

Indonesia's Diplomacy to North Korea: Changes and Continuities

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1. Introduction

2020 marked the 75th anniversary of Indonesia's independence. Independence Day is August 17, and congratulatory messages were received from the leaders of various countries in conjunction with the independence commemoration ceremony. North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea: DPRK) also sent a congratulatory telegram from Kim Jong-un, in which he praised Indonesia for achieving social prosperity through non-alignment and appealed for future-friendly relations between the two countries.¹ It is not known whether this is true, but it is not common for him to send congratulatory telegrams to other countries on their independence anniversaries. If this is the case, it can be understood as a sign of his recognition that Indonesia is an important, friendly country. He attached importance to the current Joko Widodo administration (since 2014). Why? It is premised on the relationship between former President Megawati Sukarnoputri (chairperson of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle [PDI-P]), the real power under Widodo, and North Korea, and further back to the relationship between former President Sukarno, Megawati's father and the "father of national independence," and Kim Il Sung of North Korea. While reviewing this history, I discuss the significance of diplomacy with North Korea in Indonesia's domestic politics.

2. Sukarno and North Korea

The diplomatic relations between the two countries were established in 1961. Sukarno, becoming isolated internationally, visited Pyongyang in 1964 to appeal for friendship

¹ <https://www.kompas.tv/article/102176/kim-jong-un-ucapkan-selamat-hari-kemerdekaan-indonesia-ini-harapannya>

with Kim Il Sung. In January of the following year, Sukarno announced Indonesia's withdrawal from the UN and launched the Conference of Emerging Forces (CONEFO) as a "second" UN. North Korea decided to join CONEFO alongside Vietnam and China, and Kim Il Sung visited Indonesia the same year. Kim Il Sung was interested in a flower he saw at the Bogor Botanical Gardens near Jakarta. Sukarno decided to name the flower the "Kim Il Sung Flower" (see photo) and make it a symbol of friendship between the two countries.



source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kimilsungia>

Sukarno must have had special feelings toward Kim Il Sung, who came to see him amid his growing international isolation. However, Sukarno was ousted the same year, and power in the country shifted to Suharto, an army officer. Suharto became acting president in 1966, and in a 180-degree turnaround from Sukarno's previous foreign policy line, he adopted an anti-communist, pro-US line and decided to dissolve CONEFO before the conference could be held.

The Suharto dictatorship continued for the next 30 years, and although diplomatic ties existed, relations with North Korea cooled. From Kim Il Sung's point of view, it would have been difficult to imagine friendship with Suharto, who had ousted his "good friend Sukarno," and for the Suharto regime, strong U.S.-Japan relations were essential for the establishment and development of his dictatorship. Therefore, the priority given to North Korea was relatively low.

3. Megawati and North Korea

After 2001, relations between the two countries began to revitalize. This was the year when the Suharto regime collapsed (1998), democratization progressed, and Megawati,

the leader of the PDI-P, became the president. North Korea also entered the generation of Kim Il Sung to Kim Jong Il, and both countries entered the era of the second generation. President Megawati visited Pyongyang in March 2002 and met with Kim Jong-il to reaffirm the friendship that had existed since their parents' time. The international situation at the time was tough in North Korea, just as it was in the U.S. President George W. Bush was stepping up pressure on the country with his "axis of evil" remarks. For diplomats who remembered Kim Il Sung's visit in 1964, when Sukarno was internationally isolated, Megawati's 2002 visit was perceived as a "payback" visit. However, Kim Jong-il did not visit Indonesia during Megawati's administration. Perhaps this was because Megawati's administration was too short-lived; after losing the 2004 presidential elections to retired Lieutenant General Yudhoyono, Megawati stepped down from power while remaining on the political stage as the leader of the first opposition party.

As expected, Kim Jong Il did not come to Indonesia during the Yudhoyono administration (2004-2014). Nevertheless, Kim Yong Nam (Chairman of the Standing Committee of the Supreme People's Assembly) served as his point of contact with Indonesia; he participated in the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Asia-Africa Summit (Bandung Conference) held in Bandung in 2005. Kim Yong Nam also visited Jakarta in 2012 during the second Yudhoyono administration and met with President Yudhoyono.

4. The Third Generation of Diplomatic Relations

Although no significant progress was made in bilateral relations during the Yudhoyono era, Indonesia's diplomacy with North Korea has been reinvigorated since the current Joko Widodo administration came to power. Although the president seems to have virtually no commitment to North Korea, as noted above, the backbone of this administration is the PDI-P, with Megawati, the party leader, as the de facto supreme authority. Soon after the administration's inauguration, Megawati's sister (i.e., also Sukarno's daughter), Rahmawati, visited the country. She is the president of the Sukarno Education Foundation, and her visit was to present Kim Jong-un with the "Sukarno Star Award." Rahmawati praised him for his significant contribution to peace in the Korean Peninsula.

More interestingly, Megawati's daughter, Puan, a PDI-P politician, also played a role in North Korean diplomacy. In other words, she is the third generation of the Sukarno family, and her counterpart is also a third generation, Kim Jong-un. Puan was selected as Coordinating Minister (in charge of human resource development and cultural affairs) in the first Jokowi administration (2014-19). As minister, he visited Pyongyang in July 2018 as a presidential envoy. He met with Kim Yong Nam and invited Kim Jong Un to the Asian Games the following month.

The timing of this diplomacy is also interesting. It was just after U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo appealed to ASEAN foreign ministers in Singapore to strengthen sanctions against North Korea. Neither Megawati nor Puan showed any consideration for U.S. strategy in Asia. Rather, for every appeal for increased regional cooperation and pressure on North Korea, Indonesia seems to deploy diplomacy in the opposite direction. What does this mean? Before we get the answer, let us look more closely at relations with North Korea under the Jokowi administration.

Although UN sanctions were imposed on North Korea in 2017, the Jokowi administration attempted to develop bilateral trade. In 2018, a North Korean-flagged ship brought \$3 million worth of coal into Indonesia, and although the Indonesian government once seized it, the coal trade was not stopped. In March 2020, the Indonesian ambassador to Pyongyang said on *Suara Indonesia* (Voice of Indonesia), a radio station for Indonesians abroad, that the international community should move toward easing sanctions against North Korea and that bilateral trade would proceed. He explained that the international community should move toward easing sanctions against North Korea and that the country is preparing to promote bilateral trade. Despite the hurdle of UN sanctions, he appealed that now is the time for Indonesian companies to come to Pyongyang and develop new trade and that the embassy will actively support business negotiations.

According to the Indonesian ambassador, many Indonesian food products and detergents enter North Korea and are popular among citizens. Against this background, the embassy set up a gallery of Indonesian products in the building and began active promotion in 2019.



source:<https://kemlu.go.id/pyongyang/en/news/1893/indonesian-embassy-in-pyongyang-establishes-the-first-indonesian-product-outlet-in-north-korea>

Indonesian products exhibition space set up inside the Embassy

Of course, the ambassador said that the current trade between the two countries is limited to third countries and through third parties, not direct trade, but he appealed for more active business exchanges in the future. According to data from Indonesia's Ministry of Commerce, exports to North Korea grew significantly in 2019. In terms of value, this was just over \$3 million in 2019, a nearly threefold increase compared to \$930,000 in 2018, when UN sanctions took effect. In 2015, it was approximately \$2.6 million. Imports from North Korea fell from \$5.5 million in 2016 to \$33,000 in 2018 and rose a bit in 2019 to just \$200,000. According to the company, the main imports from North Korea were minerals, chemicals, filament bulbs, and semiconductors.

During the term of the Widodo administration, in which Megawati is behind, she wants to take her father's legacy of relations with North Korea a step further with her own hands, according to a senior official within the PDI-P. The ambassador also understands the demand and is looking for an opportunity in the symbolism of the new Indonesian-North Korean relationship. In this context, one of the projects currently being explored by the Indonesian Embassy is the vision of importing North Korean Taedonggang beer and becoming a sales hub for the Oceania region.

There is also the idea that the Korean tiger and Indonesia's orangutan should be actively exchanged, just as the "Kim Il Sung flower" became a symbol of friendship between the two countries during the Sukarno era, and that a tiger and monkey should be the symbol of friendship for the new era.

In any case, it can be said that the motivation to deepen relations with North Korea is growing stronger at the core of the current Jokowi administration, and the diplomacy of hostility and isolation is not on its mind. How strong this is was also exposed in the "Aisha Incident." This famous case involved an assassination attempt on Kim Jong-nam in Malaysia in 2017, in which an Indonesian woman, Aisha, was tricked into complicity in the assassination by lying that she was helping with a TV prank project. The Vietnamese woman was also framed as the executor, and the government strongly protested North Korea to involve its own citizens. However, the Indonesian government remained silent and never publicly complained about North Korea. This opposing attitude from Vietnam shows how concerned Jakarta is about its relations with Pyongyang.

5. Conclusion

Why did Indonesia develop this kind of diplomacy with North Korea? Of course, there may be aspects of historical relations and personal preoccupation, as is generally explained. However, this also seems to reflect Indonesia's confidence as a nation that has now become a middle power. As UN sanctions continue and diplomacy with North Korea cools worldwide, Indonesia's nationalism seems to be at work to demonstrate that it can, in contrast, develop stronger diplomatic relations, thereby demonstrating its presence as a regional middle power, unlike other ASEAN countries that are buried in the tug-of-war between major powers. This is especially the case in Southeast Asia, where a US-China confrontation is occurring. As Southeast Asia is becoming a site of superpowers' contestation between the U.S. and China, the strategic identity of being able to "take its own line" satisfies Indonesia's nationalism, which has begun to pride itself as a middle power of the Global South. Indonesia's diplomacy with North Korea probably reflects contemporary nationalism and a newly developing identity as a leader of the Global South. This domestic dynamic cannot be seen from the institutional or normative perspectives of the Non-Aligned Movement and will continue to be an important aspect in understanding the direction of Indonesia's North Korean diplomacy.

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