

## Old Friends, New Partners, and Troubled Times: North Korea's Relations With Southeast Asia

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Taking a broad historical perspective, this article examines the character of North Korea's relationships with the individual member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations as well as with ASEAN as a regional organization. North Korea, with its limited experience of interacting with regional cooperation organizations, has approached Southeast Asia in terms of individual bilateral relationships that can be leveraged through historical and ideological linkages. It was not until the 1990s that North Korea took ASEAN seriously, but even then its focus remained primarily on preventing a unified position from being sustained. However, the continued nuclear and missile tests have pushed ASEAN into taking stronger critical actions against the North, despite ASEAN's aspiration to play a mediating role.

**Keywords:** North Korea, ASEAN, Legitimacy, Security, Development

In March 2016, Le Luong Minh, Secretary-General of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), received the credentials of the new Ambassador from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea hereafter), An Kwang Il. During their exchange of courteous remarks, Ambassador An explained that his country looked forward to 'expanding and developing cooperation with ASEAN,' while Le mentioned that he specifically hoped for 'greater and active participation' by North Korea in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Notably, however, Le also reaffirmed the ASEAN position on the 'importance of maintaining peace and stability in the Korean peninsula and the wider region.'<sup>1</sup> This caveat reflected the fact that only

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1. ASEAN Secretariat Press Releases, 16 March 2016, <http://asean.org/54034-2>.

two months earlier North Korea had carried out its fourth nuclear test and only a few days before this meeting had test-fired a number of missiles; both the nuclear and missile tests were in contravention of United Nations (UN) resolutions. Subsequently, a fifth and sixth nuclear test, continued missile tests, and the assassination of the half-brother of the North Korean leader Kim Jong Un at Kuala Lumpur airport would mean that the ASEAN-North Korea relationship would come under continuous and, if anything, heightened strain.

Ambassador An was, in fact, only the second such North Korean ambassador to ASEAN, following his path-breaking predecessor who took up office in Jakarta in 2011. This seemingly short official relationship between North Korea and ASEAN belies the fact that North Korea has maintained strong relations with some individual ASEAN member countries for well over six decades.<sup>2</sup>

Taking a broad historical perspective, this article examines the character of North Korea's relationships with individual ASEAN members as well as with the regional organization as a whole. It is argued that North Korea, with its limited experience of interacting with regional cooperation organizations and even more limited direct experience of being a member of any such organization, has basically approached Southeast Asia in terms of individual bilateral relationships that can be leveraged through historical and ideological linkages. Despite adopting from time to time broader 'charm offensives' and employing the occasional rhetoric of cooperation with ASEAN (such as in Ambassador An's remarks above), bilateralism has reigned supreme.

North Korea's policy – or policies – towards Southeast Asia can be broadly divided into two historical phases. First, from the 1950s to the 1980s, there was direct diplomatic competition with South Korea (ROK or the Republic of Korea) in order to counter-balance the latter's own

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2. Neither ASEAN nor its individual member states have been the focus of sustained coverage in North Korean official statements or media; visits by Southeast Asian leaders, attendance of North Korean officials at ASEAN-related meetings, and occasional meetings between North Korean foreign ministers and ASEAN ambassadors based in Pyongyang are usually reported in a perfunctory way. No major statement on policy towards ASEAN has been located.

evolving linkages with Southeast Asia. North Korea utilized both 'revolutionary' appeals to ideologically sympathetic governments and diplomatic and economic promises to non-communist regional states. Second, there were the more 'realist' approaches from the early 1990s onwards, after the shocks of the end of the Cold War and the Soviet and Chinese recognition of South Korea came to the forefront. This approach can be characterized as a greater interest in ASEAN as an organization, but also as an attempt to both undermine any putative regional unity against North Korea and exploit revenue-raising opportunities in the region.<sup>3</sup>

### **North Korean foreign policy objectives**

North Korea has been fairly consistent in its broad foreign policy goals, but has not been averse to changing specific policies in response to the changing international scene and its own domestic constraints. Byung Chul Koh usefully distinguishes between manifest goals (officially-stated goals such as 'independence, peace and friendship') and latent goals (objectives inferred from actual behaviour) in the North Korean case.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, utilising Koh's framework, three latent and inter-linked goals can be identified: legitimacy, security, and development.<sup>5</sup>

First, through military, economic and political means, the North waged a competitive struggle with the South for legitimacy and prestige. Having failed to solve the legitimacy issue by force during the Korean War, the North then resorted to diplomacy and ideological appeals. This meant trying to gain recognition from other states, achieve entry into international organizations, including the United Nations (UN), and host international events, ideally at the expense of

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3. The use of the terms 'revolutionary' and 'realist' here owes much to conversations with and my readings of writings by Hazel Smith.
  4. Byung Chul Koh, "Foreign Policy Goals, Constraints, and Prospects," in *North Korea: Ideology, Politics, Economy*, Han S. Park (ed.) (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1996), pp. 176-177.
  5. *Ibid.*, pp. 180-184.

its southern counterpart. However, despite the North making some progress in this respect during the 1960s and 1970s, by the 1980s, the balance of advantage was shifting increasingly in favour of the rising economic power, South Korea. In the Southeast Asian context, North Korea had looked not only to sustain linkages with its ideological friends, such as the socialist Vietnam, the anti-imperialist Indonesia of Sukarno, and the vehemently non-aligned Burma, but also to develop new contacts with other regional states. Recognition by most ASEAN members had been achieved by the mid-1970s, but from the 1990s onwards, the economic clout of South Korea would make it a far more desirable partner than the North for almost all the ASEAN states.

Second, security of the state and the regime has been crucial. Memories of the Korean War play strongly in North Korea, so while attempts are made to disparage the South at every opportunity, the North's real target is the United States; distrust of that 'imperialist' power remains potent. The paramount concern with security at first led the North to build up its conventional forces, but as its socialist allies declined in number and its conventional forces began to lose the qualitative competition with the South, from the early 1990s onwards, the North began slowly to rely on the nuclear option. Increasingly, especially after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the North was to come to see the possession of an effective nuclear arsenal as crucial to its survival.<sup>6</sup>

As far as Southeast Asia was concerned, none of the ASEAN states constituted a direct security threat to the North (unlike South Korea, Japan, and the United States) and, conversely, no Southeast Asian state felt directly threatened by the North's military build-up. However, the North's increased efforts to improve its missile technology and test nuclear devices from the 2000s onwards did heighten concerns in ASEAN about regional stability and security. This raised issues for the North about how to divide opinion or at least prevent such policy concerns from impinging on its own security and survival.

The third theme of North Korean foreign policy – economic development – has remained an important, if often seemingly subordinate,

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6. Glyn Ford, *North Korea on the Brink: Struggle for Survival* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), p. 154.

goal. Economic development links into and sustains both prestige and security. Despite the rhetoric of *juche*, the North did look initially to develop some commercial relations with its socialist allies. This was to be followed in later decades by expanding such linkages with other states. However, in order to avoid becoming dependent on the 'capitalist' world, the North resisted adapting to the changing global economy and became increasingly faced with hardships – and by the mid-1990s, even famine – which impacted its ability not only to meet domestic demands, but also to act as a trading partner of any note with external powers, such as with the ASEAN states.

The following sections will examine these three basic goals, as displayed in the Southeast Asian regional context, in more detail.

### **Socialist comrades, capitalist partners and historical legacies**

Before considering North Korea's interactions with ASEAN as a multilateral organization, it is necessary to review briefly the historical patterns of bilateral linkages as a means for North Korea to secure the legitimacy it desired. When ASEAN was formed in 1967 from the then five most economically-advanced economies of Southeast Asia, only Indonesia had any existing diplomatic relations with North Korea (and that connection had only been established in 1964, reflecting President Sukarno's own close linkages with both the local communist party and China). Instead, North Korea's closest links were with other Southeast Asian states, such as the ideologically-sympathetic regimes in North Vietnam and Cambodia, which were at that time respectively either in a post-colonial conflict or trying to maintain a façade of neutrality. Yet, even though ASEAN expanded by adding Brunei in 1984 and then Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam in the mid-1990s, North Korea's relations with the grouping were by no means smooth.

The longest-standing links for North Korea were with Vietnam (with the northern part, known as the Democratic People's Republic from 1945, and then with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam from its reunification in 1976). Relations were established in January 1950 and

state visits by respective leaders took place in 1957-58. As the Vietnam War escalated in the mid-1960s, North Korea tried to play the role not just of ally, but also of lead proponent of a 'united front strategy against American imperialist aggression.'<sup>7</sup> Crucially, however, Kim Il Sung was able to use the Vietnam conflict to enhance his own position internationally by heightening his anti-imperialist rhetoric and highlighting the parallels between Vietnam and the divided Korean peninsula.<sup>8</sup> But while the reunification of Vietnam in 1975 should have been a boost to North Korean morale, Kim had opposed North Vietnam's earlier peace talks with the United States and bilateral relations actually deteriorated as Vietnam's quarrels with the new Cambodia (Kampuchea) led to invasion and civil war. North Korea sympathized with the deposed Cambodian leader, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, and continued to criticize the Vietnamese actions in Cambodia.<sup>9</sup> Then, as the Cambodian crisis began to wind down, Vietnam, looking to diversify its economic partners, established diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1992. North Korea's failure to pay for a large shipment of Vietnamese rice in 1996 added to the distrust and while Vietnamese-South Korean economic ties expanded, North Korea's relationship with Vietnam remained low-key into the 2000s.<sup>10</sup>

Cambodia, attempting to follow a policy of neutrality in the Cold War after 1960, became the third Southeast Asian state to recognize North Korea by establishing diplomatic relations in late 1964. A strong

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7. Kook-Chin Kim, "An Overview of North Korean-Southeast Asian Relations," *The Foreign Relations of North Korea: New Perspectives*, Jae Kyu Park, Byung Chul Koh, and Tae-Hwan Kwak (eds) (Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), pp. 365-366.

8. Barry Gills, *Korea versus Korea: A case of contested legitimacy* (London: Routledge, 1996). pp. 106-116.

9. One Vietnamese ambassador told a Hungarian diplomat in 1983 that the relationship between Vietnam and North Korea was 'bad'; 'Although Vietnam continues to consider the DPRK a socialist country, the line of the Korean Workers' Party is contrary to Marxism-Leninism.' Wilson Center Digital Archive International History, NKIDP, Doc.No. 115830.

10. Samuel Rumani, "Can Vietnam help mediate With North Korea?" *The Diplomat*, 21 September 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/09/can-vietnam-help-mediate-with-north-korea/>.

personal relationship began to develop between Sihanouk and Kim, so much so that after Sihanouk was toppled in a military coup in 1970, North Korea not only continued to support his government-in-exile, but also provided a kind of 'second home' for Sihanouk, in the form of a special palace Kim had built for him in Pyongyang.<sup>11</sup> Sihanouk regularly resided for several months at a time in North Korea until 1993 when, after the United Nations-brokered peace deal, he again became King of Cambodia (taking back with him a bodyguard of North Korean special forces). He continued to make occasional visits to Pyongyang over the following years. Post-1993, Cambodia adopted a low-key though generally favourable attitude towards North Korea that continued into the 2000s.

The third Indochinese state, Laos, had limited diplomatic capacity and was slower to recognize North Korea, not doing so until mid-1974 (and recognizing South Korea on the same day took away much of the credit as far as North Korea was concerned). However, the communist takeover of Laos in 1975 did lead to stronger ties with the North (relations with the South were suspended). Yet, as Vietnamese influence over Laos strengthened from the late 1970s on, the souring of Vietnamese-North Korean relations reverberated onto Laotian-North Korean relations, which remained polite but distant through the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>12</sup>

Amongst the original founding members of ASEAN, it was Indonesia that was of the most interest to North Korea. The radical nationalism and anti-imperialist rhetoric of Indonesia's President Sukarno in the late 1950s appealed to Kim Il Sung, and Sukarno saw North Korea as an appropriate partner in his putative 'anti-imperialist axis' across Asia.<sup>13</sup> Although not present at the 1955 Bandung Conference, which heralded the beginning of Afro-Asian 'solidarity' against Western colonialism and imperialism, North Korea welcomed the message of revolutionary endeavour. After slowly building through trade and consul-

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11. Kim, *Overview*, pp. 366-367.

12. *Ibid.* p. 368.

13. Michael Leifer, *Indonesia's Foreign Policy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), pp. 99-105.

ar links, full diplomatic relations with Indonesia were established in April 1964. Sukarno visited Pyongyang later that same year and Kim made one of his very rare overseas visits to a non-communist state when he went to Jakarta in early 1965. However, only a few months later, an abortive communist coup in Indonesia threw the country into turmoil, from which emerged a new, more pragmatic leader, Suharto, who pursued a more even-handed policy towards the two Koreas.<sup>14</sup>

Even though contacts were maintained - foreign ministers exchanged visits in the mid-1970s and the North Korean premier visited Indonesia in 1982 - the Indonesian-North Korean relationship was unable to prosper in the way that it had under Sukarno. Indonesia recognized South Korea in 1973 and steadily built up economic links, while the relationship with North Korea basically marked time.

The mid-1970s, however, represented a breakthrough period in North Korea's relations with the Third World and even with Western Europe, as it manoeuvred through the changes taking place in global politics after the Sino-US rapprochement. ASEAN members were also included in this breakthrough, and North Korean relations were established with Malaysia in June 1973, Thailand in May 1975, and Singapore in December 1975; in addition, then non-ASEAN member Burma (Myanmar) established relations in May 1975.

Malaya, renamed Malaysia in 1963, had limited contact with North Korea during the 1950s and 1960s, not least because of the strong anti-communist attitude of the government, which had been fighting the Malayan Emergency from 1948-1960. North Korea's open support for Indonesia in its *Konfrontasi* (Confrontation) conflict with Malaysia from 1963-1966 also played a role in the lack of relations. In the early 1970s, however, the new leadership in Malaysia's more public profession of non-alignment and its strong advocacy of a Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality for ASEAN (ZOPFAN) made it a more congenial partner for North Korea.<sup>15</sup> In turn, at a time when the momentum for opening relations with China was gathering speed in

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14. Kim, Overview, pp. 368-369.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 370.

the early 1970s, Malaysia sought to expand its non-aligned foreign policy credentials by establishing relations with East Germany (German Democratic Republic) and North Vietnam (Democratic Republic of Vietnam), around the same time as it did so with North Korea.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1973 did not lead to very active exchanges, even though a Malaysian Deputy Prime Ministerial visit to Pyongyang occurred in 1979.<sup>17</sup> Instead, Malaysia became increasingly interested in South Korea's economic progress, culminating in Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohammad's proclamation of a 'Look East' policy in 1983, which specifically targeted South Korea and Japan as models for socio-economic development.

Singapore, which, like Indonesia and Malaysia, had joined the Non-Aligned Movement (an organization that also appealed to North Korea), gradually developed trade and consular links with the North starting in the late 1960s, and took the final step of establishing full diplomatic relations in 1975. Yet, Singapore had already recognized South Korea earlier that same year and, given Singapore's strong technology-based economic growth strategy, the links with the South grew much faster than any similar connections with the North.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, despite Singapore's strong connections to the United States, the North may well have continued to view some aspects of the Singaporean development model – particularly its successful struggle to establish its own national identity and economic style in the 1960s – in a favourable light.<sup>19</sup>

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16. Chandran Jeshurun, *Malaysia: Fifty Years of Diplomacy, 1957-2007* (Kuala Lumpur: The Other Press, 2007), pp.126-127; Johan Saravanamuttu, *Malaysia's Foreign Policy: the First Fifty Years: Alignment, Neutralism, Islamism* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2010), pp. 149-157.

17. The comment by an accompanying diplomat that 'North Korea had all the symptoms of an impoverished country living in blissful isolation from the reality of the rest of the world' might help to explain Malaysian reticence over deepening relations at that time (Tan Koon San, *Excellency: Journal of A Diplomat* (Kuala Lumpur: The Other Press, 2000), p. 62).

18. Kim, Overview, p. 371.

19. Tan Er-Win, Geetha Govindasamy and Chang Kyoo Park, "The Potential Role of South-East Asia in North Korea's Economic Reforms: The Cases of ASEAN,

Both Thailand and the Philippines had contributed troops to the United Nations forces fighting against the North during the Korean War and had subsequently remained closely allied to the United States, so it was not surprising that no links with the North emerged during the 1950s and 1960s. However, the Thai government in power at the time of the communist victories in Indochina in 1975 was keen to accommodate itself to the new regional realities and swiftly recognized North Korea in May 1975.<sup>20</sup> Although Thai troops were subsequently withdrawn from the United Nations Command, then based in South Korea, further progress in relations with the North was hampered by a military coup in Thailand in 1976. The fluctuating domestic political situation within Thailand remained the main factor in constraining or advancing relations with the North and relations remained low-key until the early 1990s when the North's domestic food supply problems encouraged it to turn to Thailand as an important source of rice imports.

The Philippines, constrained both by its strong treaty relationship with the United States at least until the early 1990s and by the legacies of its involvement in UN operations on the peninsula, was reluctant to develop relations with North Korea. Additionally, the Philippine side, responding to US intelligence, remained suspicious that the North had been aiding the insurgent New People's Army inside the Philippines. Desultory negotiations took place over nearly 2 decades before relations were finally established in July 2000, making the Philippines one of the last Asian states to recognize North Korea.

Brunei, which joined ASEAN in 1984 upon independence from Britain, has had no substantial connections with North Korea. Like the Philippines, Brunei appreciated the new mood of South-North Korean 'détente' in the late 1990s and diplomatic relations were established in January 1999. North Korea may not have had any real links with Brunei, even though the latter's energy supplies might be of interest, but the North's decision to establish relations with Brunei – and also with the Philippines – was almost certainly driven by the desire to gain

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Vietnam and Singapore," *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, March 2015, pp. 10-11, DOI:10.1177/0021909615570952.

20. Kim, Overview, pp. 371-372.

admittance to the ARF; diplomatic relations with these two ASEAN states had effectively become one pre-condition of admission.

The final ASEAN member, Burma/Myanmar, has probably had the most controversial relationship with North Korea. Convinced post-independence of its need to be non-aligned, Burma became increasingly insular after a military-led coup in 1962 under Ne Win forged the 'Burmese Way to Socialism.' Yet, trade relations and consular relations with North Korea did begin in the early 1960s and a regular stream of senior North Korean officials subsequently visited Rangoon, including Kim Il Sung himself in 1965. Relations were upgraded to full diplomatic levels in May 1975 and Burma supported a pro-North Korean resolution for the first time at the UN General Assembly later that year.<sup>21</sup>

However, as Burma slowly began to explore greater regional economic connections, South Korea became a particular object of interest. Consequently, South Korean President Chun Doo Hwan, who himself had made improving relations with Southeast Asia a policy priority, made a state visit to Rangoon in October 1983 as part of a six-nation tour of South and Southeast Asia. North Korea attempted to assassinate him; the bomb missed him, but killed 12 of his accompanying ministers and officials. After a Burmese investigation discovered the perpetrators, diplomatic relations were quickly broken off (and not resumed until 2007).<sup>22</sup> Though not a member of ASEAN at the time, Burma's experience at the hands of North Korea shocked its Southeast Asian neighbours.

## **The politics of regional cooperation**

North Korea's sustained desire for legitimacy eventually brought it

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21. *Ibid.*, p. 373.

22. Mark Clifford, *Troubled Tiger: Businessmen, Bureaucrats, and Generals in South Korea* (New York: M.E.Sharpe, 1994), pp. 204-205; Kim Eungseo, "The Past and Present of North Korean Belligerence: Rangoon 1983," *Sino-NK*, 7 July 2017, <http://sinonk.com/2017/07/07/the-past-and-present-of-north-korean-belligerence-rangoon-1983>.

to ASEAN's door, even though the strong focus on bilateral links had been complemented by limited North Korean interactions with ASEAN until the 1990s. North Korea had seemingly taken little notice of the formation of ASEAN in 1967. Indeed, it may well have shared the perspective of other external powers that an organization born out of confrontation would be as short-lived as some of its aborted predecessors in Southeast Asia. Given the loss of influence or at least of fellow-feeling with Indonesia after 1965, the North tended to concentrate on bilateral links with those Southeast Asian states which seemed to share its 'socialist' vision.

The cautious consolidation of the culture of consultation, which was a hall-mark of ASEAN's early years, was, however, to suffer a jolt in mid-1975 with the end of the Vietnam War and the emergence of communist control over Indo-China, the 'other Southeast Asia.' This dramatic political change not only served as a catalyst for greater intra-ASEAN co-operation, but also created an environment which enabled several Southeast Asian states to open diplomatic relations with North Korea.

However, North Korean diplomacy towards the region remained strongly bilaterally focused, even after ASEAN held its first Summit meetings, negotiated the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), and began to solicit stronger economic links with external major powers in the late 1970s and early 1980s. North Korea's relative indifference towards ASEAN as an organization was reciprocated on the ASEAN side. Even when dialogue arrangements with interested powers began to expand in the 1980s, ASEAN as a grouping showed little interest in interacting with North Korea. The North's isolationist economic policies, its terrorist actions in Burma in 1983, and the much greater economic attractiveness of South Korea, which became a dialogue partner in 1991, ensured that North Korea did not feature high on ASEAN's regional cooperation agenda. Of course, the ASEAN states were not unaware of the tensions on the Korean peninsula – and dialogues with South Korea invariably included some lobbying by the South Koreans for support of their perspectives regarding events on the peninsula and the North's military threats.

The founding ASEAN member states and subsequently-joining members have subscribed to the evolving so-called 'ASEAN Way,' a non-confrontational approach to diplomacy which relies on building trust through regular consultations and developing personal ties. As ASEAN established its regular dialogues with external partners, these inevitably focused primarily on economic issues. However, after the end of the Cold War, ASEAN leaders began to reflect on the changing international order and identified the need for a forum that might at least help to create greater confidence-building and, arguably, defuse potential security threats in the region. In July 1994, the first meeting of the ARF was held; 18 foreign ministers drawn from ASEAN and its main interlocutors attended.<sup>23</sup> South Korea was invited, but North Korea was not. Yet, even though the first nuclear crisis was at a crucial stage at that time, the ARF did not take a concerted stand since the initial meeting was devoted almost entirely to deciding issues of structure and objectives without concrete discussion of specific problems.

Although the Korean situation was picked up from the 1995 ARF meeting onwards, the subsequent chairman's concluding statements at these annual ARF meetings tended to be limited to rather anodyne expressions about the 'importance of peace and security on the Korean peninsula' and the need for dialogue and reconciliation. Around the time of the ARF's formation, North Korea did approach ASEAN members to inquire about membership, but it was told that until it had shown better behaviour over nuclear site inspection, it would not be considered.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, some ARF members felt that the North's 'participation should be a reward for conducting better relations with South Korea.'<sup>25</sup> However, in the late 1990s, under President Kim Dae-jung's 'Sunshine Policy,' the South became more receptive to the idea of the North joining the ARF. As other states in the region noted North Korea's renewed diplomatic offensive in the region and as the first

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23. Michael Leifer, *The ASEAN Regional Forum: Extending ASEAN's model of regional security* (London: Oxford University Press for the International Institute of Strategic Studies, 1996).

24. Interview with a Southeast Asian diplomat, July 1994.

25. Leifer, *ASEAN Regional Forum*, p. 48.

ever North-South Korean Summit meeting occurred in Pyongyang in June 2000, it was felt to be appropriate for the North to be invited to the July 2000 ARF meeting. Thailand, as host of the ASEAN meetings that year, took the initiative to invite the North to join the ARF, using Cambodia as a channel to the North. Additionally, given the expanded composition of ASEAN, it was left to the last remaining member which had never had any formal links to the North, the Philippines, to also strongly endorse the gesture and announce that it would establish diplomatic relations with the North when the latter attended the ARF. In what the Thai Foreign Minister described as a 'pretty unanimous' decision by the then 22 ARF members, the North Korean formal application made in May 2000 was accepted.<sup>26</sup> Japan, due to its deteriorating relations with the North over missile launches, spy ship intrusions, and the abductions of Japanese citizens, was one of the member states which had had the most reservations about the application, but it finally relented and joined the consensus.<sup>27</sup> That ARF meeting welcomed the 'positive developments' on the Korean peninsula, describing the June 2000 Pyongyang Summit as a 'turning point in inter-Korean relations.'

The 2001 ARF meeting also expressed appreciation for North Korea's 'active participation' in ARF activities, but by the 2002 meeting, ARF members were already beginning to express 'concern' (primarily about a recent North-South Korean naval clash), while also hoping for progress in the North-South reconciliation. By the 2003 meeting, when North Korea had become embroiled in the second nuclear crisis, the ARF Chairman was calling for a 'peaceful solution of the nuclear problem there for the sake of durable peace and security in the region.' After strong lobbying from the United States and Japan, the Chairman's statement also specifically called on the North to reverse its stated policy of withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and to resume cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency.<sup>28</sup> Although the meeting concluded that ARF had

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26. *People's Daily*, 21 June 2000.

27. Takeshi Yuzawa, *Japan's Security Policy and the ASEAN Regional Forum* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 135-136.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 145.

'played a useful and constructive role' by supporting efforts by the ARF Chair (Cambodia) to 'help ease tensions on the Korean peninsula,' it was not clear what exact role the ARF as an organization had played in the early stages of this second nuclear crisis.<sup>29</sup> Reportedly, the United States and Japan were not enthusiastic about one proposal floated by some ASEAN members that an ad hoc meeting involving North Korea, China, Russia, Thailand, and Malaysia might be held within the framework of the ARF.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, it was left to Cambodia, given its long-standing close relations with the North, to try to bring about some amelioration of the tension, if only through encouraging interested parties to talk to each other. Soon afterwards, however, the Chinese initiative to establish a Six-Part Talks forum - outside the ARF framework - became public.

ASEAN also attached importance to its TAC, calling on external powers to adhere to this treaty as a means of contributing to regional order and the eventual establishment of the ASEAN Security Community. New members joining ASEAN were required to sign this Treaty and, after 1998, external powers were encouraged to do so too, provided that all ASEAN members agreed. In July 2008, at the urging of Singapore and Indonesia, North Korea became the fourteenth non-ASEAN state to accede to the Treaty. In February 2014, North Korea also applied to become a dialogue partner of ASEAN, but, because of a moratorium on new partners at that time, no action was taken.

## **Two nuclear crises**

The North's preoccupation with security found vivid expression in its ambitions to develop nuclear weapons, which have been an issue for the Asian Pacific region and the wider international community for nearly a quarter of a century; ASEAN members have not been able to ignore such developments. The first nuclear crisis from 1993-1994, which

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29. ASEAN Regional Forum, *Chairman's Statements, 2000-2003*, <http://aseanregional-forum.asean.org/library/arf-chairmans-statements-and-reports.html?id=173>.

30. Yuzawa, *Japan's Security Policy*, p. 145.

brought the peninsula to the brink of military action and was only averted by former US President Jimmy Carter's mission to Pyongyang to meet Kim Il Sung, revolved around intelligence evidence of North Korean efforts to reprocess nuclear materials (plutonium) as a means to make what were widely believed to be nuclear weapons. The crisis, however, was largely contained within the US-North Korean relationship and it was a bilateral US-North Korean Agreed Framework in October 1994 that brought it to a conclusion. Asian Pacific powers, including neighbouring China, sat on the sidelines; ASEAN was no exception.<sup>31</sup>

As the Agreed Framework's implementation faltered in mutual recriminations over delays and non-commitment, the United States and Northeast Asian regional states began to be concerned about the North's development of longer-range missiles as well as nuclear weapons. In October 2002, US officials confronted North Korea with intelligence evidence that, contrary to the 1994 agreement, the North had been carrying out secret nuclear activities (uranium enrichment); in what remains a controversial exchange, the North's representative argued that the North was entitled to possess nuclear weapons (the North later denied it had admitted to having the uranium enrichment programme).<sup>32</sup>

This second crisis rapidly moved beyond bilateral bounds. China, concerned that nuclear weapons in the North could persuade South Korea and Japan, and even Taiwan, to also develop nuclear weapons, began to take an active role. This led to the creation of the Six-Party Talks (made up of the two Koreas, China, Japan, the United States, and Russia), beginning in August 2003. Hosted by China, these talks continued intermittently, with two agreements signed in 2005 and 2007 but then implemented incompletely, before finally collapsing in 2009.

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31. The definitive study of the first nuclear crisis, Leon Sigal, *Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), makes no reference to ASEAN.

32. Mike Chinoy, *Meltdown: The Inside Story of the North Korean Nuclear Crises* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008), pp. 110-140; Daniel A. Pinkston and Phillip C. Saunders. "Seeing North Korea Clearly," *Survival*, 45 (3), Autumn 2003, pp. 81-82.

The North Koreans undertook their first nuclear test in October 2006; although not entirely successful, it did change the atmosphere of the talks and showed that the North was serious about developing nuclear deterrents. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed a critical resolution and the first phase of sanctions were imposed on the North. A second nuclear test in February 2009 inevitably provoked another critical UNSC response; in turn, North Korea decided to reject any further contact through the Six-Party Talks. This has not deterred China from continuing to raise the issue of reconvening the talks on numerous occasions over the subsequent years both publicly and in private bilateral contacts with officials of the participating states, but no progress has been made yet.

Meanwhile, the ASEAN members mainly watched from the sidelines as the six powers tortuously manoeuvred for advantage during these negotiations, which were spread out over more than 5 years. They could only play two subsidiary roles: as a facilitator of bilateral talks and, through the ARF, as a provider of a forum for the protagonists to meet.

The perceived 'neutrality' of ASEAN states, or at least of some of the members, meant that they were occasionally chosen as venues where US and North Korean diplomats could meet more informally outside the Six-Party Talks format. For example, in April 2008, Christopher Hill and Kim Kye Gwan, the respective senior US and North Korean nuclear negotiators, met in Singapore.<sup>33</sup> Earlier, but admittedly prior to the opening of the Six-Party Talks, Kuala Lumpur had acted as a host for US-North Korean discussions over the North's missile development programme. This was in July and November of 2000.

Moreover, the annual ARF meetings provided opportunities for foreign minister-level interactions outside the conference room. In 2002, US Secretary of State Colin Powell casually met with the North Korean Foreign Minister Paek Nam Sun during a coffee break at the ARF meeting in Brunei, only a few months after President George W.

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33. James E. Hoare, "Foreign Relations of the Two Koreas in 2008," in Rudiger Frank, James E. Hoare, Patrick Kollner and Susan Pares (eds) *Korea Yearbook, Vol.3, Politics, Economy and Society, 2009* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), p. 83.

Bush had labelled North Korea part of an 'axis of evil' along with Iran and Iraq. In 2004, on the sidelines of the ARF meeting in Jakarta, Powell and Paek held a more formal meeting regarding the facilitation of the Six-Party Talks. In July 2008, in Singapore, the ARF meeting even provided a venue for all six foreign ministers from the Six-Party Talks member states to meet informally together for the first time. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice talked briefly first with North Korean Foreign Minister Pak Ui Chun, then the 4 other foreign ministers joined for what would become an hour-long discussion.<sup>34</sup>

Back in 1971, under a Malaysian initiative, the then ASEAN members declared the idealistic goal of making Southeast Asia into a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) by reducing any external military presence and, theoretically, working towards completely excluding such major power interventions and achieving the 'neutralization' of the region. During the discussions, the idea of a nuclear weapons-free zone in the region had also been mooted. However, while the ASEAN members were able to overcome intra-mural differences over ZOPFAN's meaning and objectives, doing the same for the Southeast Asian Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (SEANWFZ) proved more difficult to accomplish. Moreover, not unexpectedly, it faced strong opposition from the United States, which envisaged its security role in the region being undermined. Consequently, even after Malaysia formally tabled the proposal in 1984, intra-ASEAN talks dragged along in a desultory fashion and not until 1995, after the end of the Cold War, was a treaty concluded.<sup>35</sup>

This was a symbolically significant treaty, but since the nuclear weapon-possessing states around the world were not directly involved and several of the parameters of the treaty, such as verification and compliance, were left deliberately vague, serious doubts remained about its effectiveness in practice.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, at least it reflected the

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34. *Yonhap North Korea Newsletter*, 24 July 2008.

35. Mohd Bin Ahmad Yusof, "*Continuity and change in Malaysia's foreign policy, 1981-1986*" (Tufts University PhD dissertation, 1990), pp. 183-189.

36. Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 54-56.

desire of the ASEAN members – all later recruits to the grouping were required to sign on to these ZOPFAN and SEANWFZ declarations – that the region not only should develop its regional autonomy in security matters but also would never create or possess nuclear weapons. Since all the ASEAN states had already signed the NPT, in effect its impact would only be felt by the declared nuclear-weapon states. However, as of ASEAN's latest reassessment of the situation in mid-2016, none of the five nuclear states had signed the accession protocol attached to the SEANWFZ treaty. The push to complete the SEANWFZ reflected ASEAN's new self-confidence after the end of the Cold War, but it also took place soon after the wider region had had to face up to the first nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula.

Although the Korean peninsula is, of course, geographically well beyond the envisaged limits of SEANWFZ, this commitment by the ASEAN members nonetheless implied an interest in monitoring and encouraging similar non-proliferation regimes in other parts of Asia. Therefore, the successive North Korean nuclear tests, in 2006, 2009, 2013, 2016 (twice) and 2017, were of concern to the ASEAN grouping. These events forced ASEAN to respond at times which did not coincide with ARF annual meetings. The first nuclear test in October 2006 brought a sharp reaction from ASEAN. 'Deeply concerned' about the actions, the ASEAN Chairman issued a statement on behalf of the foreign ministers, noting that they 'protest such testing, and strongly urge the DPRK to desist from conducting further tests.' At the same time, however, they called on 'all parties concerned to exercise restraint,' even though the onus was clearly put on North Korea to return to the Six-Party Talks. This 'deep concern' remained a key phrase for ASEAN. For example, after the February 2013 test, the then ASEAN Chairman used the same term, stating that ASEAN 'encourages' the North to 'comply fully with its obligations' under the various UNSC resolutions and reaffirming ASEAN's 'full support for all efforts to bring about the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula in a peaceful manner and the early resumption of the Six-Party Talks.'<sup>37</sup>

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37. ASEAN statements 12 October 2006; 19 February 2013, <http://asean.org>.

After the January 2016 test, ASEAN repeated its belief in the peaceful denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. Even though it adopted a slightly tougher tone – ‘urges’ rather than ‘encourages’ the North to comply with the UNSC resolutions – the message ‘to all parties’ was to ‘exert common efforts to maintain peace and security in the said region and create an atmosphere conducive to the early resumption of the Six-Party Talks.’<sup>38</sup> ASEAN here showed that, given its traditional belief in the efficacy of dialogue, it was broadly in line with the Chinese approach of pushing for the re-opening of the Six-Party Talks.

However, the tone of ASEAN’s approach toughened up as another nuclear test in 2016, repeated launches of a variety of missiles during 2016-17, and regional tensions rose in the spring/summer of 2017, culminating in a sixth nuclear test in September 2017. Singaporean Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan encapsulated the mainstream of ASEAN thinking when he said in late April 2017 that although the Korean peninsula was ‘far away’ from Singapore, ‘the human price would be horrendous’ if any miscalculations led to hostilities there. Rodrigo Duterte, the new Philippines president and current ASEAN Chair, was less diplomatic in his telephone exchange with US President Donald Trump, describing Kim Jong Un as ‘not stable,’ since ‘he keeps smiling when he explodes a rocket.’ He added that at the April 2017 ASEAN Summit, ‘every member state was really nervous about the situation in Korean peninsula,’ so they supported US efforts to ‘keep on the pressure.’<sup>39</sup>

The ASEAN leaders reiterated their support for denuclearization of the peninsula and requested all concerned parties ‘explore all avenues for immediate dialogue’ with the blame laid clearly at the North Korean door: ‘The actions of the DPRK have resulted in an escalation of tensions that can affect peace and stability in the entire region...

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38. *Ibid.* 8 January 2016.

39. *Philippine Star*, 25 May 2017, <http://www.philstar.com/headlines/2017/05/25/1703492/transcript-trump-duterte-phone-call>. Duterte later, in July, on the eve of the ARF meeting, described Kim as ‘a fool....playing with dangerous toys.’ *Guardian*, 3 August 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/03/chubby-fool-duterte-lambasts-north-koreas-kim-jong-un-for-nuclear-ambitions>.

[We] stressed the importance of exercising self-restraint.<sup>40</sup> Immediately prior to the Summit, the North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho had written to the ASEAN Secretary-General seeking the organization's support in criticizing the recent US-South Korean military exercises, since the Korean peninsula was 'reaching the brink of war.'<sup>41</sup> Evidently, his argument did not find favour with the ASEAN leaders.

In their early August 2017 meeting, ASEAN Foreign Ministers expressed 'grave concerns' over the escalating tensions on the peninsula, especially the two inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM) tests, and called for the 'exercise of self-restraint and the resumption of dialogue'; after the September nuclear test, however, ASEAN foreign ministers not only reiterated their 'grave concerns,' but also added that North Korea's action 'seriously calls into question the country's sincerity in having meaningful dialogue on the real issues facing the Korean Peninsula.'<sup>42</sup>

## **An economic partner?**

The third latent goal of the North has been economic development. However, as a grouping keen to promote its own economic development, ASEAN has sought out South Korea as an economic partner and model, while North Korea has rarely figured in the economic calculations of the ASEAN states, except for a few isolated examples.

The North Korean economy slowly began to falter and stagnate from the 1980s onwards. The loss of Soviet bloc support at the end of the 1980s was a blow, but the economy's 'inherent institutional flaws' provided clear limits to growth. Policies of austerity and exhortation failed to halt the decline and probably two-thirds of a million people

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40. ASEAN Statement 2017, <http://asean.org/category/asean-statement-communiques>.

41. *Philippine Star*, 28 April 2017.

42. Joint Communique of the 50th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting, 5 August 2017, and ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Statement, 7 September 2017, both <http://asean.org>. Despite informal soundings by the US, the ARF members collectively decided not to expel or suspend North Korea from the forum.

died of malnutrition and disease in the mid-1990s.<sup>43</sup> Recovery did begin in the 2000s, not least because the regime was forced to allow individuals some degree of freedom to develop their own sources of income for survival reasons ('marketization'), but the levels of economic activity remained very low.

Despite the ideological commitment to self-sufficiency embodied in the *juche* philosophy of the early 1960s, Kim Il Sung recognized the need to import certain resources and capital goods for domestic economic development. A major foreign economic policy announcement in 1984 highlighted the need to expand economic relations with the developing world; Southeast Asia seemed an appropriate target for such South-South cooperation due to its geographical proximity.<sup>44</sup>

But trade relations with Southeast Asia remained as low-key as they had been prior to this new policy approach. This was to remain the case even a decade later, for in 1994, just before he died, Kim Il Sung had to issue an instruction that: 'Since the socialist bloc countries are gone, we have to actively pursue trade with Southeast Asian countries.'<sup>45</sup> Trade data is not released by North Korea, so trade flows can only be reconstructed using such data as is available from the partner countries, in this case the ASEAN members. Although different ASEAN states have featured as favoured trade partners in particular years, there has been no regular pattern. Indonesia and Singapore were relatively important as North Korean trading partners in the 1980s and 1990s, but in the 2000s, Burma, Thailand and the Philippines have had periods when they were relatively important to North Korea. For example, as North Korea's trade with Japan decreased to almost zero as a result of sanctions in the mid-2000s, Thailand found itself in

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43. Hazel Smith, *Hungry for Peace: International Security, Humanitarian Assistance, and Social Change in North Korea* (Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2005), pp. 59-66, 73-75.

44. Joseph S. Chung, "North Korea's Economic Development and Capabilities," in *The Foreign Relations of North Korea: New Perspectives*, Jae Kyu Park, Byung Chul Koh, and Tae-Hwan Kwak (eds.) (Colorado: Westview Press, 1987), pp. 120-128.

45. Yonhap News Agency. *North Korea Handbook* (New York: M.E.Sharpe, 2003), p. 627.

2005 becoming the third-largest trading partner of North Korea.

However, two points are important to remember with regards to these bilateral trading relationships. First, during the 2000s and particularly the 2010s, China has become increasingly dominant as almost the sole trading partner of the North. By 2014, over 80% of all North Korean trade was carried out with China alone and, by 2016, this had increased to an estimated 90%.<sup>46</sup> This means that even if an ASEAN member featured in the 'top ten' of the North's trading partners in any particular year, its relative importance – compared to China – was very low. Moreover, not only have bilateral trade flows fluctuated, though with a gradual decrease in recent years, but also the ranking of individual ASEAN states as trading partners of North Korea has continued to fluctuate. Second, from the ASEAN member states' perspectives, North Korea has barely registered on their radar as a trading partner. Frequently, trade with North Korea made up scarcely 0.1% of their total trade. For example, in 2005 when Thailand emerged as the third-largest trading partner of North Korea behind China and South Korea, its exports to the North were less than 0.2% of its total exports, while its imports from the North were only 0.1% of its net imports.<sup>47</sup> As UN sanctions began to increase after the various nuclear tests and related critical UN Security Council resolutions, bilateral trade flows were affected. The ASEAN Secretariat's own figures for total ASEAN trade with North Korea in 2016 showed just \$106 million in exports to the North and only \$60 million in imports, so low as to represent less than 0.1% of total ASEAN trade.<sup>48</sup>

Most individual ASEAN members have sustained a favourable balance of trade, with exports to North Korea exceeding imports,

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46. Rex Tillerson, "Rex Tillerson: North Korea nuclear drive risks catastrophic consequences," *The Guardian*, 28 April 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/28/rex-tillerson-north-korea-catastrophic-consequences>.

47. United States Embassy Bangkok, 'Thailand's Trade with North Korea: Doing Business with the Hermit Kingdom,' *Wikileaks*, Telegram, 6 November 2006, [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BANGKOK6702\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BANGKOK6702_a.html)

48. ASEAN Secretariat, *ASEAN Trade by Partner Countries/Regions*, 2016, <http://asean.org>.

reflecting the asymmetry of the North's natural resource needs compared with the relative unattractiveness of its exports, apart from gold and rare minerals. Singapore, for example, has consistently featured in the top ten of global exporters to the North during the 2000s and 2010s (though primarily for exporting foodstuffs and drinks), but is well out of the top twenty in terms of imports.

There is, however, a third dimension to ASEAN-North Korean economic relations, namely the extent to which North Korea views certain ASEAN states as potential models for its own economic development. Vietnam, which has been able to institute economic reform without losing political control, and Singapore, whose strong government created a powerful economy, have been of interest to North Korea, judging by the various visits to those states by economic and political delegations, but without resolute follow-ups domestically.<sup>49</sup>

### Shadowy linkages

However, the Southeast Asian economies have provided other benefits for North Korea. As North Korea's legal trading activities have stagnated and declined under sanctions, illegal or 'grey area' methods for gaining foreign currency have become increasingly vital. Exports of military technology and weapons, money laundering, currency counterfeiting, drug-trafficking, labour 'export,' smuggling, and cybercrime have all been uncovered by various investigations by the UN and other international bodies, as well as by individual national governments. Inevitably, the values and quantities of such illicit activities are difficult to quantify accurately, but one expert argued that by the 1990s, one-third of the North Korean economy was based on such activities; with the tightening of UN-enforced sanctions since then, it is quite feasible that the propor-

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49. Tan et al, *Potential Role*, pp. 8-13. Former British Ambassador in Pyongyang, John Everard, comments in his book *Only Beautiful, Please: A British Diplomat in North Korea* (Stanford: Stanford University, 2012) on such 'study' visits, noting that the 'regime...has never been able to bring itself to implement the necessary changes' (p. 112).

tion of national economic activity funded by such activities may be even larger.<sup>50</sup>

In the context of ASEAN's relations with North Korea, while the North is believed to have practiced several of these activities in many of the member states, certain states have become the focus for particular aspects of these illicit activities. Two important examples are chosen for analysis here. Given that its conventional military technology has seemingly become slowly outdated compared to what is available from Western and Russian suppliers, few ASEAN states have been interested in North Korean conventional military technology. However, the North's nuclear and missile technology has been steadily advancing. This has been reflected in the relationship that represents the one important exception to ASEAN indifference: Burma/Myanmar. After the Rangoon bombing, all contact ceased, but in the late 1990s, Burma and North Korea secretly re-established contacts through the Burmese military. In 1998, Burma received a delivery of field guns and over the following few years, several secret missions by Burmese governmental delegations were made to Pyongyang; in 2001, a senior North Korean Foreign Ministry official visited Rangoon to discuss defence industry cooperation. The following years saw intermittent reports of North Korean technicians being spotted at ports and military sites and also close to the central Burmese town of Natmawk, where Burma had planned to set up a nuclear reactor.<sup>51</sup> With both states short on foreign currency, North Korean arms sales to Burma were basically bartered for with Burmese rice, rubber, and other essential goods that could flow into North Korea.<sup>52</sup> These contacts eventual-

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50. Cha, *Impossible State*, pp. 129-137.

51. Bertil Lintner, "Burmese-North Korean relations have a long history," *NK News*, 24 September 2013, <https://www.nknews.org/2013/09/burmese-north-korean-ties-have-a-long-history/>; Irrawaddy, "From foes to friends: The changing face of Burma-North Korean relations," 4 October 2015, [http://www2.irrawaddy.org/burma\\_north\\_korea.php?art\\_id=16161](http://www2.irrawaddy.org/burma_north_korea.php?art_id=16161).

52. Radio Free Asia, "North Korea Aids Burma Tunnels," 18 June 2009, <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/burmatunnels-06182009131301.html>; Maria Rosaria Coduti, "A brief history of the North Korea-Myanmar friendship," *NKNews*, 9 May 2017, <https://www.nknews.org/2017/05/>

ly led to the re-establishment of diplomatic relations in April 2007.

While the Burmese military's efforts to acquire some North Korean conventional weapons have become clear, the extent to which Burma also wanted to develop nuclear weapons, with North Korean assistance, is far more controversial. Rumours swirled, and while the exact terms of a 2008 military cooperation agreement between Burma and North Korea remain obscure, by the 2010s, as a quasi-civilian government was installed in Burma and prospects of better relations with the United States began to emerge – with one US precondition being the cutting off of weapon flows from North Korea – there began a process of 'winding down' in the Burmese-North Korean military relationship.<sup>53</sup> In 2012, the then Burmese leader, Thein Sein, promised South Korean President Lee Myung-bak (the first South Korean president to visit since 1983) that Burma would not buy any more weapons from the North.<sup>54</sup> Although some very discreet weapons trade may have continued (and US officials had to raise the nuclear issue again with the new civilian government of Aung San Suu Kyi in 2015), Burma began not only to endorse ASEAN statements criticizing North Korean nuclear and missile tests, but also, by 2016, following a degree of political change within Burma, to separately condemn North Korean infractions of UN resolutions.

Malaysia also became important to North Korea because of its willingness to be open to North Korean citizens, which the North was able to exploit in various ways. In 2000, in response to the North's improvement of relations with South Korea, as well as with ASEAN, Malaysia granted North Korean citizens one month visa-free access; in 2009, primarily with the hope of increasing commercial interactions,

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a-brief-history-of-the-north-korean-myanmar-friendship.

53. Bertil Lintner, "Is the Burma-North Korean relationship a thing of the past?," NK News, 23 September 2013, <https://www.nknews.org/2013/09/is-the-burma-north-korean-relationship-a-thing-of-the-past/>; David I. Steinberg, "Myanmar turns its back on North Korea," *Nikkei Asian Review*, 18 January 2016, <http://asia.nikkei.com/Viewpoints/Viewpoints/Myanmar-turns-its-back-on-North-Korea>.

54. Coduti, op.cit..

the Malaysian Government went one step further and granted unlimited visa-free access. This in turn was reciprocated by the North for Malaysian citizens. This enabled the North to use Malaysia for a variety of activities, not all of which were strictly legal. Despite Malaysian efforts to clamp down on money-laundering, UN experts doubt whether there have been systematic means to detect sanction evasion activities by North Korean entities. For example, a UN report highlighted that one front company, Glocom, set up in Kuala Lumpur by North Korean intelligence agents, has been selling battlefield radio equipment in violation of UN sanctions.<sup>55</sup> Additionally, a coal-mine disaster in a remote part of the Sarawakian jungle in east Malaysia in November 2014 brought to light the special deal done by the Sarawak local government to allow North Korean labourers to work there legally.<sup>56</sup> Despite one death and several injuries from this accident, around 300 North Korean labourers continued to work in that state's construction industry. By March 2017, there were reportedly over 140 North Koreans who had overstayed their visas (Sarawak has an immigration system semi-independent from that of peninsula Malaysia), but these were all deported in groups by early April 2017.<sup>57</sup>

The most dramatic incident involving a North Korean citizen, of course, was the assassination in February 2017 at Kuala Lumpur airport of Kim Jong Un's half-brother, Kim Jong Nam, who in exile regularly commuted between Malaysia, Macau, and Beijing. Poisoned by two young Southeast Asian women using VX nerve agent, he collapsed and died within an hour; this assassination prompted a major diplomatic controversy between Malaysia and North Korea. Ambassadors were recalled or expelled, diplomats became hostages, and rhetoric escalated. Finally, quiet negotiations ensued, resulting in the body

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55. James Pearson and Rozanna Latiff, "North Korea spy agency runs arms operation out of Malaysia, U.N. says," Reuters, 27 February 2017, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-northkorea-malaysia-arms-insight-idUKKEN1650YG.2017>; Stephen Haggard and Kent Boydston, "Kim Jong-nam Update: Malaysia-DPRK Relations," *PIIE: North Korea Witness to Transformation*, 2 March 2017.

56. *Sunday Star*, 23 November 2014; *Star*, 24 November 2014.

57. *Malay Mail*, 30 March 2017; *Sunday Star*, 2 April 2017.

of Kim Jong Nam being flown out and two persons of interest, hiding in the North Korean Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, being allowed to leave; in turn, the stranded Malaysian diplomats were allowed to return home. While the Malaysian government did not go as far as the Burmese government had in 1983 by breaking off relations, the strain which was already becoming apparent in Malaysian-North Korea relations over the latter's continuing missile and nuclear tests rapidly came to the surface. Despite whatever 'special relationship' may have existed before, it will clearly take some time before 'normal' relations can resume.<sup>58</sup> North Korea has achieved its key target – eliminating a potential rival for the leadership – and has reminded the world that it does have chemical weapons at its disposal, but at the price of upsetting China, which had implicitly been 'looking after' the exiled Kim Jong Nam, losing its relatively free access to Malaysia, and reinforcing doubts amongst many ASEAN neighbours about the wisdom of allowing North Koreans to conduct business easily on their territories. As such, the medium-term consequences for the North may be to make its efforts to divide ASEAN more difficult. Although the ASEAN Summit meeting in Manila in April 2017 did not publicly refer to the Malaysian murder case, it must have been in the minds of the ASEAN leaders as they discussed the Korean situation.

## Conclusions

North Korea's relations with Southeast Asia have seen fluctuations both in individual bilateral connections and in the broader relationship with ASEAN as an organization. In the early decades after the Korean War

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58. Haggard and Boydston, Kim Jong-nam; Prasanth Parameswaran, "The Myth of a North Korea-Malaysia Special Relationship," *The Diplomat*, 23 February 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/02/the-myth-of-a-north-korea-malaysia-special-relationship>; Shahanaaz Habib, "Dicing with deadly diplomacy," *Sunday Star*, 26 February 2017; Mergawati, "The North Korean story is not over yet," *Star*, 1 April 2017, <http://www.thestar.com.my/opinion/columnists/mergawati/2017/04/01/the-north-korean-story-is-not-over-yet-its-been-a-nailbiting-few-weeks-and-the-time-has-come-to-take>.

Southeast Asia became yet another diplomatic battleground for North and South Korea to carry out the struggle for legitimacy and prestige. Although most ASEAN states – and the pending members of that organization – had established diplomatic relations with the North by the early 1990s, thereby achieving one component of North Korea's goals, the North at the same time was by then well on the way to losing the battle for political favour in Southeast Asia. The South Korean economic model and its promise of trade, investment and technology had become significantly more attractive to ASEAN states than the North's self-reliant and increasingly deteriorating economy. Moreover, despite several ASEAN members' interest in non-alignment, the ideological appeal of Kim Il Sung's self-reliant philosophy was limited. While not all Southeast Asian states were comfortable with the burgeoning ideas of a 'new world order' being espoused after the end of the Cold War, they did not necessarily see anything of value in the North Korean autarchic approach to international relations.

Consequently, as the North began to emerge from the devastating effects of the famine in the mid-1990s, its diplomacy began to be 'characterized by global proactivity to respond to economic imperatives while simultaneously maintaining national defence capabilities.'<sup>59</sup> This new foreign policy approach, which capitalized on the new mood associated with President Kim Dae-jung's policies, led to the North establishing diplomatic relations with many states in Europe and the West more generally, as well as with the two remaining ASEAN states which had not previously recognized it. Moreover, North Korea began to take ASEAN seriously and initiated its first substantial involvement in a regional organization by becoming a member of the ARF. However, as the 2000s continued, this 'charm offensive' petered out as the North's perceived national security imperatives – recognized domestically through the *songun* (military-first) approach of Kim Jong Il and sustained as one key pillar of Kim Jong Un's *byungjin* line – came increasingly to the forefront and were made externally more visible through missile and nuclear tests.

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59. Smith, *Hungry for Peace*, p. 187.

Although North Korea's improving military technology did not seem to directly threaten ASEAN (at least until the increased range capabilities of the ICBMs being tested in 2017 seemingly brought most parts of Southeast Asia within range), the rising tensions in the North-east Asian situation remained a problem for ensuring the regional peace and stability that ASEAN desired. Similarly, although ASEAN did not seem threatening militarily to the North, the latter could not afford to allow a strong united front to emerge, especially if linked with the United States or Japan and South Korea. Consequently, the North tried to exploit perceived 'weaker' links in ASEAN by enhancing bilateral contacts with old socialist allies, such as Vietnam and Cambodia, as well as with 'neutralist' states, such as Malaysia and Burma/Myanmar. As such, the North played on bilateral connections as a way of combating any potentially-united anti-North Korean postures by ASEAN, while trying to exploit the differing regulations – or laxity of enforcing regulations – in individual member states so as to enhance its illicit income-raising activities. The North has proved adept at exploiting certain loopholes in individual Southeast Asian states' economic governance, but generally neither its own market nor its economic model generated enough interest from ASEAN to meet the North's developmental goal.

Consequently, the North's expanding missile testing, coupled with the assassination of Kim Jong Nam, meant that by mid-2017, the North was finding it increasingly difficult to use bilateralism to undermine ASEAN's multilateralist tendencies; the consensus amongst member states has been slowly but surely moving towards a tougher line towards the North. Yet, given its long-standing belief in dialogue to solve problems, ASEAN does find itself in a difficult position vis-à-vis the North: the Trump administration wants the Southeast Asian states to undertake more vigorous sanctions, but South Korea under the Moon Jie-in administration considers ASEAN to be the 'fifth power' (apart from the 4 major powers that are already involved in the denuclearization of the peninsula), which could urge the North back to the path of dialogue. Although some ASEAN politicians have not given up the hope of acting as some kind of 'peace-maker,' the consen-

sus within ASEAN remains that the growing confrontation surrounding the peninsula is a task primarily for the Koreans, North and South, as well as the Americans and the Chinese, to solve.

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