

MALAYSIA-REPUBLIC OF KOREA-ASEAN RELATIONS AND THE IMPROVEMENT OF INTER KOREAN RELATIONS

Geetha Govindasamy

Department of East Asian Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

geethag@um.edu.my

Abstract

Despite various summits, inter-Korean relations have stalled since 2019. While this is not something new, but the Democratic Republic of Korea's aggressive expansion of its nuclear and missile programs threatens the regional stability of the Asia Pacific region. Without reviving inter-Korean interaction, there will be no path towards North Korea's eventual denuclearization process. Though the Association of Southeast Asian nations (ASEAN) is not directly involved in managing the denuclearization issue on the Korean peninsula, the article argues that the Association has a role to play in facilitating inter-Korean ties. As a regional organization, ASEAN has the capability as well as the platform to revive inter-Korean relations. It's likely that ASEAN is the only regional institution that is trusted by both North and South Korea. Therefore, it can effectively play a role to ease or reduce the trust deficit Pyongyang faces with Seoul. The article examines the strategies that could be employed by ASEAN as well as Malaysia, the ASEAN Chair for the year 2025, in persuading North Korea to revive talks with the South. Nonetheless, it should be noted that ASEAN can only play the role of a facilitator if both the ROK and DPRK accept, and the major powers support it.

Keywords: Regional organization, ASEAN Chair, Inter-Korean Relations, facilitator, multilateralism

Introduction

A relationship born during the Cold War in 1960, Malaysia and the Republic of Korea (ROK) are celebrating 65 years of bilateral relations this year. As trading nations, the ROK and Malaysia's relationship is closely tied to each other's growth and strategic interests. Over the years, this has expanded to both nations collaborating in more sectors, including, trade and investment, environment, energy, education, tourism, and people-to-people interactions. Following the implementation of the ASEAN-Korea Free Trade Agreement in 2020, which removed tariffs and non-tariff trade obstacles for goods and services, bilateral registered remarkable progress. As a result, Korea is now ASEAN's eighth-largest trading and investment partner, while Malaysia is Korea's third-largest trading and fourth-largest investment partner.

More significantly, in the last four decades, Malaysia's Look East Policy has been a catalyst in augmenting trade, investment, educational and cultural exchanges between Seoul and Kuala Lumpur. During a trade and investment mission to Seoul just last year, the Malaysian Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) and several other organizations that support foreign investment secured MYR24 billion in potential investment (LEP strengthens long-term ties with Malaysia, 2023).

On 25 November 2024, Anwar Ibrahim, the Prime Minister of Malaysia and ROK's President Yoon Suk-yeol agreed to elevate the status of bilateral relations to a Strategic Partnership. It is obvious that both states have an interest in the ever changing national and international strategic landscape, which

makes it important to create a more defined framework for bilateral relations in the long run. In a joint statement, both leaders agreed to collaborate in four key areas: peace and security, economic development, culture and education, and regional and global cooperation (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 2024). By concentrating more on one another's national interests, Yoon remarked that bilateral relations should expand to fields like the arms industry, green hydrogen and key minerals. On the other hand, among others, Anwar Ibrahim remarked that Malaysia would like to work with the ROK in the fields of digital technology, artificial intelligence, as well as in advancing regional security and the defence sector. More significantly, both leaders confirmed their intention to establish a free trade agreement by 2025, which would strengthen trade and commerce (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 2024). Given the increasingly difficult regional environment, both Malaysia and the ROK appreciate advancing regional ties just as much as bilateral ones. In this context, two events are expected to improve bilateral ties in 2025. First, South Korea is eager to expand its ASEAN-focused diplomacy and pursue a more comprehensive engagement as a regional partner for mutual development, as demonstrated by the elevation of relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) between ASEAN and the ROK on October 2024. Second, Malaysia has formally taken over as ASEAN Chair, with the theme "Inclusivity and Sustainability" on January 1, 2025. Hence, there are more opportunities to collaborate on converging issues and interests.

Malaysia has always valued cooperation with other nations in a variety of multiple arrangements. Not surprisingly, Malaysia, the ROK and ASEAN have developed into indispensable multilateral allies in advancing freedom, peace, and prosperity in the Southeast Asian region and beyond. Moreover, the ROK's status as an ASEAN Dialogue Partner and its memberships in various ASEAN mechanisms provides ample opportunities for regional cooperation.

The article contends that for the sake of maintaining regional stability, Malaysia, ROK and ASEAN ought to work constructively in addressing regional security challenges because peace and security was one of the main themes emphasized during Anwar Ibrahim's visit to Seoul. As there are multiple studies on Malaysia-ROK relations, especially on the Look East Policy, this article seeks to examine the role of Malaysia-ROK and ASEAN in improving stalled inter-Korean ties. Malaysia as the ASEAN Chair is uniquely positioned to address the complexities in inter-Korean relations as the Democratic Republic of Korea (DPRK) has relations with ASEAN. Though bilaterally, Malaysia does not have official relations with the DPRK but as the ASEAN Chair, it can still deal with Pyongyang through the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF).

After introducing the key aspects of Malaysia-ROK-ASEAN relations, the article briefly discusses inter-Korean relations, which have stagnated since 2019. The role that regional organizations like ASEAN can play in preventing and resolving conflicts by mediating between disputing parties is then examined. Given the DPRK's refusal to engage South Korea, the next section looks at the significance of ASEAN and Malaysia as ASEAN Chair in interacting with Pyongyang as a first step to restarting inter-Korean relations. A thorough overview of the different avenues and strategies that could be employed to get both Koreas to the negotiating table is then examined. Given the obstacles it faces, the assessment of how much ASEAN can do to revive inter-Korean dialogue is discussed in the concluding section.

Fluctuating inter-Korean relations

Due to mutual mistrust and misunderstandings, the ROK and the DPRK have not maintained formal relations since the creation of both republics in 1948. Then, in 1950, the ROK was attacked by the DPRK. Even after an armistice deal suspended the Korean War (1950–1953), relations continued to deteriorate. Nonetheless, the manner in which the Korean War destroyed both states heightened tensions. Both Koreas battled for international acceptance and legitimacy over the ensuing decades. Positive dialogue was nearly impossible due to North Korea's constant provocations against the ROK. In spite

of this and political changes in the global world, both Koreas signed two agreements: the Joint Statement on Reunification on July 4, 1972 and the "Basic Agreement" on reconciliation, non-aggression, and exchange and cooperation in 1991. This was followed by a Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula which forbade the two Koreas from neither acquiring nor developing nuclear weapons. However, the DPRK refused to concede and inter-Korean relations spiralled downward after Pyongyang began actively expanding its nuclear and missile programs in the late 1990s. North Korea's ever-expanding nuclear program and provocative actions are the main causes of the current state of inter-Korean relations. Despite few summits between the leaders of the two Koreas since 2000, current inter-Korean relations have been erratic. The North Korean nuclear threat is a cause of concern for regional peace and stability not only to the ROK but also ASEAN. Even the Six-Party nuclear talks (among China, Japan, North Korea, Russia, South Korea and the United States) failed to convince the DPRK to denuclearize. Despite international restrictions, North Korea is still developing its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs. The DPRK has tested six nuclear devices: in 2006, 2009, 2013, twice in 2016, and in 2017. In the last two years alone, the DPRK has launched military satellites, intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) tests and tested underwater nuclear drones. The US and the ROK have traditionally been the main parties involved in nuclear negotiations with the DPRK. In order to essentially address the denuclearization of the DPRK, there were a number of summits between the US, ROK and Pyongyang between 2018 and 2019. More significantly, the US, the main negotiator, met with the DPRK twice in 2018 and 2019 in Singapore and Hanoi, respectively. However, since the Hanoi Summit failed, ties between the US, the ROK, and the DPRK have stagnated. When North Korean leader Kim Jong Un said that there was no longer any possibility of unification with the South, relations with the ROK deteriorated further. Fluctuating inter-Korean relations is a major obstacle in dealing with an aggressive North Korea.

Thus, this article makes the case that ASEAN can help to improve the stalled inter-Korean relations. However, ASEAN is unable to address North Korea's denuclearization issue directly. The article's premise is that improved inter-Korean relations will enable the US and the ROK, to deal with the DPRK more effectively. It is imperative that inter-Korean relations resume as soon as possible as the DPRK's accelerated nuclear and missile development have become an existential threat to the region. It has to be noted that ASEAN has always supported the ROK in its efforts to denuclearize North Korea. Against this background, ASEAN and its members can use numerous channels to encourage Pyongyang to revive inter-Korean communications, especially with the ROK. In light of this, it is the ideal opportunity for Seoul to assert its position within the CSP and Kuala Lumpur to take the lead as ASEAN Chair to promote confidence building measures. The section that follows explains the significance of regional organizations such as ASEAN in mediating conflicts and disagreements.

Role of a regional organization

Due to contemporary regional dynamics in recent years, security has trumped economic concerns in the Asia Pacific region. Regional organizations can serve as platform in improving communications by giving member states and allies a forum for negotiating, cooperation, and mediation. It is reasonable to argue that Asia Pacific security is intertwined with Southeast Asian security. Regional organizations or multilateral institutions such as ASEAN are essential for not only developing regional integration and economies but also managing hostilities or disputes. ASEAN's security management is based on shared identity, interests, values, and norms of its members (Acharya, 2001, 2004; Ba, 2009). According to Jetly (2003), ASEAN's consultation and consensus-building procedures for handling disputes without upsetting any one party is a valuable contribution in conflict management. More importantly, Hseuh (2015) asserts that ASEAN promotes peace through socialization. This is true as ASEAN has strong mechanisms that provide effective tools for confidence building measures, ensuring that conflicting parties have a more coordinated approach to diplomacy. One such mechanism is the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). The purpose of the ARF is to promote regional security dialogue cooperation in order to advance preventive diplomacy and foster confidence building measures, particularly in East Asia

(Severino, Jr., 1999). The East Asian region has always been emphasized by ASEAN due to existing security issues such as the South China Sea dispute and DPRK's nuclear testing. Through the ARF and other mechanisms within the Association, ASEAN can assist in promoting communication between parties in conflict by incorporating these concerns into its discussions. The DPRK is a member of the ARF, while the ROK is a part of several ASEAN institutions. ASEAN has previously withstood external pressure to sever ties with Pyongyang because of the DPRK's missile launches. Rather, in 2017, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, remarked that North Korean leader Kim Jong-un must be told that no one was threatening him (Said, 2017). Built on principles of non-interference, consensus-building, and mutual respect, ASEAN has the ability to encourage interaction between the Koreas when inter-Korean ties are stagnant.

Given ASEAN's non-interference principle preventing punitive measures, the ASEAN Chair is especially beneficial since it allows a member state to manage regional concerns through a targeted approach that increases collaboration on pressing problems. While hosting meetings, the Chair is also in charge of creating the agenda for the year. Among other things, respect and faith in its vision for a peaceful and secure region are among Malaysia's key principles as the current ASEAN Chair (ASEAN Chairmanship 2025 – Malaysia, 2025). Malaysia has the ability to play a crucial role in managing regional conflicts by utilizing these values. Actually, this is the ideal time for Malaysia as the Chair to propose a strategy that will help Koreans interact with one another in a neutral setting, either formally or informally. Malaysia can promote cooperation by ensuring different viewpoints are taken into consideration. This tactic would be effective without upsetting the DPRK or ROK because it can eliminate mistrust and promote a sense of interdependence, which will create an atmosphere that is favourable to a resolution.

Engaging DPRK through ASEAN's mechanisms

ASEAN's regular engagement with North Korea is a crucial first step in promoting interaction between the two Koreas. North Korea is a weak sovereign state with justifiable security concerns. In line with promoting regional integration, ASEAN thinks that keeping relations with North Korea will help to influence Pyongyang on issues of shared interest and that isolating the country will not help. As a result, ASEAN favours diplomatic engagement and measures aimed at fostering confidence over military-oriented tactics. With a more lenient stance, Pyongyang might respond to constructive ASEAN engagement instead of the harsher Western censure it usually faces.

Through ASEAN-led channels, South Korea, China, and the US have continuously engaged North Korea for decades. In this regard, Malaysia, as ASEAN Chair, could create an agenda for integrating North Korea into the larger international community, given that Pyongyang's ties with Seoul and Washington have deteriorated since 2019. By interacting with Pyongyang and, ideally, incorporating it economically into the East Asian area, ASEAN could create interregional cooperation. There is opportunity for ASEAN to integrate the state into the region's economic growth in the post-COVID-19 age, where the DPRK has experienced economic hardship.

Currently, North Korea's engagement with ASEAN is limited to the ARF and the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) at the Track One and Track Two levels. The ROK and DPRK can speak openly about security matters on these platforms. Kim Sung Chull (2023), observes that the ARF provides North Korea a chance to communicate its objectives to its counterparts, mainly the US, Japan, and ROK. In light of this, Malaysia, as ASEAN Chair, ought to reaffirm ASEAN's readiness to contribute positively to improving inter-Korean relations through the ARF by encouraging amicable discussion amongst interested parties.

The ARF provides a venue for members to discuss and enhance regional security and peace, making it the primary platform for security discourse in the Indo-Pacific area. According to Kavi Chongkittavorn

(2020), a Thai journalist, the chairman's statement released at the 27th ARF meeting in 2020, it was the first time the forum openly indicated its "readiness to play a constructive role...in promoting a conducive atmosphere to peaceful dialogue amongst the concerned parties" on the Korean peninsula. The ARF conducts military cooperative activities such as the ATSEAN Chiefs of Army Multilateral Meeting (ACAMM), the ASEAN Chiefs of Defence Forces Informal Meeting (ACDFIM), the ASEAN Navy Interaction (ANI), the ASEAN Air Force Chiefs Conference (AACC) and the ASEAN Military Intelligence Meeting (Mohd Faiz Abdullah, 2023). As North Korea is primarily a security-related concern, it would be wise for Malaysia to create opportunities for Pyongyang to participate more actively in the ARF. This would enable dialogue and interaction between the DPRK, ROK and the other key players in the forum.

At the same time, Malaysia could also get consensus from member states for allowing Pyongyang to attend the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM). The ADMM was created in Kuala Lumpur in May 2006 followed by the "ADMM+8" in May 2010, comprising the ASEAN members and eight of their dialogue partners (Australia, China, Japan, India, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea and the United States) in Hanoi. Given that the purpose of the meeting is to promote regional security cooperation, both Koreas together with other major countries could discuss North's nuclear weapons and missile concerns at one go.

For the immediate future, if North Korea does join the ADMM, inter-Korean issues such as reviving the 2008 military cooperation or Comprehensive Military Agreement (CMA). The goal of the CMA was to de-escalate the risk of border confrontation along the demilitarized zone. With the termination of the CMA, North Korean provocations on land and sea borders are surely going to increase. Stalled inter-Korean relations are not the only security concerns. In reaction to North Korean missile and nuclear threats, the US, South Korea, and Japan have increased their trilateral cooperation. This in turn has resulted in North Korea responding more aggressively. As a result, global defence diplomacy forums like the ADMM+8 may be a valuable platform to encourage communication and mutual trust between the Koreas and other major players in the region.

Through such track-one diplomacy, ASEAN could gather in-depth knowledge about the conflicting parties' position which might assist in formulating a more substantive facilitating process by third parties like ASEAN. In order to establish mutual acceptance of specific issues, ASEAN could provide a safe environment for a persuasive discourse that could persuade opposing parties to alter their opinions about one another. As the Chair, Malaysia could continue these conversations by encouraging efforts at reconciliation through official gatherings, correspondence, and/or informal discussions. Lower-level officials can start formal negotiations. Once both Koreas are comfortable, the consultation process could involve higher ranking Korean officials together with other key players interested in Korean issues. Interestingly, North Korean officials have affirmed that ASEAN is fair when dealing with Pyongyang. During an informal chat with a Cambodian academic and former politician who was the former executive director of the Cambodian Center for Cooperation, Pou Sothirak, he observed that ASEAN ought to pay attention to Pyongyang which is willing to participate in the ARF in order to bring about peace on the Korean Peninsula. He remarked that North Korea "appreciated" ASEAN's fairness in dealing with the nation following the ARF Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM) in July 2020.

Apart from ARF, the DPRK is not a member of other ASEAN-led mechanisms, such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) or ASEAN Ministerial Meetings with Dialogue Partners. Considering that these platforms will provide a range of options for North Korea to be integrated into the region, As the Chair, Malaysia could seriously consider inviting North Korea as a dialogue partner. Former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has already stated that he would want to see North Korea become a dialogue partner of ASEAN, so this is not a novel notion (Valente, 2017). ASEAN rejected the idea because of the tensed security situation on the Korean Peninsula in 2017 with North Korea firing test missiles throughout the year. Nonetheless, being a

dialogue partner could encourage Pyongyang to engage more regularly with other dialogue partners to discuss the development of the region.

More effort is required by ASEAN to develop innovative strategies for enhancing North Korea's regional integration and creating an atmosphere that is favourable to meaningful discussions between the two Koreas. Again, Pou Sothirak postulates if North Korea is designated as a dialogue partner, it could then appoint a resident ambassador to ASEAN. By doing so, North Korean interests and policies will be represented in ASEAN. Compared to other regional organizations and the absence of any security architecture in East Asia, ASEAN is better suited than most to maintain North Korea's ongoing engagement and to offer a conducive environment for resolving the state's concerns.

Diversification of communication channels

Being impartial and fostering trust are crucial while attempting to reconcile disputing parties. Developing trust among one another is essential to the "ASEAN Way". In order to promote conversation and steer clear of conflict, the "ASEAN Way" is a very useful communication method. Its primary characteristics are respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, consensus based, non-interference in the internal affairs of another state, and emphasis on finding peaceful dispute settlement solutions to regional problems.

ASEAN WAY

The "ASEAN Way" encourages leaders to meet one-on-one informally, sometimes during formal meetings. "Informal diplomacy" builds diplomatic capital among those involved. Additionally, ASEAN-style diplomacy incorporates the ideas of *musyawarah* (consultation) and *muafakat* (consensus) in interacting with disputing parties. This approach permits initial informal interactions to promote a more comprehensive understanding of the best course of action. In doing so, each state's vulnerability to external power dominance is controlled through the consensus-building process. The "ASEAN Way" is a method that is generally accepted and valued by the two Koreas since it is empathetic and considers the vulnerability of all stakeholders.

Official and unofficial diplomacy

In improving inter-Korean ties, ASEAN could use official techniques for diplomacy as well as conflict consultation with unofficial means. Mechanisms such as Track 1 (official, governmental level), Track 2 (non-official, but influential), and Track 3 (grass roots and civil society) could be employed simultaneously. Depending on the circumstances, Malaysia could establish several formal and informal dialogue platforms at various levels to support confidence building measures for the DPRK and ROK to interact in more flexible modes. Track One discussion could include continuous discussions with representatives from both Koreas but under the leadership of the ASEAN Secretariat, preferably headed by the Secretary General of the organization. Malaysia could even appoint a special envoy to deal with issues pertaining to the Korean peninsula. In order to help ASEAN nations come to an agreement on how to effectively deal with North Korea, early on, former ASEAN secretary general Surin Pitsuwan proposed sending a special ARF envoy to the Korean peninsula in 2017 (Obe, 2017).

According to Staats (2019), informal conversation from Track 1.5 or Track 2 offers "a private, open environment for individuals to build trust, hold conversations that their official counterparts sometimes cannot or will not, and discuss solutions". As a result, ASEAN and its member states should urge more North and South Koreans to participate in these unofficial diplomatic events. It would offer the North Koreans, a venue for addressing difficult issues as well as foster communication with South Koreans. Such unofficial conversations from experts provides a chance to try out policy strategies, prior to being incorporated into the formal policy process (Staats, 2019). Therefore, it would be ideal if Malaysia

could initiate “back channel” diplomacy such as Track 1.5 meetings involving ASEAN and Korean officials together with non-governmental representatives who are called the Experts and Eminent Persons group (the EEPs). In addition, Track 2 (i.e., non-official) institutions, such as the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP) and the ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN ISIS) could enhance dialogue by contributing insights and recommendations for inter-Korean meetings.

Role of think tanks

Pou Sothirak suggests that the ASEAN-Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN – ISIS) network could convene a track 2, or at least a 1.5 track to engage direct talks between the two Koreas first. In relation to this, according to Pou Sothirak, the North Korean embassy in Cambodia attempted, but failed, to establish closer ties with Cambodia's research tank, CICP, in 2022. According to him, one of the main ways to start track-two diplomatic relations with North Korea is through research think tanks in Southeast Asia. It appears that one of the first important platforms for North Korean officials and scholars to interact with neighbours directly was the Vietnamese Institute for Southeast Asian Studies in Hanoi (Ciorciari, 2007:241). In actuality, there aren't many North Korean specialists in Southeast Asian universities or think tanks. Therefore, the first step towards developing a long-term vision for inter-Korean strategic and security cooperation that involves South Korea and ASEAN should be the establishment of an intellectual community of Track II experts.

Creating an intellectual community

South Korea took the first initiative to institutionalise this intellectual community. While there are many international conferences between South Korea and ASEAN experts on various themes, the Ministry of Unification (MOU) through the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU) held the first-ever "ASEAN Regional Conference for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Korean Peninsula" in Hanoi on November 28 and 29, 2023. Participants were Southeast Asian experts both from South Korea and ASEAN member countries. The conference was designed to strengthen international networking in the ASEAN region to promote peaceful unification of the Korean Peninsula. By enabling professionals and stakeholders from ASEAN nations and South Korea to share knowledge and experiences about Southeast Asia and the Korean Peninsula, the conference sought to create an ASEAN regional cooperation network on North Korea. At the same time, the conference organizers wanted to promote ASEAN countries' understanding of South Korea's the then policy on unification and North Korea as well as its “Strategy for a Free, Peaceful, and Prosperous Indo-Pacific Region.” For the Southeast Asian scholars, the conference offered an invaluable opportunity to gain new perspectives on North Korea from the South Koreans.

As a government body responsible for issues pertaining to inter-Korean relations and unification, MOU and KINU staff were exposed to the multiple perspectives from Southeast Asian experts on the role ASEAN could play in advancing inter-Korean peace and prosperity. Basically, the conference succeeded in creating a pool of Korean and Southeast Asian experts dealing with North Korea. As a stakeholder in the region and the ASEAN Chair, Malaysia could continue to cultivate and expand the pool of experts on Korean affairs in the region. At the same time, Malaysia could convince think tanks associated with ASEAN to host such conferences by inviting experts from both Koreas in addition to Southeast Asian specialists.

Role of ASEAN-IPR

As mentioned before think tanks have a role to play in contributing peace and stability in the region. ASEAN opened an institute for diplomacy with the establishment of the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation (ASEAN-IPR) in 2012. The institute was created to conduct studies on peace

processes in order to improve regional procedures and make recommendations to ASEAN bodies, build capacity and knowledge on peace processes for stakeholders, develop experts to assist ASEAN in conflict management, as well as facilitation for peace negotiation, function as a regional knowledge hub and to disseminate best practices, lessons learned and relevant information to ASEAN member states. Since the ASEAN IPR serves as a forum for exchanging knowledge in the pursuit of regional peace, ASEAN can utilize it to establish lines of communication with North Korea. By engaging with and hosting representatives from both ROK and the DPRK embassies in ASEAN, it can support peacebuilding efforts. Through such an action, the institute would be able to contribute analyses, evaluations, and action plan recommendations to ASEAN and ROK on how to move forward with the DPRK.

Given that North Korea is an isolated state, it is reasonable to presume that its officials lack conflict resolution training. As such, the ASEAN IPR could offer courses, seminars or webinars to North Korean officials and scholars. Such interactions will offer the North Koreans informal spaces to build a relationship with their Indonesian or even other ASEAN counterparts. Similarly, ASEAN IPR staff would likely have a deeper grasp of North Korean perspectives and viewpoints, which could be incorporated into workable peacekeeping strategies on the Korean Peninsula.

In person contacts

According to Holmes (2018), face-to-face interactions promote interpersonal trust and a deeper understanding of one another's problems. Proactive communication channel is required to sustain regional diplomatic process with North Korea. ASEAN could help facilitate open lines of communication with key figures in North Korea to prevent misinterpretations or miscalculations that could throw the diplomatic process off course. For example, the personal efforts of King Norodom Sihanouk, and former Prime Minister Hun Sen Hun Sen of Cambodia and the late former Foreign Minister of Thailand Surin Pitsuwan made it possible for North Korea to be persuaded to join the ARF in 2000. Therefore, a prominent individual from ASEAN could make it easier to persuade Kim Jong Un to come to the negotiating table with South Korea. As the first and only Indonesian president to visit North Korea, Megawati Sukarnoputri, Sukarno's daughter, visited Kim Jong Il in Pyongyang in 2002. Sukarno's relationship with Kim Il Sung is well known. Megawati has maintained her ties with the Kim regime by frequently traveling to the DPRK even though she is no longer in power. As Indonesia has good relations with Pyongyang and Seoul coupled with the Sukarno-Kim Il Sung link, not surprisingly, both North and South Korea hold Megawati in high respect. As such, Megawati could actually be a valuable candidate in terms of facilitating dialogue between North and South Korea. As Gatra Priyandita (2023) asserts, some observers have suggested the Indonesian government under Jokowi appoint Megawati as a mediator on the Korean peninsula, "as Kim Jong-un will have to "listen to her", since she was a friend of his father's and Sukarno was a friend of his grandfather's."

Conclusion

According to the former ASEAN Secretary General, the late Surin Pitsuwan postulated,

The fact that the world is interested in ASEAN's forums and Asean's stage [means] that we have delivered, it means we have served the purpose and that there are values in our stewardship of this architecture of cooperation [in East Asia] (Ho,2012).

Although ASEAN hasn't made an impact yet, it's still one of the most viable ways to really revive inter-Korean interaction. The Korean Peninsula problem offers the organization a chance and a necessity to showcase its diplomatic skills in managing conflicts and advancing peacebuilding initiatives. Hence, ASEAN has a chance to show its capabilities beyond its borders. ASEAN has convening power to bring both Koreas as well as other stakeholders to the table. It's likely that ASEAN is the only regional

institution that is trusted by both North and South Korea. Therefore, it has the capacity to find a way to ease or reduce the trust deficit Pyongyang faces with Seoul. ASEAN and Malaysia, as the current Chair have multiple channels to work with, in order to boost inter-Korean relations. Overall, ASEAN enjoys positive bilateral and multilateral relations with South Korea and the DPRK. Relations between ASEAN and the DPRK have persisted unabatedly in spite of the assassination of Kim Jong Nam, the stepbrother of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in 2017.

ASEAN's role as a facilitator will depend on the organization's capacity to maintain trust and neutrality. As a facilitator, instead of being episodic or ad hoc, ASEAN can promote sustained engagement with North Korea through multiple channels, using its various platforms. Such a move would provide much needed space for Pyongyang to engage with not only South Korea but also major powers. To a large degree, it might even be the case that rules based multilateral institution like ASEAN would provide a degree of pressure for Pyongyang to conform to international rules and norms.

However, there remains important caveat to how much ASEAN and Malaysia can contribute to reviving inter-Korean relations. ASEAN is not a major entity that possesses any real powers that can influence outcomes on the Korea peninsula. Instead, ASEAN can only play the role of a facilitator if both the ROK and DPRK accept, and the big powers support it. Similarly, ASEAN's ability to impose its recommendations on the DPRK is non-binding. But the association could still offer mechanisms and provide norms that are crucial for developing a multilateral framework to bring Pyongyang and Seoul on the same page.

Further, Malaysia as Chair cannot act unilaterally because ASEAN decisions are made by consensus, and holding the position for only a year won't allow for significant achievements. Therefore, laying the foundation for some new or expanded initiative is the best Malaysia can aspire to. Hopefully, the next Chair will continue and expand ASEAN's efforts.

Acknowledgement

This study was partially supported by the Embassy of the Republic of Korea, Kuala Lumpur.

References

- Abdullah, F. (2 February 2024). Taking a Principled Stand in Malaysia-South Korea Relations: International Politics Shouldn't be a Game of Pachinko. *Bernama*. Available at: <https://www.bernama.com/en/thoughts/news.php?id=2368715>
- Acharya, A. (2001). *Constructing A Security Community in Southeast Asia: ASEAN and the Problem of Regional Order*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Acharya, A. (2004). How ideas spread: whose norms matter? Norm localization and institutional change in Asian Regionalism, *International Organization*, 58(2), 239–275.
- ASEAN Chairmanship 2025 – Malaysia. (31 December, 2024). Available at: <https://asean.org/asean-chairmanship-2025-malaysia/>
- Ba, A. (2009). *(Re)Negotiating East and Southeast Asia: Region, Regionalism, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations*. 1st edn. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Chongkittavorn, K. (2020). ASEAN Mulls Role in Korean Peninsula, Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia. Available at: <https://www.eria.org/news-and-views/asean-mulls-role-in-korean-peninsula/>

Ciorciari, J. D. Korean security dilemmas: ASEAN policies and perspective. In Smith, H. (Ed). (2007). *Reconstituting Korean security: A Policy primer*. Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 230-252.

Hsueh, C. (2015). ASEAN and Southeast Asian peace: Nation building, economic performance, and ASEAN's security management. *International Relations of the Asia Pacific*. 16(1), 27-66.

Jetly, R. (2003). Conflict management strategies in ASEAN: Perspectives for SAARC, *The Pacific Review*. 16 (1), 53-76.

Kim S. C. Pyongyang's Relations with the ASEAN states and Seoul: ASEAN an epistemic hub for the Korean peninsula issues. In Lam P. E. (Ed) (2023). *Contemporary Korea-Southeast Asian Relations*, pp 49-76, London: Routledge.

LEP strengthens long-term ties with Malaysia. (19 October 2023). Expert briefing. *Asia Business Law Journal*. Available at: <https://law.asia/lep-strengthens-ties-malaysia/#:~:text=2023%20marks%20the%2040th%20anniversary%20of%20Malaysia%E2%80%99s%20co-operation,which%20Malaysia%20aims%20to%20further%20increase%20by%2020%25.>

Mahmud, A. H. (7 October, 2024). With eye on China, Malaysia pushes for new naval base in Sarawak. How will it impact their ties? *Channel News Asia*. Available at: <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/malaysia-south-china-sea-naval-base-sarawak-eez-luconia-4658451>

Obe, M. (May 19, 2017). ASEAN seeking a role in North Korea diplomacy. *Nikkei Asia*. *Office of the President Republic of Korea*. (25 November 2024). Joint Statement on the Establishment of a Strategic Partnership between the Republic of Korea and Malaysia. Available at: <https://eng.president.go.kr/briefing/ZP4WGxKeoffice>

Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia. (November 25, 2024). Malaysia, South Korea Elevate Relations to Strategic Partnership. Available at: <https://www.pmo.gov.my/2024/11/malaysia-south-korea-elevate-relations-to-strategic-partnership/>

Priyandita, G. 2023. Indonesia and North Korea: Warm memories of the Cold War. *9Dashline*. Available at: <https://www.9dashline.com/article/indonesia-and-north-korea-warm-memories-of-the-cold-war>

Said, F. (2017). Role for Asean in North Korea issue? Available at: <https://www.isis.org.my/2017/12/12/role-for-asean-in-north-korea-issue/>

Severino, Jr. R. C. (1999). ASEAN and the Growth of Regional Cooperation in Southeast Asia. Available at: <https://asean.org/asean-and-the-growth-of-regional-cooperation-in-southeast-asia-by-rodolfo-c-severino-jr/>

Staats, J. (July 31, 2019). A Primer on Multi-track Diplomacy: How Does it Work? United States Institute of Peace. Available at: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/07/primer-multi-track-diplomacy-how-does-it-work>

Valente, C. S. (August 9, 2017). Duterte eyes North Korea as 'dialogue partner.' *Manila Times*. Available at: <http://www.manilatimes.net/duterte-eyes-nkorea-dialogue-partner/343275/>