

Why Southeast Asia must unite against online scams

Southeast Asia risks becoming the global epicenter of cyber-fraud, but a powerful new partnership between Indonesia and South Korea could finally dismantle the region's most predatory digital syndicates.

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In an era defined by rapid digitization, the promise of connectivity has brought nations closer, fueled economic growth, and fostered unprecedented regional integration. Yet, this digital dawn carries a dark silhouette.

Across Southeast Asia, a sophisticated and predatory crisis is unfolding in the shadows: the meteoric rise of online scam operations. Far from being mere financial fraud, online scamming has evolved into a severe transnational crime. It is an industry built on grave human rights violations, including human trafficking and forced labor, that inflicts far-reaching damage on economic development, regional cooperation, and public trust in governance.

For ASEAN, the stakes could not be higher. Just as certain regions of the world became historically synonymous with violent extremism, Southeast Asia risks being perceived globally as the epicenter of cyber-fraud and online scams. Such a reputation would deal a devastating blow to the region's hard-won prestige. If the international community begins to view Southeast Asia through the lens of cyber-insecurity, the long-term consequences will be severe, threatening tourism, deterring foreign direct investment, and derailing crucial security cooperation with global partners.

Furthermore, this crisis strikes at the very heart of the ASEAN community-building project. Regional integration relies inherently on the seamless and safe movement of people, goods, and capital. Online scams undermine the foundational trust required for these flows. When citizens fear that a job offer abroad is a trafficking trap, or when businesses worry that digital financial transactions are inherently compromised, the momentum toward a deeply integrated ASEAN grinds to a halt.

Beyond the realms of law and order or economic security, this issue poses a profound strategic threat. It directly erodes ASEAN centrality and diminishes the region's "convening power", its unique appeal as a trusted, neutral and secure hub for global diplomacy and commerce.

Here in Indonesia, there is a temptation to view this as a distant problem. Historically, the archipelago has been considered relatively safe from the worst of these syndicates. However, complacency is a luxury we cannot afford.

Indonesia's unique geography as an archipelagic nation, composed of thousands of islands, presents a distinct vulnerability. Without constant vigilance, these remote pockets could easily be exploited by criminal networks seeking new, hidden bases of operation.

The insidious, digital nature of cyber-fraud means that no single nation can combat it in isolation. When one country intensifies its law enforcement pressure, these highly agile syndicates swiftly relocate their infrastructure and personnel across borders. This stark "balloon effect" underscores the absolute necessity of a synchronized, collective response.

While recent efforts by regional governments have yielded notable progress, resulting in the closure of several notorious scam compounds, the enactment of robust cybercrime legislation, and enhanced cooperation with Interpol, the scale of the threat continues to outpace traditional enforcement methods.

As a close neighbor and steadfast strategic partner of ASEAN, the Republic of Korea stands fully prepared to confront this transnational menace alongside our regional friends. Seoul is actively deepening bilateral cooperation by strengthening cybercrime response capacities and fostering closer ties between law enforcement agencies.

On the global stage, Korea is leading efforts through the United Nations and Interpol, while simultaneously imposing stringent sanctions on individuals and entities involved in money laundering and scam operations.

Crucially, to empower individual ASEAN nations, Korea has proposed the KARE (Korea-ASEAN Response and Enforcement against Scam-Related Crime) initiative. Designed to eradicate criminal compounds in Southeast Asia, KARE focuses on providing advanced investigative technology, capacity-building support, and facilitating real-time intelligence sharing.

The battle against online scams is not merely a technical challenge; it is a defining test of our collective resilience. In this vital endeavor, the Republic of Korea looks to Indonesia. As the largest nation and a traditional leader within ASEAN, Indonesia's proactive leadership and strategic vision are indispensable.

By combining Indonesia's regional stewardship with Korea's technological and law enforcement partnership, we can dismantle these digital syndicates, safeguard our citizens, and secure a safe, prosperous, and trusted future for the Indo-Pacific.

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