


# Chapter 7

## The South China Sea in ASEAN–Republic of Korea Relations: Strategic Interests and Maritime Security Cooperation in Historical Perspective

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter examines the South China Sea as a pivotal strategic space in Republic of Korea (ROK)–ASEAN relations since the early twenty-first century. Rather than focusing solely on sovereignty disputes, it conceptualizes the South China Sea as a multi-layered power structure where maritime economic interests, sea-lane security, and great-power competition intersect. The analysis explores how ASEAN employs international law, multilateral institutions, and functional cooperation to manage conflicts and preserve regional centrality, while the ROK, as a middle power, pursues calibrated engagement through ASEAN-led mechanisms to safeguard maritime interests without escalating strategic confrontation. This study positions the South China Sea as an illuminating case for understanding indirect middle-power engagement in regional security governance amid intensifying geopolitical pressures.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Within the Asia-Pacific regional security architecture, the South China Sea has emerged as a multi-layered strategic space where maritime economic interests, maritime security imperatives, and international power competition converge and intersect. Far beyond its function as a vital maritime artery for global trade and energy flows, the South China Sea is increasingly recognized as a “geostrategic node” in the ongoing reconfiguration of regional order—a theater wherein great powers calibrate their spheres of influence through both military deployments and institutional instruments. The strategic sensitivity of these waters stems not solely from protracted sovereignty disputes, but also from the securitization of techno-economic interactions, ensuring that any legal or political volatility in this domain can trigger spillover effects extending far beyond its immediate geographical boundaries.

From a regional governance perspective, the “South China Sea issue” is increasingly conceptualized as a power-structural problem rather than a fragmented collection of bilateral disputes. The prevailing power asymmetry among claimant states, coupled with deepening involvement by major powers, has transformed the South China Sea into a critical test of whether regional mechanisms can effectively manage conflicts and sustain a stable order (Weissmann, 2010). Within this context, ASEAN functions simultaneously as a directly affected actor and as the principal institutional hub for advancing restraint, dialogue, and the development of legal norms. Nevertheless, ASEAN’s coordinating role remains constrained by internal dynamics—namely, consensus requirements, divergent national interests, and pressures emanating from great-power competition—which collectively limit its regulatory capacity and practical effectiveness (Amer, 2009).

A notable characteristic of existing scholarship on the South China Sea is its predominant focus on claimant states and the strategic calculations of major powers such as the United States and China. By contrast, the role of extra-regional middle powers is frequently relegated to a secondary analytical tier. This analytical gap has become increasingly conspicuous since the early decades of the twenty-first century, as the Republic of Korea (ROK) has steadily expanded its strategic engagement with Southeast Asia through foreign policy initiatives including the New Southern Policy (NSP) and, subsequently, the Korea–ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI). Alongside the expansion of economic cooperation, the ROK has progressively deepened its involvement in non-traditional security domains, maritime capacity-building programs, and discourse on a rules-based order, thereby establishing an indirect yet consequential presence in the maritime security landscape of the South China Sea without assuming the position of a claimant party (Yoon, 2021).

Integrating both empirical and theoretical perspectives, this chapter situates the South China Sea within the broader evolution of ASEAN–ROK relations, treating

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