

Leadership Change and Bilateral Diplomacy:

A Neoclassical Realist Explanation
of South Korea's Evolving Policy
towards Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the evolution of diplomatic relations between the Republic of Korea (ROK, South Korea) and Malaysia from a historical and comparative foreign policy perspective. Focusing on five presidential administrations—Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun, Lee Myung-bak, Park Geun-hye, and Moon Jae-in—it investigates how changes in South Korea's domestic political leadership have shaped its bilateral engagement with Malaysia. Drawing upon neoclassical realism and foreign policy analysis, the study explores the interplay of structural international pressures and unit-level variables, including leadership perceptions, policy orientations, and domestic constraints. Using media content analysis and keyword trend analysis, the research identifies thematic continuities and strategic shifts in South Korea–Malaysia relations across different administrations. Findings reveal that while structural economic and security factors have provided a foundation for bilateral ties, it is the president's diplomatic priorities, more than the ruling party's ideological orientation, that have played a decisive role in shaping the depth and direction of cooperation. The study contributes to the broader literature on middle power diplomacy, regional cooperation in East Asia, and the role of domestic politics in shaping foreign policy trajectories.

Keywords: ASEAN, Foreign Policy, Malaysia, Middle Power Diplomacy, New Southern Policy, Neoclassical Realism, Republic of Korea

Introduction

Since the formal establishment of diplomatic relations in 1960, the Republic of Korea (hereafter South Korea) and Malaysia have maintained a steadily deepening bilateral relationship spanning politics, economics, culture, and security. Early exchanges were shaped by Cold War dynamics and postcolonial reconstruction priorities. Notably, the two countries began diplomatic engagement even before the creation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (hereafter ASEAN) in 1967. Over the decades, this relationship has matured into one of sustained cooperation and strategic alignment, reinforced by shared regional visions such as Malaysia's *Look East Policy*, launched in 1983, and South Korea's more recent *New Southern Policy*. These complementary strategies reflect a mutual interest in regional integration, economic interdependence, and principled multilateralism in East Asia.

A landmark turning point occurred in November 2024, when South Korea and Malaysia elevated their bilateral relations to a Strategic Partnership, which was formalized through a joint statement by then-President Yoon Suk-yeol and Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. This elevation signals a renewed commitment to comprehensive cooperation in emerging areas including defense, digital transformation, climate action, and cultural diplomacy (MOFA 2024). The Strategic Partnership reaffirms both nations' aspirations to act as proactive middle powers committed to regional peace and development. It also presents a timely opportunity to reassess the structural and domestic forces that have shaped South Korea–Malaysia relations over the past six decades.

Despite the growing body of research on South Korea's foreign policy toward Southeast Asia, much of the literature has focused on multilateral arrangements, such as ASEAN Plus Three (APT), the East Asia Summit (EAS), and the ROK–ASEAN Dialogue (Kim 2023(a); (b); Lee 2017). In contrast, bilateral engagements have received comparatively limited attention (Kim 2013; 2021). Moreover, while South Korea's middle power diplomacy has been widely discussed, there is insufficient analysis of how domestic political leadership and ideological orientation affect its bilateral foreign policy, particularly with partners like Malaysia. This is a notable gap given Malaysia's own enduring foreign policy identity centered on neutrality, non-alignment, and South South cooperation (SSC).

This study seeks to address these gaps by offering a comparative historical analysis of South Korea–Malaysia relations across five South Korean administrations: Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun, Lee Myung-bak, Park Geun-hye, and Moon Jae-in. Drawing on the analytical framework of Neoclassical realism, the research investigates how shifts in South Korea’s domestic leadership and ideological alignment have influenced the direction and depth of its engagement with Malaysia. Particular emphasis is placed on the interaction between structural pressures, such as trade interdependence and regional security dynamics, and unit-level variables, including leadership perceptions, bureaucratic interests, and partisan worldviews.

Malaysia provides a theoretically and empirically appropriate case for this analysis. It has served as a consistent partner for South Korea within ASEAN, played a leading role in regional initiatives such as the EAS and APT, and maintained a steady diplomatic posture rooted in non-aligned neutrality. Furthermore, Malaysia’s engagement with South Korea at multiple historical junctures, from Mahathir Mohamad’s *Look East Policy* to Moon Jae-in’s *New Southern Policy*, offers a unique window into the evolution of bilateral middle power diplomacy. Its domestic political continuity, particularly under the Barisan Nasional until 2018, also provides a relatively stable baseline for examining changes on the South Korean side.

This study is structured around two central research questions. First, what are the key themes that define Seoul’s foreign policy toward Malaysia under successive administrations? Second, how does the bilateral agenda shift in response to the ideological orientation of South Korea’s ruling party, whether conservative or progressive?

To answer these questions, the paper analyzes diplomatic discourse, economic exchanges, and socio-cultural cooperation across different periods. Methodologically, it employs media content analysis and keyword trend analysis to capture both strategic signaling and thematic shifts. The findings not only illuminate the bilateral relationship but also contribute to broader discussions about the role of domestic politics in shaping middle power diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the existing literature on South Korea–Malaysia relations and foreign policy theory, with a focus on Neoclassical Realism. Section 3 outlines the research design and methods. Section 4 presents the empirical analysis of bilateral relations under five South Korean presidencies, emphasizing changes in foreign policy

emphasis and regional engagement. Section 5 concludes by summarizing the key findings and offers theoretical and policy implications for the study of bilateral diplomacy and regional cooperation in East Asia.

Analytical Framework

This study builds its analytical foundation on two interrelated strands of scholarly literature: international relations theory, particularly Neoclassical Realism (NCR) and Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), and the emerging body of empirical research on South Korea and Malaysia's bilateral relations within the broader context of middle power diplomacy.

In international relations theory, foreign policy behavior has been examined primarily through structural realism, neoliberal institutionalism, and constructivism. Structural realism underscores systemic constraints and the distribution of material capabilities, whereas constructivism emphasizes the role of norms and identity. NCR departs from both by incorporating systemic imperatives and domestic-level mediating variables (Fearon 1998; Hudson 2005; Meibauer 2020; Smith 2016; Walker et al 2011). It posits that external pressures are necessary but insufficient to explain state behavior. Instead, systemic stimuli are filtered through elite perceptions, regime orientations, and institutional arrangements, producing diverse foreign policy responses even among states facing similar external environments (Lobell et al 2009; Rose 1998; Schweller 2003; Taliaferro 2006). States, particularly middle and small powers, do not respond uniformly to systemic stimuli; rather, their foreign policy is shaped by how domestic actors interpret external threats and opportunities. These interpretations are often influenced by leadership beliefs, regime orientation, and internal policy constraints (Ahn 2023; Jeong et al. 2023).

This feature makes NCR particularly relevant for analyzing South Korea's evolving policy toward Malaysia. Despite relatively stable regional structural conditions, South Korea's bilateral approach has varied considerably across administrations. NCR provides the theoretical leverage to explain why progressive governments emphasized multilateralism, regional integration, and value-based diplomacy, whereas conservative governments prioritized economic pragmatism, competitiveness, and security partnerships. Such divergence cannot be accounted for solely by systemic pressures, but rather by domestic political and ideational mediation (Ahn 2023; Eun 2014).

NCR is chosen deliberately over other variants of realism and competing theoretical paradigms. Structural realism offers insights into the constraints of the regional system but overlooks how domestic leadership and institutions reinterpret systemic signals. Liberal approaches, such as neoliberal institutionalism, stress the role of institutions and cooperation but underplay domestic political contestation in shaping foreign policy. Constructivism highlights identity and norms but tends to neglect how political elites and bureaucratic actors strategically recalibrate external policies in response to both international and domestic pressures. In contrast, NCR strikes a balance: it retains the realist assumption of an anarchic international system while simultaneously integrating unit-level determinants, thus enabling a more holistic analysis of bilateral diplomacy. Furthermore, NCR's compatibility with FPA approaches enhances its explanatory power. FPA's attention to leadership cognition, belief systems, and bureaucratic politics (Allison and Zelikow 1971; Hermann 2001; Hermann et al. 2001) dovetails with NCR's emphasis on domestic mediation. Together, they provide tools for tracing how leaders' worldviews, institutional competition, and policy constraints translate systemic challenges into concrete foreign policy choices.

The literature on South Korea's foreign policy has increasingly emphasized its middle power identity, caught between great power rivalries and normative diplomacy (Yoo and Cho 2022). Yet, bilateral case studies with Southeast Asian partners remain underdeveloped. Malaysia is particularly significant given its long-standing emphasis on neutrality, ASEAN centrality, and South-South cooperation, as well as its role as a consistent ASEAN interlocutor for South Korea since the Cold War. Comparative studies have explored parallels between leaders such as Kim Dae-jung and Mahathir Mohamad, but more systematic work is required to understand how ideological orientations in Seoul shape policy priorities across economic, political, and cultural dimensions (Govindasamy 2022; Lee 2007(a); (b); Lee 2023).

Malaysia-focused scholarship also demonstrates the utility of NCR. Kuik et al. (2022), for instance, show how Malaysia's 'forward diplomacy' toward Northeast Asia has been shaped by both structural asymmetries and domestic legitimation strategies. Their concept of 'nurtured necessity', that engagement with Northeast Asia was cultivated as part of internal political survival rather than geographic determinism, highlights the importance of domestic mediation. This resonates with the argument that foreign policy activism in smaller states often stems from elite legitimation and regime performance needs.

This study adopts NCR as its principal theoretical framework to explain the variation in South Korea's foreign policy toward Malaysia across five administrations. NCR builds upon the structural insights of classical and neorealist traditions but modifies them in a fundamental way: systemic pressures are regarded as necessary yet insufficient to explain foreign policy behavior (Rose 1998; Lobell et al. 2009; Schweller 2010). Instead, external constraints and opportunities are mediated through domestic-level factors, including leadership perceptions, regime ideology, institutional capacity, and elite cohesion (Rose 1998; Schweller 2002; Ripsman et al. 2016). This dual-level logic acknowledges the enduring role of the international system while also accounting for the domestic processes that condition how states interpret and act upon structural imperatives.

To operationalize NCR, this study focuses on three interrelated dimensions of domestic mediation. Leadership ideology and perception influence how presidents in Seoul have evaluated Malaysia's strategic relevance, whether as a pivotal partner in regional diplomacy or as a marginal player in broader foreign policy agendas. Regime orientation and policy priorities determine how ruling parties embed Southeast Asia into South Korea's external strategies, as demonstrated by Lee Myung-bak's *New Asia Initiative* (Lee 2010) and Moon Jae-in's *New Southern Policy*. Institutional and bureaucratic capacity further shapes bilateral engagement, as ministries and economic agencies sustain, adapt, or redirect diplomatic and economic linkages depending on the coherence, or fragmentation, of domestic governance structures. Taken together, these three dimensions provide a structured way of analyzing how systemic signals are refracted through domestic politics to generate foreign policy outcomes.

The relevance of this framework becomes clearer when examining the comparative asymmetry between South Korea and Malaysia. Malaysia has maintained a relatively consistent foreign policy posture grounded in neutrality, non-alignment, and ASEAN centrality. Its diplomacy reflects continuity across leadership changes, with external engagement serving as a tool to reinforce domestic legitimacy and regional stability. By contrast, South Korea has exhibited greater volatility, with progressive administrations emphasizing multilateralism, regional integration, and value-based diplomacy, and conservative administrations prioritizing economic pragmatism, competitiveness, and security partnerships. This divergence underlines NCR's explanatory strength: similar structural conditions produce different outcomes once filtered through the lens of leadership ideology, partisan orientation, and bureaucratic politics.

In addition to NCR, this study draws on insights from FPA to deepen the investigation of domestic mediation. FPA highlights how leaders' belief systems, cognitive predispositions, and institutional competition influence the interpretation of systemic pressures (Allison and Zelikow 1999; Hermann 2001). For instance, elite worldviews and political incentives shape whether Malaysia is framed primarily as a normative partner in regional community-building or as an economic partner within South Korea's broader global strategy. By integrating NCR's systemic-domestic framework with FPA's attention to leadership and bureaucratic dynamics, this study trace how foreign policy preferences are not only articulated but also contested and enacted within the domestic political arena.

Ultimately, the combined NCR-FPA framework provides a powerful lens for analyzing South Korea's evolving bilateral diplomacy with Malaysia. It shows that South Korea's foreign policy is not the product of structural imperatives alone, nor is it reducible to normative identity claims. Rather, it is the outcome of how successive administrations interpret external conditions through domestic filters shaped by ideology, institutions, and bureaucratic capacity. This approach allows for a controlled test of NCR's explanatory power in the context of middle-power diplomacy, demonstrating how the same external environment can produce divergent policy trajectories depending on domestic mediation (Ripsman et al. 2016; Taliaferro et al. 2014; Schweller 2010; Kuik 2022). By situating South Korea's engagement with Malaysia within this broader analytical framework, the study contributes theoretical debates in international relations and to the underdeveloped empirical literature on South Korea's diplomacy in Southeast Asia.

In international relations theories such as NCR, a recurring challenge lies in how key concepts can be measured and empirically demonstrated. This problem is closely tied to the broader question of how to overcome the inherent abstraction of these concepts. To address conceptual ambiguity, this study provides a clearer definition of the variables at both structural and domestic levels, as well as the mechanisms through which they interact. At the structural level, three categories are distinguished. *Systemic pressures* refer to the constraints and opportunities generated by the anarchic international system and the distribution of power among major states. *Structural international pressures* capture region-specific dynamics such as the U.S.-China rivalry, the logic of ASEAN-centered regionalism, and security dilemmas in East Asia.

Structural international pressures capture region-specific dynamics such as the U.S.–China rivalry, the logic of ASEAN-centered regionalism, and security dilemmas in East Asia. *Structural economic factors* denote trade interdependence, resource dependency, and exposure to global supply chain shifts. These are treated as external conditions that set the broad context within which South Korea's foreign policy is formulated.

At the domestic level, this study identifies five mediating variables, *leader perceptions*, *party ideology*, *leadership-specific attributes*, *elite cohesion*, and *institutional capacity*, that channel systemic pressures into divergent foreign policy choices. Leader perceptions refer to how individual presidents interpret Malaysia's strategic relevance, whether as a pivotal partner or a peripheral actor. As Jervis (2017) demonstrates, leaders' interpretations of threats and opportunities often diverge from structural imperatives, while Hermann (2001) emphasizes the decisive role of decision units in shaping external choices. In South Korea's case, presidents' differing views of Malaysia as either a core partner in regional diplomacy or a secondary actor illustrate the importance of perceptual filters in foreign policy.

Party ideology captures the broader orientation of the ruling coalition, progressive or conservative, which provides a normative lens through which systemic signals are filtered. Hagan (1993) shows that ruling coalitions' ideological orientations constrain and enable the range of viable foreign policy options, and Milner and Kubota (2005) further demonstrate that ideological commitments shape external economic and diplomatic strategies. Accordingly, South Korea's progressive administrations tended to frame ASEAN relations within multilateral and normative discourses, while conservative administrations pursued a more pragmatic, growth-oriented approach toward Malaysia.

Leadership-specific variables are more narrowly defined as the president's personal priorities, idiosyncrasies, and belief systems that may deviate from or amplify partisan orientations. Operational Code analyses reveal how leaders' idiosyncratic beliefs influence policy behavior (Walker et al. 2011), while Hermann and Preston (1994) highlight the role of leadership style in foreign policy decision-making. For example, Kim Dae-jung's emphasis on openness and reconciliation reflected not only his coalition's liberal orientation but also his personal democratic convictions.

Elite cohesion denotes the degree of consensus among political and bureaucratic actors. As Snyder (1991) argues, elite unity or fragmentation determines whether systemic pressures are translated into coherent strategies or contradictory foreign policies. In the South Korean context, strong elite consensus around ASEAN engagement allowed institutionalization of cooperative mechanisms, while internal divisions often disrupted continuity in Malaysia policy.

Finally, institutional and bureaucratic capacity refers to the ability of ministries and agencies to implement or adapt diplomatic initiatives. Allison and Zelikow's (1999) bureaucratic politics model demonstrates how ministerial capacity and inter-agency competition shape foreign policy outcomes, while Krasner (1972) emphasizes the structural constraints of bureaucratic organizations. In South Korea, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and economic agencies have often determined the sustainability of Malaysia-related initiatives, highlighting the significance of institutional capacity as a mediating factor.

The linkage between structural and domestic variables is central to this study's application of NCR. Systemic pressures alone cannot dictate outcomes; rather, they are filtered through the perceptions, orientations, and capacities of domestic actors. For example, while the U.S.–China rivalry provides an enduring structural backdrop, a progressive president may interpret Malaysia's neutrality as an opportunity to advance multilateral cooperation, whereas a conservative president may prioritize Malaysia as an energy supplier or trade partner. In each case, the external condition remains constant, but domestic interpretations produce divergent policy outcomes.

This framework also clarifies the relative weight of domestic-level variables. Leadership perceptions are hypothesized to have the most immediate impact on bilateral diplomacy, given the highly personalized nature of presidential decision-making in South Korea. Party ideology provides the broader parameters within which leaders operate, while bureaucratic capacity conditions the feasibility and sustainability of initiatives. This tiered logic enables the analysis to move beyond description and to explain why similar structural contexts have produced different policy choices across administrations.

Figure 1 presents the refined analytical framework, which distinguishes among structural, domestic, and individual-level variables and shows how they jointly shape South Korea's bilateral diplomacy toward Malaysia. By clearly defining each variable and specifying the mechanisms of mediation, the study enhances its explanatory rigor and ensures conceptual consistency.

At the structural level, the framework identifies three categories of external drivers: systemic pressures stemming from the anarchic international order and the distribution of power; international pressures associated with regional dynamics such as the U.S.–China rivalry and ASEAN-centered multilateralism; and economic and security factors, including trade interdependence, resource dependence, and supply-chain vulnerabilities. These elements establish the external context within which policy choices are made.

At the domestic level, party ideology, elite cohesion, and institutional capacity serve as key mediators. Party ideology provides the normative orientation of the ruling coalition and shapes the overall direction of foreign policy. Elite cohesion, or the lack thereof, determines whether systemic pressures are translated into coherent strategies or contested domestically. Institutional and bureaucratic capacity, particularly within foreign affairs and economic ministries, affects the feasibility and durability of bilateral initiatives.

The framework also highlights individual-level factors as an analytically distinct layer. Leader perceptions capture how presidents assess Malaysia's strategic relevance, either as a pivotal partner in advancing regional diplomacy or merely as a secondary actor within broader foreign policy agendas. Leadership-specific attributes, including idiosyncratic beliefs, personal priorities, and political legacies, can amplify or temper partisan orientations. Cognitive biases further influence how leaders interpret risks and opportunities. In a presidential system such as South Korea's, where leaders exercise strong control over foreign policy, these individual-level dynamics are often decisive.

For comparative purposes, the framework contrasts these dynamics with Malaysia's relatively stable diplomatic posture, marked by neutrality, non-alignment, and ASEAN centrality. Whereas South Korea's policy has varied significantly across administrations due to domestic and individual-level mediation, Malaysia's diplomacy has been characterized by structural continuity. This asymmetry highlights why the bilateral relationship provides a compelling case to test the explanatory capacity of Neoclassical Realism.

In sum, the framework specifies a causal sequence: structural factors provide the external stimuli; these are mediated through domestic and individual-level variables; and the interaction of these forces produces concrete policy outcomes in the form of bilateral diplomacy.

This three-tiered approach not only addresses earlier conceptual ambiguities but also demonstrates how systemic, institutional, and personal dimensions intersect to generate variation in South Korea’s foreign policy toward Malaysia.

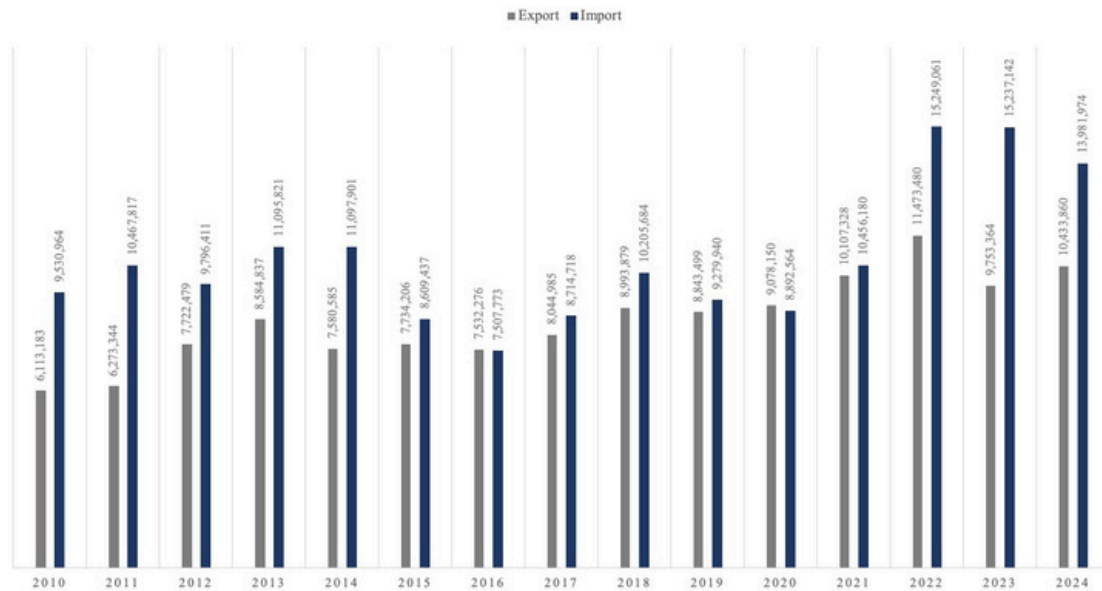
Figure 1. Analytical Framework: Asymmetry Between South Korea and Malaysia



Before engaging in an in-depth analysis of South Korea’s diplomatic engagement with Malaysia under successive administrations, this section outlines key trends in economic and people-to-people exchanges to establish the structural and ideational underpinnings of bilateral relations. As shown in Figure 2, bilateral trade over the past 15 years has been marked by a persistent imbalance, with South Korea importing more from Malaysia than it exports. Despite short-term fluctuations—most notably during the Park Geun-hye administration—overall economic relations have remained stable, serving as a foundation for sustained interdependence.

Figure 2. Trends in South Korea-Malaysia Bilateral Trade, 2010-2024

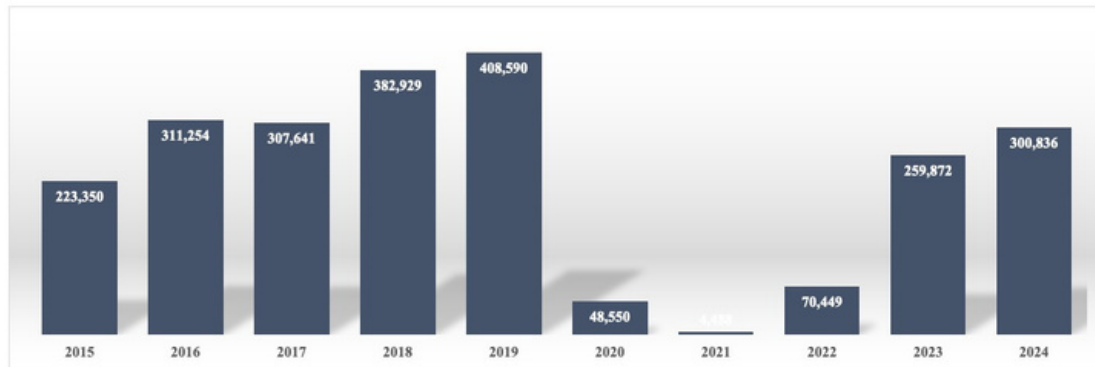
(unit: Thousand USD)



Source: KOTRA website (search: May 8 2025)

Beyond trade, people-to-people exchanges, including tourism, educational mobility, labor migration, and cultural interactions, have functioned as informal channels of diplomacy. As illustrated in Figure 3 below, visits from Malaysia to South Korea have shown a consistent upward trend, with the exception of the COVID-19 pandemic period. Notably, approximately 90 percent of Malaysian visitors travel to South Korea for tourism purposes, highlighting the significance of cultural and people-to-people exchange in sustaining bilateral ties. These transnational interactions not only facilitate mutual recognition and familiarity but also contribute to the exercise of soft power and the building of trust-based networks. In doing so, they create a conducive environment for formal diplomatic engagement and reinforce the resilience of bilateral cooperation amidst shifting geopolitical dynamics.

Figure 3. Malaysian Visitors to South Korea: Annual Trends



Source: datalab.visitkorea.or.kr (search: May 8 2025)

Methodology and Data BigKinds, provided by the Korea Media Promotion Foundation, is a system for searching and analyzing articles in domestic media. Launched in April 2016, it serves as a user-friendly platform for big data analysis. News information, often consisting of unstructured text, can be converted into structured data and utilized as a foundational resource for analyzing various social phenomena. Domestic research using this system spans a wide range of topics. For example, studies include an analysis of changes in “Autonomous Private High School” articles and comparisons of educational policies by administration (Kwon 2019), a comparative analysis of news articles on OTT services compliant with COVID-19 regulations (Kim, YS 2021), and a topographical analysis of Middle Eastern, Arab, and Islamic news coverage in Korea (Lee and Lee 2022).

This study employed a structured approach to news retrieval and analysis using the BigKinds database, a comprehensive news archive provided by the Korea Press Foundation. The analysis proceeded in multiple stages. First, key search parameters, including the time frame, media source, and integrated classification codes, were defined to narrow the scope of data collection. Following this, advanced keyword processing techniques and range filters were applied to conduct a refined and targeted search. Based on the resulting dataset, the BigKinds news visualization tool was utilized to identify issue salience, temporal patterns, and thematic trends in media coverage. The visualization functions provided by BigKinds can be categorized as follows.

Table 1 presents the number of Malaysia-related news articles published in four major South Korean newspapers (*KyungHang*, *DongA*, *JoongAng*, *Hankyoreh*) categorized by presidential administration. While these data cannot be fully generalized, they offer preliminary insights into the varying levels of media attention devoted to Malaysia across different administrations. Notably, the Moon Jae-in administration recorded the highest number of Malaysia-related articles, a trend that can be interpreted as reflecting the emphasis placed on Southeast Asia under the *New Southern Policy*. Despite its relatively short tenure, the Park Geun-hye administration also saw a high frequency of reporting on Malaysia, likely due to media coverage of North Korea-related issues involving Malaysia during that period (Lee and Sohn 2019). A distinctive pattern is observed in the Kim Dae-jung administration, where a significant portion of Malaysia-related articles appeared during the early years of his presidency.

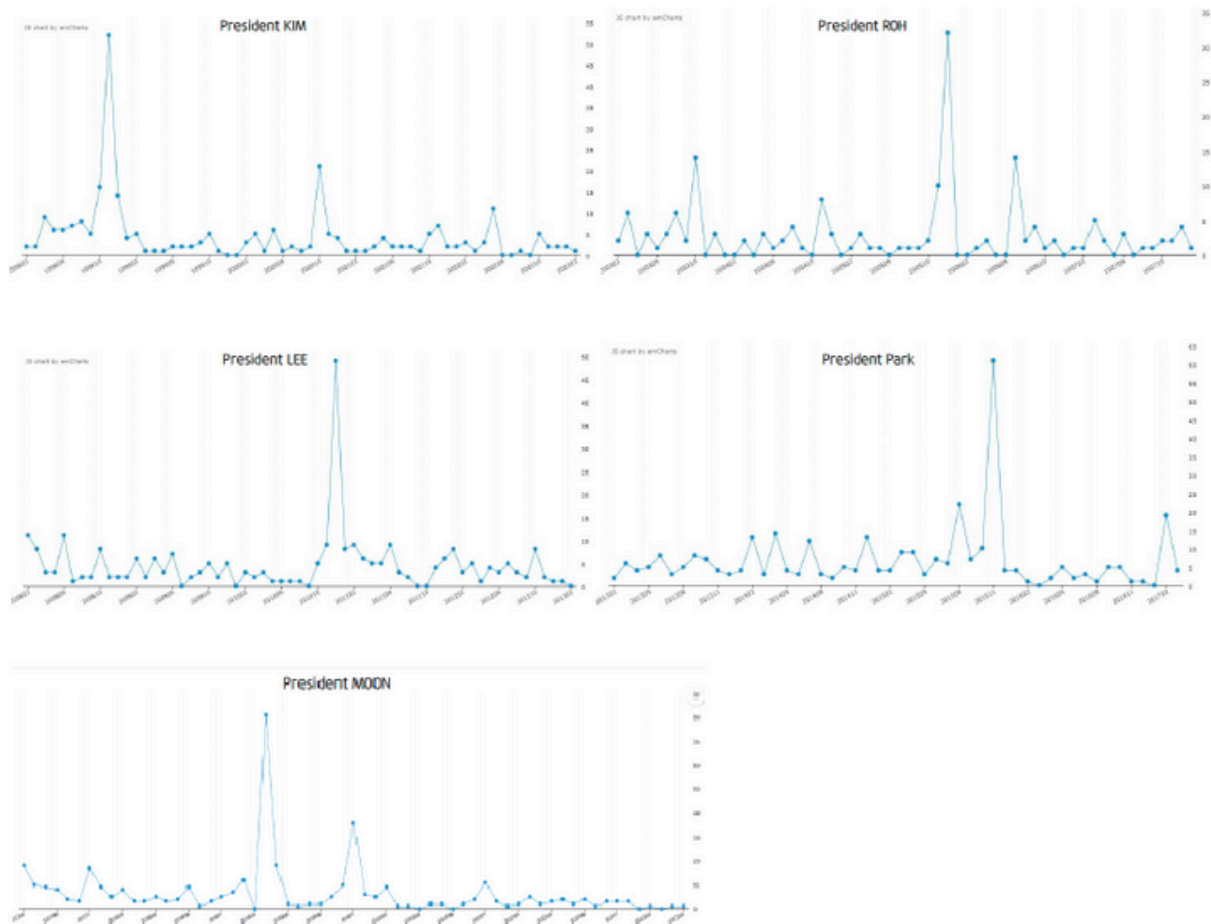
This study employs a media content analysis framework using a Keyword Trend Analysis, to examine the evolution of South Korea's bilateral relationship with Malaysia under successive presidential administrations. These features were applied to a dataset of the top 100 retrieved press releases for each. Keyword Trend Analysis measures the frequency of news articles containing the specified search keyword over user-defined intervals—daily, weekly, monthly, or yearly. The trends are visualized using linear or bar graph formats, and the tool supports simultaneous comparison of multiple keywords, including the calculation of correlation coefficients to assess co-occurrence patterns.

Number of Malaysia-related News Articles by Presidential Administration

	Kim (Feb.25.98- Feb.24.03)	Roh (Feb.25.03- Feb.24.08)	Lee (Feb.25.08- Feb.24.13)	Park (Feb.25.13- Mar.10.17)	Moon (May.10.17- May.9.22)
KyungHang	56	38	74	100	119
DongA	87	59	51	72	62
JoongAng	56	27	63	89	196
Hankyoreh	71	44	92	100	60
Total	270	168	280	361	437

Source: BigKinds (search: May 8 2025)

Figure 4. Number of Malaysia-related News Articles by Presidential Administration



The X-axis shows the time period, and the Y-axis shows the number of news.

Presents a thematic reclassification of Malaysia-related news articles published during the same period, extending the analysis beyond the four previously discussed journals. Consistent with the findings in Table 1, the data in Table 2 reveal that media coverage of Malaysia has been heavily concentrated on political and international issues, suggesting a continued emphasis on Malaysia's relevance within South Korea's foreign policy and regional security discourse.

Malaysia-related News Articles Published in Korean Newspapers Based on Themes

	Kim	Roh	Lee	Park	Moon
Political Issues	184	106	166	242	316
Economy	37	35	52	52	56
Social Issues	6	6	19	17	20
Culture	7	7	8	13	12
International	176	69	115	168	144
Regional	0	4	9	5	9
Sports	2	1	3	2	5
IT & Science	0	2	12	4	5
Total	412	230	384	503	567

Source: BigKinds (search: May 8 2025)

While the frequency of media coverage offers a useful proxy for gauging the discursive visibility of Malaysia in South Korea's foreign policy narrative, it does not fully capture the content, tone, or strategic framing of such coverage. Therefore, this study complements quantitative trends with a qualitative discourse analysis of selected articles, focusing on how Malaysia is represented in relation to South Korea's broader foreign policy objectives. Particular attention is paid to policy narratives associated with the New Southern Policy, regional security concerns involving North Korea, and evolving perceptions of Malaysia as a strategic partner. This multi-method approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of how media discourse reflects, reinforces, or diverges from official diplomatic priorities.

Kim Dae-jung's Administration (1998-2003): Trust-building and Strategic Convergence The

Kim Dae-jung (1998–2003) administration is regarded as a pivotal period in the development of political and economic relations between South Korea and Malaysia. During this time, the Kim Dae-jung administration emphasized openness and international cooperation, focusing on

strengthening ties within the Asian region (Lee 2007(b); Park and Jee 2009). Relations with Malaysia reflected these priorities. Political relations during the Kim Dae-jung presidency were marked by a vision of promoting peace and cooperation in Asia, encapsulated in the Sunshine Policy, which sought reconciliation and cooperation with North Korea. This vision aligned with Malaysia's principles of non-aligned diplomacy and its emphasis on fostering regional collaboration in Asia.

Kim's administration, placed significant importance on relations with ASEAN as part of his broader strategy to embed South Korea within East Asia's evolving regional architecture. He actively promoted regional cooperation through institutional mechanisms such as the APT framework, which brought together South Korea, China, and Japan in dialogue with ASEAN member states, including Malaysia. Notably, this initiative was pursued even when ASEAN comprised only nine member countries, reflecting a forward-looking vision for inclusive regionalism. Malaysia's active participation in these frameworks, combined with its established role in regional diplomacy, made it a crucial partner in South Korea's efforts to institutionalize East Asian cooperation.

The Kim Dae-jung administration pursued a shared regional vision with Malaysia, emphasizing the importance of strengthening East Asian cooperation through institutional and strategic initiatives. This vision was reflected in Seoul's support for the East Asia Vision Group (EAVG), which the Kim administration initiated, and Malaysia's earlier proposal of the East Asia Economic Group (EAEG) under Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, both of which aimed to institutionalize Asian-led regionalism (Stubbs 2002; Lee 2007(b)). These parallel efforts underscored a mutual commitment to regional multilateralism and helped reinforce bilateral synergy between the two governments. In addition, South Korea and Malaysia collaborated to enhance their global profile through active participation in multilateral platforms such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). In the aftermath of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, Kim's administration prioritized structural economic reforms and expanded international cooperation as part of South Korea's recovery strategy (Haggard 2000). These policy shifts not only facilitated domestic stabilization but also provided a foundation for deepening economic engagement with Malaysia, particularly in areas linked to post-crisis recovery and regional economic integration.

Both Malaysia and Seoul faced severe economic challenges due to the financial crisis, yet they expanded their bilateral cooperation to address these difficulties. Malaysia, as part of its *Look East Policy*, viewed South Korea's economic restructuring efforts positively, fostering a greater willingness for collaboration. During this period, South Korean firms recognized Malaysia's growth potential and increased investments, particularly in the electronics, telecommunications, and construction sectors. Since 1998, trade between South Korea and Malaysia grew steadily, with Malaysia emerging as a significant source of raw materials for South Korea. Furthermore, collaboration in the IT and advanced technology sectors was strengthened, establishing a foundation for sustained economic cooperation.

The relationship between Seoul and Malaysia during the Kim Dae-jung presidency can be characterized as a period of enhanced trust and collaboration. Mutual support and cooperation, particularly in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis, provided a strong basis for future bilateral ties. Kim Dae-jung's administration significantly deepened political and economic relations between South Korea and Malaysia, facilitating South Korea's growing role within the East Asian regional cooperation framework. This period serves as a critical milestone in solidifying bilateral relations and establishing a foundation for continued partnership.

The Kim administration assumed office in the immediate aftermath of the 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis. Its emphasis on openness and international cooperation reflected not only Kim's personal democratic and liberal convictions but also the structural necessity of economic recovery and diversification. Malaysia and other ASEAN states became central to this strategy as Seoul sought to rebuild credibility, reduce vulnerability to external shocks, and strengthen regional financial cooperation. Thus, the turn to Malaysia was driven by both leader-specific beliefs in openness and the broader domestic imperative of post-crisis stabilization.

Roh Moo-hyun Administration (2003- 2008): From Transactional Ties to Strategic Partnership

The Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008) administration was a period of sustained growth in political and economic relations between Seoul and Malaysia, characterized by a focus on strengthening East Asian cooperation and pursuing balanced diplomacy.

During this time, the bilateral relationship deepened, driven by a shared vision for an East Asian Community and the expansion of economic collaboration. The Roh Moo-hyun administration sought to broaden the scope of South Korean diplomacy and enhance regional cooperation in East Asia, which positively influenced its relations with Malaysia. The administration championed the vision of an East Asian Community to promote regional integration and collaboration. The Roh Administration actively engaged in this vision, particularly through APT, where Malaysia was regarded as a key partner. The administration also placed significant importance on aligning with Malaysia's *Look East Policy*. Viewing it as a critical diplomatic foundation, the Roh administration worked to deepen cooperation with Malaysia, thereby reinforcing the interdependence of the two nations.

During the Roh Moo-hyun administration, South Korea–Malaysia relations experienced notable growth across political, diplomatic, and economic dimensions, driven by both countries' shared commitment to multilateralism and regional integration. Roh administration prioritized closer engagement with ASEAN, exemplified by South Korea's participation in the inaugural EAS in 2005, which was hosted by Malaysia (Dent 2016). As the host, Malaysia played a proactive role in promoting interregional dialogue, and its emphasis on non-alignment and neutral diplomacy resonated with Seoul's balanced and pragmatic foreign policy approach under Roh. This alignment fostered deeper diplomatic trust and elevated the political partnership between the two nations.

Economically, the period was marked by the successful negotiation of the South Korea–ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (FTA), with Malaysia serving as a key interlocutor in ASEAN's collective efforts (Ravenhill 2010). The FTA provided a platform for expanding bilateral trade and investment, and Malaysian markets became increasingly attractive to South Korean businesses seeking regional diversification and access to Southeast Asia. South Korean investment in Malaysia surged during this period, particularly in strategic sectors such as manufacturing, construction, and information technology. Malaysia's geographic and economic positioning made it a gateway for South Korean firms targeting broader regional supply chains and consumer markets.

The Roh administration emphasized sustainable development and technological innovation, fostering bilateral cooperation in new and renewable energy sectors. Additionally, the two countries collaborated closely in the fields of IT, electronics, and environmental technology, further solidifying their economic partnership (MOFA 2007).

The two countries developed an interdependent trade relationship. Malaysia emerged as a major supplier of natural resources, including oil, natural gas, and palm oil, while South Korea exported electronic products, automobiles, and steel to Malaysia. This reciprocal trade structure reinforced the economic partnership between the two nations. The Roh administration's active economic diplomacy and Malaysia's receptiveness to regional economic cooperation reinforced bilateral ties and solidified South Korea's strategic engagement in Southeast Asia.

Under the Roh administration, Korea-Malaysia relations evolved around initiatives for East Asian cooperation and strengthened economic partnerships (Korea JoongAng Daily 2005). The establishment of a framework for an East Asian Community and the successful negotiation of an FTA provided opportunities to further enhance bilateral ties. Malaysia was recognized as an essential strategic partner for South Korea in Southeast Asia, while South Korea played a key role in Malaysia's East Asian cooperation strategy. The close collaboration in economic development and multilateral diplomacy laid the groundwork for the two nations to move beyond a traditional trading relationship and develop into strategic partners. The Roh administration marked a period of heightened political collaboration and economic interdependence, further reinforcing mutual trust and cooperation between Seoul and Malaysia. This era set the stage for the continued development of a robust and multifaceted bilateral relationship.

The Roh administration's foreign policy was mainly shaped by domestic debates over autonomy and balanced diplomacy. As a progressive leadership with strong support from civil society and academia, Roh advanced visions of East Asian regionalism, positioning Malaysia and ASEAN as critical partners in realizing a more independent foreign policy posture. Here, domestic-level drivers included the ruling coalition's ideological orientation toward multilateralism and the elite discourse on East Asian community-building. Malaysia's consistent support for ASEAN-centered initiatives aligned with Roh's push for cooperative regionalism, making the bilateral relationship an important vehicle for advancing his autonomy-oriented diplomacy.

Lee Myung-bak's Administration (2008-2013): Complementary Trade Structures and Infrastructure Engagement

During Lee Myung-bak's presidency (2008–2013), political and economic relations between South Korea and Malaysia witnessed significant development, driven by pragmatic diplomacy and economic cooperation. The Lee Myung-bak administration emphasized enhancing Korea's international stature and pursuing practical interests through its foreign policy vision of "Global Korea." This policy direction was evident in South Korea's relationship with Malaysia, an important partner within ASEAN and a focal point of South Korea's regional cooperation policy.

The Lee Myung-bak administration identified strengthening relations with ASEAN as a central pillar of its diplomatic strategy. Malaysia, as one of the key ASEAN member states, was regarded as a vital partner in fostering regional cooperation. This focus extended beyond bilateral ties, as the administration sought to enhance collaboration across East Asia. In 2009, the Korea-ASEAN Special Summit held in Jeju Island symbolized the deepening partnership between South Korea and ASEAN (MOFA 2009(a); Embassy of Malaysia, Seoul 2011). At the summit, Malaysia expressed a strong willingness to collaborate, thereby reinforcing its relations with South Korea. Through pragmatic diplomacy, Lee Myung Bak advanced political ties with Malaysia, particularly by emphasizing cooperation on global issues such as climate change and energy security. Furthermore, during this period, the rising global interest in Korean culture (K-culture) allowed South Korea to leverage cultural diplomacy as a tool to promote mutual understanding and trust between the two nations.

Under the Lee Myung-bak administration, South Korea's economic engagement with Malaysia was significantly shaped by the integration of green growth into its broader foreign policy and trade strategy (MOFA 2009(b)). As part of the "Global Korea" vision, Lee administration promoted sustainable development as a national priority, advancing South Korea's global competitiveness through the Green Growth agenda, which sought to balance rapid economic expansion with environmental responsibility (Blaxekjaer 2016; Lee 2023; Mathews 2012). This strategic orientation fostered deeper cooperation with Malaysia, particularly in the areas of renewable energy, eco-technology, and environmental infrastructure. These areas of engagement aligned with Malaysia's resource-rich profile and its increasing interest in sustainable development, created mutually beneficial pathways for bilateral collaboration.

Economic ties between the two countries also expanded through a complementary trade structure. South Korea relied on Malaysia for essential natural resources such as crude oil, LNG, and palm oil, inputs relevant not only for traditional industrial use but also for emerging green energy sectors. In return, Malaysia imported advanced manufactured goods, including electronics, steel, and automobiles. This interdependence was further reinforced by cooperative ventures in energy efficiency and technological innovation, positioning Malaysia as a strategic partner in Seoul's clean energy diversification efforts (Dent 2014).

In addition to energy and technology cooperation, infrastructure development became a major pillar of bilateral economic engagement. Supported by the government's push for overseas expansion of its construction sector, South Korean firms increasingly participated in large-scale infrastructure projects in Malaysia, including transportation and port development. These projects enhanced Malaysia's domestic connectivity while consolidating South Korea's economic presence in Southeast Asia.

Moreover, the implementation of the Korea–ASEAN FTA during the Lee administration marked a turning point in institutionalizing economic cooperation. The agreement reduced trade barriers, facilitated investment flows, and provided a stable framework for expanding bilateral commerce. Malaysia, as one of ASEAN's leading economies, played a crucial role in the agreement's implementation and subsequent economic outcomes. The FTA reflected the Lee administration's pragmatic economic diplomacy, which combined market expansion goals with strategic regional engagement.

The Lee Myung-bak presidency marked a period of enhanced relations between South Korea and Malaysia, characterized by pragmatic diplomacy and extensive economic collaboration. The focus on global issues such as green growth and energy security not only expanded the scope of bilateral cooperation but also reinforced economic interdependence. Malaysia emerged as a strategic partner for South Korea in Southeast Asia, while South Korea solidified its position as a trusted partner in Malaysia's economic development and international engagements. This period laid a strong foundation for sustained and mutually beneficial cooperation between the two nations.

The Lee administration marked a conservative turn, with foreign policy priorities reflecting economic pragmatism and the pursuit of global competitiveness. Domestic-level drivers included

the administration's pro-business orientation and the need to navigate the fallout of the 2008 global financial crisis. In this context, Malaysia was approached primarily as an energy and infrastructure partner, fitting into the broader strategy of resource diplomacy and global market diversification. The "Global Korea" vision was thus mediated by domestic economic imperatives and elite preferences for outward-oriented growth, which shaped Seoul's bilateral engagement with Malaysia in a markedly utilitarian manner.

Park Geun-hye's Administration (2013-2017): Creative Economy and Complementary Trade Relations with Malaysia

During the Park Geun-hye administration (2013–2017), diplomatic relations between Seoul and Malaysia developed significantly across various fields, aiming to strengthen and deepen cooperation between the two nations. Park's administration sought to further expand partnerships with Southeast Asian countries by emphasizing the "Trust-Building Process on the Korean Peninsula" and the "Creative Economy" as central themes of its foreign policy and economic strategy. Malaysia emerged as an important partner in achieving these policy objectives.

The Park Geun-hye administration prioritized strengthening relations with ASEAN as a cornerstone of South Korea's diplomacy, with Malaysia serving as a strategic partner in its Southeast Asian engagement (Korea Herald 2014; Straits Times 2014). The two countries enhanced their relationship through high-level visits and summit meetings. Notably, Park Geun Hye met with Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak during the 2015 Korea-ASEAN Summit and EAS in Kuala Lumpur, where they discussed ways to bolster political and economic cooperation (ASEAN 2015; Korea Times 2015). During this period, cooperation with Malaysia gained significance in the context of international issues concerning peace on the Korean Peninsula (Lee and Sohn 2019; Lee 2023; Niksch 2013). Given Malaysia's diplomatic relations with North Korea, Seoul sought to leverage its ties with Malaysia to garner international support for the resolution of Korean Peninsula issues.

In the economic domain, trade and investment between South Korea and Malaysia expanded. The Park Geun-hye administration emphasized collaboration in advanced technology, energy, and information and communication sectors as part of its goal to foster a creative economy.

Malaysia's abundant natural resources and South Korea's technological expertise created a complementary economic relationship. During this period, Malaysia became one of South Korea's top 10 trading partners. Bilateral trade between the two nations reached USD 18.03 billion in 2013, marking a 13.6% increase from the previous year (MITI 2015). Key trade items included South Korea's imports of natural gas and palm oil from Malaysia, while Malaysia imported South Korean electronics, automobiles, and steel products. Economic cooperation was further bolstered by the Korea-ASEAN FTA, which came into effect in 2010. The FTA reduced trade barriers and facilitated increased investment and trade in services between the two countries. The Park Geun-hye administration also emphasized sustainable development and energy security, deepening energy cooperation with Malaysia. Specifically, it ensured energy supply stability through increased imports of liquefied natural gas (LNG) and encouraged South Korean companies to participate in Malaysia's energy projects.

The Korean Wave, represented by K-culture, gained immense popularity in Malaysia during this period. Centered on dramas, movies, and K-pop, Hallyu served as a key driver of cultural exchange between the two countries. The Park Geun-hye administration capitalized on this cultural phenomenon as a diplomatic asset to enhance South Korea's positive image among Malaysians and to strengthen bilateral ties. Cultural diplomacy initiatives, such as K-pop concerts and the Korean Cultural Festival in Malaysia, received enthusiastic responses. Additionally, the exchange of students and the expansion of Korean language education programs further solidified academic and interpersonal connections between the two nations.

During Park's administration, relations between Seoul and Malaysia developed steadily in the realms of politics, economy, and culture. Politically, Malaysia was recognized as a strategic partner in South Korea's ASEAN-focused diplomacy. Economically, complementary trade structures and energy cooperation deepened the bilateral partnership. Culturally, diplomacy centered on the Korean Wave played a vital role in fostering mutual understanding and friendship between the peoples of both countries. These developments laid a strong foundation for the sustainability of bilateral relations beyond the Park administration.

The Park administration faced growing domestic political challenges alongside heightened tensions on the Korean Peninsula. While alliance politics dominated security policy, Park relied heavily on economic diplomacy to secure political legitimacy at home. Malaysia featured prominently in this approach, with bilateral cooperation framed in terms of economic opportunity and linked to the “creative economy” agenda. The domestic-level drivers here were twofold: the search for visible diplomatic achievements to compensate for declining domestic support, and the institutional emphasis on expanding trade and investment ties with Southeast Asia.

Moon Jae-in’s Administration (2017-2022): Deepening Economic Integration through the New Southern Policy and RCEP

During the Moon Jae-in administration (2017–2022), relations between Seoul and Malaysia were significantly strengthened across economic, political, and cultural dimensions. The Moon administration greatly expanded cooperation with ASEAN countries, with the "Peace Process on the Korean Peninsula" and the "New Southern Policy" serving as its main diplomatic frameworks (Lee 2019; Lee 2020; Lee 2023).

The Moon administration deepened its strategic partnership with Malaysia, positioning cooperation with ASEAN countries as a core diplomatic priority. In 2019, Moon made a state visit to Malaysia and held a summit meeting with Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad (MOFA, Malaysia 2019). During this meeting, the leaders discussed specific measures to enhance economic cooperation, technology exchanges, infrastructure development, and collaboration in the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Yonhap News 2019(b)).

Malaysia was also recognized as a key diplomatic partner in South Korea's "Peace Process on the Korean Peninsula." Given Malaysia's traditional diplomatic relations with North Korea, South Korea sought to leverage its relationship with Malaysia to secure international support for denuclearization and peace on the Korean Peninsula (Lee 2019).

The Moon administration prioritized economic cooperation with ASEAN countries under the "New Southern Policy," with Malaysia emerging as a major partner. Bilateral trade between South Korea and Malaysia steadily increased, with key trade items including electronics, automobiles,

refined oil products, and LNG. Malaysia became a primary LNG supplier for South Korea, underscoring energy cooperation as a cornerstone of their bilateral relations. President Moon Jae In and Prime Minister Mahathir emphasized the importance of comprehensive collaboration to advance economic ties, particularly in areas such as smart city development, the digital economy, and eco-energy projects. South Korean companies actively participated in large-scale infrastructure projects in Malaysia, including railways, roads, and smart city construction, further strengthening economic cooperation.

The year 2020 marked the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between South Korea and Malaysia. Over these six decades, the two countries have steadily developed relations in diverse fields, including politics, economy, and cultural exchange. This milestone year was particularly significant, as it coincided with the implementation of the "New Southern Policy Plus" strategy and ongoing negotiations for the South Korea-Malaysia FTA, both of which were expected to deepen bilateral cooperation. Furthermore, in November 2020, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the world's largest free trade agreement, was signed, with South Korea and Malaysia among its 15 member countries. This agreement provided a pivotal opportunity to further strengthen economic cooperation and integration between the two nations.

During the Moon administration, the Korean Wave gained significant traction in Malaysia, becoming an important medium for cultural exchange (Yonhap News 2019(a)). The Korean Wave, exemplified by K-pop, K-dramas, and movies, enjoyed immense popularity among Malaysia's younger generation, contributing to the enhancement of South Korea's soft power. Various Korean cultural events, K-pop concerts, and Korean film festivals held in Malaysia received enthusiastic response, fostering greater understanding and familiarity between the peoples of both countries. The number of Malaysian students studying in South Korea increased, and the expansion of Korean language education in Malaysia further strengthened academic and interpersonal networks.

Under the Moon administration, relations between South Korea and Malaysia deepened across all domains-politics, economy, and culture, with the "New Southern Policy" serving as the primary framework (Lee 2019). Malaysia firmly established itself as an important partner for South Korea within ASEAN, and the strategic partnership between the two nations grew stronger. This

collaboration laid a crucial foundation for promoting peace and prosperity not only in Southeast Asia and the Korean Peninsula but also in the broader international context.

Emerging from the political upheaval of the 2016–2017 impeachment crisis, the Moon administration emphasized democratic legitimacy, inclusive growth, and value-based diplomacy. These domestic orientations were institutionalized through the New Southern Policy (NSP), which elevated ASEAN and Malaysia in particular, to the status of key strategic partners. Domestic-level variables included the progressive coalition’s normative worldview, Moon’s personal commitment to “people-centered diplomacy,” and the bureaucratic push to diversify South Korea’s diplomatic portfolio beyond the Korean Peninsula and major powers. Malaysia’s role in this context was not incidental but central to Seoul’s effort to project normative middle-power leadership in Southeast Asia.

Conclusion

This study has examined the evolution of South Korea’s bilateral relations with Malaysia through the theoretical lens of neoclassical realism, highlighting how domestic political leadership interacts with external structural conditions to shape foreign policy behavior. By analyzing five successive administrations, the study demonstrates that South Korea’s approach to Malaysia has consistently reflected the ideological orientation, policy priorities, and bureaucratic dynamics of each government. The variation in media attention and thematic patterns shown in Tables 1 and 2 further illustrates how Malaysia’s relevance has shifted according to South Korea’s broader diplomatic agenda.

Under the administrations of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, South Korea emphasized multilateralism, East Asian regionalism, and normative values such as peace and cooperation, aligning closely with Malaysia’s non-aligned diplomacy and ASEAN-centered engagement. During this period, Malaysia played an important role in regional institution-building, participating in platforms such as the APT, the East Asia Vision Group, and the East Asia Summit. From the Lee Myung-bak administration onward, the bilateral relationship took on a more pragmatic and diversified character. Cooperation expanded across complementary trade structures, energy security, infrastructure development, and green growth initiatives, while the Park Geun-hye government reinforced economic ties through the creative economy agenda and saw heightened

media attention due to North Korea–related incidents involving Malaysia. Under Moon Jae-in, bilateral relations reached their peak as the New Southern Policy and RCEP deepened political, economic, and cultural cooperation, establishing Malaysia as a comprehensive strategic partner.

Malaysia’s consistent foreign policy orientation—grounded in non-alignment, South-South cooperation, and ASEAN leadership—has provided a stable counterpart to South Korea’s shifting diplomatic strategies. This complementarity has enabled both countries to maintain resilient cooperation despite regional uncertainties in the Indo-Pacific. The findings underscore the key insight of neoclassical realism: while structural factors such as economic interdependence and regional security dynamics remain influential, domestic-level variables—leadership perceptions, ideological orientations, and bureaucratic preferences—play a critical mediating role in shaping foreign policy outcomes.

Despite its contributions, this study acknowledges several limitations. The single-country case design constrains comparative generalizability, and future research could incorporate additional ASEAN states to identify broader regional patterns. The analysis primarily focuses on policy direction rather than implementation outcomes, and the reliance on media-based content analysis introduces potential biases that could be mitigated through the use of primary documents or elite interviews. Furthermore, the study foregrounds the South Korean perspective, and incorporating Malaysia’s strategic calculations would provide a more balanced bilateral account. Lastly, while neoclassical realism offers a strong explanatory framework, integrating complementary approaches, such as bureaucratic politics or cognitive models, could further enrich future analyses.

Overall, this study contributes to the scholarship on middle-power diplomacy in East Asia by illustrating how South Korea and Malaysia navigate the interplay between domestic politics and international constraints. It advances a more nuanced understanding of bilateral diplomacy, leadership-driven engagement, and middle-power behavior in an increasingly complex and multipolar regional order.

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