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Asian NATO Versus Pragmatic Multi-Alignment: Assessing Middle-Power Realignment Pathways in Trump 2.0

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Introduction

The idea of an "Asian NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization)" is not new. For decades, there have been intermittent discussions exploring the feasibility of transforming the U.S.-led "hub-and-spokes" bilateral alliance system into a NATO-like multilateral collective defense organization. Before Shigeru Ishiba was elected president of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and appointed Prime Minister of Japan in October 2024, he proposed the idea in a commentary published by the Hudson Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank. He wrote: "Ukraine today is Asia tomorrow," adding that "the absence of a collective self-defense system like NATO in Asia means that wars are likely to break out because there is no obligation for mutual defense. Under these circumstances, the creation of an Asian version of NATO is essential to deter China by its Western allies."[1] Although Ishiba's proposal did not take off, it attracted attention among security establishments in several Indo-Pacific countries. For instance, in August 2025, Ju Hyung Kim, president of the Security Management Institute, a think tank affiliated with South Korea's National Assembly, wrote in the Canberra-based *East Asia Forum*: "With China's military assertiveness, North Korea's expanding nuclear arsenal, and defense collaboration among Russia, China, and North Korea, there are growing questions about whether Asia needs its own version of NATO."[2]

The proposal for an Asian NATO has gained fresh momentum with the advent of Donald Trump's second presidency (hereafter Trump 2.0) and subsequent geopolitical developments in Europe and Asia.[3] In the face of growing multifaceted threats and increasing Trumpian unpredictability amid intensifying U.S.-China rivalry, nearly all U.S. allies across the Indo-Pacific and Europe have been reassessing their reliance on Washington's security guarantee, rethinking their own defense and deterrence capabilities, and recalibrating their alignment positions vis-à-vis one another.[4] Against this backdrop, some have advocated the need for like-minded U.S. allies to forge a NATO-like pact in Asia through which they could collectively deter aggression, deny their adversaries' hostile moves, and defend their shared interests and values.

This Issue Brief assesses the relative desirability of an "Asian NATO" by contrasting it with a distinct approach, termed "pragmatic multi-alignment," and presenting them as two competing pathways for middle-power realignment in the Trump 2.0 era. Middle-power realignment is likely to persist through Trump 2.0 and beyond. As the United States under Trump 2.0 becomes more unpredictable, transactional, and coercive, while China under Xi Jinping displays visible assertiveness—particularly in the maritime and cyber domains, often with unclear intentions—many countries caught between Washington and Beijing are becoming increasingly concerned about both superpowers. These countries, particularly next-tier powers and secondary states that are viewed as, or perceive themselves as, "middle powers," have realigned and stepped up efforts to explore collective or convergent self-help mechanisms, with an eye toward pooling resources, multiplying capabilities, and managing shared challenges amid an increasingly volatile global environment. The momentum for such middle-power realignment was further amplified by Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney's rousing speech at the January 2026 World Economic Forum, in which he called on middle powers to assert themselves and act together amid a ruptured world order.

We argue that these still-evolving middle-power realignments should be pursued and promoted through pragmatic multi-alignment. Although an Asian NATO might appear to be the more appealing pathway because of the potentially more coherent structure of a typical alliance, as well as the convergent values and interests among U.S. allies, such a collective defense pact—an alliance targeted at specific powers—is likely to drive away a good number of actual and potential partners that South Korea and other middle powers need in pursuing their broader interests, especially at a time when all countries face growing uncertainties and mounting challenges on both military and non-military fronts. By contrast, pragmatic multi-alignment, as a form of inclusive statecraft, enables middle powers to continue embracing their existing patron and/or partners while adaptively exploring additional mutually beneficial partnerships. Such statecraft is pragmatic in that it involves a survival-driven readiness to engage in dialogue and cooperation with other countries despite differences, disagreements, or dislikes. It is multi-alignment in that it involves multiple sets of alignments and partnerships. We further argue that, in an era in which the only certainty is uncertainty, South Korea's prudent strategic choice is not an "either-or" choice between "alliance" and "no alliance," but rather the cultivation of multiple networks of concurrently developed alignments and partnerships. Growing ties between South Korea and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), in particular, can and must be further enhanced from partnership to alignment.

Some definitions are in order. An "alignment" is an institutionalized, as opposed to an ad hoc or one-off, form of partnership. Not all partnerships can be regarded as alignments, because an "alignment," in the strict sense of the word, refers to a partnership characterized by three Cs: a relatively high degree of *convergence* of interests, regular *consultations*, and some degree of *compatibility-enhancement* coordination. An "alliance" is the highest form of alignment. However, not all alignments can be deemed alliances, because an alliance is a binding alignment that includes a mutual defense commitment.

Amid growing uncertainties during Trump 2.0, U.S. allies have gradually recalibrated their decades-long "alliance-first" approach—in which the alliance served as the cornerstone of their external policies—toward an "alliance-plus" posture, in which the alliance remains a core element but is complemented and supplemented by additional circles of alignments and partnerships. Such recalibration is opening up space and creating opportunities for middle powers and secondary states to pursue pragmatic multi-alignment bilaterally, trilaterally, and minilaterally. These countries include the member states of the ASEAN and others across the Global South. Many countries in the Global South are "alliance-allergic," that is, they do not favor alliances, which they view as exclusive policies of siding with one major power (or power bloc) against another. Instead, alliance-allergic countries prefer to embrace multiple inclusive partnerships and alignments based on converging interests without targeting any particular power or camp. In practice, all alliance-allergic countries tend to pursue the goal of "non-alignment" (that is, not taking sides) through the means of multi-alignment.[5]

This Issue Brief proceeds in three parts. The first explains why Southeast Asian countries, like many other postcolonial states in the Global South, are circumspect about the idea of an Asian NATO. The second takes stock of South Korea's past and present partnerships with ASEAN which collectively display middle-power attributes. The third presents key policy recommendations for building "alignment-plus" impetus to make Southeast Asia and ASEAN South Korea's two-level strategic partners, while also promoting broader middle-power multi-alignment.

Why Are ASEAN States Likely to Stay Away from the Idea of "an Asian NATO"?

We focus on ASEAN states' perspectives on an Asian NATO primarily because Southeast Asian states' geopolitical outlook largely mirrors that of the broader Global South (the global majority in the contemporary international system). Southeast Asia is a highly diverse region, and the ASEAN member states hold divergent views on almost everything. However, ASEAN states share common views on such issues as alliances, alignments, and major-power politics. Judging from Southeast Asian states' responses to the revival of the Quad—an "alignment" but not an "alliance"—and the once-discussed idea of "Quad-Plus" as well as the creation of AUKUS, we can expect that the majority of ASEAN states, with the exception of the Philippines under Bongbong Marcos Jr., are likely to remain cautious, distant, and guarded toward the notion of an Asian NATO. There are historical, structural, and domestic reasons for such a response.

Historical reasons: The history of Southeast Asia is, in many ways, a history of big-power politics. All Southeast Asian states, with the exception of Thailand, were victims of centuries of colonization. As postcolonial states, ASEAN members are acutely sensitive about their hard-earned sovereignty and autonomy. Hence, all ASEAN states, except the Philippines, are alliance-allergic; that is, they are clearly inclined to reject alliances as an option in their respective external policies. However, being "allergic" is not the same as being "anti." While ASEAN states are allergic to alliances, they understand that U.S. allies in Northeast Asia and elsewhere have security and other reasons for embracing an alliance-first policy. Nevertheless, most Southeast Asian states and many other alliance-allergic countries across the Global South insist that alliances are not for them, at least under current circumstances.

ASEAN states have learned from history to avoid alliances. First, there is **no free lunch**: when a weaker state relies on a stronger power for security and/or prosperity, it necessarily must relax its autonomy, make concessions to its independence, and pay a price both internally and externally. Second, a big-power patron might retreat and replace an existing alliance with an "alignment" (a defense partnership without a mutual defense commitment). One example is Britain's "East of Suez" policy in the late 1960s, under which British forces were withdrawn from Southeast Asia because of domestic financial strain, effectively abandoning allies such as Malaysia to confront communist threats both internally and externally. Third, a major-power ally might reduce its alliance commitment. One example is the U.S. "Nixon Doctrine" of 1969, which left its two Southeast Asian treaty allies, Thailand and the Philippines, to deal with communist threats without Washington's support. Consequently, Thailand—the frontline state threatened by Soviet-backed Vietnamese forces after the U.S. defeat in the Vietnam War—began to pursue an "alliance-plus" policy. While maintaining its alliance with the United States, Thailand also forged a de facto alignment with China, which, after the Sino-Soviet split, viewed the Soviet Union and Vietnam as enemies. Because of these historical reasons, postcolonial Southeast Asian states are convinced about the unpredictable nature and limitations of alliances. While an alliance often serves as an essential tool when a weaker state faces a direct and immediate threat, that state cannot control whether the alliance will last, for how long, or what price it may have to pay.

Structural reasons: In the contemporary context, most Southeast Asian states view alliances such as an "Asian NATO" as necessary only when a state's existential interests are threatened by an imminent and clear danger. Short of that, and in the absence of an immediate and direct threat, Southeast Asian states prefer "alignments" (aligned partnerships in defense and other domains, without necessarily targeting any power) to "alliances" (defense pacts targeting certain power[s]). This does not mean that alliance-allergic states are naïve in dismissing the necessity of alliances. Rather, they are prudently adaptive in preserving fallback options as conditions change. For instance, if and as soon as a security concern turns into an unambiguous threat, and if credible protective partners are available, the state is likely to switch to an alliance-first policy.

Short of such circumstances, alliance-allergic states, based on both historical and contemporary considerations, view alliances as undesirable tools that are likely to trigger numerous structural *"chain action-reaction"*:

- **Deepening the security dilemma:** an alliance targeting a specific power or powers is bound to push that state or those states to increase armament and build their own circles of alliance for security-maximization purposes.
- **Deepening regional polarization:** an alliance organized and operationalized along a values-based ideological distinction between the "like-minded" and the "non-like-minded" is likely to deepen a "we versus they" mentality and a "friends versus enemies" modus operandi (for example, by labeling "CRINK" as a collective other and describing the four countries as an "axis" of authoritarian powers), thereby:
    - deepening multi-level polarization between the in-group and the out-group;
    - creating a self-fulfilling prophecy by turning potential security concerns into definite enemies as well as making seperate challenges as collective foes and immediate problems; and
    - reducing the space for maneuver and fallback options for all regional countries.
- **Inching closer to "Cold War 2.0":** a combination of prolonged security dilemma and regional polarization is likely to deepen regional divides, escalate tensions, and move the region closer to ideology-based confrontation or proxy war. As Southeast Asian states were frontline victims during the decades-long Cold War 1.0—especially during the Vietnam War, when the "Cold" War turned hot—they know they are likely to suffer, and perhaps suffer the most, if Cold War 2.0 occurs.

Domestic reasons: All politics is local. This is especially true for Southeast Asian states, whose diversity within and across borders complicates issues at all levels and across all fronts. These enduring realities compel their governments—regardless of whether they are democratic, semi-democratic, or authoritarian—to concentrate on more pressing and profound matters at home. These conditions, in turn, necessitate governments to pursue survival-oriented strategies that prioritize growth-based performance legitimation and other pathways of domestic justification, while promoting stable and productive external environments. Hence, Southeast Asian states prefer adaptive, inclusive alignments to rigid, divisive alliances. They also prefer mutually beneficial, multi-layered partnerships across domains—based on a relative convergence of interests in tackling concrete here-and-now issues—to exclusive, values-based circles.

Why Middle-Power Activism Should Be Anchored in "Pragmatic Multi-Alignment"

As South Korea and other U.S. allies gradually recalibrate their alliance-first posture toward an alliance-plus middle-power strategy, they should avoid forging allied partnerships only with like-minded countries for the aforementioned reasons. Instead, this recalibration should be driven and carried out on pragmatic grounds; that is, it should involve developing multiple networks of alignments and

partnerships—including South Korea's expanding ties with ASEAN states, both bilaterally and regionally—based on the relative convergence of interests across defense, diplomatic, and development domains, even with politically less like-minded countries such as Vietnam. Such a pragmatic multi-alignment statecraft enhances the impact of middle-power activism for the following reasons:

- **Concurrent benefits:** Concurrently developing and investing in multiple partnerships and alignments, as opposed to relying on a single alliance or one exclusive network of allied partners, would allow South Korea to benefit simultaneously from multiple partnerships, each with significant importance for South Korea. For example, defense alignments with like-minded U.S. allies will maximize collective deterrence in the absence of a credible U.S. security commitment. At the same time, diplomatic and development alignments with ASEAN and other partners beyond the "Western" circles will maximize the availability of economic diversification platforms, monetary contingency measures, and strategic fallback options if and when the next crisis—economic, financial, pandemic-related, natural-disaster, or cyber—strikes.
- **Complementary effects:** Different partnerships and alignments complement one another in terms of functional purposes (access to resources, energy, food, and so forth), space (sub regional, regional, and global), and time (short- and long-term). Promoting these mutually reinforcing alignments also maximizes South Korea's agency and autonomy while avoiding dependency and subservience.
- **Catalytic or multiplier potential:** Time-tested alignments and mutually beneficial partnerships may stimulate, spark, or spill over into broader and larger-scale cooperation. The decades-long South Korea–ASEAN relationship is one such partnership that can be and must be developed into a catalytic alignment, as elaborated in the next section.

These are not trivial issues, because middle-power realignments and multidirectional activism are among the emerging trends likely to grow in the years ahead. In response to unprecedented uncertainty—when both harmful and helpful actors are becoming increasingly unpredictable—survival-seeking next-tier powers and secondary states are being compelled to realign and pursue collective self-help measures.

Thus far, middle-power realignments have been unfolding in the following forms: (a) not as a single coalition, but as multiple concurrently developed networks of partnerships across multiple domains, sectors, and levels; (b) not aimed at tackling one single threat, but multiple sets of risks and dangers; and (c) not necessarily as alignment against any single superpower, but as alignment with multiple powers, albeit partially, selectively, and adaptively. While some of these emerging partnerships have already expanded—or may over time evolve—into "alignments," others are likely to remain loose, ad hoc, and issue-based forms of cooperation contingent on changing circumstances. Middle-power realignment, in short, has been and will continue to be a fluid and fragmented process of forging multiple *pragmatically* driven, overlapping layers of partnership—bilateral, minilateral, and multilateral—the substance and style of which depend largely on the relative convergence of interests and values among the partners, both like-minded and less like-minded. In light of these trends, South Korea–ASEAN partnerships should be further enhanced and expanded into a de facto alignment as both sides pragmatically adapt to rapidly changing realities by recalibrating their respective external postures.

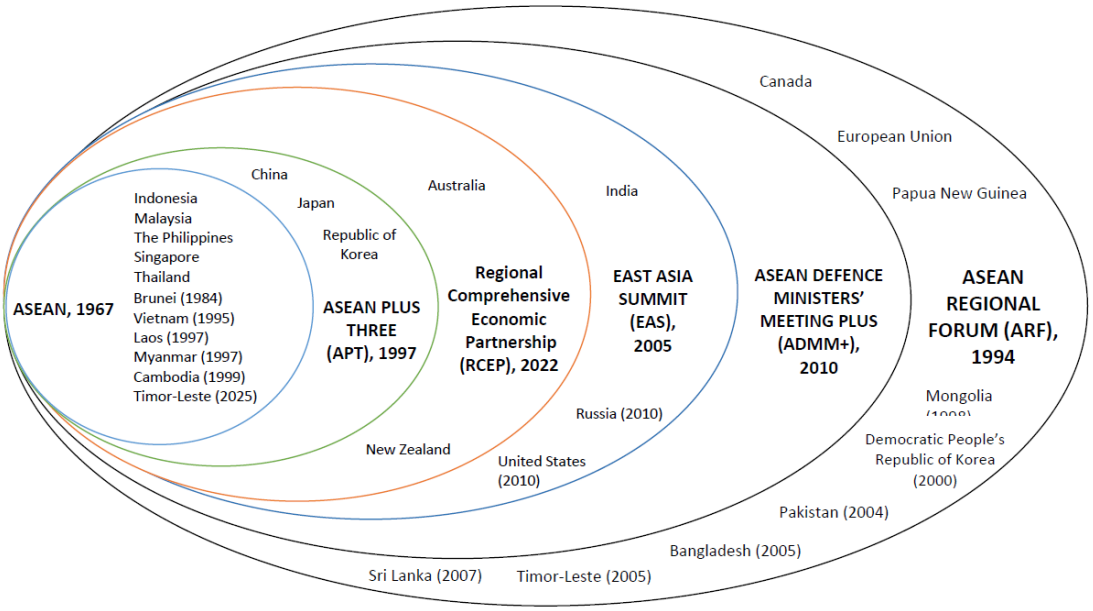
One might ask: Who are "middle powers"? What criteria determine and distinguish middle powers from other non-major powers? Do South Korea and ASEAN states belong to this category? If so, how does their middle-power status matter? How have they exerted middlepowership and how will their past

exercise of middlepowership allow them to pursue pragmatic multi-alignment in beneficial ways under Trump 2.0?

We define "middle powers" as non-major powers with **3-I agency**; that is, states that possess above-average abilities to advance their own *initiatives*, rather than merely adopting or following those of the major powers; to *institutionalize* these initiatives into cooperative mechanisms, rather than relying on one-off or sporadic interactions; and to amplify these mechanisms into *impactful* forms of collaboration that are significant and sustained enough to shape the conduct of international affairs at the regional or global level.[6] "Initiative" here refers to internationalist ideas, ideals, or ideational norms, rules, and principles that promote continuous cooperation and collaboration among sovereign states. These include, but are not limited to, multilateralism, regional integration, peacekeeping and peacemaking commitments, the responsibility to protect, environmental protection, and other fundamental values and standards.

Based on the aforementioned 3-I criteria, South Korea and most ASEAN member states have been among the middle powers at least since the 1990s. Throughout the post–Cold War decades, these countries—either individually or collectively with other Asian and non-Asian partners—have persistently displayed proactive agency in proposing and promoting numerous internationalist ideas and ideals that have transformed regional peace, prosperity, and resilience-building landscapes. South Korea has been a founding member of all of the ASEAN-led regional multilateral institutions, namely the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF, established in 1994), ASEAN Plus Three (APT, 1997), the East Asia Summit (EAS, 2005), and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus, 2010). Figure 1 below shows the scope of membership across these concentric circles of ASEAN-centric, ASEAN-plus mechanisms—involving regional states as well as all major powers and key players—as well as the range of cooperative domains, covering diplomatic, development, and defense issues, and partnership channels at the summit, ministerial, and working levels. These cooperative security institutions coexist with—and complement—the collective defense nature of the U.S.-centric "hub-and-spokes" alliance system across the Asia-Pacific, contributing to regional peace and stability throughout the post–Cold War decades.

Figure 1: ASEAN-Plus Regional Multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific



Note: countries without a year in parentheses next to their names denote that they are founding members of the institution. Otherwise, the year in parentheses next to a country's name denote when it joined the institution.

The creation and expansion of these ASEAN-led, ASEAN-plus forums are evidence of middle-power agency on the part of ASEAN states and their regional partners, including South Korea and the other founding members of these forums. These forums are the products of internationalist initiatives, institutionalization, and impactful collaboration. Such initiatives involve not only the idea of ASEAN-way "cooperative security" (which is among the *raisons d'être* of the ARF, ADMM, ADMM-Plus, and associated mechanisms), but also the idea of East Asian cooperation and integration.

The APT, in particular, has been impactful in several ways. By bridging countries in Southeast and Northeast Asia, the APT emerged as the first East Asian intergovernmental mechanism. It also developed multiple layers of cooperation. In terms of domains, APT cooperation initially focused on finance, but later expanded into public health, transport, connectivity-building, and other functional realms. In terms of mechanisms, the APT gave rise to the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI) in 2000 and later to the Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralization (CMIM) in 2010. The CMI and CMIM—currency-swap arrangements at the bilateral and multilateral levels, designed to provide short-term liquidity and protect against future financial crises—involved all 13 APT members. Over time, APT cooperation also contributed to the creation of *more* ASEAN-led institutions involving countries beyond geographic East Asia. These include the EAS, whose membership included all 13 APT countries plus the three non-East Asian states of India, Australia, and New Zealand when it was established in 2005, and the ADMM-Plus, which brought together those 16 members plus the United States and Russia, both of which also joined the EAS in 2010.

Of course, the creation of these institutions is attributable not only to ASEAN and South Korea but also to the group's other partners, including China, Japan, India, Australia, and New Zealand. However, it is well known that South Korea played a vital role at critical junctures in the decades-long processes of region-building and institution-building in East Asia. For instance, it was South Korean President Kim Dae-jung who proposed a landmark initiative in 1998 that led to the launch of the East Asia Vision Group (EAVG) in 1999. This group, comprising experts from the APT countries, was later followed by the East Asia Study Group (EASG), which put forward a blueprint for an East Asian community.[7]

In retrospect, these ASEAN-plus institutions—with their bridging and institution-building functions—have brought about concrete collaboration that benefits not only ASEAN states but also their partners in Northeast Asia, Oceania, and beyond. The Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS), officially inaugurated in Seoul in September 2011, would not have been possible without the APT process. The trilateral dialogue was launched at a 1999 breakfast meeting, when the leaders of China, Japan, and South Korea met on the sidelines of the APT Summit. Likewise, the 15-member Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), consisting of the ten ASEAN states, the three Northeast Asian states, plus Australia and New Zealand, would not have been possible without decades of continuous collaboration through the APT and the EAS. Each of these non-alliance instruments and platforms continues to enable ASEAN states, South Korea, and other partners (both like-minded and not so like-minded) to exert and expand their middle-power agency, shaping and substantiating regional prosperity and stability.

Policy Recommendations: How and Why Korea-ASEAN Multi-Level Ties Can Serve as a Catalytic Alignment

For South Korea and ASEAN states, while these small-state-led mechanisms are imperfect and far from adequate, they serve as ***readily available avenues*** for both sides—and, for that matter, for all Asia-based middle powers—to pursue multilayered cooperation bilaterally, minilaterally, and regionally, for both present and future purposes. Rather than reinventing the wheel, middle powers can leverage the ASEAN-plus mechanisms and ***create new layers and clusters of collaboration*** based on converging needs and emerging circumstances.

In 2024, the Republic of Korea and ASEAN elevated their ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP). The CSP is not an alliance, and under current circumstances, the two sides are unlikely to move toward an alliance primarily because the different geopolitical ecosystems of Northeast and Southeast Asia have produced different threat perceptions and divergent strategic outlooks—namely, alliance-plus on the one hand and alliance-allergic on the other. However, the Korea-ASEAN CSP has the mutually beneficial potential of moving toward a de facto alignment; that is, a partnership underpinned by a relatively high degree of convergence of interests, regular consultations, and some degree of compatibility-enhancing coordination across defense, diplomatic, and developmental domains.

Looking ahead, Korea-ASEAN alignment should be promoted even as South Korea steps up efforts to strengthen its alliance and alignments with like-minded partners such as the United States, Japan, Australia, Europe, and other Western powers.[8] These are not either-or options. Rather, each of these multi-level, multi-domain alignments can be ***mutually reinforcing***. South Korea's multi-level and multi-domain partnerships with ASEAN states, in particular, are uniquely vital and catalytic. Indeed, Korea-ASEAN ties are important not only for their own right, but also for broader strategic reasons. Due to geographical proximity, economic complementarity, and, above all, the time-tested institutional dynamics underpinning Korea-ASEAN ties, the relative convergence of interests and the vast potential for cooperation between South Korea and ASEAN countries are likely to grow significantly in the years and decades ahead, both bilaterally and as a group.[9] These dynamics are vital not only for ASEAN-wide reasons, but also for ASEAN-plus ***potentials***: the aggregated effects of ASEAN-related multilateral ties and institutional dynamics *go* beyond Southeast Asia. As shown by Figure 1, South Korea's decades-long activism in the ever-expanding web of ASEAN-based institutions involves not only Southeast Asian countries, but also multiple circles of ASEAN's dialogue partners in and out of Asia. In addition, these two dimensions—ASEAN-wide and ASEAN-plus—make Korea-ASEAN multi-level ties an ideal case of catalytic alignment for maximizing the potential dynamics of middle-power multi-alignment, *side by side* with South Korea's alliance-plus efforts vis-à-vis its like-minded partners. Korea-ASEAN alignment is not about pivoting away from or supplanting any of their existing strategic alignments. South Korea and ASEAN will be neither each other's principal ally nor each other's sufficient partner. However, robustly recalibrated Korea-ASEAN ties should be part and parcel

of the wider, multiple networks of middle-power realignments, with the following catalytic impacts: shaping the shared geostrategic environment, supplementing existing circles of collaboration, and stimulating more niche-based partnerships with more partners across the globe in ways that strengthen overall resilience and broaden strategic options.

The rationale for highlighting these past records of East Asia-based, East Asia-wide middlepowership—in which Korea-ASEAN collaboration is an integral part—is threefold. First, the decades-long trajectory shows that regional institutions, despite their limitations as small-state-led platforms, still matter in shaping the course of regional affairs alongside alliances and alignments. These institutions matter in more than one way: they bring together countries with diverse interests, bridge regions and subregions, and build layers of cooperation and collaboration. Second, the records also show that these regional institutions, despite their East Asian origins, have benefited not only East Asian countries but also their extra-regional partners in Oceania, Eurasia, South Asia, and North America.

Third, and most importantly, these multilateral platforms—despite their overlapping organizational structures and functions—have evolved and expanded in ways that continue to attract new members and partners from different regions of the world. This is in large part due to their institutional features, which are, by and large, inclusive, adaptive, and accumulative. These platforms are "inclusive" in that they involve members and partners that are both like-minded and less like-minded in terms of political values, developmental models, and strategic outlooks. They are "adaptive" and "accumulative" in that their institutional forms and functions are not static but dynamic and progressive. Each of these institutions has been widened in membership and expanded in functional roles based on the changing circumstances and emerging needs at different critical junctures throughout the past few decades.

Taken together, these rationales suggest that the ASEAN-plus institutions—all created and developed well before Trump 2.0—have functioned as time-tested platforms through which countries large and small can continuously engage in and expand multi-domain, multi-level collaboration. Their proven record underpins their potential to develop into a convergent hub of indispensable—albeit still insufficient—institutional platforms through which middle powers in and beyond Asia can work together, jointly tackling the shared challenges under Trump 2.0 by pragmatically forging multi-domain, multi-level collaboration that benefits all.

Conclusion

To conclude, pragmatic multi-alignment allows "alliance-plus" countries (like South Korea) and "alliance-allergic" countries (like the majority of ASEAN member states) to ***work together*** to maximize shared interests, mitigate common risks, maintain fallback maneuverability, and create space for continuous collaboration that benefits all. While this Issue Brief focuses on South Korea-ASEAN partnerships as an exemplary case of alignment-plus middlepowership, the analytical themes generated here are equally relevant for South Korea's relations with other countries across the globe. Such alignment-plus partnerships are pragmatically inclusive in that they involve both like-minded and less like-minded partners, brought together on the basis of a relative convergence of interests across defense, developmental, and diplomatic domains. They are adaptive in that each layer of partnership can be prudently expanded based on the evolving magnitude of threats and the availability of protective support. Alignments can be expanded into alliances if and as soon as any power proves to be an immediate and direct threat. Short of that, emerging multilayered alignments allow countries of all kinds to work together on the basis of converging interests and emerging needs amid ever-evolving global uncertainties.

About the Author

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