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THE PENINSULA

How the “Plus” Factor in South Korea’s New Southern Policy Plus Can Ensure Sustainability

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The New Southern Policy Plus (NSP Plus) was announced by President Moon Jae-in at the 21st ASEAN-ROK Summit on November 12, 2020. While maintaining emphasis on economic partnerships, the NSP Plus identifies collective recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic and sustainability as critical areas for cooperation. It expands on the original NSP’s three-pillar framework of “People, Prosperity, and Peace” by listing seven key agenda including education and human resource development, non-traditional security concerns such as climate change, and digitalization. Yet for the NSP Plus to be successfully etched into South Korea’s diplomatic trajectory and continue past the upcoming 2022 presidential election,[i] the goals of the policy themselves need to be sustainable. In other words, South Korea

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needs to identify and advocate for specific niches such as digitalization where it could play a lead role in advancing cooperation with ASEAN and India.

When the original New Southern Policy (NSP) was first announced in 2017, it was met with both praise and skepticism. On the one hand, it was applauded as South Korea's due recognition of Southeast Asia and India—in addition to Northeast Asia and in particular, the Korean Peninsula—as important regions for expanding diplomatic and economic cooperation. The policy is also considered President Moon's major legacy; no South Korean leader in the past had highlighted Southeast Asia and India as top diplomatic priorities to the same extent as his administration. Under President Moon, the NSP has been promoted at the frontlines in tandem with the New Northern Policy, for the overall objective of building a "responsible Northeast Asia Plus community."

On the other hand, there were concerns within the South Korean policy community that the NSP might fail to extend beyond its brand-name and message. References have been drawn to the late 1990s, when the Kim Dae-jung administration helped propagate and foster economic and diplomatic partnerships with Southeast Asia vis-à-vis bilateral dialogues and ASEAN Plus Three initiatives. Unfortunately, the "Southeast Asia hype" of the 1990s did not translate into prolonged research and engagement as South Korea turned to other more pressing concerns centered on the Korean Peninsula throughout the proceeding administrations. As such, a common criticism has been that the NSP lacks the necessary policy framework for executing the proposed initiatives beyond statements and agreements. Gaps in public-private partnerships also raise the question of whether the government is truly capable of exercising leadership over the various stakeholders involved.[ij]

In that regard, the renewed NSP Plus provides an extended structural framework with the '7 NSP Plus Initiatives.' [iii] The policy statement also explicitly recognizes "choosing areas of concentration" and the "securing] a consistent and sustainable implementation of the NSP" as key underlining principles. Yet in addition to carving out and diversifying different projects under the original 3P ("People, Peace and Prosperity") strategy, what the NSP Plus needs is a specific action plan for implementing these initiatives and helping them see tangible results. And though the COVID-19 pandemic has delayed certain projects and damaged South Korea's greater ability to contribute economically to ASEAN and India, it would be concerning if further delays result from the government's revisions in the NSP's overarching message and its implications.

A strategy that South Korea can pursue is to specialize by selecting areas of comparative advantage among the various NSP Plus initiatives, and actively communicate current achievements of key projects with the public. For example, one of the projects that has been reiterated since the original NSP is infrastructure development, specifically as related to digitalization and smart cities. In fact, the NSP bridged South Korea's domestic 2008 Ubiquitous City (U-City) Act with the ASEAN Smart City Network (ASCN), an initiative that was announced at the 32nd ASEAN Summit in 2018. Since signaling willingness to provide infrastructural and technical support to ASCN at the 2019 ASEAN-ROK Commemorative Summit, South Korea has signed multiple MOUs with ASEAN members including Vietnam and Thailand. Unfortunately, the project continues to lack both public interest and citizen participation which has inevitably impacted its diplomatic outreach. It is therefore advised that the government facilitate better communication with the public on such NSP projects, especially since the construction of smart cities and the project's sustainability depend primarily on the public.

In addition to identifying and advocating priority projects, South Korea needs to assemble government-led task force groups and institute specific monitoring systems dedicated to meeting each project's end-goals. While envisioning the end-state of the NSP may be difficult, it would be more realistic to define specific goals for individual projects. Currently, the Presidential Committee on New Southern Policy oversees the NSP projects with the help of other governmental organizations, state-owned enterprises, and research institutes. Yet the diversification of labor among the governmental and non-governmental bodies, coupled with varying conditions for cooperation set by partner nations make it difficult for the Presidential Committee to monitor them all. This dilemma is reflected in the brochure that the Committee has for the smart city project, which includes an extensive list of 42 agenda items including the construction of information and pipeline systems, with an accompanying list of nearly 20 organizations involved, with little information on how these two are connected.[iv] To push the NSP Plus agenda forward, the government needs to allocate specific responsibilities—including duties such as monitoring and documenting progress—to specific organizations and governmental bodies.

South Korea is considered as a regional leader in enhancing connectivity through digitalization and sustainability through smart city technologies. These altogether contribute to the “plus” factor in the NSP Plus that the government needs to communicate with the domestic and international public. Many NSP projects are in their early stages and

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demand patience in bearing fruit. However, better advocacy of key projects and distribution of labor by the government would add to the extended framework of the NSP Plus by helping to ensure its sustainability.

[i] South Korea shows a tendency to shift its foreign policy and diplomatic initiatives with changes in the administration as well as the ruling party.

[ii] The report cites the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute's "State of Southeast Asia 2020" survey in which South Korea ranked second lowest regionally as a preferred strategic partner for ASEAN countries, while Samsung was selected as the preferred developer over other corporations in building the regional 5G networks.

[iii] The seven initiatives include the following: 1) Comprehensive public health cooperation in post-Covid era, 2) Share Korean-style education model and support the development of human resources, 3) Promote two-way cultural exchanges, 4) Build the foundation of mutually beneficial and sustainable trade and investment, 5) Support rural villages and urban infrastructure development, 6) Cooperate in future industries for common prosperity, 7) Cooperate for safety and peace promotion at the transnational level.

[iv] Organizations and institutions currently involved in the smart city project include the following: 1) Government: Presidential Committee on New Southern Policy (NSP), Ministry of Economy and Finance (MOEF), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport (MOLIT), Ministry of Science and ICT (MISIT), Ministry of Environment (MOE), 2) State-owned Enterprise: Korea Land and Housing Corporation (LH), Korea Water Resources Cooperation (K-water), Korea Trade Promotion Agency (KOTRA), Korea Electric Power Corporation (KEPCO), 3) Research Institute: Korea Institute for International Economic Policy (KIEP), Korea Research Institute for Human Settlements (KRIHS), Korea Transport Institute (KOTI), Korea Environment Institute (KEI), Electronics and Telecommunications Institute (ETRI), Korea Association for ICT Promotion (KAIT), 4) Other Partners: Smart City Alliance (Public-Private Smart City Alliance in Korea), ASEAN-Korea Centre (AKC), World Smart Cities Organization (WeGO).

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