
THE CHANGE IN SOUTH KOREA'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS ASEAN COUNTRIES THROUGH THE NEW SOUTHERN POLICY PLUS

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ABSTRACT

This study identifies the factors influencing the evolution of South Korea's foreign policy towards ASEAN through the New Southern Policy Plus (NSPP). Despite the initial New Southern Policy's (NSP) successes, the Moon Jae-in administration introduced seven new initiatives for more focused cooperation. Employing foreign policy change theories, this research argues that the shift was driven by both international and domestic factors. Internationally, the Covid-19 pandemic presented strategic opportunities for South Korea to deepen its engagement with ASEAN. Domestically, liberal political leadership and policy entrepreneurs likely aligned internal preferences with the NSPP's objectives. Utilizing secondary data, the study concludes that these modifications represent 'adjustment change' and 'program change.' This indicates a shift in implementation strategies to better suit the changing regional context, without altering the fundamental goals of the original policy.

Keywords: New Southern Policy Plus, South Korea, ASEAN, Foreign Policy Changes.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengidentifikasi faktor pendorong perubahan kebijakan luar negeri Korea Selatan terhadap ASEAN melalui *New Southern Policy Plus* (NSPP). Sebagai penyempurnaan dari *New Southern Policy* (NSP), pemerintahan Moon Jae-in menambahkan tujuh inisiatif baru untuk kerja sama yang lebih terarah. Menggunakan teori perubahan kebijakan luar negeri, studi ini berargumen bahwa pergeseran ini didorong oleh faktor internasional dan domestik. Di tingkat internasional, pandemi Covid-19 membuka peluang strategis bagi Korea Selatan untuk memperdalam keterlibatannya dengan ASEAN. Sementara di tingkat domestik, kepemimpinan politik liberal dan peran para *policy entrepreneurs* diyakini berhasil menyelaraskan preferensi internal dengan tujuan NSPP. Memanfaatkan data sekunder, studi ini mengklasifikasikan perubahan tersebut sebagai *adjustment change* dan *program change*. Hal ini menandai adanya pergeseran strategi implementasi untuk menyesuaikan diri pada konteks regional yang dinamis, tanpa mengubah tujuan fundamental dari kebijakan awal.

Kata Kunci: New Southern Policy Plus, Korea Selatan, ASEAN, Perubahan Kebijakan Luar Negeri.

BACKGROUND

Changes in foreign policy are an important scope of study in international relations, as they reflect how countries are adapting to the changing global landscape and domestic circumstances. Foreign policy, in typical terms, consists of actions that are explicitly directed at entities outside the political jurisdiction of a country. This includes both formal programs and implicit patterns of behaviour. Foreign policy is also inseparable from how a country responds to changes at the global and regional levels. These changes can be viewed through the lens of foreign policy change theory particularly the tension between systemic factors – such as international shocks – and domestic influences like leadership shifts and bureaucratic advocacy (Haesebrouck & Joly, 2021).

As one of the countries in the dynamic East Asian region, South Korea is also inseparable from changes in its foreign policy. After the election of President Moon Jae-in as president in May 2017, South Korea announced one of its new foreign policy initiatives, the New Southern Policy (NSP) (Mulyaman, Virgianita, & Chandra, 2021). NSP was introduced by Moon during his visit to Indonesia on November 9, 2017, at the Indonesia-Korea Business Forum in Jakarta. At the forum, President Moon delivered a keynote speech about South Korea's desire to strongly push the New Southern Policy and dramatically improve its relations with ASEAN countries (Presidential Committee on New Southern Policy, n.d.; Whiteside, 2017).

In principle, this policy is a diplomatic initiative that emphasizes improving and strengthening South Korea's relations with ASEAN countries and India to the same level as its main traditional partners, namely the United States, China, Japan, and Russia. Where historically, since its independence in 1948, countries like the four major powers have had a great impact on a medium country like South Korea in international relations (Park, 2022).

President Moon Jae-in, who introduced the New Southern Policy as the flagship of his foreign policy by prioritizing ASEAN countries, can be said to differ from several of his predecessors. The relationship between South Korea and ASEAN began when it became a sectoral dialogue partner in 1989. It is important to note that cooperation between ASEAN and Korea has continued to develop in the period before President Moon Jae-in. This is due in part to several factors, such as the existing foundation for multilateral project cooperation like ASEAN+3 and the East Asia Summit (EAS). Additionally, there is a momentum of regionalization that enhances economic interaction (Jaehyon, 2019).

However, the previous three governments have shown a weaker commitment to ASEAN. During Roh Moo-Hyun's administration, foreign policy priorities were further explained through the initiative "Korea, Northeast Asia Hub Country" which

further sought to accelerate the Reconciliation Process and build trust between the two countries. (Jaehyon, 2019). Meanwhile, during the leadership of President Lee Myung Bak, there was an initiative called the New Asia Initiative. However, this policy does not focus on Southeast Asia but Asia as a whole. Meanwhile, some people consider that this policy initiative is very mercantilist, aiming to maximize economic profits.

During Park Geun Hye's administration, the policy again shifted to the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia. Where there is a policy of political trust on the Korean peninsula and the Northeast Asia Peace and Cooperative Initiative (NAPCI). However, the participation of ASEAN countries in NAPCI is only limited to observers. This discontinuity in strategic focus illustrates the fluctuating influence of leadership preference and regime change – an important domestic driver in foreign policy reorientation. Based on some of the explanations above, it can be seen from the above explanation that it is classified as inconsistent, especially to place ASEAN countries in their priorities (Jaehyon, 2019).

In general, this NSP policy initiative has three aspects as the core pillars (3P's). First, People, which emphasizes promoting people to people exchange (socio-cultural cooperation). Second, Prosperity, which promotes mutually beneficial economic cooperation and builds communities that support regional peace and security, emphasizes strengthening economic cooperation, and third, Peace, which is maintaining regional peace and security (cooperation in the field of politics and security) including non-traditional security approaches. These three pillars are the core areas of implementation. (Wongi, 2021)

One of the commitments supports that can be seen from this NSP policy is the establishment of the Presidential Committee on New Southern Policy. The establishment of this committee aims to determine the direction and strategy of NSP implementation, coordinate the scope of policy implementation by each Government Agency, identify cooperation projects for government organizations, and conduct mentoring and evaluation of the status of policy implementation (Presidential Committee on New Southern Policy, 2018)

In addition, there are several things that show the difference in President Moon Jae-in's initiatives compared to the previous South Korean leader towards ASEAN. First, ASEAN has been referred to as the "main thrust" or the main focus in foreign policy. South Korea during his campaign if he is elected president. This is the first time that ASEAN has received special attention in the South Korean presidential election. Second, Moon also sent a special mission to ASEAN after he became president. Previously, this special mission was only given to four major countries, namely the United States, China, Japan, and Russia. Third, President Moon is the first President to visit 10 ASEAN countries during his administration, even the visit was achieved in the middle of his term, at the end of 2019 (Jaehyon, 2020).

Moon Jae In's initiative in the NSP can be said to be the most consistent foreign policy towards ASEAN. In addition to the political commitment shown by South Korea, this policy has also reaped a number of achievements in various fields. This can be seen from Korea's increasing funding commitments to ASEAN. Through the ASEAN – Korea Cooperation Fund, funding increased from 7 million USD to 14 million USD in 2019. Korea also selected 90 projects from various departments to be implemented based on the 3 pillars of NSP (Kim, 2021).

In the context of the prosperity pillar, progress can be seen in terms of trade and investment, in terms of the value of two-way trade increased from 135.6 billion USD in 2016 to 156 billion USD in 2019. In addition, in terms of investment, the increase was also seen from 5.3 billion USD in 2016 to 9.5 trillion USD in 2019. ASEAN countries have also been selected as regions with various high-value infrastructure projects (Kim, 2021). Nonetheless, critics have questioned NSP truly to elevated ASEAN to the level of Korea's traditional partners, or whether the policy remained largely economic in orientation with limited strategic depth.

Meanwhile, the achievements of the people pillar context can be seen from efforts to encourage people and cultural exchanges, one of which is through the ASEAN Culture House which opened in 2017 in Busan, Korea. The ASEAN Culture House aims to deepen mutual understanding and facilitate two-way cultural exchanges between ASEAN countries and Korea. Meanwhile, in the pillar of 'Peace'. One of the prominent aspects is that ASEAN expressed readiness to play a constructive role in the Korean Peninsula peace process, while Korea showed its support for the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific and sought ways for maritime cooperation (Kim, 2021).

Despite these gains, the Moons administration introduced the New Southern Policy Plus (NSPP) in November 2020 – a decision that appears puzzling given its timing during the final year of presidency, raising questions about the policy's sustainability and implementation. NSPP generally adds seven new initiatives that are still in line with the three pillars that have been carried out previously. These seven cooperation initiatives cover several areas. First, comprehensive public health cooperation. Second, cooperation on education and human resources development. Third, the promotion of a two-way cultural exchange. Where all three are included in the people pillar. Fourth, building mutually beneficial trade and investment. Fifth, development of rural villages and urban infrastructure. Sixth, cooperation on future industries for common prosperity. Where all three are included in the prosperity pillar. Seventh, transnational cooperation for fostering safety and peace in the security pillar (Presidential Committee on New Southern Policy, 2020)

Based on some of the descriptions above, the South Korean government in the era of President Moon Jae-In took a different step compared to some previous presidents. The existence of a greater commitment to strengthen Korea's relations with

ASEAN countries through the New Southern Policy (NSP) and the intention to improve these relations at the same level as its traditional partners such as the United States, China, Japan, and Russia signify a reorientation or change in the direction of South Korea's foreign policy.

However, despite a number of achievements made in this policy, Korea updated the NSP policy to New Southern Policy Plus (NSP Plus) which adds emphasis on the 7 cooperation initiatives in the previous 3 pillars. Meanwhile, this policy change was made in the remaining relatively short term of President Moon Jae-in in November 2020, so the commitment related to the implementation of this policy has been questioned by some circles. Therefore, this study intends to identify the factors behind why South Korea changed its foreign policy through the New Southern Policy Plus? Although it is possible that the NSPP change also occurred in the context of South Korea's relationship with India, this study focuses on the policy change with ASEAN countries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To find the significance of this research, there are several previous studies related to the *New Southern Policy*, including the *New Southern Policy Plus* of South Korea. Some previous studies are essentially grouped into two categories, namely those related to the New Southern Policy Plus and the New Southern Policy Plus, as well as studies regarding South Korea as a *middle power*. As one of the main foreign policies of the Moon Jae-In era, South Korea's New Southern Policy (NSP) has been the focus of research which has greatly highlighted South Korea's role in the ASEAN country. According to Kamaruddin & Deivasagayam (2023), the geopolitical rivalry between the US and China encourages South Korea to engage more deeply with ASEAN, covering various aspects. The study confirms that South Korea's presence continues to strengthen in the region, driven by the strengthening of the three pillars of the NSP and the new NSPP initiative. On the other hand, Rubiolo & Aguirre (2023) observed that the NSP has resulted in an intensification of South Korea's economic relations with ASEAN, mainly through the investment, trade, and development assistance sectors. However, political and security relations have not yet achieved comparable development.

Other research, such as those conducted by Oh (2023) and Anantasya (2023), also emphasizes that the expansion of South Korea's strategic ties with ASEAN is more focused on the economy and cultural exchanges than conventional security issues. This reflects a broader trend in which economic and cultural cooperation is becoming more dominant than hard security issues within the framework of regional cooperation. In all the available literature, this categorization makes it clear that the NSP Policy including the NSPP has generally improved relations between ASEAN

countries and South Korea in various fields, while some of them emphasize that economic cooperation is a strong basis for this policy.

Meanwhile, in the second group of literature, many relate the conceptualization of *middle power* in South Korea's foreign policy, including its role in the Southeast Asia and Indo-Pacific regions. Research from Hyunh (2023), for example, reveals that amid President Moon's reluctance to define his official view of the Indo-Pacific, aligning NSP policies and playing a balancing role in the Indo-Pacific region is important because both policies are in line with South Korea's vision as a middle power, several other studies (Teo, Singh, Tan, 2016; Howe & Park, 2019; Mo, 2016) emphasizing South Korea's role as a *middle power* in carrying out regional and global diplomacy as well as the evolution reflected in its foreign policy. However, some studies show that the role of this *middle power* is still limited where South Korea tends to play a role in certain economic domains or sectors that are *niche areas* for South Korea (Howe & Park, 2019). South Korea is indeed increasingly showing its increasing identity as a *middle power* in the region. However, Korea also faces a dilemma as competition between two major powers, the United States and China, also has influence in the region and limits South Korea's role as a middle power.

Among all the literature that has been described, there are many studies discussing the role of South Korea as a *middle power*. Researchers assess that the NSP policy is part of regional diplomacy and *balance diplomacy* strategy amid the competition between the United States and China in global politics. In addition, existing research highlights the implementation of this policy, which strengthens South Korea's relations with ASEAN countries and India. However, of all the studies that have been collected, the changes in the *New Southern Policy Plus* have received less attention for further research. Therefore, this research attempts to fill that gap.

This research argues that the changes that have occurred from the New Southern Policy to the *New Southern Policy Plus* are inseparable from various factors behind it at the domestic and international levels. At the international level, change is driven by external events such as the Covid-19 pandemic that have led to policy adjustments and South Korea's active involvement in ASEAN as well as the role of ASEAN that influence each other in responding to issues that arise at the regional level. At the domestic level, these changes are inseparable from the role of Policy Entrepreneurs who adjust domestic policies with foreign policies. Meanwhile, the changes that occur are at the level of changes in the way and efforts to achieve the goals but do not change the goals and orientation of the previous policy.

Theoretical Framework: Changes in Foreign Policy

Foreign policy is defined as 'actions expressed in the form of objectives, commitments and/or directions that are explicitly carried out, and carried out by representatives of the government acting on behalf of the state (Carlsnaes,2013). Basically, foreign policy also includes practices that are so frequent and considered natural that they are also considered broad behavioral trends. Foreign policy, thus foreign policy can be defined as a broad trend of behavior, or a set of rules governing such behavior, that are adopted by authoritative foreign policymakers and directed at entities outside their jurisdiction (Haesebrouck & Joly, 2021). This definition focuses on actions that are explicitly directed at external actors and includes both behavioral patterns and government programs and strategies.

Furthermore, there are several scientists who study this pattern change as a change in foreign policy. According to Haesebrouck & Joly (2021), foreign policy change can be defined as - Replacement of a sustained pattern of action against external actors or rules that guide those actions with new patterns or new rules that pursue different objectives and/or use different methods.

The last one can be the result of a dramatic break from the past or the cumulative effect of smaller changes. Changes in foreign policy may be limited to specific foreign policy issues or bilateral relations, may encompass a broader domain of foreign policy such as security or aid policy, or may relate to simultaneous changes across various domains and foreign policy relations, leading to a fundamental shift in the overall orientation of actors towards international affairs. (Haesebrouck & Joly, 2021).

Various academic studies have focused on fundamental changes in foreign policy. One of the most influential categorizations to date was proposed by Hermann (1990). Hermann distinguishes between four levels of change that are more based on qualitative rather than quantitative changes. The first level is *adjustment change*, referring to quantitative changes in the level of effort that do not alter the goals or methods of policy. The second level is *program change*, which refers to changes in methods but not in the goals of foreign policy. The third change is *goal change*, which implies a change in the objectives of foreign policy. The fourth and most fundamental level is *directional change*, which involves a change in the orientation of actors towards international affairs as a whole, involving simultaneous shifts in many policies. (Hermann, 1990: Haesebrouck & Joly, 2021).

Furthermore, it is explained that foreign policy changes are caused by *foreign policy drivers* and (absence) of *inhibitors* that interact with each other in a complex way (Haesebrouck & Joly, 2021). This driving factor consists of various levels both internationally and domestically. However, this research will focus more on

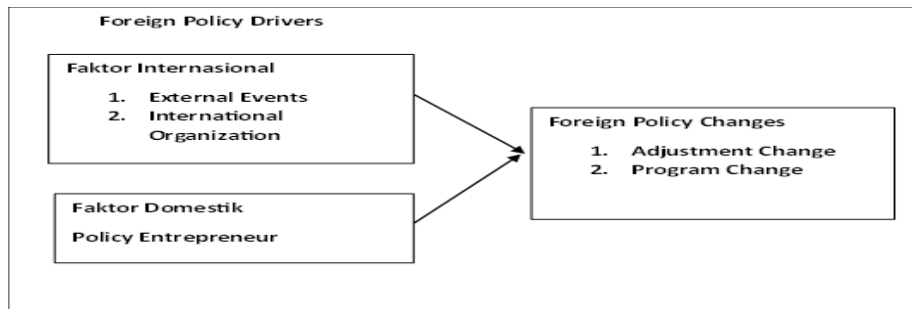
examining *drivers* rather than *inhibitors*. The justification for not discussing the inhibitor side is that several case studies that have been carried out show that inhibitors tend to be difficult to observe, because it is easier to see changes than no changes (leading to continuity) (Haesebrouck & Joly, 2021). Therefore, the identification of inhibitors can be an obstacle and a challenge in itself.

The driving factors for foreign policy change are divided into two, namely international and domestic factors. International factors consist of systemic changes, international norms, international organizations, and external events. Systemic change refers to the structure of the international system that can limit or allow flexibility. Bipolar systems tend to limit while multipolarity tends to increase flexibility (Volgy and Schwarz, 1994). These systemic changes can lead to the reconceptualization of security threats and the reprioritization of foreign policy objectives, as well as the emergence of new foreign policy options (Blavoukos & Bouratonis, 2014; Haesebrouck & Joly, 2021).

Brazys et al (2017) explained that international norms can be the main driver or can be instrumentalized for countries that want to change their foreign policy. Regarding International Organizations, there are two ways how IO encourages foreign policy change, First, participation in international organizations can encourage foreign policy change through the socialization process. Second, the foreign policy of countries that aspire to become international organizations can change because they often require various conditions (Blavoukos & Bouratonis, 2014; Haesebrouck & Joly, 2021). (Blavoukos & Bouratonis, 2014; Haesebrouck & Joly, 2021). Furthermore, external events can also be a potential major driver of foreign policy change. These changes come from some changes or initiatives in the country's external environment. This can also be interpreted as external shocks of external events that are large, obvious, have a direct impact on the country, and result in conditions of uncertainty/crisis (Lee, 2012; Hermann, 1990; Haesebrouck & Joly, 2021)

In identifying *foreign policy drivers*, there are also several domestic factors, namely leadership/regime changes, *policy entrepreneurs*, and *societal pressures/demands*. First, it is related to regime or leadership changes. In this case, as Peltner (2017) and Walsh (2006) explain that a significant change in leadership or government brings a change in foreign policy (Haesebrouck & Joly, 2021). Secondly, *policy entrepreneurs* refer to political figures with specific skills, vision, and/or leadership capacity who successfully overcome the inertia of previous foreign policy actions. This can refer to *leader-driven change* or bureaucratic advocacy, where a group within the government becomes a supporter of such change. Additionally, this can also be seen from the coalition groups supporting the government. Thirdly, *societal demand/pressure* refers to the demands arising from society or community groups to influence a country's policies. Based on this explanation, the following is the analytical framework model used in this research

Chart 1. Framework of Analysis: Foreign Policy Change



Source: Haesebrouck & Joly, 2021

For the record, in identifying the driving factors of foreign policy, it may not be possible for all factors that exist both domestically and internationally to appear as significant factors in a foreign policy (Holsti, 2016; Haesebrouck & Joly, 2021). Therefore, this study will basically focus on exploring factors that may be relevant related to changes in South Korea's *New Southern Policy Plus* (NSPP) foreign policy towards ASEAN countries in terms of *External Events*, *International Organizations*, and *Policy Entrepreneurs*, including identifying the form of change based on the type given.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research is a type of qualitative research with a deductive approach. Qualitative methods are data collection and analysis strategies that rely on the collection and analysis of non-numerical data (Lamont, 2015). Meanwhile, a deductive approach means an approach to develop or confirm a theory that starts with abstracts and theoretical relationships, then collects more concrete empirical evidence (Neuman, 2014). Through a deductive approach, a theoretical or analytical framework, in this case a *foreign policy change* from Haesebrouck & Joly, is used to guide the design of the research and the interpretation of the results. The data sources used in this study are archives, or official documents issued by the government such as official statements, official speeches, the Korea Diplomatic White Paper, and information booklets about the *New Southern Policy Plus* that collected from internet-based sources, books, journal articles, research reports, and news related to this research topic. The data were analyzed by categorizing empirical findings according to the key concepts and classifications provided in the theoretical framework, particularly the types and drivers of foreign policy change.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

International Factor

The Covid-19 pandemic as an external shock

While several external events may influence South Korea's foreign policy—including tensions with China and North Korea—this study focuses on the COVID-19 pandemic as a significant external shock that meets criteria outlined in foreign policy change theory. According to Haesebrouck & Joly (2021), external shocks are events that are sudden, visible, have widespread impact, and create conditions of uncertainty. In contrast to the earlier New Southern Policy (NSP), where strategic geopolitical calculations—particularly U.S.-China rivalry and North Korea's provocations—served as stronger motivations for engagement with ASEAN, the shift to the New Southern Policy Plus (NSPP) in late 2020 was explicitly framed as a response to the multidimensional crisis caused by the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic uniquely satisfies the criteria of an external shock by disrupting multiple sectors simultaneously, affecting both South Korea and ASEAN, and being directly cited as a justification for the NSPP's expanded initiatives. Therefore, although geopolitical tensions remain relevant in broader foreign policy, this study prioritizes COVID-19 to analyze how a global health and economic crisis can act as a catalyst for foreign policy adjustment and programmatic change. The Covid-19 pandemic is one of the issues that continues to attract the attention of the global community at that time, including South Korea and ASEAN countries. (AMS).

The Covid-19 pandemic has become a major issue that has had an impact on various sectors of life ranging from health, economy, education, tourism, labor, to various other fields. ASEAN countries themselves are countries that have been significantly affected by this pandemic. In the field of health and Covid-19 control, ASEAN countries themselves can be described as having different capacities. In terms of health and the handling of Covid-19, ASEAN countries with large populations also experience significant impacts, although each country has various different approaches in mitigating the pandemic. The following is a summary table of data regarding the development of Covid-19 cases in ASEAN countries and South Korea as of November 2020.

Table 1. Development of Covid-19 Cases in AMS and South Korea as of November 4, 2020

	Country	First case confirmation	Total Cases Confirmed	Total Death
	Brunei Darussalam	March 10, 2020	148	3
	Cambodia	January 27, 2020	292	N/A
	Indonesia	02 March 2020	418375	14146
	Laos	October 21, 2020	24	N/A
	Malaysia	January 25, 2020	34393	263
	Myanmar	March 23, 2020	55804	1307
	Philippines	30 January 2020	387161	7318
	Singapore	January 23, 2020	58029	28
	Thailand	January 13, 2020	3797	59
0	Vietnam	January 23, 2020	1202	35
Total case in ASEAN			959225	23159
1	South Korea	January 20, 2020	26807	472

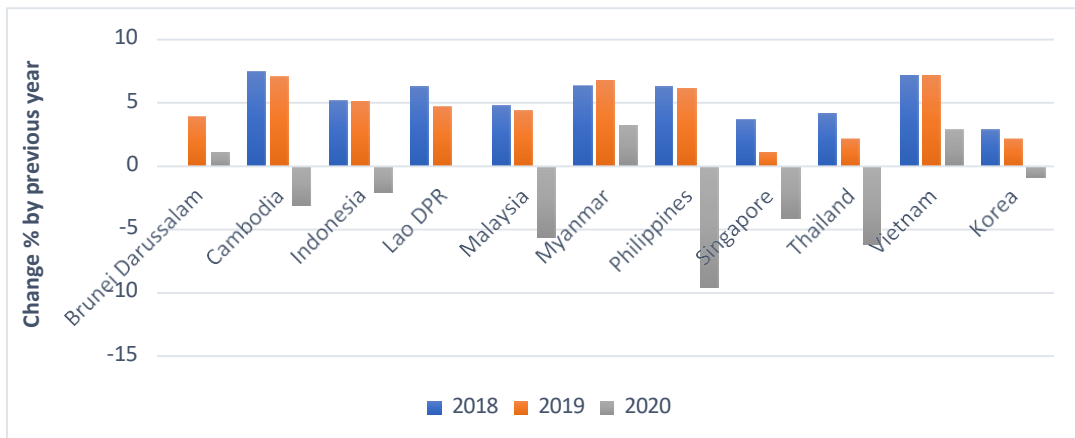
Source: ASEAN Biodiaspora Virtual Center (ABVC)

The data shows the number of Covid-19 cases that continue to grow in both ASEAN countries and South Korea. If referring to the table, Indonesia and the Philippines are the most vulnerable countries to the impact of Covid-19 in terms of health, including the number of deaths due to Covid-19. Since March 11, 2020, Covid-19 has been declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO). Therefore, this pandemic is a crucial issue that has various multi-dimensional impacts and collective handling at the domestic, regional, and global levels (ABVC, 2020).

Population of Southeast Asia, which amounts to 649 million people, 218 million workers are in the informal sector. As a result, they do not have access to health insurance benefits, work visas, and wage security. In the context of a pandemic with reinforced national borders and various *lockdown* restrictions on movement within

and between countries, these forms of socioeconomic uncertainty translate into a shrinking remittance economy as well as food and health insecurity for millions of people across Southeast Asia (Djalante et al, 2020). The following is data on the economic growth of ASEAN countries and Korea.

Graph 1. GDP Growth Rate of ASEAN Countries and South Korea 2018 – 2020



Source : aseankorea.org, reprocessed by the author.

From this data, it can be seen that economic growth conditions in both ASEAN and Korea countries have deteriorated, based on the value of their GDP growth percentage. In 2020, only Vietnam (2.9%), Myanmar (3.2%), and Brunei Darussalam (1.1%), were able to maintain their economic growth with positive values. Meanwhile, South Korea and seven other ASEAN countries experienced a significant decline in economic growth due to the Covid-19 Pandemic. Activity restrictions imposed in various parts of the world have fallen threatening the ASEAN economy. As a region, in general, the Southeast Asian region experienced an economic contraction of -4.0% in 2020 (Zen, 2023).

In the context of the *New Southern Policy* that has been running, the emergence of this pandemic has also had its own impact on the implementation of the policy. When the New Southern Policy was announced in 2017, this policy had a fairly ambitious target, that is to achieve a target of 200 billion USD in trade value by 2020. The achievement of this target is increasingly difficult to achieve as the pandemic situation affects the conditions of Korea and ASEAN. (Kim, Y.S. 2021) In the context of trade, a decline in global demand downtime or a slowdown in domestic production has led to a reduction in South Korea's exports, which typically account for 44% of GDP. This decline occurred in important market markets such as China down by 17.9%; ASEAN, by 32.9%; US, by 13.5%; and, the European Union, by 12.8%. Where export yields deteriorated in almost all sectors except for individual goods such as

coronavirus tests or *solid-state drives* which recorded an increase in overseas sales (Pietrewicz, 2020).

On the other hand, the pandemic situation can also give rise to new habits to switch and accelerate the adoption of the digital economy. ASEAN in this case has great potential, namely a young population of which 60 percent of the population is under 35 years old. ASEAN is considered to be the 5th largest economic group in the world. Where positive economic growth can be anticipated because the young generation is digitally connected (Yong, Teo, & Ho, 2021).

From the explanation above, it can be understood that external changes experienced by various countries can affect changes in a country's foreign policy. Because, from the existing pandemic crisis, this has implications for human survival, as well as the economic activities that surround it. These restrictions can influence various decisions that may be a form of adaptation related to the identification of changing issues and a concern for relations between countries in regional and global contexts.

This is also reinforced in the statement of Bok-Young Park, chairman of the Presidential Committee on NSP, who stated in the *New Southern Policy Plus Policy Statement* that - "*New Southern Policy Plus*" is announced by the President in November 2020. This is an upgrade version of the *New Southern Policy* reflecting changes in the current demand and environment from a longer-term perspective during the pandemic. In particular, we hope to discover concrete cooperation projects in various fields such as infrastructure, healthcare, industrial complexes, and cultural exchanges. Korea is also ready to discuss cooperation on 5G, Startup, and response to GVC reorganization. (The Presidential Committee on New Southern Policy, 2020)

Therefore, due to the occurrence of external events such as Covid-19, it is possible to focus emphasis on certain areas to deal with the changing world situation. This can increase the effectiveness of implementation, which may have been a challenge before due to the pandemic. On the other hand, it could also open up opportunities for Korea to identify other potential "*niche diplomacy*" that can be applied in this NSPP policy.

The involvement of South Korea in ASEAN

In the context of the next external factor, international organizations such as ASEAN can be a driver of foreign policy change. In this case, participation in international organizations can encourage change through the process of socialization (Haesebrouck & Joly, 2021). This is in line with how ASEAN and Korea's role in it can drive change in policy substance as well as the seven initiatives in the *New Southern Policy Plus*.

This can be seen from how Korea actively participates in socializing the *New Southern Policy* in various ASEAN activities, even though to achieve its goals, the policy is also carried out in a bilateral approach. Korea's active involvement in ASEAN during the NSP policy can be seen from several implementations. On November 26, 2019, ASEAN and Korea successfully held the 3rd *ASEAN – ROK Commemorative Summit*, which was held in Busan, South Korea. Basically, this activity aims to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the commemoration of ASEAN – ROK Dialogue Relations. In organizing this summit, various areas of cooperation that are of concern to the parties through the outcome document *Co-chair Statement of the ASEAN – ROK Commemorative Summit*.

In the document, there is a point that explicitly states that ASEAN countries welcome and appreciate South Korea through the *New Southern Policy* to further strengthen relations in line with the three pillars of the ASEAN Community and support efforts to sustain South Korea's contribution to development in the Region.

Some other deliverables at the meeting were (1) MoU on development cooperation between South Korea and Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Vietnam. This development cooperation aims to increase Korea's *Official Development Assistance* (ODA) funds to target countries by focusing on several sectors such as digital partnerships, higher education assistance, *smart cities* and transportation. (2) Establishment of a joint ASEAN-South Korea startup fund and startup ecology to create more unicorn companies in Industry 4.0. (3) The "New Southern" business cooperation center will be established to help South Korean companies expand into ASEAN and strengthen the competitiveness of ASEAN-based companies (Yeon, 2019; Ha & Ong, 2020).

Second, in a series of ASEAN – ROK *commemorative summits*, the Mekong – ROK Summit was also held between South Korea and Mekong River countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam). This activity was held on November 27, 2019, in Busan, South Korea. This meeting resulted in the *deliverables* of the Mekong – Han River Declaration for Establishing Partnership for People, Prosperity, and Peace which identified seven new areas of cooperation, namely (i) culture and tourism, (ii) human resource development (iii) agriculture and rural development; (iv) infrastructure; (v) ICT; (vi) environmental and (vii) non-traditional security challenges. These deliverables also explicitly state the three pillars of the New Southern Policy, namely People, Prosperity, and Peace as the foundation of the ROK-Mekong cooperation (Ha & Ong, 2019).

Third. ASEAN as a regional organization also has an interest in handling the Covid-19 issue in the region. This can be seen from how ASEAN held the Special ASEAN Plus Three Summit on Coronavirus Disease on April 14, 2020, and adopted the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework (ACRF) *and Its Implementation Plan* at the 37th ASEAN Summit in Vietnam which was held on November 12, 2020. The basis for

the adoption of the ACRF is ASEAN's awareness that it will overcome the impact of the pandemic that disrupts lives and livelihoods around the world (ASEAN Secretariat, 2020). Therefore, coordinated action is needed not only within the Region but also with ASEAN partners. While the region's priority is to overcome the pandemic, ASEAN must also consider a long-term collective socio-economic recovery strategy

The ACRF is intended to articulate ASEAN's response through various stages of recovery, focusing on the sectors and segments of society most affected by the pandemic, setting strategies and identifying them in accordance with sectoral and regional priorities. In this case, the ACRF has five strategies that are the basis in the framework of handling COVID-19 in ASEAN countries. First, *improving the health system*. Second, *strengthening human security*. Third, *maximize the potential of Intra-ASEAN Market and broader economic integration*. Fourth, *accelerating inclusive digital transformation*. Fifth, *advancing toward a more sustainable and resilient future*). When linking it to the New Southern Policy Plus changes, the strategies taken by ASEAN countries reflect a form of adaptation similar to South Korea's policy changes. Various comprehensive approaches are needed to deal with the Covid-19 problem in a multi-dimensional manner with a collaborative approach not only with intra-ASEAN but also with ASEAN partners such as South Korea.

Through the above description, it can be understood that international organizations are one of the means for partners / *dialogue partners* such as South Korea to find issues that are regional or global problems. In this case, ASEAN can also be a tool for South Korea to socialize its foreign policy to ASEAN member countries. Basically, changes to the seven initiatives in the *New Southern Policy* such as health, digital economy, human resource development, aligning issues that have been a concern for Korea and ASEAN in various forums that bring the two together and make them common problems. So, in this case, both ASEAN and South Korea's involvement in ASEAN can be an important driving factor for NSPP policy changes.

DOMESTIC FACTOR

The Role of *Policy Entrepreneurs* as Domestic Drivers

Essentially, the process of decision-making regarding South Korea's foreign policy is a complex matter, and the role of bureaucratic advocacy can be one way to view this in a democratic country, as opposed to the *leader-driven* approach typically adopted by authoritarian regimes. Moon Jae In, who serves as president, comes from the Liberal Democratic party. These party ideological differences between liberals and conservatives in South Korea often have different preferences in foreign policy. There are at least three mechanisms by which the liberal instinct becomes a series of initiatives in the real world. *First*, the liberal coalition pays great attention to public

preferences, for example, the liberal coalition must balance peace efforts with North Korea, on the other hand, maintain alliances and good relations with the US as public preferences (Park, 2022; Darusalam, 2020).

Second, personal history and the character of liberal leadership. Moon Jae In himself is a lawyer who actively defended human rights issues before joining the world of politics. Moon Jae In joined Blue House Roh Moo Hyun as a senior staffer, then also won a seat in the National Assembly in 2012 (Britannica, n.d). Their political education in institutionalized electoral politics dulls their radical or idealistic tendencies. Kim Dae-jung, who is also the president of the liberal party, famously advised liberal politicians to be equipped with the philosophy of a scholar and the instincts of a merchant. It also steered liberals toward a series of pragmatic foreign policies. (Park, 2022).

The third mechanism is the bureaucracy through which South Korean liberals will implement their foreign policy. Compared to conservatives who have been in power since the dictatorship, Korean liberals' experience of government is relatively short. Holding power for the first time in 1997, there are very few foreign policies think tanks that can fill key leadership positions such as Minister of State, Minister of Unification and National Security Adviser. And because liberals don't have much time to penetrate the ranks of working-class diplomats, liberals' foreign policy initiatives are often moderated by practitioners who sometimes exert direct pressure, or bureaucracy outside of the three groups (Park, 2022; Bae, 2020). In the context of the *New Southern Policy Plus* policy, it can be understood that the COVID-19 Pandemic situation has greatly affected more adaptive policies in the context of health, the economy (including the digital economy), and education. Thus, the bureaucracy that allows for recommendations and policy implementation can be traced from the Ministries/Institutions that are authorized on these three issues.

For example, the seven NSPP initiatives are in line with how South Korea has domestic strengthening measures that are in line with its economic/fiscal policies. There are 10 leading sectors identified by the *Ministry of Economy and Finance* in responding to the COVID-19 situation. These sectors are sectors that the government is striving for the development of business regulations and have great potential during the pandemic, namely 1) AI Data 2) Future Cars Mobility 3) Healthcare 4) Fintech 5) Medical Technologies 6) Recycling 7) Venture Startup 8) Industrial Complexes 9) Tourism 10) E-Commerce. This policy is also known as the *Korea New Deal* (MOEFa, 2020; MOEFb, 2020).

In July 2020, South Korea adopted the New Deal program to respond to the negative economic impact caused by COVID-19, with an emphasis on a regional approach. Through investment and increased regulation, the Korean New Deal aims to accelerate the adoption of remote work and education, promote green and low-carbon manufacturing, and lead the transformation to a digital and green economy

(MOEFb, 2020).

From this analysis, it is evident that domestic political and bureaucratic actors—particularly policy entrepreneurs—played a key role in shaping South Korea’s foreign policy adjustments through the New Southern Policy Plus. The liberal administration’s responsiveness to public sentiment, the leadership’s pragmatic orientation, and the proactive role of ministries and agencies in formulating adaptive policy responses all contributed to aligning domestic priorities with foreign policy objectives. In this context, the Korea New Deal and its focus on strategic sectors during the pandemic served as a foundation for external cooperation agendas under NSPP. This convergence reflects how domestic policy innovation became a key domestic driver, enabling South Korea to reframe its engagement with ASEAN and pursue new diplomatic niches aligned with its strengths and emerging global challenges.

Illustrating NSPP through Policy Initiative: Adjustment and Program Change

This section aims to illustrate how the New Southern Policy Plus (NSPP) embodies two types of foreign policy change—adjustment change and program change. Rather than evaluating the outcomes of NSPP, the focus here is to map key initiatives against these categories of change. This is relevant because the NSPP did not alter South Korea’s core foreign policy goals toward ASEAN but introduced new mechanisms, emphases, and policy instruments in response to the shifting global context, especially the COVID-19 crisis. By identifying these elements, this section contributes to explaining how South Korea adapted its foreign policy approach while reaffirming its regional commitments.

The change from the New Southern Policy to the *New Southern Policy Plus* can be understood as a form of *program change* in the classification of *foreign policy changes*. Because, basically, this policy does not change the orientation and goals that have existed in the New Southern Policy. Previously, it was to improve diplomatic relations with ASEAN countries based on the three existing pillars. Based on Hermann’s explanation, change in the form of a program change is defined as a change in the method or way to achieve goals or overcome problems. In this case, the seven existing initiatives can be qualitative changes and involve new ways. Meanwhile, adjustment change refers to the strengthening (or weakening) of pre-existing efforts (Hermann, 1990; Haesebrouck & Joly, 2021).

In the *people pillar*, there are several progress and initiatives that illustrate this form of *adjustment* and *program change*. First, related to comprehensive public health cooperation, a new initiative that has emerged since the NSPP change is South Korea’s commitment to support ASEAN countries up to 50 million USD for health cooperation. The cooperation consists of the *COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund* of 6 million USD, which is related to the procurement of *vaccines* and *other medical supplies*,

increasing the capacity of COVID-19 detection in countries of 5 million USD, ASEAN to humanitarian assistance in Myanmar of 3 million USD. In addition, at the ASEAN-ROK Health Ministers Meeting in November 2021, Korea committed to increasing grants in the health sector from 20 million in 2020 to 40 million USD to ASEAN countries by 2025.

Second, regarding cooperation in the field of education and human resource development, one of the advances in this field is *Higher Education for ASEAN Talents* (HEAT) starting in 2020 which supports university lecturers in ASEAN countries to achieve doctoral degrees through the ASEAN – Korea Cooperation Fund. In addition, Korea also holds various capacity building programs for ASEAN teachers and policymakers related to E-Learning through *virtual courses* as a form of educational adaptation during the pandemic. (MOFA ROK, 2021; KCUE, 2020)

Third. Regarding the promotion of cultural exchanges, there are various program initiatives carried out through the ASEAN-Korea Cooperation Fund (AKCF), including the ASEAN-ROK Film Community Program, Development of Digital Heritage Contents with UNESCO World Heritage of ASEAN, ASEAN-Korea Music Festival and ASEAN-ROK Arts and Culture Program under KONNECT ASEAN (MOFA ROK 2021; MOFA ROK, n.d). Fourth, from the prosperity pillar, there are initiative points to build sustainable trade and investment. In this case, there is progress in the signing of the Indonesia-Korea Comprehensive Partnership Economic Agreement (IKCEPA) in December 2020 and Korea – Cambodia Free Trade Agreement in October 2021. In 2021, there was also the establishment of the Financial Cooperation Center under the ROK Mission to ASEAN. Basically, this center was established to support South Korean financial companies as Korean companies such as Shinhan Financial Group, Hana Financial Group, as well as KB and Woori Financial Group expand into Southeast Asia. In addition, this center also aims to help SMEs in the Southeast Asian region, to support financial infrastructure in ASEAN (MOFA ROK, 2021).

Fifth, the development of village and urban infrastructure. In this initiative, Korea seeks to support ASEAN connectivity in line with the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 (MPAC 2025). One of the new initiatives is the launch of the K-City Network Global Cooperation Program, a *smart cities* cooperation platform that assists in the development of master plans and feasibility studies as well as technology consultation and training support in eight cities in the ASEAN region. Among them are improving waste, water, and transportation management in the Capital City of the Archipelago (IKN), Indonesia; tackling slums and traffic congestion in Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia; conducting a *smart cities* feasibility study for Dala New Town in Myanmar; and established a smart mobility system in Khon Kaen, Thailand. In addition, Korea also increased funding for the Mekong region through the ROK – Mekong Cooperation Fund in 2021, where these Mekong countries are also thematic

destinations for rural development (MOFA ROK, 2021).

Sixth, Future industrial cooperation for common prosperity, this is mainly related to the use of artificial intelligence (AI), *big data*, *virtual reality*, and the *Internet of Things* (IoT). The development of this cooperation includes the launch of the ASEAN – ROK *ICT Convergence Village* in Busan in 2021 to increase cooperation with ASEAN in digital content involving 5G technology. In addition, South Korea and ASEAN also collaborated in the creation of the *ASEAN – ROK Startup Policy Roadmap* which was inaugurated in 2019 and the organization of the ASEAN – ROK Startup Festival in December 2021 in Brunei Darussalam (MOFA ROK, 2021). Lastly, the initiative on encouraging transnational cooperation to promote security and peace. However, the development of cooperation here refers more to non-traditional security.

Where in 2019, the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime to Deepen Countering Terrorism and Transnational Crime was launched and continued at the second meeting in 2021. In 2020, there was the launch of the Thailand-South Korea *cyber policy dialogue*. In addition, this initiative also highlights the issue of climate change and pollution which are also non-traditional security threats. In this regard, the Korea-Mekong Water Management Collaboration Research Centre (KMCRC) has been established to support the development of water resource management capacity in the Mekong River, in September 2021, the ASEAN-ROK dialogue on Environment and Climate Change was held to strengthen this area of cooperation.

Essentially, the *New Southern Policy Plus* is a policy resulting from various changes occurring in the relationship between South Korea and ASEAN countries. These changes can be described by the classification of gradual nature related to the policy in the form of adjustments or changes in the level of efforts by South Korea and ASEAN (*adjustment change*) as well as changes in methods or new initiatives by South Korea towards the target countries, namely ASEAN countries (*program change*). However, the level of change cannot yet be said to significantly affect its overarching goals or changes related to its orientation. This is because, fundamentally, NSP Plus does not entirely alter the objectives of the NSP in strengthening the relationship between South Korea and ASEAN countries.

While many of these initiatives appear as a natural extension of the previous NSP, the timing and content of NSPP reflect more than just policy continuity. The disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic created a vacuum in the implementation of earlier projects under NSP, which necessitated a recalibration of priorities. In this context, NSPP not only addressed pressing global issues such as health security and digital transformation, but also provided South Korea with a renewed platform to showcase its niche diplomatic strengths—particularly in areas like smart technology, public health, and education—within ASEAN member

countries. This dual function of policy adaptation and strategic repositioning underlines how Korea used NSPP to restore policy momentum while subtly enhancing its role as a middle power in Southeast Asia.

CONCLUSIONS

This research has explored the driving forces behind South Korea's shift from the New Southern Policy to the New Southern Policy Plus, focusing on its engagement with ASEAN. While the policy change occurred in the final year of President Moon Jae-in's administration, it represents more than a symbolic update—it reflects South Korea's strategic responsiveness to a rapidly evolving global and regional landscape, particularly amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The analysis identified three main drivers: the external shock of the pandemic, institutional engagement with ASEAN, and the influence of policy entrepreneurs shaped by South Korea's liberal leadership and bureaucratic dynamics. These drivers catalysed changes that fall within the categories of program and adjustment change, as they introduced new methods while reaffirming the fundamental goals of NSP.

More broadly, these policy adjustments highlight South Korea's effort to maintain regional influence and relevance by aligning domestic innovation (such as the Korean New Deal) with its foreign policy agenda. The NSPP provided a platform not only for addressing global challenges—such as public health, digital transformation, and non-traditional security—but also for showcasing Korea's diplomatic niche in the region. In this sense, the policy shift contributes to strengthening ASEAN–South Korea relations beyond economic cooperation, by building mutual resilience and broadening the scope of engagement.

Going forward, further research should explore the implementation of NSPP at the country level, especially in less developed ASEAN members where Korea's engagement may face different constraints and opportunities. Studies might also examine the under-researched Peace pillar to better understand Korea's evolving security diplomacy in Southeast Asia.

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