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South Korea at the 2026 ARF:

From Communiqué Language to Regional Public Goods

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The 2026 ASEAN foreign ministers' meetings were held in the Philippines from July 21 to 24, culminating in the 33rd ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). The meetings addressed the South China Sea, Myanmar, the Thailand–Cambodia border dispute, the Korean Peninsula, Ukraine and the Middle East. The ARF also issued the Manila Plan of Action 2026–2030, setting out cooperation in disaster relief, counter-terrorism and transnational crime, maritime security, nonproliferation and disarmament, ICT security, defense cooperation and peacekeeping.

On the Korean Peninsula, the Chairman's Statement expressed "serious concern" over North Korea's nuclear and missile programs as violations of UN Security Council resolutions. Seoul counted as achievements the retention of "complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" in place of CVID, the new phrase "in a peaceful manner," and the designation of creating conditions for dialogue as the first priority. Yet Pyongyang skipped the meeting for the second consecutive year, and four days later Kim Yo Jong rejected calls to return to talks. The real question is not the fine-tuning of communiqué language but where South Korea allocated its diplomatic resources and whether that matched its policy goals. In short, Seoul largely met its objectives in the form of diplomacy but made limited progress in substance. The problem is not diligence; it is how effort is distributed and how success is measured.

A forum that resolves no disputes, but a stage that cannot be left empty

Founded in 1994, the ARF was the first institutional expression of ASEAN centrality, created to promote confidence-building, develop preventive diplomacy and, eventually, conflict-management mechanisms. It is a consultative body for accumulating trust, not an instrument for settling disputes. Disappointment that the ARF "does little" for the Peninsula stems from expectations higher than the forum was originally designed to meet.

Structural constraints run deeper. As U.S.–China competition has spread into the realm of ideology, both powers have bypassed ASEAN-led institutions pursuing their own narratives. The Trump administration has engaged multilateral bodies more selectively. ASEAN itself, built on member sovereignty, struggles to reach unified strategic positions, as the 2012 Phnom Penh rupture, the 2021 Myanmar coup and the 2025 Thailand–Cambodia clash showed.

The Peninsula language in successive Chairman's Statements illustrates the point. For over a decade the core issues barely changed, but the tone has tracked inter-Korean relations: "concern" in 2017, "welcome" after PyeongChang in 2018, "neutrality" after Hanoi in 2019, and renewed criticism after 2022. The ARF records changed circumstances rather than attempting to change them. Communiqué wording is therefore a defensive line, not a performance indicator. Whether the shift from CVID to "complete denuclearization" is a realistic adjustment or a gradual retreat from nonproliferation norms cannot be judged from text alone. However, concern about the latter is spreading. The language protects the minimum baseline of the nonproliferation regime and Security Council resolutions; it is not a report card on North Korea policy. Still, the ARF stage cannot be vacated: keeping the Peninsula on the agenda sustains Southeast Asian engagement, and defensive diplomacy that holds the normative line remains necessary. The mistake is expecting more.

Achievement in form, gaps in substance

Seoul's 2026 record is mixed. In form, such as language, protocol, relationship management, it delivered. The Chairman's Statement stayed consistent with government policy; the Korea–ASEAN Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) advanced, with Seoul co-chairing the Korea–ASEAN and Korea–Mekong ministerials; a U.S.–ROK–Japan foreign ministers' meeting on July 22 reaffirmed denuclearization, deterrence and maritime security, building on a recent trilateral SMR cooperation memorandum; and Seoul endorsed the Manila Plan of Action, pledging contributions in five fields, though implementation will be the real test.

Substantive results were thinner. Calls for North Korea to return to dialogue won broad rhetorical support but no traction. On the South China Sea, Seoul restated freedom of navigation and overflight, a UNCLOS-based order and a Code of Conduct that respects third-party rights, but stayed out of the 14-nation joint statement of July 12. On Hormuz-driven energy and supply-chain shocks, it stressed safe navigation in all international waters and proposed action-oriented ASEAN+3 food and energy cooperation, but left its mode of contribution to the United States unresolved. Weakest of all was management of bilateral U.S. issues: there was no separate ROK–U.S. foreign ministers' meeting, only brief exchanges with Secretary Rubio and Under Secretary Hooker. Immediately afterward, Washington announced new Section 301 tariffs on some 60 countries, including Korea.

As resource allocation, the pattern is stark: over-investment in multilateral text, publicized as the headline outcome; under-investment in sideline bilateral and minilateral diplomacy; and a weak narrative, with no concrete answer to the question, "What does Korea provide to the region?" The ARF should shift from a channel for messaging Pyongyang to a venue for tracking and publicizing Korea's supply of regional public

goods. That is, Peninsula language should be held at the defensive line of Security Council implementation and nonproliferation, with surplus capacity redirected to bilateral and minilateral channels and a Korea-centered narrative.

The ROK-US alliance and multilateral forums are complements, not substitutes

The 2026 meetings sharpened the dual track of U.S. Indo-Pacific policy: security engagement is intensifying, as seen in \$100 million in defense financing for the Philippines and firm rhetoric on the South China Sea, while tariffs are imposed without distinguishing allies from others. For ASEAN states this reinforces a "security with America, economic hedging" posture. Managed U.S.–China competition ahead of the September summit gives Seoul temporary room toward Beijing, but it could close quickly.

Whether ASEAN accepts U.S.–ROK–Japan cooperation depends on its public-goods narrative: trilateral projects that meet regional needs, such as the SMR memorandum, draw little resistance, whereas cooperation read purely as China containment provokes objections that it undermines ASEAN centrality. The principle to hold is that the alliance and the ARF perform different functions: the alliance anchors deterrence and readiness, while multilateral frameworks sustain norms and keep communication open with competitors. If that division is blurred, multilateral caution reads as defection in Washington and principled statements as bloc alignment in Beijing. Meanwhile the geographic expansion of burden-sharing is already real; U.S. requests for a Korean contribution to stabilizing the Strait of Hormuz are part of a broader push to extend allied contributions to sea lanes beyond the region.

From Hormuz to the South China Sea: sea-lane resilience as the point of convergence

The Hormuz crisis triggered by the Iran war has bound Korea, Japan and ASEAN together around a shared stake in energy and sea-lane stability, which is why the Middle East drew its own ministerial statement this year. Rather than reducing its Hormuz contribution to a partisan debate over alliance demands, Seoul could design a "SLOC resilience" initiative linking Hormuz, Malacca and the South China Sea and bring it to the ARF's maritime security agenda: maritime domain awareness and information sharing, merchant-shipping protection protocols, lessons from Hormuz on rerouting, insurance and emergency stockpiles, and coast-guard capacity-building in Southeast Asia. This has three advantages. It lowers political sensitivity by focusing on navigation safety and crisis response rather than sovereignty claims; it consolidates contributions to the United States and to ASEAN under one narrative and one budget; and it makes visible Korea's transition from consumer to provider of maritime security, while limiting entanglement risk and managing alliance burdens more flexibly.

Multilaterally, Korea should participate more actively in ARF intersessional meetings and working groups and co-chair those tied to its core interests. On inter-Korean deadlock, seeking bilateral help from interested Southeast Asian states is more realistic than working through the ARF. Over the longer term, Seoul should widen engagement on non-traditional issues such as the South China Sea and online scams, use the navy and coast guard together to support Southeast Asian maritime surveillance, and treat defense-industrial ties not merely as export markets but as confidence-building through multinational exercises, technology transfer and MRO capacity.

The lesson of 2026 is about where Korean diplomacy spends its effort. Seoul invested considerable effort in language it has limited ability to shape, while devoting comparatively less attention to the cooperative agendas and narrative of contribution that lie within its own control. A communiqué records the regional order; it does

not shape it. A record of providing public goods and the story explaining it, is an asset Korea can build and deploy with Washington, Beijing and Southeast Asia alike. The task is a two-track approach: use multilateral forums to accumulate and showcase contributions, and concentrate real bargaining in bilateral and minilateral channels. The ARF's limited leverage on the Peninsula is not in itself the concern; the more pressing question is whether Korea has developed a strategy that redistributes diplomatic resources and priorities in light of that limit.