

East Asian regionalism during Kim Dae-jung's administration: an emergence or euphoria?

Introduction

South Korean former Prime Minister Kim Dae-jung has gained the designation as the "Nelson Mandela of Asia", the first and only Korean to be honored as a Noble Prize Laureate. Entering the office during the unprecedented financial crisis that has affected Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia then South Korea in 1997/1998, he has also been recognized as an optimist supporter and initiator for regionalism when he proposed the East Asian Vision Group (EAVG) in 1998 and East Asian Study Group (EASG) in 2002.

This paper intends to examine South Korea's regional diplomacy towards ASEAN in East Asian regionalism. In particular, it will focus on the nature of South Korea's engagement vis-à-vis ASEAN during Kim Dae-jung's administration from 1998 to 2003. This study is important as the East Asian regionalism flourished during the administration of Kim and he's arguably one of the most notable regional leaders of the era in East Asia in putting the nascent ASEAN Plus Three on the track, especially during the aftermath of the 1997/ 1998 Asian Financial Crisis.

The first part of the paper focus on the strategic role of South Korea in East Asian regionalism. The second of the paper will analyze the underpinnings of South Korea's regional strategy vis-à-vis ASEAN during Kim Dae-jung's tenure, by answering the question "why" and "how". Three main variables in contributing to the strategies towards East Asian regionalism will be analyzed by focusing on 1) Kim Dae-jung's political credibility, challenges and constraints in South Korea's domestic politics; 2) Direct and indirect impact of regional and global environment on South Korea's regional diplomacy and 3) The nature of South Korea's engagement with ASEAN countries, such as the participation and contribution at the ASEAN Plus Three summits. As a conclusion, the answer of whether Kim Dae-jung has lead South Korea in playing the middle power role adroitly in East Asian regionalism will be drawn.

South Korea's Strategic Role in East Asian Regionalism

Throughout history, South Korea has been portrayed as a minor power, or "shrimp among the whales"¹ that engages in passive diplomacy as opposed to an aggressive one. However, as South Korea gained a higher status in the international community, its role has somewhat shifted. The combination of rapid economic and industrial growth since the Park Chung-hee era in the 1960s, and its commitment to the alliance with the United States has given it greater capacity to increase its diplomatic and strategic leverage in the region, albeit still small compared to China and Japan.

The geographical position of South Korea has also granted it a special role. Situated strategically in the centre of Northeast Asia, South Korea promotes itself as a regional hub. A hub, not only in terms of air, land and sea traffic, but also in IT technology, regional trade as well as in the heavy industries, which South Korea is far more advanced and has advantage at.

¹ Bluth, Christoph and Dent, Christopher M. (2008). A shrimp among the whales? Korea in the Northeast and East Asia regional system. In *China, Japan and Regional Leadership in East Asia*, ed. M. Dent, Christopher, Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 247.

With the exception of its geographical position that has remained constant, South Korea's diplomatic behavior vis-à-vis the region has gone through a series of changes. Such shifts have been most evident from the late 1990s, not only in its policies towards the United States, Japan, China and Russia, but also in its attitudes vis-à-vis ASEAN states and regionalism.

Not until after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the bipolar world system, that regionalism in East Asia only began to sprout. In the early 1990s, Malaysian then Prime Minister Mahathir Muhammad suggested the East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC). Mahathir's ambition includes China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea and Vietnam, plus the ASEAN-6 countries at that time, ostracizing the American and its Pacific-allies of Australia and New Zealand. This has not only faced a strong criticism from the 'external' opponent United States, even the 'internal' members like Japan and Singapore were in defiance of the "caucus without causations" proposal. The opponents have the EAEC jibed as the "East Asia Excluding Caucasions".² This was not surprising, as even during the aftermath of World War II, the United States chose to operate its allies in the North Atlantic region multilaterally while the Southeast Asian region was left with a bilateral modus operandi.³ On top of that, the United States is reluctant and even fears of any economic or trade blocs that marginalizes Washington as it compromises its economic interests and influence.

In March 1996, the inauguration of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) held in Bangkok bonded the Northeast and Southeast Asian together. Earlier in October 1994, it was the former Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chock Tong who has articulated the idea of creating ASEM, a dialogue platform for the European Union and the Asians. Despite the initial hesitation from the Japanese and Chinese government, the three Northeast Asian governments eventually joined their ASEAN⁴ counterparts in second half of 1995, forging a stronger rapport of the 'Asia' side as an integrated entity, to face their counterparts from Europe. This initiative has thus gained a new momentum in the East Asian regional integration efforts. Since 1996, ASEM has been having biannual meetings, bringing along fifteen European and ten East Asian heads of states.

More than a decade ago, a crucial turning point or a stronger catalyst for the East Asian cooperation occurred during the outbreak and in the wake of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC)'s failure in providing a desirable stimulus package to the troubled East Asian economies gave the East Asian states to commit to a regional approach. The failure of to gain momentum for a pan-Pacific regionalism is supported by Higgott, arguing that "There is no Pacific community in a linguistic, religious, cultural or ideological sense. Nor is there a history of regional consciousness or a framework of institutions comparable to those developed in Europe over the last thirty-five years".⁵ The nascent regional framework of ASEAN Plus Three (APT), was inaugurated in December 1997, in Kuala Lumpur. Held in tandem with the ASEAN summits, this architecture that consisted of the original members of EAEC, plus the newcomers of ASEAN, has catalyzed a process of deeper integration in East Asia. As Douglas Webber famously analyses, the declining ASEAN and APEC are the "two funerals" and the ambitious yet embryonic of APT rising as "a wedding" to fill up the vacuum left by the former two.⁶

² Robert Stephen Milne and Diane K. Mauzy (Eds.) (1999). *Malaysian Politics Under Mahathir*. London: Routledge in Asia. pp.130.

³ Hemmer, Christopher and Peter J. Katzenstein (2002). Why is there no NATO in Asia? Collective identity, regionalism, and the origins of multilateralism. *International Organization*, Summer, Vol. 56, No. 3, pp. 575-607.

⁴ Laos PDR and Myanmar joined ASEAN together in 1997 and Cambodia only became a member by 1999.

⁵ Higgott, Richard (1995). Economic co-operation in the Asia Pacific: a theoretical comparison with the European Union. *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 2, No. 3, pp. 364-365.

⁶ Webber, Douglas (2001). Two funerals and a wedding? The ups and down of regionalism in East Asia and Asia-Pacific after the Asian crisis. *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 14, No. 3, pp. 339-372.

South Korea has made notable initiatives consolidating the East Asian regionalism under President Kim Dae-jung. In 1998, he proposed the East Asia Vision Group (EAVG) and the first meeting was held in Seoul. By November 1999, the Joint Statement on East Asia Cooperation was issued by all the thirteen heads of government at the 3rd APT Summit in Manila, in an effort to systemizing the institutional mechanism. Subsequently in November 2001, the EAVG consisting of Eminent Intellectuals from the thirteen countries has submitted its Report at the 5th APT Summit in Brunei. Again, under the initiative of Kim Dae-jung in November 2002, the East Asian Study Group (EASG) was formed. The EASG has come out with a set of twenty-six implementable short to long term concrete measures that include economic and financial cooperation as well as political, security, environmental, energy, cultural, educational, social and institutional measures. Besides assessing the recommendations of the EAVG, the EASG Final Report was also designed to assess the implications of an East Asian Summit to strengthen the East Asian cooperation. Another significant suggestion is the creation of an East Asia Free Trade Area (EAFTA).⁷

Accurately pointed out by Professor Bae, the ASEAN has provided the “hardware” for East Asian Cooperation through ASEAN Plus Three while South Korea has provided the “software” by proposing the EAVG in 1998 and then EASG in 2002. Therefore, ASEAN and South Korea are two possible surrogates or substitute power that posse reasonable potential for leading regional co-operation in East Asia. Hence, South Korea views it can act as the “mediator” and “balance of power” between China-Japan rivalries, while also exercising its own authoritative power on its own. Meanwhile, South Korea and ASEAN can strengthen their relatively weak position to become a cohesive coalition in East Asia. Thus, it is vital for South Korea to work hand-in-hand with ASEAN to gain a more desirable bargaining power vis-à-vis the major powers of the region. Nevertheless, Professor Bae also stressed out that despite the support for the ASEAN Plus Three as the favored regional architecture, the close alliance with the United States should not be put aside, especially under an East Asian Regionalism which excludes the U.S.⁸

During the 5th APT Summit in October 2003, the historic Joint Declaration on the Promotion of Tripartite Cooperation among the Republic of Korea, People’s Republic of China and Japan was issued. This declaration was yet another promise in deepening the cooperation between ASEAN and the Plus Three countries.

In December 2005, however, despite objections and hesitations, the inaugural East Asian Summit (EAS) kicked-off in Kuala Lumpur has involved not only the thirteen APT countries, but also another “Plus Three” countries of the South Asian India along with the Oceania Australia and New Zealand. In addition, Russia was eventually granted the participation as an “observer”. The sudden widening of the membership has created controversy and doubts about the future of the APT as the main axis of the East Asian Regionalism process. The progress has turned out to throw the regionalists with a big question mark of whether should the EAS replace and marginalize APT to be the main architecture or to pursue the two simultaneously in a parallel way.

Three years later on 13 December 2008, Premier Wen Jiabao of China, Prime Minister Taro Aso of Japan and President Lee Myung-bak of South Korea gathered in Dazaifu, the Fukuoka Prefecture of Japan for a historical tripartite summit. It is the first of its kind for the three Northeast Asian leaders to meet up, not within an APT framework. Besides the global economic crisis, trade facilitation and investment protection. Donald E. Weatherbee hinted that the Daizaifu Summit of “Three Minus ASEAN” as the beginning of a

⁷ _____ (2002). *Final Report of the East Asian Study Group*, ASEAN Plus Three Summit, 4 November, at Nin Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

⁸ 배공찬 (2008). 동아시아공동체의 의의와 과제. 동아시아공동체연구회(지은). 동아시아공동체와 한국의 미래: 동북아를 넘어 동아시아로서울: 이매진.

trilateral process which “would be much more regionally and globally significant than the APT.”⁹ In comparison of Weatherbee’s skeptical observation on the APT’s future in the East Asian regionalism process, Rodolfo C. Severino is more optimistic about the latest progress. He argues that “ASEAN Plus Three is meant not only to improve relations among the three Northeast Asian countries but, above all, to link Northeast and Southeast Asia together” and concludes that “indeed, ASEAN welcomes it (the Dazaifu summit) as a major contribution to regional stability, which is one of ASEAN’s main purpose”.¹⁰ On 23 December 2008, South Korea has appointed the first Ambassador, H.E. Kim Ho-young to ASEAN, becoming the fifth country to appoint its Ambassador to ASEAN, following the United States, Australia, New Zealand and Japan¹¹.

The year 2009 is special for the South Korea-ASEAN relations. In 1989, South Korea has become ASEAN’s dialogue partner, initiating what will be a promising relationship. In commemoration of the important milestone of the twentieth anniversary, the ASEAN-ROK Commemorative Summit has been held on June 1-2, 2009 in Jeju Island, South Korea. Another notable achievement of the South Korea-ASEAN relations was the official opening of the ASEAN-Korea Centre on March 13, 2009 which is situated strategically in the heart of Seoul.

East Asian Regionalism during Kim Dae-jung’s Administration

Throughout the history, South Korea has been surrounded by a constellation of heavyweight neighbors of China, Japan, the United States and Russia. Wedged by China and Japan in East Asia regionalism, South Korea has been seeking ways to find a suitable leverage as a strategic middle power, or a “balancer” role. Thus, what is the significance of the role played by South Korea in East Asian regionalism?

In this section of the paper, we will assess South Korea’s role in East Asian regionalism, specifically looking at South Korea’s Regional Strategy vis-à-vis ASEAN during Kim Dae-jung’s administration, from 1998 to 2002. More importantly, it is crucial to find out the obstacles and constraints posed in order to suggest the best way and in finding the right space where South Korea can perform adroitly in her own ways in East Asian regionalism, for now and in the future.

If the Asian Financial Crisis has accelerated a stronger call for an East Asian regionalism, there are at least two main regional leaders who have acted as the accelerator for the nascent yet ambitious regional architecture of ASEAN Plus Three. They are arguably Malaysia’s Mahathir Mohammad¹² and South Korea’s Kim Dae-jung¹³. The Asian Financial Crisis has made Kim Dae-jung the first Korean leader to envision an “East Asian regionalism”, compared to the kind of “open regionalism” which has been practiced by his predecessors. Since his administration’s inauguration, Kim Dae-jung engaged proactively in the building of a momentum for the East Asian cooperation, particularly in proposing the idea of

⁹ Weatherbee, Donald E. (2009). *Three Minus ASEAN: The Dazaifu Summit*. Pac Net Number 2, Honolulu, Hawaii, Pacific Forum, January 8. <http://www.pacforum.org>.

¹⁰ Rodolfo C. Severino, Rodolfo C. (2009). The Northeast Asian Summit: An initiative not at odds with ASEAN, *The Straits Times*, 13 January.

¹¹ The ASEAN Secretariat official site at <http://www.aseansec.org>, accessed on April 2, 2010.

¹² For more reading, please refer to He, Baogang. 2004. East Asian Ideas of Regionalism a Normative Critique. *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 58 (1): pp.105-125.

¹³ For detailed reading, please refer to 이재현. 동아시아 지역협력과 역내 리더십: 마하티르와 김대중의 동아시아지역협력구상. pp.105-132 In 동아시아공동체연구회 (2008). *동아시아공동체와 한국의 미래: 동북아를 넘어 동아시아로*. 서울: 이매진.

creating the EAVG and EASG in 1998 and 2000 respectively. However, this raises questions. Has Kim Dae-jung left South Korea with a legacy to emergence as a stunning actor to make significant and consistent contributions in East Asian regionalism? Or was it a mere euphoria that evaporated after Roh Moo-hyun took over?

Challenges and Constraints in South Korea's Domestic Politics

Being sworn into Cheong Wa Dae in February 1998, Kim Dae-jung has marked an epoch to important shift of paradigm in East Asian regional building. He has marked several “firsts” in Korean modern history. His government was the first smooth transition of power from the ruling party to the opposition party in Korean modern history. Apart being the first opposition and liberal leader, he was also the first president from a long-time oppressed region in terms of social welfare and economic developments of Jeolla-do after his predecessors Park Chung Hee, Chun Doo-hwan, Roh Tae-woo and Kim Young-san from Gyeongsang-do region. Globally, Kim Dae-jung won the reputation as the first ever Korean Nobel Prize laureate in 2000, while domestically, he is recognized as the anti-authoritarian democratization leader over the decades. He has also been known as the man that has survived at least five times of political assassinations and accidents attempts.

One of the most significant efforts made by Kim Dae-jung in the midst of the Asian Financial Crisis, or “IMF Crisis” as it has been known in Korea, was by implement neoliberal economic restructuring and mass-participatory economy. However, in the domestic political environment that emphasized “regional domestic politics” and preferences, his failure in the social welfare reforms has also been waged as “provoking an unnecessary backlash from the public”.¹⁴ While decreasing popularity poll towards the second half of his administration has drawn Kim Dae-jung to be more focused and aggressive in East Asian regionalism, he has also succeeded and created miracle in bringing South Korea to the track from the IMF Crisis. By November 1999, the Asian Development Bank singled out South Korea as the first to make its escape from the crisis.

Meanwhile, reconciliation with North Korea, has always been high in agenda under the Kim Dae-jung administration. His Sunshine Policy, also popularly be termed as the “DJ Doctrine”, was examined by Moon Chung-in as portraying its six fundamental principles: 1) it is characterized by taking the strategic offensive; 2) it pursues “flexible dualism” predicated on major changes in the sequential order of inter-Korean interactions; 3) it simultaneously pursues engagement and security through military deterrence; 4) it emphasizes international collaboration; 5) it requires domestic consensus; and 6) it pursues defacto “pseudo-unification.”¹⁵ Subsequently, the historical Seoul-Pyeongyang Summit on June 15, 2000 has brought him the Nobel Peace Prize winner later in October the same year. Despite of that, there were also critics about his surreptitious assistance to North Korea to lobby for the unprecedented North-South Summit. Scott Snyder pointed out that, “As a prodemocracy activist, Kim failed to gain bipartisan support for his central policy initiative, pursuing it in such a single-minded, top-down fashion that it appeared he had placed personal ambition for a Nobel Peace Prize above South Korea’s national security needs and

¹⁴ Ahn, Byung Young. 2009. Globalization and Welfare System in South Korea under Kim Dae Jung in *Korea Confronts Globalization*. Chang, Yun-shik, Hyun-ho Seok, and Donald L. Baker. eds, pp. 229-248 Oxon: Routledge Advances in Korean Studies. pp.244.

¹⁵ Moon, Chung-in (1999). Understanding the DJ Doctrine: The Sunshine Policy and the Korean Peninsula. In Moon, Chung-in and David I. Steinberg (eds.) *Kim Dae-jung Government and Sunshine Policy: Promises and Challenges*. Seoul: Yonsei University Press. pp. 35–56.

substituted expediency and bribery for a principled stance toward advance work conducive to a summit.”¹⁶

Relationships with Major Neighbors

South Korea relatively put more weight on bilateral relations with its neighbour of China, Japan and the United States in its strategic diplomacy. In order to foster a healthy cooperation in East Asia regionalism, amicable bilateral relations as well as a stable Northeast Asian environment is vital. As reminded by Gilbert Rozman, who points out “rather than diverse Southeast Asia becoming the main obstacles, it is Northeast Asia where Confucian traditions prevailed.”¹⁷ Instead of the rich diversity in cultural, lifestyles, race, religion, and government in Southeast Asia, the main obstacles lie within the three “Confusion” Northeast neighbours who sometimes portraiture a more diversified “common value”.

During his presidency, Kim Dae-jung has experienced both the democratic Clinton administration as well as the republican Bush administration from January 2001. Besides the traditional United States-Republic of Korea-Japan tripartite security alliances, the main focus of U.S.-R.O.K centred on the reconciliation of North Korea and the balance of power on the Korean peninsula as well as the Northeast Asia region.

South Korea and China enjoyed a stable relations. Kim Dae-jung visited Beijing in 1998 and consolidating the “Sino-ROK Cooperative Partnership for the 21st Century” to strengthen China-South Korea relations. China supported Kim’s Sunshine Policy and Jiang Zemin assured a Beijing’s readiness and willingness to play an active role in North-South Korea relation.

Seoul has changing attitude towards Tokyo in the beginning of Kim’s presidency, by adopting a forward-looking diplomacy towards Japan, and resting behind traditional historical disputes to build up a common “East Asian identity”. Kim Dae-jung initiated the first visit to Tokyo in October in 1998 and met up with Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi, marking a significant improvement in Seoul-Tokyo relations. However, towards the second half of his administration, the tensed relations of Seoul-Tokyo due to the historical text book and historical issues during Koizumi’s administration fell back to restore traditional sense of menace among the two neighbours. This is most obvious when Koizumi visited Yasukuni Shrine in August 2001, despite the concerns and critics showed by its neighbours. While these events have triggered and constrained the relations of the two allies, South Korea turned to focus more on the ASEAN and the East Asian regional efforts.

South Korea vis-à-vis ASEAN in East Asian Regionalism

In comparison to the other major issues concerning the neighbors in a closer proximity, South Korean foreign policy arguably put a lower degree of attention to the Southeast Asian counterparts in general and multilateral framework such as APT in particular. As Professor Lee accurately described the bilateral relations with the giant four of United States, Japan, China and Russia as a “line foreign policy (선의 외교)” while foreign policy on East Asian Community as a “space foreign policy (공간의 외교)”.

¹⁶Scott Synder. (2008). South Korean Strategic Thought toward Regionalism. In South Korean Strategic Thought Toward Asia, Gilbert Rozman, In-Taek Hyun and Shin-Wha Lee (eds.), New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.99.

¹⁷ Rozman, Gilbert (2006). Cultural prerequisites of East Asian regionalism in the age of globalization. *Korea Observer*, Spring, Vol. 37, No. 1, pp.149-179.

¹⁸ Moreover, the rivalry between China and Japan has always been seen as the catalyst for South Korea and ASEAN to play “an intermediary role” in the East Asia cooperation.¹⁹ Therefore, Kim Dae-jung has grabbed this opportunity and took active initiatives to work closely with its Southeast Asian counterparts in the East Asian regionalism since his administration.

Suggested by Kim Dae-jung in Hanoi in November 1998 during the APT, the EAVG appointed two representatives from each of the ASEAN countries as well as their Northeast Asian counterparts of China, Japan and Korea to form a Track-Two dialogue, aiming to come out with measures and recommendations at the 2001 Summit in Brunei. Dr. Han Sung-joo, the former Foreign Minister of South Korea was appointed as the Chair at EAVG. With a Secretariat ran by the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy (KIEP), its President by then, Dr. Lee Yung-Tae has also become a Korean representative on the EAVG.

By the Manila Summit in November 1999, the East Asian regional architecture in the framework of APT has been consolidated by the Joint Statement on East Asia Cooperation. The leaders of the ASEAN member countries, together with Chinese Premier Zhu Rong Ji and Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi, President Kim Dae-jung and his colleagues vowed for a wider and deeper engagement:

“The bright prospects for enhanced interaction and closer linkages in East Asia and recognized the fact that this growing interaction has helped increase opportunities for cooperation and collaboration with each other, thereby strengthening the elements essential for the promotion of peace, stability and prosperity in the region.”

“Mindful of the challenges and opportunities in the new millennium, as well as the growing regional interdependence in the age of globalization and information, they agreed to promote dialogue and to deepen and consolidate collective efforts with a view to advancing mutual understanding, trust, good neighborliness and friendly relations, peace, stability and prosperity in East Asia and the world.”²⁰

Marking a significant milestone in East Asian regionalism, another historic event took place, witnessing the three Northeast Asian leaders having an informal breakfast meeting at Manila Hotel on 27 November 1999. This was the first meeting among the heads of government of these three countries in modern times. And it was their common desire to work with ASEAN and to develop East Asia cooperation that bounded them together.

In November 2000, during the fourth APT Summit in Singapore in November 2000, the trio leaders of China, Japan and South Korea, sat down for their informal breakfast meeting for the second time. This time, they promised to regularize the meeting of its kind to enhance coordination in working hand-in-hand with ASEAN under the APT regional structure. Since then, ministerial meetings on trade and economic, finance, forestry and agriculture, labor and tourism have been convened annually.

While this attracted support from other states in the region, and turned a new chapter in East Asian regionalism, the handover of power to Roh Moo-hyun in February 2003 had triggered some impact on the

¹⁸ 이원형(2008). 이명박 정권의 외교전략: 한국의 국가전략. 서울: 博迎社. pp.321.

¹⁹ Bae, Geung Chan (2007). ASEAN and Korea. In *ASEAN-Korea relations: security, trade and community building*, ed. Ho, Khai Leong. Singapore: ISEAS Publication. pp.142-151.

²⁰ _____ November 1999. The Joint Statement on East Asia Cooperation, at <http://www.aseansec.org/691.htm>, accessed on April 2, 2010.

South Korea's approach to regionalism in East Asia. By focusing more on policies vis-à-vis Northeast Asia, as well as the North Korean issues, efforts and legacy left by Kim Dae-jung had gradually evaporated and plunged back into the freezer during the Roh Moo-hyun tenure. As observed by Choo JaeWoo, upon succession, Roh Moo-hyun administration would eventually removed governmental supports from the groups²¹, resulting on efforts and legacy left by Kim Dae-jung to gradually evaporated and plunged back into the freezer during the Roh Moo-hyun tenure.

These moves, however, were perhaps inevitable in some ways, due to the issues that surfaced during Roh's presidency. First, during 2004-2005, sovereignty disputes between China, Japan and South Korea surged, resulting in halt in diplomatic activities.²² Second, Roh took over as president during a time when North Korea's nuclear issue was high on the agenda. As the atmosphere tightened, the first set of Six Party Talks started in late August 2003.

Conclusion

This paper argues that, any successful form of regionalism in East Asian should be credited to the rising of an Asian age, than the individual capability of regional leaders. In June 2008, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd suggested an Asia-Pacific Community. And more recently in September 2009, Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama, put forth his vision of an East Asian Community, upon succeeded an overwhelming winning against the decades of LDP-ruling in Japan. Despite the much applauds as well as doubts triggered, both of these regional initiatives became redundant after the individual leaders have stepped down from the office. Not only have these new initiatives not adding new momentum into the regional integration, they fell short of living up to the expectations in a longer period. Regardless of the ambitions envisaged by the leaders, due to lack of proper strategies and consistency, any regional ambition will just remain dubious.

The significant contribution of President Kim for being audacious and outspoken in suggesting the EAVG and EASG, leading the other small and medium power in the East Asian regionalism, should not be undermined. However, his contribution alone would have remained as a whither vision if proper implementation and constructive initiatives do not come in a tandem. Hence, despite of the aspiration of Kim Dae-jung, as a regional leader in the nascent East Asian regionalism, the main contributing factor has been the entire regional environment that has spurred the flourish of the encouraging momentum for regional architecture.

Thus far, the study found that the major issue in South Korea's efforts is that Seoul seems to be pondering on policies that are likely to prove to be ineffective. That is, South Korea can make a more productive contribution by exploiting its own strength, rather than making efforts to countering its own complexes. No matter how ambitious and optimist the government is, South Korea still faces a lot of constrains and challenges in becoming the leading power in the East Asian Cooperation.

This study found that South Korea indeed has a lot to offer in terms of non-security issues, especially in

²¹ For further reading, please refer to Choo, Jae Woo. (2008). South Korea and East Asian Regionalism: Policies, Norms and Challenges. In Governance and Regionalism in Asia. Nicholas Thomas (ed.). Routledge. pp. 93-.

²² See: International Crisis Group (2005), *Northeast Asia's undercurrents of conflict*, Asia Report N° 108, 15 December, Seoul/ Brussels: International Crisis Group. <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=3834>

trade and socio-cultural aspects. Specifically, in regards of the cooperation between South Korea and ASEAN in building a stronger consolidation, it is easier and perhaps more fruitful to pursue “a bottom-up melting pot” strategy of forging better understanding at the grass roots level. One of the issues here however, is that in the context of “regionalism” as a whole, states (or more specifically policy makers) may consider that non-security issues are less important compared to security issues.

In regards to security issues, South Korea’s role is quite limited. The crux of the problem here is that Seoul has a strong sense of distrust with its own external environment, especially towards China and Japan. Moreover, problem is compounded considering that the North-South Korea conflict is yet to be solved. These problems make it hard for South Korea to work as a neutral power. While it may be perceived that Seoul could act as a mediator, given that the country is driven heavily by its strong sovereignty interests, it is dubious as to whether it can genuinely live up to the task.

In comparison to the other major issues concerning the neighbors in a closer proximity, the South Korean foreign policy arguably put a lower degree of attention to the Southeast Asian counterparts in general and multilateral framework such as APT in particular. As Shin-wha Lee clearly clarified, “Regionalism remains a goal for South Korea, but it will not be allowed to supersede high priority object centered on the United States, North Korea, and triangular relations with China and Japan.”²³ In other words, unless and until ASEAN and East Asian regionalism be given a heavier focus in both depth and breadth in South Korea’s foreign policy making.

It is vital for South Korea to work hand-in-hand with ASEAN to gain a more desirable bargaining power vis-à-vis the major power of the region. In other words, despite the lesser significance of ASEAN in South Korean foreign policy, it is not wrong to say that ASEAN and Southeast Asian counterparts should not be neglected or looked down upon in consolidating a stronger standpoint of Korea in the entire East Asian cooperation.

While on numerous occasions, the strategic ends of “East Asian regionalism” has received consensus, the “means” towards achieving this provoke more controversy and disputes than agreement. For the past few decades, ASEAN has almost been a stage for competition, than cooperation between Japan, China and South Korea, each trying to get the influential edge over the other. Hence for any real progress to come true, it is vital that the relations between these powers improve, systemized, and sustained, especially in areas of economy, environment, energy, politics and security.

To conclude, South Korea does have a significant role to play in East Asian regionalism, albeit different to that of China or Japan. Nevertheless, Seoul should pursue a qualitative approach, specifically in the areas of trade, industrial development, and socio-cultural exchanges. There are, nevertheless two issues to be considered. First, Seoul must make efforts to minimize political connotations that may undermine confidence building measures between the parties in the APT. Second, the South Korean government will need to ensure that its projects are consistent, and manageable. If these two objectives can be met, it is then fair to conclude that South Korea can play a relatively small, but significant role in the APT, contributing towards a win-win progress in East Asian regionalism.

²³ Lee, Shin-wha. (2008). South Korean Strategic Thought toward Regionalism”, in *South Korean Strategic Thought Toward Asia*, Gilbert Rozman, In-Taek Hyun and Shin-Wha Lee (eds.), New York: Palgrave Macmillan. pp.245.

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