



## R.O.K Minilateral Engagement with ASEAN: Assessment of BIMP-EAGA\*

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### [ *Abstract* ]

The ASEAN and ROK have played a crucial role in fostering regional peace and economic development. Nevertheless, the recent strategic competition between the US and China has turned the region into a contested arena. The relationship faces challenges due to the ROK's growing alignment with the US, prompting a rising interest in minilateralism as an alternative collaboration model. This paper scrutinizes the impact of ROK's foreign policy behavior, with a focus on minilateralism as a preferred cooperation model with ASEAN. The study centers on BIMP-EAGA, investigating its effectiveness in sustaining collaboration amid geopolitical rivalry. The paper concludes that BIMP-EAGA, as a manifestation of minilateralism, serves as an alternative platform for ROK and ASEAN cooperation. However, the study reveals that the implementation of BIMP-EAGA falls short of expectations. This paper emphasizes the need for greater subregional focus and comprehensive coverage of BIMP-EAGA to truly reflect the shared interests of ASEAN member states.

**Keywords:** ASEAN, Republic of Korea, Minilateralism, BIMP-EAGA

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## **I . Introduction**

ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nation), established in 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, is a regional organization comprising countries in Southeast Asia. Subsequently, Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia joined, making it the prominent international organization representing Southeast Asia. Over the past 56 years, ASEAN has made significant contributions to maintaining regional peace and stability and achieving economic development. The absence of serious armed conflicts among member countries and the influx of foreign investments based on peace have facilitated rapid economic growth. Indeed, ASEAN's core principles of sovereign equality, consensus decision-making, and non-interference in domestic affairs have been subject to significant criticism in terms of efficiency. However, it can be considered valid to unify ten sovereign nations with diverse characteristics under one organization (D. Y. Kim 2023).

However, due to the recent strategic competition between the United States and China, ASEAN has turned into a battleground for external major power rivalry, jeopardizing its role as a mediator. The erosion of ASEAN's leadership in regional multilateral cooperation has led to a growing interest in new forms of collaboration, especially minilateralism. Minilateralism refers to the collaboration among a limited number of nations that possess a shared understanding. It is essentially a scaled-down version of multilateralism, wherein three or more countries engage in cooperative efforts. Minilateralism is frequently likened to subregional cooperation in discussions of ASEAN.

ASEAN's subregionalism began with the establishment of the Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) in 1989, proposed by Singapore. Subsequently, the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) was founded in 1992, IMT-GT involving Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand was established in 1993, and the Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) was formed in 1994. The ASEAN subregional economic cooperation initiatives aim to promote economic growth by fostering mutual cooperation in various fields such as trade,

investment, tourism, and transportation among regions sharing common development goals.

The relationship between Republic of Korea (ROK) and ASEAN was established in 1989 with sectoral dialogue relations, which were elevated to a full dialogue partnership in 1991. Over the years, the cooperation has become indissoluble, encompassing various areas such as economy, politics, and society. Currently, ASEAN is South Korea's second-largest trading partner and investment partner. The partnership is emphasized as an optimal collaboration due to the mutual strengths and development potential shared between the two.

The significance of the relationship between ROK and ASEAN is underscored by initiatives such as the New Southern Policy announced in 2017 and the Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI) in 2022. Particularly, KASI represents a tailored regional strategy for ASEAN within the Indo-Pacific policy framework. ASEAN-centered policies, including the New Southern Policy, have been consistent across successive governments, with differences in degree, and KASI represents a further improved policy. It outlines plans to strengthen digital technology, climate change and environmental interventions, health, national and international security and defense, human resources, and sub-regional cooperation. This approach centered around ASEAN demonstrates a consistent policy across successive governments, showcasing Korea's dedication to fostering stronger ties with its regional partners.

However, ROK foreign policy indicates a different orientation. In August 2023, President Yoon Seok Yul flew to the US in order to participate in a trilateral summit with US President Joe Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. The summit was held with the objective of exploring avenues to strengthen security collaboration in response to the nuclear danger posed by North Korea. Principal Deputy National Security Adviser of ROK Kim Tae Hyo stressed that the trilateral negotiations are expected to establish a distinct and autonomous identity as a cooperative entity in the Indo-Pacific region (Lee 2023). ROK's interest in building a newfound conception of "distinct identity" within the Indo-Pacific has garnered concern from ASEAN scholars on the relative

importance of the regional block's "leading" position.

Considering this context, experts have posited that Seoul's increasing alignment with the US has undermined the ASEAN Centrality, thereby placing Seoul in an awkward situation vis-à-vis the ASEAN. However, optimistic scholars have highlighted ROK's continued engagement with ASEAN, with goals and interests intertwined (Indraswari & Martinus 2023).

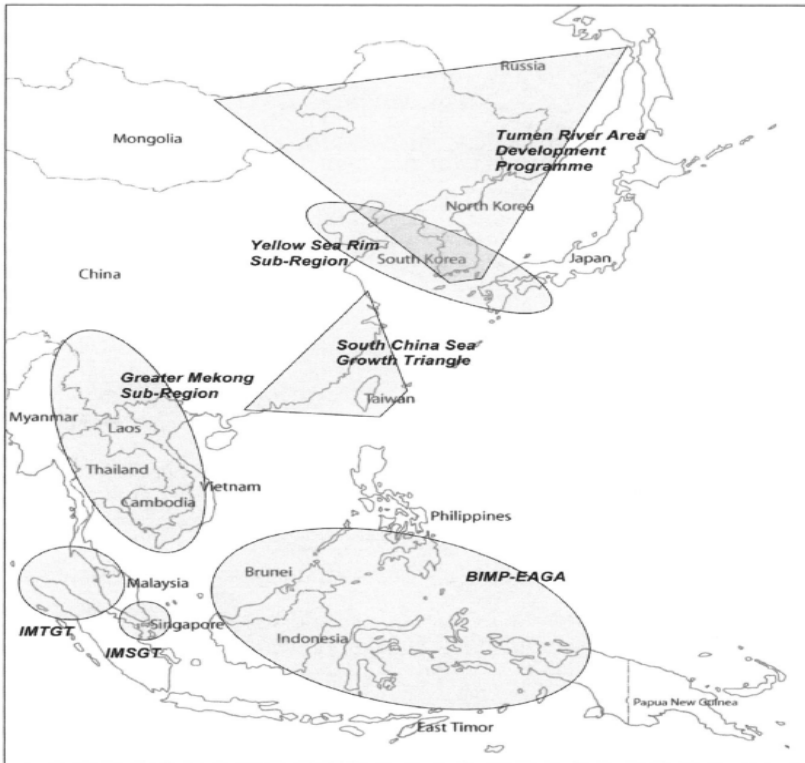
Instead of adopting an over-encompassing approach, ROK focuses on a small-scope and issue-focused cooperation. By focusing on specific issues, ROK and ASEAN are able to sustain collaboration despite growing rivalry.

The current main clustering of minilateralism cooperation between ROK and ASEAN are as follows: GMS (Greater Mekong Sub-region), IMT-GT (Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle), IMS-GT (Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore Growth Triangle), and BIMP-EAGA (Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area). BIMP-EAGA is chosen as the subject of this research because compared to other minilateralism, it covers the largest area. Furthermore, the project is central for both ASEAN and ROK. For ASEAN, BIMP-EAGA supports the narrowing of development gap among member states as enshrined in the ASEAN connectivity vision. BIMP-EAGA is tasked to enhance the economic capacity of lesser developed and peripheral areas through the promotion of regional economic activity. Areas under BIMP-EAGA have low GDP in comparison to national GDPs with inadequate infrastructure (Evangelista 2000). BIMP-EAGA is also one of the main projects in the ASEAN Outlook of Indo Pacific (AOIP). AOIP focuses on connectivity by exploring the potential synergies with sub-regional frameworks, including BIMP-EAGA. This key priority area of cooperation in connectivity reinforces the existing ASEAN Master Plan Action on Connectivity (MPAC) 2025.

Meanwhile for ROK, BIMP-EAGA sits well under KASI. Launched by the Korean government during the ASEAN Summit in Cambodia in 2022, KASI is part of Seoul's vision to become a Global Pivotal State under the Strategy for Free Peaceful and Prosperous Indo-Pacific region. Seoul wishes for ASEAN to be an

ROK key partner in peace and shared prosperity and is committed in supporting AOIP's four-priority areas including connectivity, SDGs, and economic and maritime cooperation. Regarding narrowing the development gap in the region, KASI aims to sustain ASEAN-ROK cooperation by increasing budgets to approximately 200 million USD. Seoul also committed to increase the annual volume of the ASEAN Korean Cooperation Fund (AKCF) to 32 million USD, the Mekong-Republic of Korea Cooperation Found (MKCF) to 10 million USD, and the BIMP-EAGA-ROK Cooperation Fund (BKCF) to 6 million USD. Respectively ROK's official development assistance (ODA) allocation remained focused on infrastructure projects.

<Figure 1> Mapping of Minilateralism in East Asia (Dent & Richter 2011)



*Notes:* BIMP-EAGA = Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area  
 IMSGT = Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore Growth Triangle  
 IMTGT = Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle

The prevailing general optimism suggests that the concept of minilateralism contributes to the long-term viability of the ROK-ASEAN relationship in the face of significant geopolitical competition. Against this backdrop, this research seeks to examine the extent to which minilateralism contributes to the development of the ROK-ASEAN relationship. In doing so, the research assesses the efficacy of BIMP-EAGA as an alternative minilateralism model of cooperation strategy against external constraints.

## **II . Literature Review**

Tow and Envall (2011) define minilateralism as “usually three, but sometimes four or five states meeting and interacting informally (in the absence of governing documents) to discuss issues-areas involving mutual threats to their security or more often to go over specific task related to building regional stability and order” (p. 62). Recent developments indicate that there have been alterations in this definition. However, minilateralism’s character remains distinctive. It is “informal, non-binding, [with the] purpose to build partnership and coalitions of the interested, willing and capable” (Stewart 2015).

Minilateralism emerges due to mounting disappointment in the inability of current multilateral systems to solve old problems. Multilateralism in its inception was a response to achieve equality among states in which small powers are often discriminate (Kahler 1992). However, this universalist character is a subject to criticism. Neoliberalism challenges the idea of universalism by positing that it leads to the emergence of “large number problem” and inefficiencies. Meanwhile, realism posits that major countries tend to favor bilateralism as it is immune from the scrutiny of others.

In his commentary, Naim Moises (2009) questions the work of multilateral institutions in solving global concerns. The failure of multilateral global governance, for example, on trade negotiation blocks and the inefficiency of the UN in addressing global issues, has forced states to seek alternative ways of managing international relations. Moises stresses that there has been no global consensus

since 2000 and this pinpoints to the global public's shared "flawed obsession with multilateralism as the panacea for all the world ills" (Naim 2009). He suggested that minilateralism's "magic number" serves as the solution for the current global impasse. Minilateralism offers a "smarter and targeted approach, ... to have the largest possible impact on solving a particular problem" (Naim 2009).

Similarly, Sung Mi Kim, et al. argue that traditional multilateral avenues have become increasingly "deadlock prone and anachronistic" (S.M. Kim et al. 2018). They argue that the heightening interdependency and "multiplex" order create a geopolitical uncertainty that pushes states to search for alternate strategies to insert influences. Here, minilateralism comes to the front by providing a fresh approach characterized by its small size and agility.

William T. Tow (2015) argues that minilateralism strength lies in its small size. It is able to circumvent problems coming from alliance politic as it focuses on a small number of members willing and interested to solve a particular issue. Furthermore, minilateralism is task oriented, it doesn't aspire to build an identity, nor establish norms or rules. It is also not a bilateral alliance, thus it is less threatening (Tow 2015).

Yet minilateralism is not free from criticism. Patrick Stewart (2015) argues that the emergence of this informal club of the like-minded also has certain risks as it leads to the erosion of crucial international organizations, and diminished accountability within global governance structures (Stewart 2015). Meanwhile, Amalina Anuar and Nazia Hussain (2021) argue that despite minilateralism's focus on small members eases the development of trust shared by its individual leaders, the very same closeness is precarious as cooperation rests on individual leaders. The informality of minilateralism leads to low institutionalization, thus is dangerous because it creates a vacuum when leaders change (Anuar & Hussain 2021). As government leadership is changing regularly, the absence of formal institutionalization incapacitates minilateral groupings. Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) in 2007 was one example. The grouping went on "hiatus" when Japan Prime Minister Shinzo

Abe stepped down and Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd refused to go against China.

In general, research on minilateralism addresses topics from the perspective of macro-level governance, especially on its efficiency in tackling international problems. Sung Mi Kim, et al. contribute to minilateralism on a micro level by focusing on the perspective of members of the club (S.M. Kim et al. 2018). They assess minilateral groupings on key motivations sustaining them. They found that minilateralism allows a member to get benefits without incurring a major additional budget. Minilateralism is also low maintenance and provides more flexibility. Therefore, it is an inexpensive multipurpose tool that can be deployed for capacity building and network sharing, as well for gaining diplomatic diversification and global visibility.

Research in minilateralism predominantly addresses non-security issues. Falkner, for example, argues that the minilateralism's "magic number club" is important in tackling climate change issues (Falkner 2016). Similarly, McGee goes further by distinguishing what he calls inclusive and exclusive multilateralism. He concludes that the later provides greater effectiveness in reducing global greenhouse gas emissions, further emphasizing the effective performance by small, like-minded groups (McGee 2011). On the contrary, minilateralism is less preferred in addressing security issues. Because compared to multilateralism, minilateralism is less inclusive and amenable to implementing norms of regional order and governance (Tow 2015).

The concept of minilateralism has been under discussed in the context of regional security issues (Moore 2007). Despite the lack of utilization of minilateralism in security cooperation, Tow argues that in the contemporary Asia Pacific geopolitical setting, minilateralism is becoming a prominent security trend. This is because the cooperation of small groups to pursue a common security interest informally is a better fit for post-war Asian models of institutional design. Few explanations supported this trend. First, the shift towards a multilateral system weakened the asymmetrical alliances with the US, in particular the hub and spokes system in addressing



security concerns in the Asia Pacific. As such, states in the region have at their disposal more elbow room to create their own security clubs through minilateralism. Second, the regional multilateral setting of the security framework in Asia is limited and has not been able to manage overall security issues. ASEAN is the only multilateral, regional grouping that provides a platform to discuss security challenges. However, its power is curbed by its institutional design that prohibits the emergence of rigid and binding resolutions to solve any security issues. In contrast, the region has been a focal point of prolonged security tensions, with the Korean peninsula peace issues and the South China Sea territorial disputes present, making it difficult for regional multilateral grouping to antagonize the great power interests and sensitivity. Hence, as suggested by Michael Green (2014), minilateralism is suitable in Asia as it serves as a hedging instrument applied within an environment that has an “immature” regional security architecture” (Green 2014) .

Similarly, David Cha (2011) argues that minilateralism works best in the “complex patchwork” of the security environment in Asia. The patchwork refers to the “informality, absence of rules-based institution, smattering bilateral alliances and inseparability of low vs. high politic” (Van 2014), making it difficult to navigate the Asia security framework. Cha further argues that Asia's contemporary security environment is not primarily influenced by China, nor is it primarily characterized by a decrease in the influence of the United States. Instead, it incorporates the major power states in the region. To make the regional architecture framework work best, he stressed that major powers must be able to overcome the security dilemma of having to choose between US and China.

Because minilateralism focuses on the “willing,” it allows middle and small powers to assume more roles. Amitav Acharya underscores that in minilateralism, “the agency in building a world order is more dispersed and lies more with the audience than with the producers (great powers)” (Acharya 2018). By focusing on the agency role, security minilateralism in Asia gives the stage to major powers. Thus, they should have more say in shaping security issues in the region.

ROK minilateral cooperation in the Asia Pacific takes two forms. First, minilateralism with the US, and second, minilateralism with ASEAN. This two-sphered minilateral conception was created because of the ROK's struggle for autonomy. On the one hand, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) security threat and Seoul's dependence on the US in security provisions prompted the establishment of the first security minilateralism. On the other hand, the increasing desire for autonomy prompted Seoul to entertain its middle power status and cooperate with like-minded countries through ASEAN, giving birth to the second minilateral clubs. While the first focuses on security, the second encompasses a wider area of concerns, particularly in development strategy.

ROK's struggle for autonomy determines the character of minilateralism it has developed with the US and ASEAN. At the same time, both multilateralisms may be argued as mutually exclusive. Hoang Thi Ha stresses that the ROK's tendency to engage in security minilateralism with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) erodes ROK relations with ASEAN (Ha 2023). Hoang argues that ROK minilateralism with the US challenges ASEAN in three ways. First, the ROK shows hard balancing towards the US and reduced reliance on ASEAN. Second, small memberships hold out better than ASEAN, which is known for its informal and hence infective problem-solving mechanism. Third, ROK minilateralism accentuates the existing strategic incoherence within ASEAN in the face of great power competitions. Thus, it logically follows why ROK drifted away from ASEAN. The increasing prevalence of minilateralism can be attributed to the influence of great power competition and the perceived inefficacy of established multilateral frameworks. In the Asia Pacific, ASEAN's limited capacity to enhance its centrality and unity in its interactions with external powers allow the emergence of minilateralism outside the ASEAN framework. ROK's minilateral engagement with the US poses risks to ASEAN Centrality. The possible erosion of ASEAN's credibility arises from the discriminatory characteristics inherent in minilateralism. The fundamental principles of centrality and unity within ASEAN are also inherently incompatible with minilateralism's exclusivity. Thus, concerns regarding great power interests presiding over lesser power

interests in the region comes with minilateralism.

ROK is aware that its engagement in minilateralism with the US serves its security interests and at the same time puts strain to Seoul relations with ASEAN. To overcome it, ROK retains engagement with ASEAN through minilateralism on non-security issues.

Subregional (and essentially, minilateral) cooperation matters for ASEAN. Lim and Lee (2023) argue that ASEAN's slow and inefficient nature raises concerns about its efficacy in leading the region. They advocate for minilateral cooperation within ASEAN, suggesting that smaller groups of like-minded member countries collaborate more effectively in addressing specific issues (Lin & Lee 2023). Similarly, Heydrian suggests that shifting towards minilateralism is crucial for ASEAN. He argues that ASEAN is falling into the “middle institutional trap” as current decision-making mechanisms are inadequate in confronting institutionally evolving challenges. Hence, preserving the principle of ASEAN centrality demands that the regional organization goes beyond its consensus-driven decision-making and adopts minilateral agreements to address contentious issues (Heydarian 2017).

Minilateralism allows ASEAN to be more flexible and efficient as it offers a venue for a smaller group of ASEAN member states to concentrate on specific issues, bypassing the complexities of involving an entire bloc. This approach can lead to faster decision-making and more effective resolution of problems as it can address specific challenges more directly. By focusing only on like-minded states, minilateralism creates a stronger and deeper bond among countries, which may consequently lead to ease of coordination and increased collaborations. For one, minilateralism “saves” ASEAN from its lagging decision-making process. With fewer states involved, an agreed decision is easier to be achieved. Minilateralism, in this sense, aims to complement rather than replace multilateralism, and therefore does not undermine ASEAN unity.

On connectivity issues, BIMP-EAGA serves as a nodal that connects ASEAN and ROK interests. Despite the massive coverage area, BIMP-EAGA has received less attention. Dent and Ritcher (2011) assess how BIMP-EAGA pursued developmental regionalism

through initiatives aimed at enhancing interrelated development capacities and improve connectivity (Dent & Richter 2011). Devi Putri Kussanti explores the contribution of BIMP-EAGA to benefit ecotourism in Indonesia (Kussanti 2017). Similarly, Anugrah and Pengestu argues that tourism benefited from BIMP-EAGA. Their study shows an increase in bilateral trade, and ease in trade barriers and carrying out infrastructure to boost FDI (Anugrah & Pangestu 2023). Despite shared optimism on the impact of BIMP-EAGA for Indonesian scholars, Evangelista is less convinced that this is the case. She argued that it was only in 2003 when significant progress was noted, and in spite of the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997. However, Evangelista (2000) adds that there is hope on the long term as BIMP-EAGA incorporates strong private sector collaborations.

### **III. Analyses**

#### **3.1. BIMP-EAGA Background**

BIMP-EAGA was initiated during the 1992 ASEAN Summit, when President Fidel V. Ramos of the Philippines introduced the concept of a subregional cooperation, connecting southern Philippines, eastern Indonesia, and eastern Malaysia. This initiative aimed to bolster maritime connectivity, enhance security, and foster economic development among the Southeast Asian maritime nations.

In response, Indonesian President Suharto and Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir officially approved the East Coast Growth Zone (EAGA) in October 1993. Brunei eventually participated in November, officially launching it in 1994. The subregion covers the entire sultanate of Brunei Darussalam; the provinces of Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Maluku, and West Papua of Indonesia; the states of Sabah and Sarawak and the federal territory of Labuan in Malaysia; and the island of Mindanao and the province of Palawan in the Philippines.

Except for Brunei, the regions were geographically far from the capital, and although the countries were different, they were geographically close and have great cultural similarities among

them. The majority of EAGA's local populace adheres to Islam, comprising a significant proportion of Malays and indigenous communities. This region shares the Malay language and preserves traditional economic ties, enabling the unrestricted flow of goods and people across borders since ancient times. Also, these states and provinces account for over 60% of the land area, but has a population of less than 20%, of the BIMP-EAGA countries (Gu 2022).

This subregional cooperation initiative's main objective is to expedite the socio-economic progress of underdeveloped and geographically isolated regions by strengthening trade, tourism, and investments through the facilitation of seamless movement of individuals, commodities, and services. This initiative aimed to address the wider goal of narrowing development gaps and was achieved by maximizing the utilization of infrastructure and natural resources, as well as fully capitalizing on economic complementarity. BIMP-EAGA was organized around five fundamental strategic pillars: connectivity, food production, tourism, environmental conservation, and socio-cultural education. The long-term goal of BIMP-EAGA was to develop non-resource sectors in resource-based economies. This involved easing the movement of products, public services, and human resources across borders, as well as utilizing infrastructure and natural resources to stimulate trade, tourism facilities, and foreign investments. The fundamental strategy was led by the private sector to activate the market, while governments and institutions provided an environment conducive to increased private investment.

BIMP-EAGA integrated the facilitation of private sector investments, with governments at different levels of administration (national, state, provincial, and local) working towards establishing a conducive climate and providing necessary support. Decision making in BIMP-EAGA was guided from various levels of meetings within BIMP-EAGA, ranging from the Summit and Ministerial Meetings to the Senior Official Level Meeting and technical meetings under the Senior Officials Meeting (SOM). These technical meetings include clusters and task forces; the Cluster on Natural Resources Development was chaired by Indonesia; Transport, Infrastructure, & ICT Development chaired by Brunei Darussalam; Joint Tourism Development chaired by Malaysia; and Customs, Immigration,

Quarantine, and Security (CIQSTask Force) and SME chaired by the Philippines.

However, BIMP-EAGA experienced a deceleration following the occurrence of the 1997-1998 Asian Financial Crisis. The establishment of the Facilitation Center, an intergovernmental coordinating entity, only happened in 2003, about ten years after the initiation of the program. It is then followed by the inaugural BIMP-EAGA Leaders' meeting coinciding with an ASEAN meeting in the same year. Since then, the development of BIMP-EAGA has been led by three significant documents: The Roadmap to Development (2006-2010), the Implementation Blueprint (2012-2016), and the BIMP-EAGA Vision 2025 (2017-2025). The aforementioned publications delineated the strategic pillars, significant economic sectors, and essential initiatives of the group, which were intended to actualize the vision of BIMP-EAGA for a subregion that is resilient, inclusive, sustainable, and economically competitive.

### **3.2. ASEAN Perspectives**

Indonesia covers the West Borneo Economic Corridor (WBEC) together with Brunei Darussalam and Malaysia, as well as the Greater Sulu - Sulawesi Corridor (GSSC) together with Malaysia and the Philippines. Jakarta has consistently highlighted the importance of the connectivity sector in BIMP-EAGA, particularly on sea connectivity. During the 12th BIMP-EAGA Meeting held in 2018, Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi emphasized that connectivity stands as a pivotal element in the concrete collaboration among BIMP-EAGA member countries. She emphasized that improved connectivity provides twofold benefits. First, it plays a vital role in fostering parity among local administrations. Second, it creates harmonization between central and local governments, allowing for more seamless operations and cooperation. Indonesian President Joko Widodo or Jokowi re-emphasized the importance of the maritime sector during the 13th BIMP-EAGA Meeting in 2019 (SetKab 2019) by highlighting the critical significance of the maritime sector in bolstering inclusive economic empowerment programs. He specifically addressed the importance of developing a

maritime community base to support the eco-tourism sector. In addition, Jokowi has also mentioned that the advancement of connectivity cooperation needs to be supported by the development of ICT infrastructure. Despite acknowledging the BIMP-EAGA setback caused by the pandemic, Jokowi once again reiterated that Indonesia's specific focus was on projects enhancing sea connectivity during the 14th BIMP-EAGA Meeting in 2021 (SetKab 2021). Sea connectivity is important to bolster sub-regional economic cooperation as it plays a crucial role in supporting trade, tourism, investment, and people-to-people connectivity. At the 16th BIMP-EAGA Meeting in 2023, Indonesian Transportation Minister Budi Karya Sumadi proposed Indonesia's role as a hub in sea connectivity. He pointed out that as an archipelagic country, Indonesia possesses numerous harbours. The minister advocated that collaborations among harbour management within the four BIMP-EAGA countries are crucial to ultimately establishing a prominent global presence in the logistics sector (Junida & Ruhman 2023). Furthermore, Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs Airlangga Hartarto argued that revitalizing (transportation) connectivity require the reopening or creation of new routes to support trade and tourism. Rebuilding the tourism sector was a priority to make it resilient and sustainable (Heriyanto & Liman 2022)

Malaysia shares a border with Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam under the West Borneo Economic Corridor (WBEC), as well as Indonesia and the Philippines under the Greater Sulu - Sulawesi Corridor (GSSC). Like Indonesia, Malaysia takes great interest in connectivity issues. During the 11th BIMP-EAGA Transport Ministers Meeting in October 2016, Transport Minister Liow Tiong Lai highlighted the objective to expand the number of townships serviced by flights within the BIMP-EAGA region. This was in line with the ASEAN Sky Policy, in which broadening flight connectivity to smaller cities across this region was a crucial step in enhancing regional integration and accessibility. Meanwhile, Minister of Economy Rafizi Ramli stressed Malaysia's call for a more active involvement of the private sector and Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSME) to capitalize on business opportunities facilitated by these subregional collaborations. He noted that

BIMP-EAGA delivered economic recovery, in which the combined GDP of BIMP-EAGA in 2021 was recorded at US\$358.6 billion, exceeding the 20% target by 2025. Additionally, the total trade in goods surged to US\$65.8 billion in 2022.

The Philippines is part of the Greater Sulu - Sulawesi Corridor (GSSC), which shares its border with Indonesia and Malaysia. Similarly, connectivity remains a recurring theme of focus. During the 15th BIMP-EAGA Summit in Labuan Bajo, Indonesia, Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) Secretary Alfredo Pascual reemphasized the importance of fostering "soft connectivity" to bolster the sub-region's economy (Crismundo 2023). Pascual argued that connectivity opens opportunities for the private sector and MSMEs. The total value of these priority investment projects within BIMP-EAGA stands at USD32.8 billion, enhancing private sector engagement on crucial programs infrastructure projects like roads, bridges, railways, seaports, airports, and technological advancements in information and communications. Furthermore, connectivity develops and promotes sub-regional value chains to augment the region's competitiveness offer opportunities for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs).

### **3.3. Korean Perspective**

At the 21st ASEAN-ROK Summit in 2020, the South Korean government announced the establishment of the BIMP-EAGA-ROK Cooperation Fund (BKCF) to enhance collaboration with countries in Maritime Southeast Asia. Through this partnership with BIMP-EAGA, ROK aims to contribute to the balanced and inclusive growth of Maritime Southeast Asia and establish a cornerstone for its maritime expansion into the Indo-Pacific region (Gu 2022)

Compared to Korea's formal cooperation with GMS since 2011 and the establishment of MKCF in 2013, its engagement with BIMP-EAGA seems relatively delayed (Kim 2023). The limited progress in ROK's collaboration with BIMP-EAGA can be attributed to several factors. First was Korea's tepidness in relation to BIMP-EAGA. Additionally, the decision-making structure and practical negotiation processes within BIMP-EAGA were complex



due to the relatively low level of institutionalization, making it challenging to consider BIMP-EAGA as a fully-fledged international organization. BIMP-EAGA was established in 1994, but the Asian financial crisis in 1997 halted the cooperation's activities. It was not until 2003 that a first summit was held. By adopting VISION 2025 as a development strategy with the support of ADB in 2015, a specific direction and system for cooperation has been established, and practical cooperation has begun. Moreover, the implementation structure was complicated because there were four countries involved, which meant that there were many stakeholders from the private sector, such as local governments and business councils. The multilayered procedural system resulted in lengthy timelines for discussions and implementation, leading to a relatively slow and delayed practical negotiation process and the commencement of cooperation with South Korea (Koh 2023).

Nevertheless, the establishment of BKCF appears to indicate an inclusive, collaborative direction and intent with BIMP members. Furthermore, the ASEAN-specific policy framework of KASI plans to double BKCF until 2027, further solidifying its determination in this regard.

#### **IV. Implementation Projects in BIMP-EAGA**

At the 1st ROK-BIMP-EAGA Senior Officials' Meeting held in 2021, regularizing diplomacy cooperation, delegations, and agreements were formalized. In particular, and in consideration of the needs of BIMP-EAGA countries which were vulnerable to climate change, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs actively supported environmental interventions by establishing a triangular partnership that includes the Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI) as a third party. And this fund (approx. 1 million USD) carried out cooperation projects in various areas such as the environment, tourism, and connectivity (MOFA ROK 2021).

The first call was held in December 2021 and two projects were adopted. In 2022, the fund was increased to 3 million US

dollars, prioritizing proposals that provide economic recovery solutions for subregion after COVID-19. Efforts were made to facilitate economic recovery in these areas (BIMP-EAGA 2022). In the third call conducted in 2023, the agricultural and fisheries sectors were included to develop high-quality agricultural products and ensure long-term food security and stable livelihood for farmers in BIMP-EAGA (BKCF 2023b).

<Table 1> provides a list of ongoing BKCF projects from 2021 to 2023. A total of 21 projects have been approved over three rounds of proposals. The most recent call for proposals received applications for 66 projects, indicating an increasing interest in BKCF. However, upon examining the list and details of the selected 21 projects, it becomes evident that the focus is more on multilateral cooperation with individual countries rather than a comprehensive coverage of EAGA, contradicting the implications of subregional cooperation.

<Table 1> 2021~2023 BKCF Project

	Target	Project Title	Proponent
1st	Philippines	Developing Land Management Options for Diverse Cacao-based system in Mindanao	University of Southern Mindanao
	EAGA	Renewable Energy Certificate Potential in the Area of BIMP	ASEAN Center for Energy
2nd	Indonesia	Increasing resilience of small-scale fisheries to climate change impact	Research Center for Fisheries
	Indonesia	Low-emission landscape management in the Meratus Mountains, South Kalimantan	South Kalimantan Forestry Agency
	Malaysia	Waterworks improvement project for rural areas in Sabah	K-water
	Malaysia	Promoting low-carbon schools in East Malaysia	IMT-GT Joint Business Council
	Philippines	Off-grid solar home systems deployment in disaster vulnerable Mindanao	Light of Hope Ph Ventures INC
	Philippines	Creating Livelihood Options through Agroenterprise Development towards the Reinvention of the Municipality of Butig as a Premier Agro-Ecotourism Destination in Lanao del Sur	Peace Corps Incorporated

	Target	Project Title	Proponent
	Philippines	Mainstream energy efficiency in MSME buildings in the Philippines	Department of Trade and Industry
	EAGA	Farm Konek Agri-Tech supply chain platform for BIMP-EAGA markets	Project Zaccheus
3rd	Brunei	Promoting youth engagement and employment in bio-circular-green (BCG) agriculture and food systems for food security	Centre for Strategic and Policy Studies
	Indonesia	Improvement of Eucheumatoid seed production in Indonesia through Gradual Selection and Good Aquaculture Practice	PT SELT Alga, Indonesia
	Indonesia	Strengthening the resilience of social forestry groups to climate change through the development of adaptive coffee	Aku Rimba Indonesia Foundation
	Indonesia	Community-led improved marine management that benefits dugongs, people, and nature in Kalimantan	Yayasan International Animal Rescue Indonesia
	Malaysia	Intelligent water loss management system in Sarawak	WI.Plant Co., Ltd
	Malaysia	Segama integrated catchment management strategy	Forever Sabah
	Philippines	Sustainable intensification through vegetable intercropping in perennial crops farming systems in Zamboanga Peninsula, Mindanao Island	East West Seed Company, Inc.
	Philippines	Smart FARM through internet of things and Biosensing technology for sustainable liberica and arabica nursery coffee production in Mindanao	Varacco Inc
	Philippines	Enabling immediate wireless connectivity to underserved/unserved communities in Mindanao	STEMEd, Philippines, Inc.
	Philippines	A/I machine learning-powered digital monitoring of mangrove ecosystems in Surigao del Sur	Thinking Machines Data Science, Inc.
	EAGA	BIMP-EAGA mission on innovation and SMEs start-ups in South Korea	MSMED Working group

Source: BKCF 2023a

## V. Conclusion

This paper concludes that minilateralism emerged as a favored alternative approach to maintain and enhance ROK-ASEAN collaboration in the face of escalating competition among major powers. It demonstrates efficacy in facilitating prompt collaboration across nations by concentrating on particular concerns and fostering cooperation among governments with similar perspectives. The efficacy of minilateralism is in its capacity to concentrate on specific issues, circumventing the potential for political inertia that is inherent in the ASEAN multilateral framework. Furthermore, minilateralism does not operate in opposition to ASEAN multilateralism; rather, it serves to complement to regional dispositions and forces.

The BIMP-EAGA, functioning as a manifestation of minilateralism, serves as an alternative venue where ROK and ASEAN can cooperate. However, this research discovered that the implementation of BIMP-EAGA falls short of the expectations. The spirit of BIMP-EAGA stresses the subregional character of cooperation. However, the current focus is more on multilateral cooperation with individual countries rather than a comprehensive coverage of EAGA. Furthermore, the agreed upon implemented projects have yet to reflect the shared interests of ASEAN member states on connectivity issues.

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