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## The 2023 ASEAN, ASEAN+3, & East Asia Summits: Focusing on ASEAN issues amid US-China indifference

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In 2023, a series of summits related to ASEAN were held. The 43rd ASEAN Summit, 26th ASEAN+3 Summit, and 18th East Asia Summit (EAS) took place from September 4 to 7 in Jakarta, Indonesia, the chair country of ASEAN this year. Before and after these multilateral summits, separate ASEAN+1 summits were also held between ASEAN and ASEAN Dialogue Partners, including South Korea.

### **43rd ASEAN Summit: Covering up the Myanmar problem and promoting ASEAN centrality and economic growth**

The 2021 military coup in Myanmar has become ASEAN's most critical dilemma. As military rule became a fait accompli, the international community's criticism of ASEAN for failing to effectively respond to this democratic rollback within the member country has increased. Nevertheless, Cambodia in 2022 and Indonesia in 2023 failed to resolve the problem as chair countries. There were expectations that Indonesia, the most democratic country in Southeast Asia, would respond more decisively to the Myanmar issue as it took over the presidency in 2023, but there was no significant development.

At this summit, the ASEAN leaders only repeated their existing positions with the document "ASEAN Leaders' Review and Decision on Implementation of the Five-Point Agreement." A more politically sensitive and difficult matter was the issue of Myanmar's upcoming ASEAN presidency in 2026. ASEAN received criticism from the international community ahead of Myanmar's ASEAN chairmanship ten years ago. At this summit, ASEAN decided to skip Myanmar's turn as chairman in 2026. However, the ASEAN leaders' statement did not express this decision by removing Myanmar from the chairmanship order, but expressed it indirectly by saying, "the Philippines shall assume the ASEAN Chairmanship in 2026 and, subsequently, the Chairmanship rotation will continue based on alphabetical order until a different decision is made." ASEAN appears to have calculated that it will take time to observe the situation in Myanmar and the international community's response over the next one to two years.

Among the various declarations and agreements announced at this ASEAN summit, there are three statements that particularly stand out - declarations of cooperation focusing on the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, or AOIP, with Korea, the United States, and China. Each declaration is titled the ASEAN+1 Joint Statement on AOIP Cooperation. ASEAN announced a statement to focus on AOIP within ASEAN cooperation mechanisms in 2022. In 2023, AOIP

expanded beyond ASEAN to dialogue partners. The resulting documents explore this cooperation on AOIP between ASEAN and Korea, the United States, and China.

In particular, the expansion of AOIP to dialogue partners strengthens ASEAN centrality. ASEAN is working to remain a major regional actor in this period of US-China strategic competition in the wider Indo-Pacific region. This is the core of the ASEAN centrality concept. The fact that ASEAN issued separate AOIP-related statements with Korea, the United States, and China can be interpreted as ASEAN's attempt to strengthen cooperation between these dialogue partners and ASEAN by involving these countries in ASEAN-led AOIP efforts. It also appears to be an effort to strengthen ASEAN centrality in a broader framework – that is, to show that cooperation in the region is centered around ASEAN.

The legacy that Indonesia leaves as the ASEAN chairman in 2023 is the “Jakarta Declaration on ASEAN Matters: Epicentrum of Growth.” Named ASEAN Concord IV, the declaration succeeded the ASEAN Concord I, II, and III, created when Indonesia previously chaired ASEAN. Indonesia's focus as chair of ASEAN this year was economic growth. ASEAN leaders are working together to ensure sustainable economic growth by strengthening ASEAN's participation in global supply chains, digital transformation, green economy, blue economy, creative economy, inclusive economy, etc.

In particular, cooperation in the blue economy and digital transformation was presented in detail with a more specific blueprint. The blue economy blueprint aims to become a future growth engine for ASEAN as a whole, including not only the ocean but also freshwater resources. This blue economy consists of three pillars: marine environmental conservation; marine science, technology, and innovation; and ocean priorities.

Another important axis of economic growth has been identified as digital transformation. The Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA), endorsed at the ASEAN Economic Ministers' Meeting in August 2023, was put on the agenda for this summit. ASEAN leaders reviewed the plan and agreed on the principles for DEFA negotiations. The ASEAN-level digital economy agreement will be finalized by 2025, and it can be seen as the first step toward a digital trade agreement at the ASEAN level that covers everything from cyber security to human mobility.

## **US-China competition over ASEAN: ASEAN+3 and the East Asia Summit**

For several years, the annual ASEAN summit has been the stage for strategic competition between the United States and China. The EAS, in which both the United States and China participate, has been used as a venue for the United States and China to criticize each other and competitively court ASEAN countries.

This year, the 2023 China Standard Map, released by China's Ministry of Natural Resources just before the ASEAN Summit, drew strong opposition from some ASEAN countries and India. Despite the controversy, this year's EAS was relatively free from U.S.-China competition. Neither leader of the United States nor China participated in this year's EAS, with only US Vice President Kamala Harris and Chinese Premier Li Qiang attending. Vice President Harris emphasized the United States' involvement in the ASEAN region during the EAS. However, as Josh Rogin pointed out, it was difficult to believe that the United States paid enough attention

to regional multilateral cooperation centered on ASEAN. For Chinese Premier Li Qiang, who took office in 2023, this year's ASEAN+3 Summit and EAS were his debut at a regional multilateral meeting centered on ASEAN. He repeated the same position as President Xi Jinping and former Premier Li Keqiang did in previous years, such as promising more cooperation through the Belt and Road Initiative with Southeast Asian countries.

President Biden stopped by Vietnam for 24 hours on his way home from attending the G20 in India, where he upgraded relations with Vietnam to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP), Vietnam's highest-level partnership. The signing of the CSP between the United States and Vietnam went directly from the 'comprehensive partnership' level, skipping the mid-level 'strategic partnership'. However, although the United States is putting a lot of effort into Vietnam in response to China's growing influence in the region, it is difficult to believe that Vietnam's fundamental strategic position will change due to this American approach.

Vietnam already had strategic partnerships with four of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and established comprehensive strategic partnerships with China and Russia well before the United States. Vietnam also has comprehensive strategic partnerships with Korea and India. In addition, just before President Biden's visit, Liu Jianchao, head of the Central External Liaison Department of the Chinese Communist Party, visited the Vietnamese leadership, and immediately after Biden's visit, there was news that Vietnam would procure new weapons from Russia.

### **What should Korea's ASEAN strategy be?**

Korea joined the ASEAN+3 Summit, the East Asia Summit, and held a separate ASEAN-Korea Summit this year. The Korea-ASEAN joint statement on the aforementioned AOIP cooperation was announced, and the chairman's statement for the 24th Korea-ASEAN Summit was also issued separately. In the former, specific cooperation projects related to AOIP cooperation between Korea and ASEAN were listed. The latter evaluated existing Korea-ASEAN cooperation and included future plans. In both documents, ASEAN welcomed Korea's policy toward the region, the Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI), and Korea's Indo-Pacific Strategy, and supported Korea's intention to elevate bilateral relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2024.

There are several important questions regarding future Korea-ASEAN cooperation. The next important milestone in relations is the establishment of the Korea-ASEAN Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, scheduled for next year. To this end, the Korean government must create specific projects in line with the 'meaningful, substantive, and mutually beneficial' standards suggested by ASEAN. In particular, it will be important to see how well the AOIP and the CSP cooperation project correspond to each other. In an AOIP-centric Korea-ASEAN CSP, the key will be to strengthen ASEAN centrality before than anything else.

In addition, Korea needs to further clarify the relationship between KASI and Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy. Questions are often raised as to whether KASI is rather a means to realize Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy, which relegates ASEAN to an instrument of Korea's strategic goals in the region. It is time for more active public diplomacy toward ASEAN regarding the contents of KASI and Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy.

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