASEAN Center, as well as a high-profile Korea-ASEAN 'Sages Group'. Even in the last of these examples, however, it is hard to say for sure how much exchange and cooperation actually increased as a result of such initiatives, and whether Korea-ASEAN cooperation made any substantive progress during that period. The nature of the "New Southern Policy" and the source of the new policy, as well as the differences between New Southern Policy and KASI were put into question. Existing studies analyzing Korea's relationship with Southeast Asia have focused on the value of potential market in Southeast Asia, and the ways in which South Korea views relations with ASEAN nations in the context of its relationship with North Korea. This study aimed to extend this body of previous studies and to compare the foreign policies of successive Korea's governments toward Southeast Asia. Furthermore, this study revealed the core values of four successive Korean presidents based on content analysis of their respective Presidential Speech Archives, and examined the foreign policy direction of each government from a macro perspective[9]. The remainder of this paper is as follows. Chapter 2 presents the case analyses of the foreign policy initiatives of the successive Korean administrations from 1998 to 2016. On the other hand, Chapter 3 presents the summary of this study's findings.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Research Design

Social Network Analysis (SNA) is a broad strategy for investigating social structures and phenomenon. Usually included within the social science disciplines, individual actor's choices and behavior are typically explained based upon rational theories. Therefore, there have been limitations in explaining individual's choices in the context of the relationship between social environmental circumstance and factors. Such individualistic approaches, however, ignore the social context of the actors involved. In contrast, SNA emphasizes the importance of the relationships between actors. It should be pointed out that individual characteristics as well as relational links are necessary in order to fully understand social phenomena and relationships[10]. In what follows, the perspectives of SNA to bear on analyzing the policies and public discourses of Korean engagement with ASEAN are brought up. Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), Atlas.ti were used for this paper. Atlas.ti software is particularly useful in mapping node to node relationships. Data can be linked to codes, and codes can be linked to each other or to categorize families/ groups.

2.2 Data Analysis and Results

2.2.1 Data Gathering Procedures

[Table 1] lists the various categorisations of relationships between Korea and Southeast Asian countries, especially focusing on ASEAN, from 1989 to 2017. At first, Korea officially launched a dialogue partnership with the member states of ASEAN in 1989 after that ASEAN Plus Three (APT) was formed in 1997. After Cambodia's entry into ASEAN, Korea and ASEAN's relationship has gotten closer.

[Table 1] Korean State Relations with Southeast Asian Countries (from 1989 to 2017)

Year	Contents
1989	Sectoral Dialogue Partner
1991	Full Dialogue Partner
1997	First ASEAN Plus Three Summit (at the 2nd ASEAN Informal Summit)
2004	Joint Declaration on Comprehensive Cooperation Partnership (at the 8th ASEAN-ROK Summit)
2005	ASEAN-ROK Plan of Action (at the 9th ASEAN-ROK Summit)
2007	Signing of the MOU on the establishment of the ASEAN-Korea Centre (11th ASEAN-ROK Summit)
2007	Entry into force of the ASEAN-Korea FTA on Trade in Goods
2009	Inauguration of the ASEAN-Korea Centre in Seoul and the ASEAN-ROK Commemorative Summit
2009	Entry into force of the ASEAN-Korea FTA on Services and on Investment
2010	Adoption of the Joint Declaration on ASEAN-ROK Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity and its Action Plan, which covers the period of 2011-2015 (13th ASEAN-ROK Summit)
2011	The 1st Mekong-ROK Foreign Ministers' Meeting and Adoption of the Han-River Declaration
2012	Establishment of the ROK Mission to ASEAN in Jakarta
2015	Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-U.S. Strategic Partnership
2017	Inauguration of the ASEAN Culture House in Busan

Source: MOFA website

To compare and analyze the policies of successive Korean administrations toward ASEAN member states, data were collected divided the SNA analysis of newspaper reports was into two stages. Survey data were collected from the websites; Dong-A Ilbo, Hankyoreh, and Kyunghyang Shinmun from 1998 to 2016. The search keywords used were Kim Dae-Jung with ASEAN, Roh Moo-Hyun with ASEAN, Lee Myung-Bak with ASEAN, and Park Geu-Hye with ASEAN. Table 2 shows the numbers of data, where the same event between journals were excluded for analyses.

[Table 2] Collecting Data

President	DongA Ilbo	Hankyoreh	Kyunghayng Shinmun	Total (n)
Kim, Dae-Jung	35	0	0	35
Roh, Moo-Hyun	49	127	78	254
Lee, Myung-Bak	143	105	109	357
Park, Geun-Hye	134	118	180	432

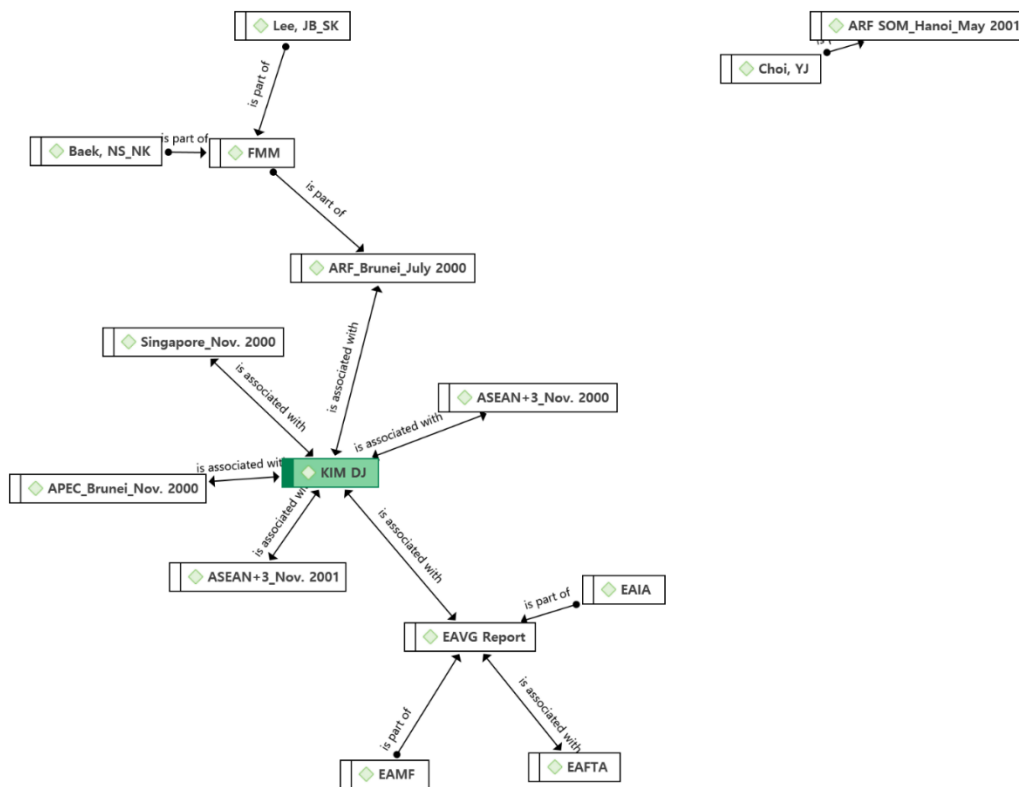
First, the frequency analysis identified the major countries engaged with by each administration. The frequency analysis focused on how often the president visited during his tenure, the number of visits by the administration's foreign minister, and the number of visits to the ASEAN-related events and meetings. Then, the analysis of which topics are connected to when referring to the ASEAN for each administration was done. At this stage, the analysis method used the content analysis – but framed in relation to networked relationships. Table 3 summarizes the Government's foreign ministers and their incumbencies.

[Table 3] Korean President and Foreign Minister (from Kim to Park)

President	Foreign Minister's Name		Foreign minister's incumbency
Kim, Dae-Jung	Park, JS	27 th	1998.03.03-1998.08.04
	Hong, SY	28 th	1998.08.04-2000.01.14
	Lee, JB	29 th	2000.01.14-2001.03.26
	Han, SS	30 th	2001.03.26-2002.02.04
	Choi, SH	31 st	2002.02.04-2003.02.27
Roh, Moo-Hyun	Yoon, YG	32 nd	2003.02.07-2004.01.17
	Ban, KM	33 rd	2004.01.17-2006.11.10
	Song, MS	34 th	2006.11.10-2008.02.29
Lee, Myung-Bak	Yoo, MH	35 th	2008.02.29-2010.09.04
	Kim, SH	36 th	2010.10.08-2013.03.11
Park, Geun-Hye	Yun, BS	37 th	2013.03.13-2017.06.18

2.2.2 Results and Discussion

Figures 1 to 4 illustrate the presidents' attendance at ASEAN meetings and their visits to Southeast Asian countries – as mapped by Atlas.ti software. {note: the in these figures indicate: (a) 'visit to'/ 'participation in': the specific country or summit meeting regarding ASEAN, (b) 'part of': the highlights from the key meeting, (c) 'associate with': related to that meeting or acted on an initiative}. The frequency of ASEAN meetings includes: ASEAN Summits, ASEAN Plus Three (APT) events, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meetings. Looking across these four figures it appears that there has been no consistent approach to Southeast Asian countries by the Korean government over this period. Of course, each government has its own policies to emphasize; president Kim Dae-Jung proposed the EAVG at the December 1998 APT Summit in Hanoi. The first EAVG was subsequently held in 1999, and through four subsequent meetings over a period of two years, a final report was prepared that presented a comprehensive vision for East Asian cooperation at the APT Summit in 2001[11]. Following on from the EAVG's recommendations and Kim's proposal, the first East Asia Summit (EAS) meeting was held in 2005[12]. This was the first time the Korean Government took the initiative to a regional cooperation vision for East Asia.



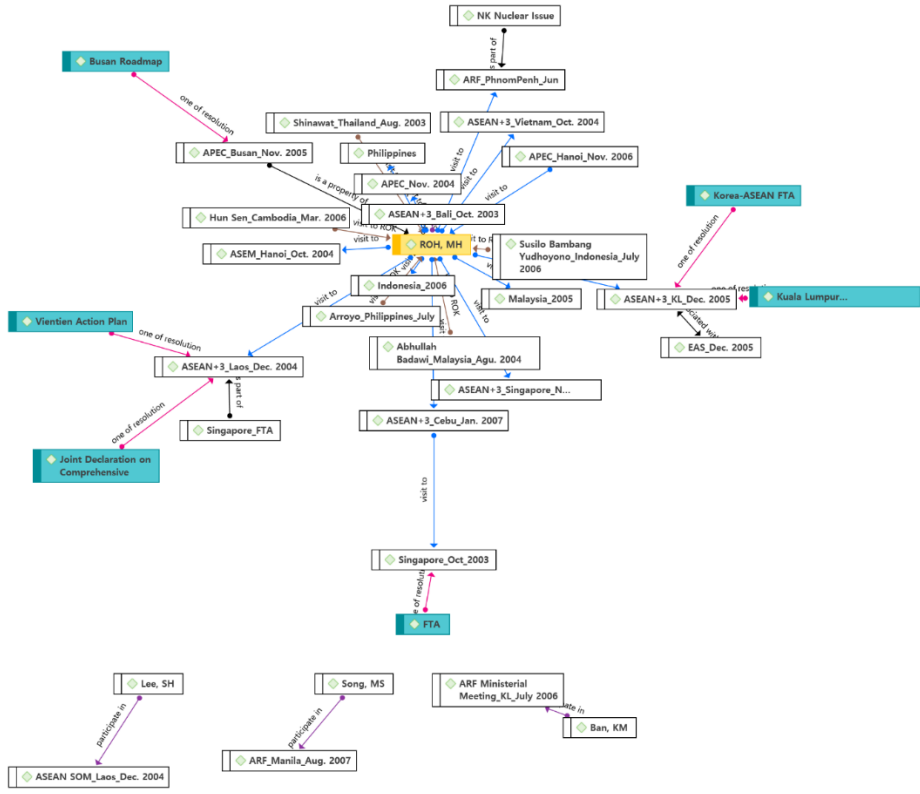
[Fig. 1] President Kim’s visits to Southeast Asia and attendance at ASEAN Meetings

Kim Dea-jung’s government proposed the EAVG, but that initiative never really took off. However, it was significant that Korea proposed an initiative that encompasses Northeast and Southeast Asia in its East Asian foreign policy. Compared to the Kim Dae-jung’s, the Roh Moo-hyun government was relatively more active in Southeast Asia-centered diplomacy. For example, there were many exchanges with major Southeast Asian countries, including AMS such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. Overall Korea’s relations with Southeast Asia have been focused on economics with the Busan Roadmap being proposed at the APEC meeting in Busan in 2005.

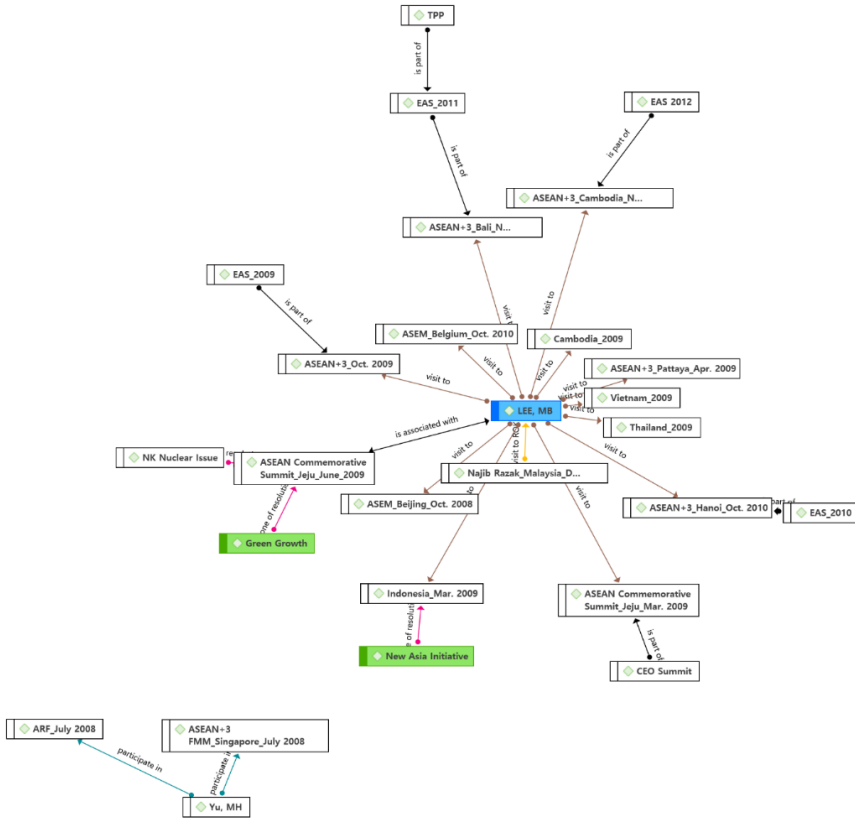
A significant event presented by [Fig. 3] is President Lee’s mention of Official Development Assistance (ODA) at the ASEAN meeting in Indonesia in 2009. Lee also announced there the establishment of a New Asia Initiative (NAI), under which Korea will make an effort to conclude free trade agreements with other countries in Asia[13].

What was the NAI from President Lee? and how was that different from Moon’s New Southern Policy? Lee expanded Korea’s diplomatic relationship broader beyond Asia region in 2009, enlarging the scope of cooperation from an economic focused to one that included security issues, cultural exchanges, and energy and climate change with environmental development[14]. As announced during a presidential visit of Southeast Asia in March 2009, the NAI aimed to “enhance substantial cooperation with all the countries of Asia, and especially focus on the ASEAN”[15]. The NAI mentioned three points; an ODA budget of around 862 million (USD) by 2015, and the launch of the “Low Carbon Green Growth” strategy with half of its 200 million (USD) budget pledged to the “East Asia Climate Partnership” with ASEAN. At the time, the core of the NAI was driven by a priority of consolidating Korea’s position as a middle power capable of playing a ‘bridging’ role between powerful and weak states in the region[16]. Regarding the previous literature of ODA and foreign policy, political parties and domestic political institutions play a critical part in shaping international development cooperation and ODA policy. According to Thrien and Noël’s argument, domestic political forces and foreign aid

emphasize that “parties make a difference”[17]. From these points, Lee’s NAI was clearer than Moon’s NSP.

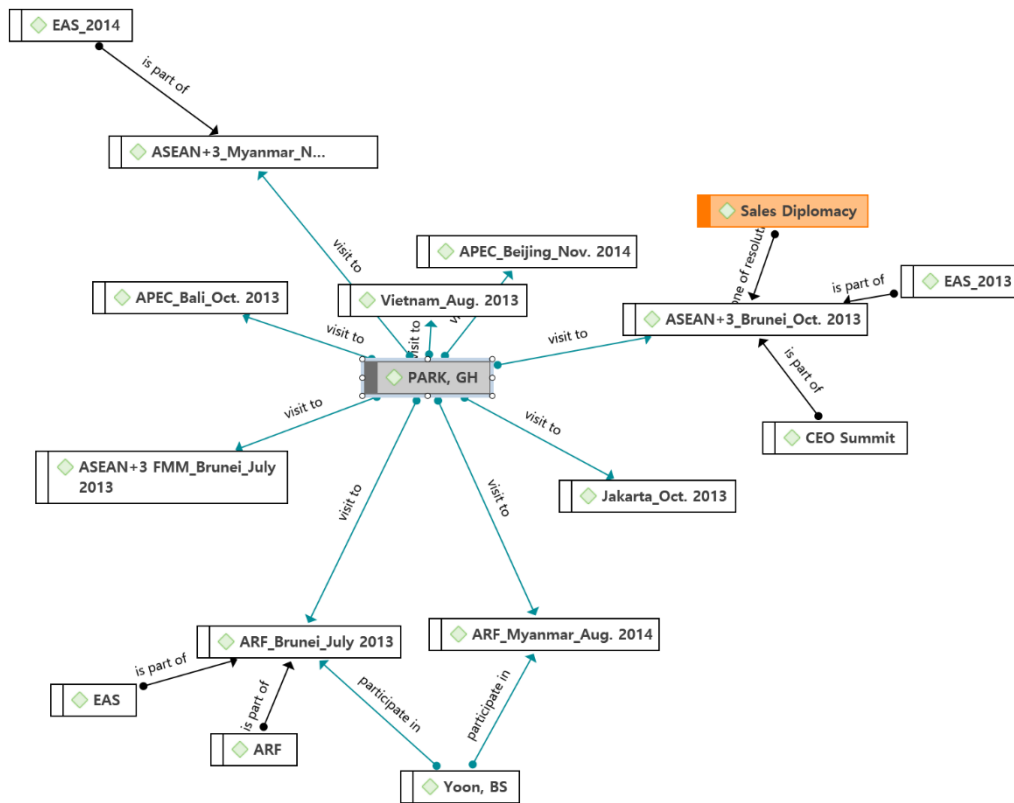


[Fig. 2] President Roh’s visits to Southeast Asia and attendance at ASEAN Meetings



[Fig. 3] President Lee’s visits to Southeast Asia and attendance at ASEAN Meetings

[Fig. 4] shows the comparisons of the ASEAN visits and meetings of president Park's. Note that President Park, rarely attended ASEAN meetings, marking a significant difference between her administration and that of her predecessor.



[Fig. 4] President Park's visits to Southeast Asia and attendance at ASEAN Meetings

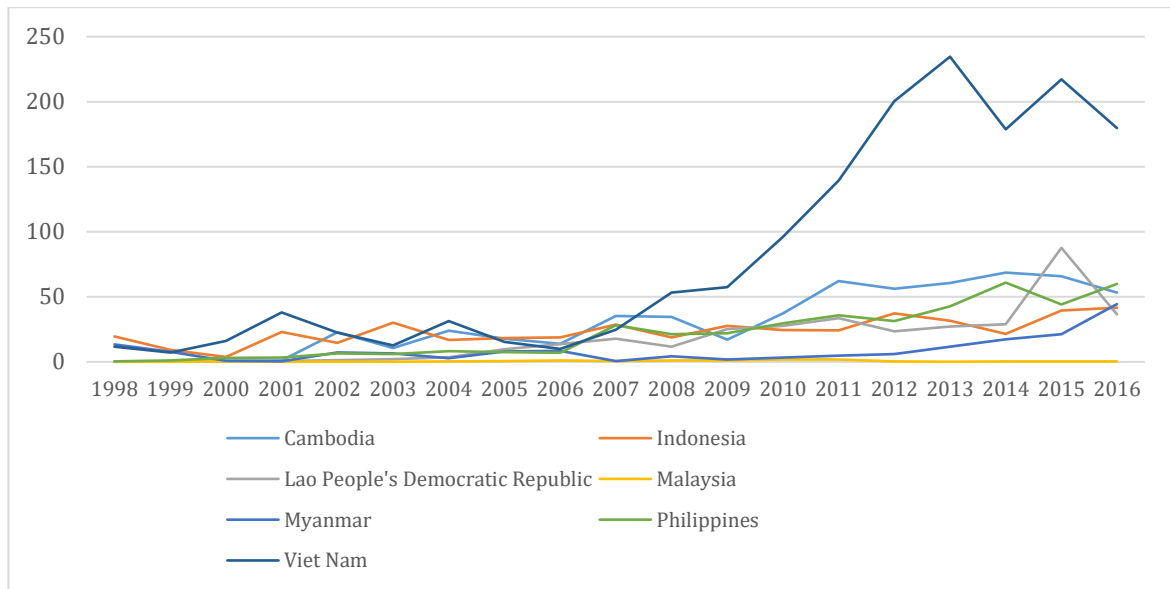
To further support this paper's argument, another kind of document was collected and analysed: that of presidential speeches mentioning ASEAN and regarding ASEAN events. For this, examples for every administration discussed here were accessed from Kim and Park's data. Thus, Table 4 includes materials for the Kim, Roh, Lee, and Park's administrations, including 23 for Kim, nine for Roh, nine for Lee, and nine for Park. From these results, it is clear that Park's policy was more economy-centric. This is evident, for instance, in its ODA focus on Vietnam, Indonesia, and Myanmar and in the frequent references to creative economy, economic growth, and economic cooperation in presidential speeches.

[Table 4] President's Speech Content Analysis

	Kim		Roh		Lee		Park	
	word	count	word	count	word	count	word	count
1	North Korea	41	peace	17	Green growth	41	Vietnam	64
2	Information Technology	38	Investment	9	Climate change	23	Creative economy	48
3	Peace	35	North Korea Nuclear Issue	8	Economic Crisis	12	Indonesia	43
4	Economic Cooperation	25	Economic cooperation	8	Economic investment	9	North Korea & Nuclear issue	30
5	Prosperity	21	prosperity	6	North Korea Nuclear Issue	7	Economic cooperation	27
6	Democracy	21	trade	5	Environmental issue	6	Economic growth	16
7	China	11	infrastructure	4	Education	3	Peace	16
8	Japan	9	Economic growth	3	Green energy	3	Gender	10

9	USA	7	democracy	3	Partnership	3	Prosperity	10
10	East Asia Vision Group	7	energy	3	prosperity	2	Value chain	9

[Fig. 5] shows that the ODA flows from Kim to Park’s administration in seven countries: Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Vietnam. Here, the flows of the ODA net from 1998 to 2016 were explained. After 2008, that is following the administrations of Lee and Park, the amount of ODA had been increased and Korea entered into OECD DAC membership in 2011.



[Fig. 5] Korea’s ODA flows to seven Southeast Asian countries (1998-2016) (USD: million)
 Source: OECD QWIDS (search: July 3, 2023)

This study has presented a number of significant similarities and differences in Korea’s foreign policy toward Southeast Asia over successive presidential administrations. By comparing the differences between the two liberal and conservative political parties, this study highlighted the persistent relevance of concerns over relations with North Korea to various government’s approaches toward engagement with ASEAN member states[18]. At the same time, this study found that the Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye governments have emphasized economic cooperation more than their predecessors, and have increasingly applied ODA policies.

3. Conclusions

Successive Korean governments have presented various policies that were proclaimed to be efforts to strengthen cooperation with ASEAN member states. However, the actual motivations for these policies was clearly to strengthen economic cooperation with Southeast Asian countries and to secure Korea's potential markets in the region – as well as to bolster the ROK’s relative position vis-à-vis North Korea. While there have been some significant policy differences between different governments, these broader overarching goals appear as constants in South Korean policy toward ASEAN member states.

Since the Lee Myung-bak government (2008-2013), there has been a gradual increase in public discussions of ODA directed toward the Southeast Asian region. This evidently continued under the Park Geun-hye (2013-2017) and Moon Jae-in (2017-2022) administrations. This expansion of the volume of Korean ODA to the Southeast Asian region can be seen as a reflection of a changing international order. In some ways then this may be seen as analogous to the United States’ deployment of International

Development Cooperation in response to China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (One Belt and One Road or New Silk Road Initiative).

The fact that countries with influence in Southeast Asia, such as the United States, China, and Japan, continue to establish Southeast Asia-centered foreign policies and actively reflect and utilize the volume and allocation of ODA in their foreign policies has important implications for Korea's relations with Southeast Asia. Based upon this contextualized analysis, this study concludes that Korea's future foreign policy toward Southeast Asia should be consistent with the direction of ODA policies that take into account the specific conditions of particular Southeast Asian countries and strengthen their sustainability.

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