

Digital on Digital: Strengthening ASEAN-Korea digital-economic cooperation via integrated e-platforms

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Abstract

Cooperation between ASEAN and South Korea (ROK) has been accelerating since the latter's advancement of the New Southern Policy. In particular, the digital sphere has emerged as a key area of cooperation since ROK could leverage on her technological expertise to spearhead initiatives that complement ASEAN's digitalization agendas. As Covid-19 ushers in an era of restricted movement accompanied by contracting economies, cooperation via digital means in the economic sphere appears more pertinent than ever. This paper explores two significant facets of a digital economy which could potentially foster ASEAN-Korea digital-economic cooperation - e-commerce and business networking. Adapting to the constraints of a post-Covid-19 era, it is proffered that existing ASEAN-Korea digital cooperation in the economic field can be strengthened by establishing integrated e-platforms. With more digital initiatives building on existing ones, the shared vision of creating a "People-centered Community of Peace and Prosperity" will not reach a standstill even if the odds of Covid-19 are stacked against both ROK and ASEAN.

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I. Introduction

South Korea's(ROK) pivot to Southeast Asia(SEA) via the New Southern Policy(NSP) in 2017 heralded an era of increased cooperation with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations(ASEAN) (Kwak 2020). While collaboration on multiple fronts has since been forged, partnership in the digital field is especially pronounced. In particular, the latest ASEAN-Korea five-year Plan of Action repeatedly details digital partnership across multiple areas, including smart cities development, digital upskilling, smart connectivity enhancement, and many more(MOFA 2020). It is unsurprising to witness digitalization emerging as a key area of cooperation since ROK, being a pioneer in the technological industry, has the expertise to assist ASEAN in realizing her digital agendas, as delineated in the ASEAN ICT Masterplan 2020.

Amongst the diversified forms of digital cooperation, the focus of the ASEAN-Korea digital collaboration should be centered on the economy in the near future, and its reason is twofold. Firstly, economic recovery would likely top the priority list of most countries in the post-Covid-19 phase. Economies worldwide have been severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, and both ROK and ASEAN are no exceptions. Not only did the Bank of Korea forecast ROK's economic growth to shrink by 1.3% (Bank of Korea, 2020), the Asian Development Bank similarly predicted a contraction in SEA's growth by a significant 2.7%(Asian Development Bank 2020). However, Covid-19 has left governments with no choice but to rebuild

contracting economies amidst constraints such as movement restrictions and tightened border controls. This has caused seismic shifts in the region's digital landscape, where governments and businesses began to accelerate transition towards a digital economy (Medina 2020). As the role of a digital economy becomes increasingly indispensable in the Covid-19 setting, cooperation in this area should be brought to the fore. Secondly, ASEAN's potential in economic digitalization nicely complements ROK's economic interests, begetting a win-win outcome for both stakeholders. If well developed, ASEAN's digital economy has the potential to accelerate regional trade and local business growth, where the projected gain to ASEAN's GDP amounts to \$1 trillion (Hoppe, May & Lim 2018). Partnering with an economically and digitally vibrant region would in turn better the quality of ROK's economic diversification - a fundamental impetus of the NSP initiative (Hoang & Ong 2020). In brief, owing to the increasing relevance of a digital economy in a post-Covid-19 era coupled by the prospects of mutual gains via economic digitalization, the development of a digital economy should definitely be considered as one of the centerpieces of ASEAN-Korea digital collaboration.

Understanding the primacy of a digital economy then begets the next question: what are the ways to strengthen ASEAN-Korea digital-economic cooperation, especially in the post-pandemic context? This paper proposes the establishment of integrated ASEAN-Korea e-platforms to meet this objective. Specifically, two aspects crucial to a digital economy - e-commerce and business

networking - will be introduced to show how tailored e-platforms could foster digital-economic collaboration between Korea and ASEAN. These facets would be analyzed respectively, where we provide an evaluation of the existing initiatives, followed by proposals that outline how integrated e-platforms could enhance ASEAN-Korea digital-economic cooperation. Subsequently, we identify potential pitfalls of the proposed idea and ways to circumvent them. The paper will finally conclude by elucidating how integrated e-platforms is not only a contributor to economic digitalization perse, but is also an idea that could be conveniently transplanted to other dimensions of ASEAN-Korea digital partnership.

II. E-commerce

E-commerce is one of the backbones of a digital economy that generates new forms of economic growth(Kinda 2019); both ROK and ASEAN are well-positioned to leverage on this sphere to reap economic benefits. Consistently ranked in the top tier of the Digital Opportunity Index(Ahn 2019), ROK is home to a thriving domestic e-commerce industry. In fact, she had witnessed an exceptional 17% increase in online sale figures from 2018 to 2019(ecommerceDB 2020). As for ASEAN, not only did the region's e-commerce value grow close to 700% within 4 years, industrial forecasts have also predicted this value to cross \$150 billion by 2025 (The ASEAN Post 2019). Hence, fostering ASEAN-Korea collaboration in this area would further expand each of their existing e-commerce sizes,

increasing economic gains for both.

In addition to the salient monetary benefits, cooperation in e-commerce development is also becoming ever-more necessary as Covid-19 accelerates the transformation of business models. Many businesses were forced to do away with their brick-and-mortar stores as enforcement such as social distancing and lockdowns enact barriers to the physical sales of goods and services. This has begot a spike in business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-consumer(B2C) e-commerce(WTO 2020) where retailers, in an attempt to stay afloat, turn to e-marketplaces for alternative merchandizing means. With Covid-19 escalating business digitalization, e-commerce is set to take center stage in the post-Covid-19 era. Therefore, ROK and ASEAN should cooperate to smoothen the process of e-commerce with one another, ensuring that the ASEAN-Korea e-business potential could be maximized and make contributions to post-pandemic economic recovery.

Currently, ROK and ASEAN have in place several initiatives aimed at facilitating their respective e-commerce activities. The succeeding sub-sections would evaluate the potentiality of expanding these existing schemes' idea to form integrated e-platforms that could promote ASEAN-Korea e-commerce.

1. Building on the 'buyKorea' initiative: ASEAN-Korea B2B2C e-marketplace

E-marketplaces are avenues where e-commerce activities materialize.

Although a handful of such e-platforms is present, they have assumed a minimal role in forging ASEAN-Korea B2C or B2B e-commerce. A study by iPrice Group has divulged that ASEAN's B2C e-commerce market share is disproportionately dominated by Alibaba's Lazada, where the Korean e-commerce platform - 11street - claims a meagre 13% of the entire market pie(Singh 2019). Meanwhile in ROK, the e-commerce market remains largely dominated by local players such as Coupang¹⁾(Millard 2020). In each of these preferred e-marketplace, ROK and ASEAN businesses are pitched against many other non-Korean or non-ASEAN retailers who are more well-established amongst ROK and ASEAN's respective customer base. As a result, ROK and ASEAN firms would find it difficult to substantially penetrate into each other's e-commerce market due to their lack of brand identity and exposure.

Setting up an ASEAN-Korea e-marketplace would alleviate this problem. The e-platform could be modelled after ROK's buyKorea initiative, which is a government-operated B2B e-platform that connects international buyers to Korean suppliers(KOTRA 2016). By shrinking the e-commerce realm into one that is explicitly catered for Korean businesses, buyKorea concentrates the clients' process of locating new e-commerce opportunities within the Korean market. In a similar fashion, the integrated e-marketplace is proposed to be a B2B platform that centralizes ROK and ASEAN e-commerce activities. This enables businesses to better identify potential ROK

1) A domestic e-commerce giant that supplanted Amazon as the top online retailer in ROK within a span of 10 years(Palmer 2020).

and ASEAN companies to commerce with without being overly distracted by other alternatives. The suggested e-commerce platform can even be further expanded to incorporate B2C e-transactions. This model may allow ROK and ASEAN firms to gain access to each other's list of qualified leads²⁾, thereby broadening their consumer base. Moreover, as ROK and ASEAN companies increase their cooperation via B2B e-commerce, such business associations could increase their brand credibility amongst each other's customer base, reducing the lead-time for retailers to construct brand reputation in new B2C e-markets. These advantages significantly lower the difficulty level for e-market penetration, ergo stimulating more ASEAN-Korea B2B and B2C e-commerce activities.

It is noteworthy, however, that the establishment of this integrated e-marketplace needs to be complemented by a standardized set of rules and regulations that safeguard consumer interests. As discussed during the 2016 ASEAN-Korea Workshop on E-commerce, legal mechanisms that assist the enforcement of consumer protection, e-transaction disputes resolution, and fraud detection are required (ASEAN 2016). In this regard, ROK who has experience in instituting e-commerce industrial policies as early as 1999³⁾ could render constructive advice and assistance to the development of a regional e-commerce framework that provides a safe environment for

2) Qualified leads refer to individuals who could potentially become a firm's customer, based on the criteria and personal information they have provided (Ironpaper 2019).

3) In 1999, the Basic Act on Electronic Commerce was established in ROK. Subsequently in 2000 and 2001, the "Comprehensive Policies for e-Commerce Development" and "e-Business Initiative in Korea" were implemented (Yu 2002).

ASEAN-Korea e-businesses to flourish.

2. Building on the ASEAN Single Window: ASEAN-Korea e-trade data platform

Additionally, e-commerce often entails the cross-border flow of goods(Ding, Huo & Campos 2017). As such, cooperation in terms of trade facilitation is essential in supporting international e-commerce as well. To this end, ASEAN has established the ASEAN Single Window(ASW) - a digital platform aimed at expediting the process of regional trade via electronic exchanges of commercial data and border trade-related documents(ASEAN 2018). The integration of member states' National Single Window(NSW) under the ASW framework has enabled companies across ASEAN to enjoy reduced paperwork formalities as well as smoother cargo and custom clearances. In the same vein, ROK and ASEAN could ameliorate their e-commerce trading by creating a common data repository that consolidates essential information from ASW and ROK's NSW. This can be achieved by simply developing a subsidiary data platform within the ASW, where ASEAN and ROK would consolidate subsets of information that are most relevant to ASEAN-Korea trade. As trade efficacy improves due to convenient access to trade-related documents, firms would find ASEAN-Korea e-commerce increasingly viable and favorable.

A supplementary benefit to the joint development of an ASEAN-Korea e-trade data platform is the increased prospects of digital knowledge transfer. ROK's NSW model, known as the

uTradeHub, is an all-encompassing platform that provides not only e-trade infrastructure(e.g. standardized registry for electronic document), but also e-trade services(e.g. marketing, financial settlements, certification, logistics)(Yoon 2007). Some of these efficient e-systems and digital features may be introduced into the integrated data platform to better the latter's functionality. This confers ASEAN the chance to gain digital expertise that could improve their own ASW. The initiative can even be extended in a way where ROK collaborates with the advanced ASEAN member states to provide digital assistance to the less-developed countries who have been struggling with their operationalization of NSW(Das 2017).

III. Business Networking

Networking is another important component of a digital economy that lubricates the activities of e-businesses. The catchphrase - it is not only what you know, but also who you know that matters - equally applies to the realm of e-businesses as it does to business sectors in the physical-world. Organizational and industrial-sociological scholars alike have long posited that social networking is a form of capital for firms as it provides avenues that enable the exchange of information, knowledge and resources(Adler & Kwon 2002; Burt 1997; Gulati 1998), thence creating more opportunities for cooperation. The fact that the signing of an agreement between two Southeast Asia's leading e-commerce and the Korea SMEs⁴⁾ and

4) SMEs is the abbreviation for Small and medium enterprises.

Startups Agency had occurred over a virtual fair aimed at networking South Korean SMEs with overseas firms(Pulse 2020) serves only to testify the role of networking in elevating the prospects of e-business collaboration.

Networking's boon is cognized by leaders who are responsible for spearheading ASEAN-Korea initiatives as well. Specifically, the ASEAN-Korea Centre(AKC) Secretary General, Lee Hyuk, has emphasized that priority will be placed on the creation of a ASEAN-ROK community through people-to-people exchanges(Yoon 2019) - a key approach to accelerate cross-country networking. This agenda was further reaffirmed by President Moon Jae-in during the 2019 ASEAN-Korea Commemorative Summit, where he announced plans to introduce schemes that ease cross-border movements⁵⁾(Asia News Network 2019). Nonetheless, the traditional mode of networking via physical exchanges and immersion was faced with mounting challenges when governments raced to shut national borders amidst the Covid-19 outbreak. Although certain regions are gradually regaining control of the situation, the pandemic's unpredictability, evidenced by its recurring infectious waves across Asia(Coates 2020), makes it necessary for both the ROK and ASEAN to prepare to operate in a world of limited international movement. Hence, to ensure that e-businesses can continue to benefit from commercial networks even when restrained movement remains a characteristic of the post-Covid-19 era, new modes of networking should be explored.

Presently, existing ASEAN-Korea networking initiatives have been

5) Examples include streamlining of visa issuance procedures and open-skies policy.

modified to adapt to the demographic changes in population movement caused by Covid-19. Before delving into our proposed idea, the upcoming section will review the amendment that current initiatives have undertaken to preview the type of networking that would likely take place in a post-Covid-19 era. In addition, inherent inadequacies of these initiatives would also be discussed to identify areas for improvement.

1. Current ASEAN-Korea Networking Initiatives

When physical distancing emerged as a new norm amidst Covid-19, the virtualization of events promptly rose to popularity. Organizers of the ASEAN-Korea networking activities have similarly jumped on the bandwagon. For instance, the recent ‘ASEAN-Korea Bio Week 2020’ and ‘ASEAN-Korea Online Contents Business Matchmaking Program’⁶⁾ were both conducted via online platforms(AKC 2020a, 2020b). This sheds light onto the potential trajectory of future networking, that is, transforming into more digitalized forms. While one may argue that face-to-face networking can be restored if the situation stabilizes in the post-Covid-19 phase, the pandemic’s capricious nature makes it difficult to predict the feasibility of such an option. Therefore, new modes of networking in the foreseeable future is likely to manifest in digital formats.

On top of understanding the prospective nature of future

⁶⁾ Business networking events that were organized by the AKC for the biotechnological industry and the various contents sector respectively.

networking, examining the weaknesses of current ASEAN-Korea networking discloses key areas that require amelioration. Notably, the segregation of networking spheres according to industries shrinks the opportunity set for cross-sector e-business collaboration. There are a variety of industry-specific ASEAN-Korea business networking forums at the moment, ranging from robotics to infrastructure to biotechnology(AKC 2019). Indisputably, these networking platforms have their merits as they bring together the personnel who are most likely to create business cooperation opportunities with one another. However, this has inadvertently eliminated the chance for businesses from other sectors to build networks with the e-commerce industry, since the latter similarly has its own tailored networking arenas such as the ASEAN Digital Commerce Forum(AKC 2018). Consequently, most of the non-e-commerce firms would be unaware of their business potential in the e-marketplaces, reducing possibilities for e-business collaboration.

Another deficiency of the current ASEAN-Korea networking approach is time constraint. Majority of the networking events are typically held over a time period of two days, with a few exceptions that last for maximum one week⁷⁾. This suggests that there lies a limit to how much digital know-how could be transferred from larger technologically-savvy companies to smaller firms such as MSMEs⁸⁾ - the cornerstone of ASEAN's economy that accounts for 95-99% of

7) Refer to the ASEAN-Korea Centre's 'Centre Activities' website for the duration of each networking events.

8) MSMEs is the abbreviation for Micro, small & medium enterprises.

all business establishments(ERIA 2019). MSMEs usually suffer from a shortage of digital technology expertise(Tan & Tang 2016) and are definitely on the receiving end of an increasingly digitalized economy. While networking platforms host consultation sessions, the limited time frame constrains the amount of insights that could be imparted and does not ensure the continuity of digital knowledge transfers. Consequently, digital divide between large and small firms remains largely unbridged⁹⁾, impeding the creation of more e-business opportunities amongst the MSMEs.

2. ASEAN-Korea social business e-networking Platform(SBEP)

Since uncertainties over movement restrictions abound in a post-Covid-19 era, migrating networking activities into the virtual space via the establishment of an ASEAN-Korea social business e-networking platform is a suitable alternative. The SBEP is suggested to serve as a multilateral networking avenue where ASEAN and ROK firms could create intra and inter-sector business networks. With personalized profiles that cover a range of basic business information¹⁰⁾, users will be granted access to other industries' e-networking pages to seek potential cross-sector e-business collaboration. This is particularly crucial as securing networks with the digital technology industry is becoming more of a necessity for many businesses who

9) According to a study by Bain & Co, only a meagre 16% of MSMEs in ASEAN use digital technologies to their full potential(Hoppe, May, & Lim 2018). Even within ROK itself, digital gaps between large and small firms remain wide(OECD 2020).

10) Examples of such information details include business type, description of the firm's products and services, as well as investment interests.

were forced to digitalize amidst Covid-19. The tourism sector, for example, was one of the most badly hit industries that needs to accelerate their pace of digitalization. Recognizing this urgency, the AKC has even organized a webinar aimed at boosting ASEAN-Korea smart tourism businesses(AKC 2020). Nonetheless, on top of such intra-sector initiatives, cooperative ties with the ICT and e-commerce industries are also vital to developing a smart tourism ecosystem (Fereidouni & Alizadeh 2020). The SBEP thus aims to become a one-stop destination where ROK and ASEAN firms could network with different industries to optimize e-business cooperation opportunities.

Additionally, the amount of networking time available on the SBEP is infinite since it is a 24/7 functioning e-service. This means that there is ample time for information sharing, so long as the ASEAN-Korea firms arrive at an agreement to do so. Hence, the SBEP is proposed to adopt social media features that facilitate online communication between ASEAN-Korea companies. This encompasses functions such as secured chat rooms, video conferences, and convenient document uploading processes. Leading in both the e-commerce and technology industries, ROK is abundant in digitally-competent companies who could assist the region's MSMEs to climb the ladder of digitalization. The availability of virtual communication channels coupled with the absence of time constraint would create more opportunities for the diffusion of digital insights as well as collaborative innovation, thereby alleviating the severity of digital gap between large and small firms. In coordinating the

transmission of digital knowledge, SBEP complements the goal to “empower MSMEs by promoting and accelerating the use of digital technology”¹¹⁾. As the community of digitally-abled companies balloons in size, ASEAN-Korea e-businesses is poised to increase.

Indeed, one may question the necessity of an integrated SBEP since there exist many other business networking sites that can help firms connect on a global scale. However, many of such platforms have algorithms that may sieve out ASEAN and ROK businesses from each other’s potential connection list. LinkedIn, for example, builds business networks by analyzing users’ working location, existing connections, and profile content(Jurka 2018). Since the user profile information of ASEAN and ROK firms would likely correlate more to other companies of their own region, the algorithms may not effectively interlink ASEAN-Korea businesses together. Thus, analogous to the rationale of an integrated e-marketplace, the SBEP aims to create a concentrated social circle where ASEAN and ROK firms could network with each other despite having no prior associations.

IV. Potential Limitations and Proposed Solutions

Despite its potentiality, there are a few challenges to the implementation of integrated ASEAN-Korea e-platforms. With regards to the e-trade data platform in particular, data security issues

11) An objective that was listed in the ASEAN-Korea five-year Plan of Action (2021-2025)(MOFA 2020).

and the paucity of infrastructures are potential hindrances. For the former, cross-border data flows would necessitate not just intra-ASEAN but also ASEAN-Korea cooperation on the harmonization of legal landscapes for data protection purposes. One possible means to fulfil this agenda is to incorporate ROK into the development of the 2018 ASEAN Framework on Digital Data Governance(ASEAN 2018). For the latter, data centers and cloud computing services are fundamental facilities required to support the voluminous data and e-documentations from ASEAN and ROK firms. While this might not necessarily be a concern for ROK and certain ASEAN members¹²⁾, it remains a real obstacle amongst the less digitally-advanced CLM¹³⁾ states. Hence, more effort is needed to assist these states in their development of the requisite infrastructures. This can be achieved by promoting greater CLM-Korea information technology collaboration; the recent cooperation between ROK and Thailand's telecommunications companies in the construction of a data center facility(Sharon 2020) could serve as a precedent for ROK-led digital infrastructure projects in the CLM states.

As for the SBEP, accessibility issues may arise due to low internet and broadband penetration. Within ASEAN lies a large digital divide,

12) According to Datacentrepricing's new report, ROK, Viet Nam and Thailand are amongst the list of countries whose data center markets are forecasted to experience high growth rates (Datacentrepricing 2020). Several ASEAN member states such as Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand have also been channeling investments into data center infrastructures in their respective countries (Jayaraman 2017). It is thus likely that these states would be well-equipped to accommodate the integrated data platform.

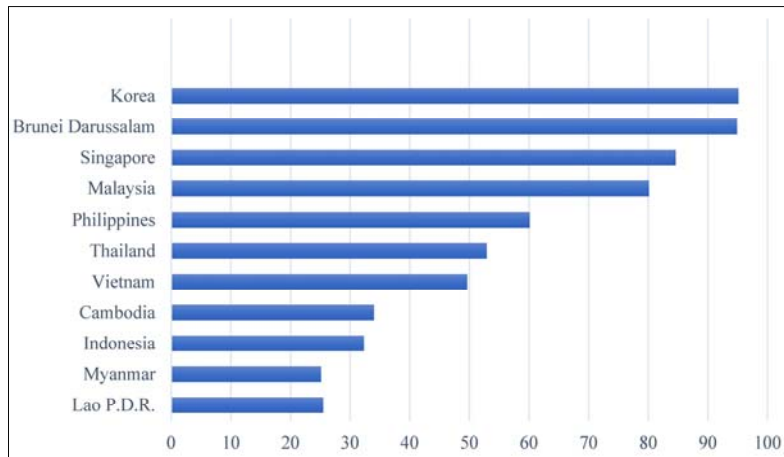
13) CLM is the abbreviation for Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar.

where more than 70% of people in Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos and Myanmar remain offline(Figure 1). In order to ensure comprehensive access to platforms like SBEP, developments in ICT infrastructure have to be accelerated. ROK and ASEAN could step up their joint commitment in realizing ICT-relevant objectives in the ASEAN Digital Master Plan such as broadband deployment and improvement in broadband affordability(ASEAN Secretariat 2015). This process of infrastructural development, however, requires time to be brought to fruition. A short-term resolution that could enable business operators from less-developed countries to stay connected to the e-platform is the creation of an online/offline SBEP mobile application. This is because mobile phone penetration is consistently high across all ASEAN member states, where its density is estimated at 967 per 1000 population(ASEAN 2018). This implies that the SBEP mobile application would be accessible by individuals who reside in places that lack well-established broadband connection as well. As a matter of fact, some scholars have already postulated a similar idea, suggesting an extension of agricultural-related mobile applications to include offline functions; this is to ensure that farmers with mobile phones could continue to reap benefits of technological systems even when their environment is ill-equipped with the required infrastructure (Bartling et al. 2016).

Notwithstanding the digital barrier, SBEP remains a viable option as its social media style caters to the large social site user base in ROK and ASEAN. Not only has ROK's social media penetration rate reached an impressive 87%(Shim 2020), social media usage in the Southeast Asia region is experiencing phenomenal growth as well

(World Bank 2019). This indicates that most people in ASEAN and ROK would be promptly attuned to utilizing SBEP for business networking. In sum, enhancement in other digital areas have to be concurrently carried through to support the e-platforms in engendering more digital-economic collaboration.

<Figure 1> Percentage of individuals using the internet in ASEAN member states and ROK



Source: Measuring the Information Society Report 2018, International Telecommunication Union

V. Conclusion

Efforts aimed at realizing the ASEAN-Korea’s vision of building a “People-centered Community of Peace and Prosperity” are set to unfold in an era of digitalization. As Covid-19 continues to catalyze the pace of Fourth Industrial Revolution, ROK and ASEAN could

further enhance digital collaboration to better each other's adaptability to the dynamics of a rapidly shifting digital landscape. This paper argues that digital-economic cooperation should be at the forefront of ASEAN-Korea's agenda list; the main reason being that a robust digital economy would greatly aid countries to tide over pandemic-triggered economic downturns. In line with this proposition, two important aspects of a digital economy - e-commerce and business networking - have been examined in detail to unearth potential means to strengthen ASEAN-Korea digital-economic cooperation.

It is proffered that tailored integrated e-platforms are useful drivers of digital-economic collaboration between ROK and ASEAN. In the case of encouraging more ASEAN-Korea e-commerce activities, whilst an integrated e-marketplace would assist ROK and ASEAN firms to penetrate into each other's e-commerce market with greater ease, a common e-trade data platform stands to benefit e-commerce retailers by simplifying ASEAN-Korea cross-border trade operations. With respect to promoting ASEAN-Korea business networking, the SBEP serves as an avenue for extensive inter and intra-industrial networking, as well as timeless information sharing amongst firms of various sizes. Even if border or movement restrictions were to persist in the post-covid-19 phase, installing these e-platforms would ensure the continuity and even strengthen ASEAN-Korea cooperation in the e-business realm, thereby contributing to the construction of a sustainable digital economy.

What is more interesting about the idea of integrated e-platforms is its flexibility in being applied to other aspects of ASEAN-Korea digital cooperation. For instance, the e-trade data platform could be modified into one that assembles educational materials, complementing existing ASEAN-Korea e-learning initiatives such as the ASEAN Cyber University. Social networking e-platforms could be also established for ASEAN-Korea academics where a whole range of ideas could be exchanged and debated, including those that are constructive to digital innovation. It is almost safe to say that there is no exhaustive list concerning the types of e-platforms that could be designed to buttress ASEAN-Korea digital cooperation; what is left to do is to identify optimal e-platform versions that best meet the needs of the different digital projects. As digitalization becomes the new normal, developing new digital initiatives such as integrated e-platforms would fortify and enhance existing digital efforts. Perhaps, the only way forward is digital on digital.

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