

## **The Philippines - North Korea Relations: From the Perspective of the Philippine Security**

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### **Introduction**

Since gaining independence in 1946, the Philippines had been aligned with the United States or part of the Western bloc, opposite North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea: DPRK). However, from the late 1980s, there were attempts to improve relations between the Philippines and North Korea, and in the year 2000, diplomatic relations between both countries were established. Although the Philippines was the last among Southeast Asian nations to establish diplomatic relations with North Korea, by the mid-2010s, the Philippines briefly ranked among the top countries engaging in trade with North Korea. However, trade relations declined rapidly afterward and have since stagnated.

What factors influenced the evolution of relations between the two countries? How can the relationship between the Philippines and North Korea be perceived? This article aims to explore these questions by examining the process of establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries that accelerated in the late 1980s and its before and after, particularly in the context of elements related to Philippine security that became pivotal in the negotiation process.

### **1. Historical Background**

#### **As an ally of the United States**

From 1898 to 1946, excluding the period of Japanese occupation, the Philippines was under American colonial rule. Even after gaining independence, the Philippines continued to host one of the largest U.S. military bases in Asia. Under such circumstances, the division of roles in the security field persisted, with the United States overseeing the Philippines' external security, while internal security was the responsibility of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). Because of this historical background, the influence of the United States remains strong in the diplomatic and

security domains in the Philippines.

During the Korean War that erupted in 1950, the Philippines, as an ally of the United States, deployed the Philippine Expeditionary Force to Korea (PEFTOK) as part of the United Nations forces. In 1954, the Philippines joined the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), which was established under the leadership of the U.S. The Philippines also contributed its military forces to the Vietnam War on the side of the United States. Domestically, continuous counterinsurgency operations have been conducted against communist insurgent forces engaged in armed struggle.

Since gaining independence, the Philippines has consistently maintained a strong anti-communist stance within the context of the Cold War, positioning itself diametrically opposite to North Korea.

#### **Improvement of relations with Eastern Bloc countries**

Since the establishment of the Ferdinand Marcos administration in 1965, the Philippines has pursued an independent foreign policy aimed at moving away from a strong U.S. influence and diversifying its external relations. This involved strategies like forging closer ties with Middle Eastern countries and strengthening cooperation within ASEAN. Especially, the ultimate goal was the normalization of relations with socialist countries. The objective was to leverage the diversification of external relations for the diversification and expansion of trade, and contribute to the president's economic development plan, an approach referred to as "development diplomacy."<sup>1</sup>

President Marcos articulated a policy in the late 1960s to normalize relations with socialist countries. As the 1970s began, diplomatic ties were established with several socialist nations. In June 1975, diplomatic relations were established with China, and in June 1976 with the Soviet Union. Within this context, the prospect of establishing diplomatic relations with North Korea emerged.

In 1979, the Deputy Foreign Minister of the Philippines revealed that he had received proposals for visits from North Korea in May and July of the same year.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, in October of that year, President Marcos disclosed that there were ongoing contacts between the two governments

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Kessler, *Development diplomacy: The making of Philippine foreign policy under Ferdinand E. Marcos*, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy (Tufts University), 1986.

<sup>2</sup> *Asahi Shinbun*, July 10, 1979. (Japanese)

and expressed his intention to recognize North Korea.<sup>3</sup>

However, suspicions of North Korea supporting communist insurgency within the Philippines and the political turmoil, as well as political regime change in the Philippines, hindered progress toward establishing diplomatic relations. While many Southeast Asian countries established diplomatic ties with North Korea in the 1970s, the Philippines was slower in normalizing relations compared to other Southeast Asian nations.

### **Starting diplomatic negotiations with North Korea**

In February 1986, the authoritarian regime of President Marcos collapsed, and under President Corazon Aquino, democratization progressed in the Philippines. Even after this shift in the political system towards democratization, the country continued to maintain close ties with the United States and sought to diversify its foreign relations, including improving of relations with socialist countries.

In January 1989, Philippine Foreign Minister Raul Manglapus emphasized the prioritization of improving relations with socialist countries, revealing that the establishment of diplomatic ties with North Korea was under consideration.<sup>4</sup> Subsequently, annual diplomatic contacts and discussions between the Philippines and North Korea began, eventually leading to the establishment of diplomatic relations in 2000.

Changes in political leadership— including the collapse of the authoritarian regime and subsequent periodic changes in administrations in the Philippines, as well as the death of North Korea's Kim Il-sung—were seen as factors that interrupted the negotiations. Other influences also affected the trajectory of relations between the two countries.

This paper will explore factors on the Philippine side that influenced the negotiations, particularly in relation to elements related to Philippine security.

## **2. The threat of communist forces within the Philippines**

### **Internal security threat: CPP-NPA**

As a prerequisite for establishing diplomatic relations with North Korea, the Philippines demanded North Korea cease its support for the communist insurgency in the Philippines, namely

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<sup>3</sup> *Asahi Shinbun*, October 30, 1979. (Japanese)

<sup>4</sup> *Asahi Shinbun*, January 18, 1989. (Japanese)

the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its military arm, the New People's Army (NPA).

The Philippines has experienced a prolonged armed struggle by the communist insurgency against the government. The Partido Komunista ng Philipinas (PKP), established during American colonial rule, continued armed resistance even after independence. However, it was decimated in the mid-1950s by the military's counterinsurgency operations, supported by the United States. Subsequently, in 1968, the CPP was established, centered around Jose Maria Sison and based on Marxist-Leninist and Maoist ideologies. In 1969, its military wing, the NPA, began armed struggle with the aim of achieving an armed revolution. Since the 1990s, there have been organizational splits, and the momentum has declined, but armed struggle continues to this day.

The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) have recognized the activities of communist insurgency, comprising the CPP-NPA and its front organization, the National Democratic Front, as the most significant threat. According to military estimates in the late 1980s, the NPA's regular forces were believed to have reached around 23,000 by the mid-1986, with an estimated support base of approximately one to two million people<sup>5</sup>. In 1985, it was estimated that 17% of barangays<sup>6</sup> nationwide in the Philippines were believed to be under the influence of the CPP-NPA<sup>7</sup>. Many high-ranking military officers recognized that the CPP-NPA were the most serious security threat both militarily and politically. Consequently, they remained vigilant about the expansion of these forces<sup>8</sup>.

Subsequently, around the 1990s, the CPP-NPA experienced a decline in influence and power. However, during the period when diplomatic negotiations between the Philippines and North Korea accelerated, it remained the most significant security threat to the Philippines.

### **CPP-NPA and North Korea**

The Philippine government, particularly the AFP, has been cautious about foreign support for the CPP-NPA from socialist countries, and it has been wary of North Korea's involvement as a

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<sup>5</sup> David G. Timberman, "The Philippines in 1986," *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 1987, p. 253.

<sup>6</sup> The smallest administrative unit in the Philippines, corresponding to a village or district.

<sup>7</sup> Fidel V. Ramos, "The NAFP: Its First Hundred Days," *Fookien Times Philippines Yearbook 1985-86*, 1986, p.76.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.76. Rafael M. Iletto, "At the Crossroads," *Fookien Times Philippines Yearbook 1986-87*, 1987, p. 58. In an April and May 1987 survey conducted among military officers, 93% of the respondents described the threat posed by communist forces as "quite significant" or "significant." Felipe B. Miranda and Rubin F. Ciron, "Development and the Military in the Philippines: Military Perceptions in a Time of Continuing Crisis," Soedjati Djiwanjono and Yong Mun Cheong, eds., *Soldiers and Stability in Southeast Asia*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1988, 193-197.

supporting nation.

In its early days, the CPP-NPA received limited financial assistance from abroad, primarily in the form of token support from China. In their of an armed revolution, the CPP-NPA sought arms assistance from China, attempting to import hundreds of firearms from mainland China in July 1972 and January 1974. However, both of attempts failed.<sup>9</sup> The aid pipeline was cut in 1975-1976 with the opening of diplomatic relations between Manila and Beijing and the death of Mao Zedong.<sup>10</sup>

The CPP-NPA also sought support from the Soviet Union, negotiating directly with the them and requesting low-level arms support and high-level funding in 1984 and 1985. Since 1987, the CPP has begun taking steps to strengthen and publicize its already well-established relations with Moscow. In 1987, CPP members revealed that the Soviet Union had offered “all the arms and money it needed.”<sup>11</sup> In 1988, Defense Secretary Ramos said the CPP was receiving “moral and other support” from communist parties abroad, including the Soviet Union.<sup>12</sup>

Such military and financial support from China and the Soviet Union to the CPP-NPA was minimal, essentially constituting moral and psychological assistance. However, by the late 1980s, it was a significant concern for the Philippine government, as evidenced by a joint statement released during the 1988 foreign ministers' meeting between the Soviet Union and the Philippines, confirming that the Soviet Union would not continue supporting the CPP-NPA in the future<sup>13</sup>. In such a situation, the Philippine government, as well as the AFP, perceived that North Korea was still providing support to the CPP-NPA.

In the late 1980s, the CPP established connections with Libya, the Palestine Liberation Organization, North Korea, Nicaragua, Cuba, and Eastern European countries.<sup>14</sup>

According to the intelligence officer of the APF, documents seized from a detained official of the CPP in 1989 revealed that meetings between the CPP and the Workers' Party of Korea had taken

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<sup>9</sup> Antonio Lopez, “Running a Revolution,” *Asiaweek*, March 9, 1994, pp. 35-37.

<sup>10</sup> On the relationship between China and CPP-NPA, see the chapter 6 in Gregg R. Jones, *Red Revolution: Inside the Philippine Guerrilla Movement*, Westview Press.

<sup>11</sup> On the relationship between Soviet Union and CPP-NPA, Leif Rosenberger, “Toward a U.S.-Soviet Agreement in the Philippines,” *SASIS Review*, 9(1), pp. 213-226.

<sup>12</sup> *The Manila Chronicle*, March 3, 1988.

<sup>13</sup> *Asahi Shinbun*, December 23, 1988. (Japanese)

<sup>14</sup> Dominique Caouette, *Persevering Revolutionaries: Armed Struggle in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Exploring the Revolution of the Communist Party of the Philippines*, A Dissertation presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Cornell University, 2004, p. 478.

place in September and October 1986 and in May 1987.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, it was reported that from 1987 to 1988, 11 members of the NPA's special forces underwent training in North Korea.<sup>16</sup> The CPP enjoyed warm relations with Pyongyang, a fact underscored by the visit of a delegation of Filipino communists to North Korea in September 1988 to attend ceremonies celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the communist regime.<sup>17</sup>

By the late 1980s, it was believed that the most likely source of arms for the NPA was North Korea. Several events suggested this. For example, in late October or early November 1987, a North Korean ship believed to be carrying arms was spotted sailing toward the Philippines.<sup>18</sup> The arms shipment coming from North Korea with about 50 tons of arms (including anti-tank missiles, land mines, and Soviet-made light weapons) was almost discovered when US military ships started patrolling one of the landing points. Seeing such intense monitoring of the coastline, the NPA decided to call off the operation.<sup>19</sup>

#### **Negotiations for the establishment of diplomatic relations and CPP-NPA problem**

The AFP has become a resistance force against establishing diplomatic relations with North Korea, which is suspected of supporting the CPP-NPA. Since the Philippines participated on the side of South Korea in the Korean War, the AFP officers and retired veteran organizations were cautious about establishing diplomatic relations with North Korea. Furthermore, the AFP, which is deeply engaged in military assistance and exchanges with the U.S. military and has long-standing conflicts with the CPP-NPA within the country, is the organization most infused with anti-communist ideology in the Philippines. And the influence of the AFP on the security policy is particularly strong in the Philippines, where the presence of multiple anti-government armed groups poses a significant threat to internal security.

In January 1990, around the time when the periodic diplomatic negotiations between the Philippines and North Korea began, an officer from the AFP intelligence division disclosed that, in meetings between the CPP and the Workers' Party of Korea held in 1986 and 1987, the CPP had agreed to provide information to North Korea about U.S. military bases in the Philippines and, in return, North Korea had agreed to provide military assistance to the CPP-NPA.<sup>20</sup> It was

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<sup>15</sup> Manny Mogato, "AFP: NPAs spy for N. Korean communists", *The Manila Chronicle*, January 25, 1990.

<sup>16</sup> Raymond Burgos, "Defector's protectors keep eye on NPA rebels", *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, March 22, 1997.

<sup>17</sup> Gregg R. Jones, *Red Revolution: Inside the Philippine Guerrilla Movement*, Westview Press, 1989, p. 305.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 305.

<sup>19</sup> Caouette, 2004, p. 480.

<sup>20</sup> Manny Mogato, "AFP: NPAs spy for N. Korean communists", *The Manila Chronicle*, January 25, 1990.

thought that the leak was intended to affect the negotiations between the Philippines and North Korea adversely.<sup>21</sup>

In response, President Aquino stated that foreign assistance to CPP-NPA had been decreasing, emphasizing that the support was more financial in nature than the provision of weapons.<sup>22</sup> The President's statement was a measure of consideration to ensure that the AFP's leak did not negatively impact the negotiations.

Regarding this matter, North Korea addressed the concerns of the Philippines at the negotiation table. In June 1990, a delegation of Philippine parliamentarians made the first-ever visit to Pyongyang as political representatives, meeting with Vice Premier Kim Dal-hyon and later with President Kim Il-sung. During the talks, the Vice Premier reiterated that North Korea 'will not provide weapons or training to the NPA-CPP, now or in the future.' Moreover, in an official letter to President Aquino from Vice Premier Kim, it was stated, 'I am authorized by the government (of North Korea) to convey that we will not have any contact with or support for the New People's Army in the Philippines,' ensuring no support for the CPP-NPA.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, in June 1991, North Korea's Vice Premier Kim Dal-hyon, the first official representative from North Korea, visited Manila and held meetings with President Aquino and Philippine Foreign Minister Manglapus.<sup>24</sup> During these meetings, North Korea once again explicitly stated that they would not support the CPP.<sup>25</sup>

In the subsequent years, entering the 1990s, the CPP-NPA experienced a rapid decline in strength due to offensives by the AFP and internal ideological disputes leading to break-up. The number of NPA forces, which was 25,800 in 1988, decreased to 8,350 by 1993.<sup>26</sup> As a result, the CPP-NPA receded as a security threat in the Philippines, and the negative impact of the CPP-NPA issue on negotiations between the Philippines and North Korea dwindled.

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<sup>21</sup> It was reminded that, in the 1970s, during the diplomatic negotiations between the Philippines and China, the AFP, with a negative stance towards the negotiations, leaked information about the relationship between China and the CPP-NPA. See, "Choices in Philippine Diplomacy", *Sekai*, Vol. 349, December, 1974, p. 129. (Japanese)

<sup>22</sup> "Foreign aid to NPA dwindling", *The Manila Chronicle*, January 27, 1990.

<sup>23</sup> "N. Korea won't aid NPA rebels", *The Manila Chronicle*, June 17, 1990.

<sup>24</sup> "RP, N. Korea to set up diplomatic ties", *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, June 14, 1991, Bert Castro, "Manila and Pyongyang warm up", *The Manila Chronicle*, June 14, 1991.

<sup>25</sup> "Aquino holds face-to-face talks with N. Korea deputy premier", *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, June 12, 1991, "North Koreans renounce NPA", *The Manila Chronicle*, June 12, 1991.

<sup>26</sup> Takeshi Yamane, *Armed Forces and Politics in the Philippines: Civilian Supremacy and Military Intervention of Politics after Democratization*, Horitsu Bunka Sha, 2014, pp. 85-86. (Japanese)

### 3. Allegations of North Korea's nuclear and missile development

The Philippines had cited the resolution of North Korea's nuclear suspicions as one of the conditions for establishing diplomatic relations.

North Korea joined the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in December 1985 but refused to sign the safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) for inspection. Meanwhile, from the autumn of 1990 onward, suspicions about North Korea's nuclear development escalated, leading to expressions of concern from the Japanese, American, and South Korean governments. However, as reconciliation efforts between North and South Korea began in the 1990s, in December 1991, North Korea agreed to a joint declaration with South Korea, pledging the prohibition of nuclear weapons testing, manufacturing, possession, as well as the non-possession of uranium enrichment and reprocessing facilities. In January 1992, North Korea also agreed to sign the safeguards agreement with the IAEA.

The Philippines, which had set the resolution of North Korea's nuclear suspicions as a condition for establishing diplomatic relations, welcomed the development. In January 1992, a diplomat from the Philippines stated that North Korea's decision to sign the NPT and accept nuclear inspections was a 'welcome development' that would 'promote the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries.'<sup>27</sup>

However, during six inspections by the IAEA from May 1992 to February 1993, discrepancies with North Korea's declared activities became apparent, deepening suspicions of nuclear development. As a result, the IAEA demanded North Korea accept a 'special inspection,' but North Korea refused. In March 1993, North Korea announced its withdrawal from the NPT.

North Korea's withdrawal from the NPT treaty set back Manila's efforts to open ties with Pyongyang. Foreign Secretary Roberto Romulo said "We have looked forward to the normalization with North Korea once they had complied with the IAEA inspection. However, because North Korea refused to meet the deadline set by the IAEA to allow inspection of two suspected nuclear facilities, it becomes a little bit tougher and more difficult to normalize ties with it".<sup>28</sup>

In response to North Korea's withdrawal, Foreign Secretary Romulo recommended to the

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<sup>27</sup> *Asahi Shinbun*, January 4, 1992. (Japanese)

<sup>28</sup> "Delay seen in Manila's recognition of Pyongyang", *The Manila Chronicle*, March 15, 1993.



National Security Council of the Philippines the administration's plan to hold off the decision to normalize relations with North Korea. Romulo told reporters, "I did point out to the NSC whereas the Philippines hope to normalize its relations with North Korea in the near future, this does not seem very probable considering the rather deplorable behavior of North Korea in connection with thier withdrawal from the NPT".<sup>29</sup>

Following North Korea's refusal to open its nuclear facilities to the IAEA inspection, diplomatic negotiations for establishing diplomatic relations came to a standstill. Philippine Foreign Minister Domingo Siazon, who was the foreign minister when diplomatic relations were established, later stated, "we had always been postponing because of the nuclear issue"<sup>30</sup>, indicating that suspicions of North Korea's nuclear development had a significant impact on the course of relations between the two countries.

#### 4. Relationship between the Philippines and South Korea

North Korea's nuclear development seemed to have affected the progress of negotiations more in relation to the Philippines' relationship with South Korea than as a direct threat to Philippine security.<sup>31</sup>

In relation to negotiations with North Korea, in June 1990, Philippine Foreign Minister Manglapus stated, 'the government will still have to consult with South Korea before it decides to establish ties with North Korea'.<sup>32</sup> From the outset of the accelerated diplomatic negotiations with North Korea, it was evident that the Philippines had been proceeding with the talks while taking into consideration South Korea's concerns.

Failure to consider South Korea led to backlash. For instance, in June 1991, when North Korea's Vice Premier Kim Dal-hyon visited Manila and held talks with President Aquino and Foreign Minister Manglapus, announcing their agreement to establish diplomatic relations as early as possible in 1991 and exchange ambassadors<sup>33</sup>, it was reported that South Korea protested as

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<sup>29</sup> "Manila views as 'worrysome' Nokor's move", *The Manila Chronicle*, March 20, 1993.

<sup>30</sup> "Siazon favors RP relations with N. Korea", *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, November 10, 1999.

<sup>31</sup> On the relationship between the Philippines and South Korea, Renato Cruz De Castro, "The Philippines-South Korea-North Korea Triangular Relationship: Between a Long-Time Security Partner and a Traditional Security Threat", Lam Peng Er ed. *Contemporary Korea-Southeast Asian Relations*, Routledge, 2023, pp. 179-196.

<sup>32</sup> "Talks with N. Korea held", *The Manila Chronicle*, June 21, 1990.

<sup>33</sup> "RP, N. Korea to set up diplomatic ties", *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, June 14, 1991, Bert Castro, "Manila and Pyongyang warm up", *The Manila Chronicle*, June 14, 1991.

follows. The South Korean Ambassador to Manila said to the Philippine Foreign Minister that his government found it difficult to understand why Philippine officials never consulted them on the issue, as they had earlier promised, considering the strong, friendly relations between the two governments. The Ambassador said it was regrettable that his office was informed only less than an hour after a joint statement by Manglapus and Kim announced plans to exchange ambassadors before the yearend. He also mentioned that before the North Korean delegation visited here, the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) of the Philippines assured the South Korean embassy that the Philippines would not conclude any agreement with the North Korean delegation, as this would be tantamount to a de facto recognition of Pyongyang. In addition, the Ambassador noted that the DFA had informed the embassy that the North Korean delegation would not meet with President Aquino.<sup>34</sup>

This kind of relationship with South Korea has influenced diplomatic negotiations with North Korea, especially since the mid-1990s.

The Philippines had set the following conditions for establishing diplomatic relations with North Korea: 1) UN membership, 2) Resolution of nuclear suspicions, and 3) Cessation of support for the CPP-NPA.<sup>35</sup> Regarding this matter, on February 1, 1995, Philippine Foreign Undersecretary Rodolfo Severino stated, “we consider that the three conditions have been met.”<sup>36</sup> However, on the other hand, as mentioned later, the South Korean government believed that the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Philippines and North Korea, given the connection with nuclear suspicions, was premature.

In February 1995, Philippine Undersecretary Severino held talks with the North Korean Ambassador to Thailand regarding establishing diplomatic relations. Immediately after this meeting, the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs cautioned Manila against opening relations with North Korea quickly, expressing concerns about North Korea's nuclear development suspicions. Seoul said in a statement, “The talks leading to diplomatic relations will give the wrong signal to North Korea”. It also mentioned that establishing relations would be premature because Pyongyang had yet to fully comply with an agreement with the US on its controversial nuclear program.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, a South Korean official cautioned the Philippine government, stating that Seoul

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<sup>34</sup> Cynthia D. Balana, “Sokors sore at RP’s fling with Nokors”, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, June 15, 1991.

<sup>35</sup> North Korea joined the United Nations on September 17, 1991.

<sup>36</sup> *Asahi Shinbun*, February 1, 1995. (Japanese)

<sup>37</sup> “Diplomatic ties with Nokor loom”, *The Manila Chronicle*, February 1, 1995.

wanted Manila to avoid approaching North Korea until there was progress in relations between the two Koreas, which were still technically at war. The official also mentioned that considering the nuclear accord between Pyongyang and Washington had not yet been implemented, it would be better if Manila did not hurry to establish relations.<sup>38</sup>

In the face of such a reaction from the South Korean government, the Philippine government decided to postpone the establishment of diplomatic relations with North Korea. President Ramos said forging ties with Pyongyang would have to be done step by step and in consultation with Seoul, with whom Manila has diplomatic relations.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, the North Korean nuclear development issue had an impact on the diplomatic negotiations between the Philippines and North Korea in relation to South Korea.

At that time, economic relations between the Philippines and South Korea were deepening. Bilateral trade between the two countries increased by 25 percent from \$1.01 billion in 1992 to \$1.25 billion in 1993. South Korea had become the 7th largest trading partner for the Philippines, while the Philippines ranked as the 20th trading partner for South Korea.<sup>40</sup>

In the midst of these developments, in November 1994, South Korean President Kim Young-sam visited the Philippines and held talks with President Ramos. The meeting between the two parties included discussions on the expansion of trade and investment between the two countries and the acceptance of Filipino overseas workers in South Korea.<sup>41</sup> It was in February 1995, immediately after this meeting, that the South Korean government's concerns regarding the diplomatic negotiations between the Philippines and North Korea, mentioned above, were expressed.

Philippine foreign policy is characterized by three pillars instituted under the Fidel Ramos administration: (1) national security, (2) economic security, and (3) the protection of the rights of overseas Filipinos. Regarding economic security, the Ramos administration viewed it within the framework of comprehensive security and prioritized the Philippines' economic growth.<sup>42</sup>

For the Philippines, South Korea has been a friendly nation since the Korean War. Furthermore, as the Philippines sought to expand trade and investment for economic growth to promote economic security, its relationship with South Korea became increasingly significant. In a context

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<sup>38</sup> "South Korea unhappy over Manila's pro-North moves", *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, February 3, 1995.

<sup>39</sup> Lynda T. Jumilla, "RP delays decision on North Korea ties", *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, February 2, 1995.

<sup>40</sup> "Welcome President Kim Young Sam and party", *Manila Bulletin*, November 11, 1994.

<sup>41</sup> "Kim to promote trade during three-day visit", *The Manila Chronicle*, November 11, 1994.

<sup>42</sup> Yusuke Takagi, "The Philippine Foreign and Security Policy Perspective" Society of Security and Diplomatic Policy Studies, [ssdpaki.la.coocan.jp/en/proposals/72.html](http://ssdpaki.la.coocan.jp/en/proposals/72.html), Accessed January 24, 2024.

where the recognition of the importance of economic security was heightened, it was challenging for the Philippine government to proceed with negotiations with North Korea without taking into account considerations of the concern of the South Korean government.

##### **5. Changes in the international situation and the establishment of diplomatic relations**

By the late 1990s, signs of easing tensions in the international situation regarding North Korea began to emerge. The international community actively worked to improve relations with North Korea.

In February 1998, the Kim Dae-jung administration came into power in South Korea, initiating a conciliatory "Sunshine Policy" towards North Korea. In June 2000, President Kim Dae-jung visited Pyongyang, and the first-ever North-South summit meeting took place between him and North Korea's leader Kim Jong-il.

Regarding the nuclear development issue, in September 1999, North Korea agreed to freeze the launch of ballistic missiles as long as U.S.-North Korea talks continued. In response, the United States partially lifted sanctions against North Korea.

Furthermore, North Korea started diversifying its relations with other states. It established diplomatic relations with South Africa in August 1998, with Burnie in January 1999, and with Italy in January 2000, followed by the restoration of disrupted ties with Australia in May 2000.

In the meantime, diplomatic negotiations between the Philippines and North Korea also progressed. The catalyst for this was an attempt to bring North Korea into the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). North Korea had been invited to the ARF, scheduled in Bangkok, Thailand, in July 2000.

According to former Philippine diplomat Juanito P. Jarasa, who served as Assistant Secretary for Asian and Pacific Affairs at the Department of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines and Philippine Ambassador to South Korea, two years before the ARF annual conference in Bangkok, the Philippines, as chairman of the ARF annual conference in 1998, he initiated the process of securing the membership of the North Korea in the forum. However, North Korea indicated that ASEAN member countries, such as Brunei and the Philippines, which did not have inter-state relations with North Korea, should establish such relations before Pyongyang could give due

consideration to its participation in the ARF.<sup>43</sup>

Besides, it was reported that North Korea assured the Philippines in 1999 that if Manila agreed to normalize relations, North Korea would seek membership in the ASEAN Regional Forum<sup>44</sup>. With Brunei establishing diplomatic relations in January 1999, the Philippines and Myanmar were the only ASEAN member countries without diplomatic ties with North Korea.<sup>45</sup>

These circumstances meant that North Korea's participation in the ARF was contingent on the progress of diplomatic negotiations between the Philippines and North Korea. In addition, Western powers have been urging the Philippines to adopt a policy of "constructive engagement" with North Korea.<sup>46</sup> Under these circumstances, to facilitate North Korea's participation in the ARF, the Philippines needed to advance the negotiations.

According to Juanito P. Jarasa, the foreign ministers of the Philippines and North Korea met on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York in September 1999 to discuss the improvement of relations. Subsequently, the two officials met during the 13<sup>th</sup> conference of the Non-Aligned Movement in Colombia in April 2000, where they agreed to establish diplomatic ties. Both South Korea and the United States expressed support for the diplomatic breakthrough, as this would bring North Korea into the international political mainstream. South Korea welcomed the development perfectly in accordance with then-President Kim Dae-jung's "Sunshine Policy".<sup>47</sup>

In July 2000, the Foreign Undersecretary of the Philippines announced that the Philippines and North Korea would sign an agreement next month, setting up diplomatic relations two nations.<sup>48</sup>

About 10 days later, the Deputy Chief of Staff of the AFP announced that the Moro Islamic Liberation Front 49 had arranged to purchase arms from North Korea using the \$3 million it had earlier received from suspected international terrorist Osama bin Laden.<sup>49</sup> This was considered to be a leak from the AFP, indicating a restrained stance towards establishing diplomatic relations with North Korea. In response, several senators urged the government to postpone a plan to

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<sup>43</sup> Juanito P. Jarasa, "The Philippines vis-à-vis NKorea", *The Manila Times*, September 23, 2017.

<sup>44</sup> Dona Pazzibugan and Juliet Labog-Javellana, "RP, North Korea establish ties today", *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, July 12, 2000.

<sup>45</sup> Due to the Rangoon bombing incident in 1983, Myanmar had severed diplomatic relations with North Korea. However, in April 2007, diplomatic ties were restored.

<sup>46</sup> Dona Pazzibugan and Juliet Labog-Javellana, "RP, North Korea establish ties today", *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, July 12, 2000.

<sup>47</sup> Juanito P. Jarasa, "The Philippines vis-à-vis NKorea", *The Manila Times*, September 23, 2017.

<sup>48</sup> "RP, Nokor plan ties", *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, June 11, 2000.

<sup>49</sup> Carlito Pable, "MILF buying weapons from N. Korea – AFP", *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, June 21, 2000.

establish diplomatic relations with Pyongyang until the alleged arms purchase could be verified.<sup>50</sup>

In response, Foreign Minister Siazon stated, “the North Korean ambassador to Thailand had conveyed Pyongyang's assurance that it would look into the alleged arms deal and stop it if the shipment was still in North Korea” and he emphasized that the 'government would be able to stop such arms deals in the future if it has established ‘friendly ties’ with North Korea. He also emphasized that the signing of the agreement would push through as scheduled.<sup>51</sup> After this, subsequent resistance to diplomatic negotiations with North Korea did not escalate. The leak by the AFP did not have a hindering effect on the negotiations. As planned, diplomatic relations between the two countries were established on July 12, 2000.

As discussed above, various factors, such as internal threats, nuclear development suspicions, and considerations for South Korea, could have hindered the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Philippines and North Korea. However, except for the final phase, there was no indication that the Philippines prioritized and hurried the establishment of diplomatic relations with North Korea.

When negotiations were accelerated around 1990, then Philippine Foreign Minister Manglapus stated, “it was the North Korean government and not the Philippines which initiated calls for the forging of diplomatic ties.”<sup>52</sup> When diplomatic relations were about to be established, Foreign Minister Siazon stated, “they have always wanted relations with us but we had always been postponing because of the nuclear issue.”<sup>53</sup> These statements suggest that the Philippines, if anything, had a passive stance toward establishing diplomatic relations with North Korea. Amid such circumstances, in the final phase, it seems that the Philippines opted for a response taking into account the trend in the international community, as stated by a senior official from the Department of Foreign Affairs who mentioned, “We do not want to be left behind by the international community.”<sup>54</sup>

## 6. Stagnant relationship

In the 2010s, the Philippines expanded its trade relations with North Korea, becoming the top or

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<sup>50</sup> Dona Pazzibugan, Christine Avendano and Cynthia Balana, “Postpone ties with N. Korea, gov’t urged”, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, June 22, 2000.

<sup>51</sup> Cynthia D. Balana and Dona Pazzibugan, “House OKs diplomatic ties with North Korea: Pyongyang envoy assures Manila”, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, June 24, 2000.

<sup>52</sup> “Talks with N. Korea held”, *The Manila Chronicle*, June 21, 1990.

<sup>53</sup> “Siazon favors RP relations with N. Korea”, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, November 10, 1999.

<sup>54</sup> *Asahi Shinbun*, July 11, 2000. (Japanese)

second trading partner among Southeast Asian countries with North Korea. On the global scale, the Philippines was North Korea's fifth-largest trade partner in 2016, according to the state-run Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency. The main export items from the Philippines include computers, bananas, integrated circuits, women's underwear, and more<sup>55</sup>. On an annual basis, North Korea imported \$28.8 million worth of products from the Philippines in 2016, an increase of 80 percent from the previous year, while the Philippines' imports from North Korea surged 170 percent to \$16.1 million.<sup>56</sup>

However, the relationship between the two countries, including trade, did not further develop. North Korea's nuclear and missile development became a concrete threat to the security of the Philippines, leading to a stagnation in the development of the relationship.

### **North Korea's nuclear and missile issues and the threat to the Philippines**

The Philippines had long recognized North Korea's nuclear and missile development as a security threat. However, with the advancement of North Korea's missile technology and the increasing number of Filipino overseas workers, the threat had become more concrete.

Philippine policymakers believe that North Korea poses a direct threat to their country's national security for two reasons. First, many Filipinos are concerned that a North Korean missile test could directly threaten the territory of the Philippines. For example, in December 2012, debris from a North Korean rocket launch landed off the coast of northern Luzon, heightening concerns in Manila about Pyongyang's nuclear and missile ambitions. Second, North Korea's nuclear program poses a major security threat to Asia-Pacific countries where large numbers of Filipino overseas workers live. The heightened prospect of a military confrontation between North Korea and South Korea has increased concerns in Manila about the welfare of Filipino migrant workers in South Korea.<sup>57</sup>

As mentioned above, Philippine foreign policy is characterized by three pillars. They are (1) national security, (2) economic security, and (3) the protection of the rights of overseas Filipinos<sup>58</sup>.

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<sup>55</sup> Portia Ladrido, "Women's undergarment, bananas, refugees: The Philippines-North Korea relationship", *CNN Philippines*, Apr. 27, 2018, <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/politics/2018/4/27/north-korea-ph-relations.html>, Accessed January 22, 2024.

<sup>56</sup> "PH suspends trade with North Korea to comply with UN resolution", *Manila Bulletin*, September 10, 2017.

<sup>57</sup> Samuel Ramani, "The Philippines' Approach to North Korea", *The Diplomat*, January 25, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/the-philippines-approach-to-north-korea/>, Accessed January 22, 2024.

<sup>58</sup> Yusuke Takagi, "The Philippine Foreign and Security Policy Perspective" Society of Security and Diplomatic Policy Studies, [ssdpaki.la.coocan.jp/en/proposals/72.html](http://ssdpaki.la.coocan.jp/en/proposals/72.html), Accessed January 24, 2024.

North Korea's nuclear and missile development, in connection with the increasing overseas employment in the Philippines, has had a new impact on the country's recognition of security threats.

The Philippines has been promoting overseas employment as a national policy, and the number of Filipinos working abroad has rapidly increased since the 1990s. Around 10 million Filipinos, including permanent residents, live overseas. Therefore, protecting its citizens abroad is a crucial responsibility for the government and poses a significant burden. Especially in countries like South Korea and Japan, where the threat of a military conflict that could be triggered by North Korea's nuclear and missile development is significant, there is a large population of Filipinos. As a result, the issue of North Korea's nuclear and missile development has been increasingly recognized in the Philippines, not just as a threat confined to its territory but as a spatially expansive threat. Indeed, every time North Korea conducts nuclear or missile tests, the Philippine government has been compelled to respond.

For example, in March 2012, Pyongyang announced it would launch a rocket to place a satellite in orbit and insisted this was purely for space research. But the United States and other nations saw the launch as a disguised ballistic missile test. Meanwhile, the Philippines said it was ready with a contingency plan to protect the safety of more than 50,000 overseas Filipino workers in South Korea if tensions with North Korea over its plan to launch a new rocket escalated into a full-blown crisis. The Philippine Embassy has posted a 10-page advisory on the contingency plan for Filipino workers in South Korea on its website.<sup>59</sup>

Another example, in August 2017, North Korea launched a ballistic missile that flew over Japanese airspace. The Philippines expressed its grave concern over the firing by North Korea. In a statement, Foreign Affairs Secretary Alan Peter Cayetano called on North Korea to halt "these dangerous and provocative actions, which heighten tensions, increase instability and the risk of miscalculation, and could possibly endanger lives." The Secretary said he has instructed the Philippine Embassy in Tokyo to continue to closely monitor the situation and to ensure that the estimated 242,000 Filipinos living and working in Japan are safe. The Secretary added, "I wish to assure our kababayans (fellow countrymen) in Japan that our Embassy in Tokyo and our Consulate General in Osaka are prepared to assist them should it be necessary".<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Jerry E. Esplanada, "PH readies evacuation of Pinoys in South Korea", *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, Mar. 28, 2012.

<sup>60</sup> Roy C. Mabasa, "PH expresses concern, calls on N. Korea to stop 'dangerous, provocative actions'", *Manila Bulletin*, Aug 30, 2017.



### **UN Sanctions and the Philippines**

In response to such threats, the Philippines has taken measures, including condemnation and protests through statements and actions in accordance with United Nations resolutions. Here are some examples.

On January 6, 2016, North Korea conducted its fourth nuclear test, which was followed by a ballistic missile launch test on February 7. In response to these actions, on March 2, 2016, the United Nations Security Council adopted a resolution imposing sanctions on North Korea. The resolution required all countries to inspect cargo going to and from North Korea.

The Philippines, on March 3, hailed the UN resolution that imposed the “toughest sanctions so far” on North Korea after Pyongyang’s “provocative” nuclear tests. The Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) said in a statement that “the Philippines welcomes the unanimous adoption of UN Security Council Resolution on the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea.”. The DFA also said the Philippines “joins the international community in strongly urging” North Korea to comply with this recent UN resolution.<sup>61</sup> Enforcing the UN sanctions on North Korea, the Philippines impounded a North Korean freighter on March 5. Several weeks later, the Philippines impounded another ship.

Furthermore, on July 4 and 28, 2017, North Korea conducted ballistic missile launch tests. In response to these actions, a UN Security Council resolution was adopted on August 5, 2017. Then, in September 2017, the Philippines suspended trade relations with North Korea to comply with a UN Security Council resolution over its repeated missile tests. Philippine Foreign Secretary stated, “We will fully comply with UN Security Council resolution, including the economic sanctions.”<sup>62</sup> As a result of the sanctions, trade between the Philippines and North Korea significantly decreased. According to UN statistics, Philippine exports to North Korea, which were \$53,242,211 in 2015, dropped to \$1,216,106 in 2017 and further decreased to \$35,461 in 2022.<sup>63</sup>

Indeed, recent developments have brought the nuclear and missile issues into the realm of concern of Philippine policy and security stakeholders. However, it has been pointed out that the threat

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<sup>61</sup> Paterno R. Esmaguél II, “Philippines hail UN sanctions vs North Korea,” *Rappler*, March 3, 2016, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/124561-philippines-north-korea-un-sanctions-nuclear-tests/>, Accessed January 16, 2024.

<sup>62</sup> “PH suspends trade with North Korea to comply with UN resolution,” *Manila Bulletin*, September 10, 2017.

<sup>63</sup> UN Comtrade Database, <https://comtradeplus.un.org/TradeFlow?Frequency=A&Flows=X&CommodityCodes=TOTAL&Partners=408&Reporters=608&period=all&AggregateBy=none&BreakdownMode=plus>, Accessed January 10, 2024.

from North Korea is not particularly high and is not a pressing issue in the overall context of Philippine national security.<sup>64</sup>

Amador Research Services, a think tank based in Manila, conducted the 2022 National Security Survey, which measured the tendencies of the security sector along various issue areas. The report found that only 4.6% of respondents listed nuclear proliferation as a top national security issue. As such, there is a largely neutral stance on what occurs in the Korean Peninsula. The survey also identified food/energy security, China, and natural disasters/climate change as the Philippines' primary and more immediate concerns. This suggests that, for the security sector, the Korean Peninsula is not a high-priority concern among the Philippines' security issues<sup>65</sup>.

This tendency is also observed in some of the government's security policy documents. The "National Security Policy 2011-2016" of the Benigno Aquino III administration, the "National Security Policy 2017-2022," and the "National Security Strategy 2018" of the Rodrigo Duterte Administration recognized North Korea as part of the Philippines' external security concerns. Still, it only referred to North Korea in the context of persisting tension in the Korean Peninsula and its status as a state possessing weapons of mass destruction<sup>66</sup>. Besides, in "National Security Policy 2023-2028" of the Ferdinand Marcos Jr. administration, there is no word for 'North Korea.'<sup>67</sup>

## Conclusion

Given North Korea's involvement in the Philippines' internal and external security threats (communist insurgency, nuclear weapons, and missiles), the Philippines' perceptions of them have influenced the development of the relationship between the Philippines and North Korea. In these circumstances, as such threats persisted while undergoing slight transformation, diplomatic

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<sup>64</sup> Deryk Matthew N. Baladjay and Matthew C. Uy, "Whither the Philippines' Securitization of North Korea?", *Facts Asia*, Oct. 31, 2023, <https://www.factsasia.org/blog/whither-the-philippines-securitization-of-north-korea>, Accessed January 22, 2024.

<sup>65</sup> Julio Amador, Aries Arugay, Deryk Baladjay, Justin Baquisal and Charmaine Misalucha-Willoughby, *National Security Survey 2022: Results & Findings*, Amador Research Services, May 24, 2023, [https://www.amadorresearchservices.com/\\_files/ugd/58aa99\\_816b2faebc4143789ee77316255ca842.pdf](https://www.amadorresearchservices.com/_files/ugd/58aa99_816b2faebc4143789ee77316255ca842.pdf), Accessed January 22, 2024.

<sup>66</sup> Republic of the Philippines, Office of the President, "National Security Policy 2011-2016", <https://nsc.gov.ph/attachments/article/NSP/NSP-2011-2016.pdf>, Accessed January 24, 2024, Republic of the Philippines, Office of the President, "National Security Policy 2017-2022", <https://nsc.gov.ph/attachments/article/NSP/NSP-2017-2022.pdf>, Accessed January 24, 2024, Republic of the Philippines, Office of the President, "National Security Strategy", [https://nsc.gov.ph/images/NSS\\_NSP/NSS\\_2018.pdf](https://nsc.gov.ph/images/NSS_NSP/NSS_2018.pdf), Accessed January 24, 2024, Nuclear weapons are one of three such types listed.

<sup>67</sup> Republic of the Philippines, Office of the President, "National Security Policy 2023-2028", [https://nsc.gov.ph/images/NSS\\_NSP/National\\_Security\\_Policy\\_2023\\_2028.pdf](https://nsc.gov.ph/images/NSS_NSP/National_Security_Policy_2023_2028.pdf), Accessed January 24, 2024.

relations between the two countries were established, driven by the conciliatory atmosphere in the international community around the 2000s. During this process, it became apparent that the necessity for improving relations with North Korea was not an urgent matter for the Philippines.

Furthermore, in recent years, as the relations between the two countries have deteriorated due to North Korea's nuclear and missile development, the Philippines has actively implemented sanctions based on UN resolutions. Unless there is a noticeable change in North Korea's pursuit of nuclear and missile development, it seems unlikely that the Philippines will actively engage in improving relations with North Korea.

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