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## Korean Peninsula policies of ASEAN: Efforts to promote peaceful unification

Teuku Rezasyah

*Department of International Relations, Universitas Padjadjaran, Bandung, Indonesia.*

*(Email: [teuku.rezasyah@unpad.ac.id](mailto:teuku.rezasyah@unpad.ac.id))*

### Abstract

This study analyzes ASEAN policies related to efforts to promote peaceful unification on the Korean Peninsula, which are hampered by differences between the Republic of Korea (RoK) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). This research aims to explore the structural factors that hinder unification and how ASEAN leverages the three pillars of the ASEAN community: political-security, economic, and socio-cultural, to support the unification process. This research method uses a qualitative approach with descriptive analysis, relying on primary and secondary data from sources related to ASEAN, DPRK, and RoK, and applying Realist and Liberal perspectives in international relations. The results show that although ASEAN has made efforts to build constructive relations with the two Koreas through dialogue and economic cooperation, the main challenges remain political and ideological differences, unstable leadership in the DPRK, and nuclear threats. The discussion included the difficulty of achieving rapid unification with external influence from major countries. In conclusion, although ASEAN's efforts have not yielded maximum results, ASEAN still has an important role to play in providing a platform for dialogue and building the foundations of long-term peace on the Korean Peninsula.

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### 1. Introduction

The modern history of Korea reached the world's attention when Japan ruled the country in 1910, followed by the fall of Japan after the end of World War II in 1945. The liberal United States then intervened in Japan's defeat in the southern part of Korea, while the communist Soviet Union controlled the northern part of Korea. The profound ideological differences between the two Koreas led to another war in 1950, which only ended in 1953. Since then, the two Koreas have viewed each other from opposite sides, escalating tensions and instability in the East Asian region. It was during the Cold War that the two superpowers intervened in all national aspects of the two Koreas, evidenced by the existence of military bases in both North Korea and South Korea. Currently, various efforts involving the United Nations have aimed at creating peace, but have yet to yield optimum results [1]. ASEAN fully understands that the two Koreas are officially separated by a line called the

38th parallel, known as the demilitarized zone (DMZ). Even though the two countries and the external powers agreed to a ceasefire in 1953, the state of hostilities between the two countries remains. The following paragraphs will discuss the difficulties for both the RoK and the DPRK in unifying themselves into a single country.

Despite strong efforts to unite the two countries, there are critics inside ASEAN on the unique leadership style of the North Korean leader, Kim Jong Un, which has been considered unpredictable, charismatic, and also authoritarian at the same time. In the mind of ordinary ASEAN people, he did not hesitate to punish anyone who was deemed incompetent or who violated the established rules. However, Kim Jong Un has been considered a very important factor in producing a successful unification, as he can challenge the already agreed-upon agreements [2].

The conditions offered by North Korean leaders were equally difficult for South Korea, as Kim Jong Un has long requested that US military troops leave South Korea and found that joint military exercises carried out by South Korea and the US were sometimes considered violations of the Korean reunification agreement, tarnishing the 2018 summit. Kim Jong Un also protested against defectors who fled to South Korea and accused its neighbor of providing protection.

As tensions continued, North Korea, in mid-2017, warned the US president against provocative actions in the region, saying it was fully prepared to retaliate with a nuclear attack. This statement was made during the 105th anniversary of the birth of the country's founder, President Kim Il-sung. The North Korean government deliberately deployed large military forces at a large military parade, amid concerns that increasing tensions between countries in the East Asia region could trigger open conflict with the United States, South Korea, and Japan. Tensions between the two countries increased after the United States military ordered naval forces to approach the Korean peninsula [3].

Nuclear development in North Korea is an endless worry and threat to South Korea to this day. Looking at the geographical, political, and historical conditions of these two countries on the Korean peninsula, it appears that South Korea will always be threatened and disadvantaged by North Korea's unstable behavior. Other critical issues are the North's possession of weapons of mass destruction, biochemical weapons, nuclear arsenal, and military provocations, as well as non-traditional challenges such as the global economic and social crisis, and a larger inflow of refugees. North Korea insists that the possession of nuclear weapons contributes to economic development and self-reliance, as well as protection against foreign aggression. Learning from the past attitudes of the US towards Iraq and Afghanistan, which do not have nuclear power, such a North Korean position is understandable.

The two Koreas have developed their state's different forms of government. South Korea has adopted democracy and capitalism, while North Korea remains one of the most stringent and isolated communist states in the world today. Meanwhile, in terms of economic development, the North was ahead of the South until 1960. However, since the 1960s, South Korea underwent rapid industrialization over six decades and became a competitive player in the international system. Although North Korea adheres to the self-reliance concept of the Juche ideology, its economy is largely developing compared with the advanced economy of the RoK.

ASEAN is also aware that South Korea and North Korea have several contrasting differences, especially in terms of national ideology, norms, and values. As a consequence, it would be difficult to think of Pyongyang accepting and implementing Seoul's liberal ideology in its country in the same way the South Koreans accept the Juche ideology of North Korea. Next to this, it would be difficult for the South to convince the North to denuclearize, report its nuclear weapons and facilities, and agree to monitoring procedures carried out by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Regarding reunification, we can also find great consistency on the side of the DPRK if we witness Kim Jong Il's statement made on 4 August 1997; all ideas were referring to President Kim Il Sung's earlier statement made in October 1980. Accordingly, the DPRK was referring to a new kind of government under the name of the Democratic Federal Republic of Koryo, referring to the following ideas. Firstly, 'the most realistic and reasonable way to reunify the country independently, peacefully, and on the principle of great national unity was to found a federal republic through the establishment of a unified national government on the condition that the north and the south recognize and tolerate each other's ideas and social systems, a government in which the two sides are represented on an equal footing and under which they exercise regional autonomy respectively with equal rights and duties'.

Secondly, 'in the unified state of a federal type, a supreme national federal assembly should be formed with an equal number of representatives from north and south and an appropriate number of representatives of overseas nationals and that this assembly should organize a federal standing committee to guide the regional governments of the north and south and to administer all affairs of the federal state. Thirdly, to call the federal state the Democratic Federal Republic of Koryo, after a unified state that once existed in Korea and is well known to the world, and such a name would also serve to reflect the common political aspirations of the north and south for democracy. Fourthly, 'The DFRK should be a neutral country that does not participate in any political, or military alliance or bloc. As a unified state, embracing the whole of the territory and people of the country, it should pursue a policy that agrees with the fundamental interests and demands of the entire Korean people [4]. Considering the sharp differences in the political systems of the two countries, it would be difficult to achieve rapid and targeted unification. Therefore, reunification should take place if mutual trust building continues to increase. Both countries should be open, transparent, and tolerant of each other.

The public inside ASEAN is considering a possible Confederation Republic, aiming to bind the two countries based on official and legal agreements, and to implement various strategic policies in the future. In the process, the two countries exercise their respective regional autonomy through the rights and obligations that have been mutually agreed upon [5].

The problem of unification of the Korean Peninsula becomes more complex because it involves not only inter-Korean factors but also international factors, and uncertainty in the Asia-Pacific external dynamics. To begin with, the USA always finds itself frustrated in understanding the DPRK's behavior and is not interested in negotiating with the USA regarding its nuclear weapons. The regional tensions have been sparked by continuous North Korea's nuclear and missile tests. Not only

does the DPRK continuously conduct missile tests and nuclear tests, but Pyongyang also wants to put nuclear warheads on intercontinental ballistic missiles that can reach the United States. Seen from China, North Korea is becoming a liability rather than an asset. There has been less exchange of high-ranking officials between North Korea and China since Kim Jong-un took office. Chinese investments in North Korea are also under pressure, as fewer Chinese state companies are investing in North Korea. However, China does not want to see the collapse of North Korea.

The previous research has been conducted by Levi [6]. *The Unification of the Two Koreas: An ASEAN Perspective*. This research discusses the role of ASEAN in supporting the unification efforts of the two Koreas, focusing on the diplomatic approach taken by ASEAN member states. Despite the sharp political and ideological differences between North and South Korea, the study highlights ASEAN's efforts to facilitate dialogue and mediation to create a platform for more constructive interactions, although major challenges remain, such as North Korea's nuclear ambitions.

Rezasyah [7] *Like Germany, Korean Reunification Requires Extraordinary Diplomacy Priorities*. This study delves deeper into ASEAN's role in the Korean unification process by emphasizing the importance of extraordinary diplomacy and patience in building mutual trust between North and South Korea. Rezasyah [7] proposed that the reunification process requires a more gradual approach, given the sharp differences in the political systems of the two countries, as well as the impact of international dynamics that affect regional stability. He also highlighted that careful diplomacy and policies based on the values of economic and political cooperation between ASEAN member states are indispensable to support this process.

These two studies provide highly relevant views on the challenges faced by ASEAN in fighting for peace and unification on the Korean Peninsula, as well as affirming ASEAN's role as a mediator in maintaining stability and facilitating dialogue between the two sides.

The purpose of this study is to analyze ASEAN policies and its efforts in promoting peaceful unification on the Korean Peninsula, taking into account the political, economic, and sociocultural challenges between the Republic of Korea (RoK) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). This research aims to explore the structural factors that hinder unification and how ASEAN leverages its three community pillars, political-security, economic, and socio-cultural communities to support the unification process.

The benefits of this research include contributing to the understanding of ASEAN's role in fostering dialogue and cooperation between the two Koreas, as well as identifying potential challenges and solutions to achieve peaceful unification. The results of this study will also highlight the importance of multilateral engagement and ASEAN's potential as a platform for diplomacy and long-term peace efforts on the Korean Peninsula.

## **2. Method**

This research will apply the qualitative method to explain the phenomenon happening inside ASEAN and the way it perceives developments happening in the Korean Peninsula. In the whole analytical process, this research will rely on the description and observation of non-numerical data, aimed at drawing inferences and capturing themes and patterns in the areas of cooperation and competition, while in the process seeking information about actions and reactions played by all relevant actors.

This research will simultaneously apply three levels of analysis, incorporating the individual, state, and international. To understand the position of the DPRK in world affairs, this research will rely on primary data coming from North Korean sources and critically examine the causes of events as interpreted by Kelion [4] as the primary actor in the country. Regarding ASEAN, this research will rely on decisions made by ASEAN as a unit and acknowledge the fact that the institution has ten member countries. A systemic level of analysis will be applied to see how the international system perceives all efforts made by ASEAN to help produce a peaceful environment.

All primary and secondary sources of information coming from ASEAN, DPRK, and also ROK are to be analyzed using qualitative and historical methods, under the Realist and Liberal perspectives in International Relations. Regarding the Realist perspective, this research will focus on the notion of national interests of the relevant actors, aimed at finding common ground leading to a peaceful region. In utilizing the Liberal perspective, the ideas will revolve around the importance of promoting economic cooperation, aimed at bridging all differences to produce mutual understanding. As a key instrument, the writer will utilize his ideas already published in the national media.

In analyzing all interactions involving ASEAN, DPRK, and also ROK, this research will take into account the personal experiences of the writer, who was assigned as the Eminent Expert Person (EEP) of Indonesia in various conferences of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) from 2017 to 2019.

## **3. Result and Discussion**

### **3.1. ASEAN Support for Korean Unification**

The following section will discuss ASEAN-RoK cooperation in three areas, namely the Political Security Community, the Economic Community, and the Socio-Cultural Community.

### **3.2. Political Security Level of Cooperation**

During the Cold War era, there was little ASEAN countries could do for the unification of both Koreas. Thereafter, entering a post-Cold War period, ASEAN has shown greater interest in helping with ideas and policies leading to a peaceful unification. ASEAN and South Korea initiated sectoral dialogue relations in November 1989. The Republic of Korea (ROK) was accorded a full Dialogue Partner status by ASEAN at the 24<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) in July 1991 in Kuala Lumpur. Further, the partnership was elevated to a Summit level in 1997 in Kuala Lumpur. South Korea acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) in 2004 [8]. The Republic of Korea became a participant in the

ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) since its inception in 1994 and has played an active role in its evolution since then. South Korea is also an active contributor to the ARF Annual Security Outlook since its first publication in 2000 [9].

During this time, ASEAN highly appreciated plans from both the North and the South for unification, and ASEAN was pleased to witness processes that happened on 15 June 2000, named the 'South-North Joint Combined Declaration'. Accordingly, the two countries agreed to carry out a reunification policy for the sake of creating a unified and peaceful Korean peninsula in the future [10]. Commenting on the above development, ASEAN leaders congratulated President Kim Dae Jung on being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his historic contribution to inter-Korean reconciliation. In the mind of ASEAN leaders, maintaining the momentum would lead to peaceful unification that would contribute to the stability of East Asia [3].

Inside ASEAN, Indonesia has perceived itself as a bridge for reunification, considering how close the fifth Indonesian President, Megawati Soekarnoputri, is to former North Korean leader Kim Il-sung [4], who is the father of the current North Korean leader, Kim Jong Un. South Korean President Moon Jae-in met with Megawati in Seoul as a courtesy visit during Megawati's series of activities as a speaker at the Jeju Forum for Peace and Prosperity [11]. Considering Indonesia's good relations with South Korea and North Korea, Indonesia continuously supports the development of a sustainable peaceful situation on the Korean Peninsula. However, this will require time and a long process; peace in the East Asian region will support stability, security, and shared prosperity. This development puts Indonesia in a position to become a neutral mediator or honest broker to facilitate peaceful dialogue between North and South Korea [12].

As the ongoing differences in the Korean Peninsula continued, South Korean President Moon Jae-in at one stage expected Indonesian support to increase cooperation not only bilaterally, but also multilaterally in the Asia Pacific and Southeast Asia. Regionally, South Korea also hopes to generate cooperation with countries in South Asia, especially India. The above connections made the South Korean government positively welcome President Joko Widodo's initiative to invite North Korean leader Kim Jong-un to the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ASEAN-South Korea partnership in 2019 [13]. The Republic of Korea is co-chairing the ARF Inter-Sessional Meeting on Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (ARF ISM on NPD) with Indonesia and Japan for the 2018-2021 cycle. The ROK is also co-chairing the ARF Table Top Exercise on Response Capabilities to Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) Incidents along with the Philippines and the United States in the Inter-Sessional Year (ISY) 2020-2021.

Seeing such a closer relationship, the DPRK wrote an official letter to ASEAN, asking for support in its dispute with the United States in the Asia-Pacific region. In the letter, the North Korean government clearly warned of the possibility of a nuclear holocaust. The Southeast Asian leaders strongly issued this formal official statement at the ASEAN Summit meeting in Manila, in response to regional security dynamics in East Asia, which were triggered by North Korea's unilateral decision to threaten security stability. South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol has also asked ASEAN to suppress North Korea's nuclear and missile programs because they could threaten peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region [14].

Another development occurred in 2018, when ASEAN showed its seriousness in helping to produce peace on the Korean Peninsula, as evidenced by Singapore being the location of the United States-North Korea Summit in June 2018 [15]. ASEAN leaders were very supportive of the above development and considered that such dialogue could bring light on Korean unification and may have a conclusive impact on the North Korean nuclear program. Similarly, the ASEAN Foreign Ministers appreciated the readiness of the United States (US) President Donald J. Trump and Chairman of the State Affairs Commission of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) Kim Jong Un to conduct a summit on 27th – 28th February 2019 in Hanoi. In the minds of ASEAN countries, such a summit may bring progress to the denuclearization process of the Korean Peninsula and help produce a lasting and stable peace regime and complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula [12].

Regardless of ASEAN's strong efforts to help produce a future unification, ASEAN's role is limited to providing a conducive environment for dialogue and interaction, so that peace and stability can be pursued in the East Asia regions. For Indonesia, especially, its efforts to achieve peace on the Korean peninsula have always been appreciated by the leaders of South Korea and North Korea. Apart from the fact that reunification ambitions are waning, along with North Korean missile testing programs, ASEAN began to believe that North Korea cannot be influenced by external parties to change its attitude, even if it is by Beijing, which is Pyongyang's closest ally. No country has been able to force the North Korean leader to change his attitude and decisions since the end of the Cold War, not even the Chinese leader would be able to do so [6].

### *3.3. Economic Level of Cooperation: Korea – ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI)*

Closer ASEAN–South Korea relations improved significantly since October 2021, when President Yoon Suk-Yeol introduced a new policy named as Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative (KASI). This policy, which was introduced in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, highlighted the importance of Korea's growing efforts to strengthen its Indo-Pacific Strategy and broaden its international engagement beyond its traditional partners such as the PRC, the USA, Japan, and Russia. ASEAN responses towards KASI were positive, as along with Japan and the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Republic of Korea (RoK) has become an ASEAN partner under the name of ASEAN Plus Three (APT). The economic cooperation between ASEAN and the Plus Three countries started in 1997 and has evolved ever since. In 2019, the total APT trade reached USD 890.2 billion, accounting for 31.6 percent of ASEAN's total merchandise trade. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from APT countries to ASEAN reached USD 32 billion in 2019, accounting for 19.9 percent of the total FDI to ASEAN [8].

As the three countries do not have a regional organization, APT helps them to check each other's motives and interests in the East Asian and Southeast Asian regions. APT has also become an umbrella for the three countries to deal with all ASEAN countries in various development issues, and permitted the three countries to assist ASEAN during the height of the Asian financial crisis in 1997, the global financial crisis in 2007, and the recent COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. ASEAN is now Korea's 2nd largest trading partner and construction market. For ASEAN, Korea is the 5th largest trading partner. Before

the COVID-19 pandemic, people-to-people exchange between ASEAN and Korea showed that 10 million Korean tourists visited ASEAN countries, while 2.7 million ASEAN nationals visited Korea in 2019 [16]. From my understanding, RoK's MNCs in Indonesia have received good respect from the government and its people. We hardly hear critics of Korean companies related to human rights environment, wages, and taxation, and Indonesians respect the companies' commitments to prepare Indonesians to work in the companies and cooperate with the seniors coming from Korea. The Hyundai automobile project in Cikarang in this case, has become an excellent example [17].

Such a suitable foundation has helped Indonesia to conduct various kinds of academic activities with its RoK counterparts and permitted Indonesia to gain insights into the challenges faced by RoK in pursuing unification with its neighbor. While welcoming KASI, countries inside ASEAN expected Korea to bring more concrete ideas and actions to strengthen the ties. In the opinion of Robert Matheus Michael Tene, Deputy Secretary-General of the ASEAN Secretariat for the ASEAN Political-Security Community, ASEAN encouraged RoK to undertake substantive, practical, and tangible cooperation with ASEAN and welcomed RoK's efforts to improve the relations through doubling its annual contribution to the ASEAN-Korea Cooperation Fund over the next five years to support more activities and projects and the establishment of an ASEAN Korea Cooperation Centre for Carbon Neutrality and Energy Security. (Kwon Mee-yoo. Interview. ASEAN deputy secretary-general hopes for stronger cooperation [18].

As the economies of ASEAN and RoK are becoming closer through investment, trade, and people contacts, KASI must highlight the importance of greater cooperation based on the principles of Good Governance and Good Corporate Governance. It is also necessary for KASI to help empower bureaucracies and business communities inside ASEAN so that they since their earlier career will be familiar with new ideas such as: (a) Participation, (b) Rule of Law, (c) Transparency, (d) Responsiveness, (e) Consensus Oriented, (f) Equity and Inclusiveness, (g) Effectiveness, and Efficiency, as well as (h) Accountability [7].

### 3.4. Social Cultural Level of Cooperation

From the ASEAN perspective, the 2018 Asian Games held in Indonesia in August that year was indeed historical, considering the long conflict that occurred for seventy years in Korea. The South Korean and North Korean contingents united to carry the name of the Korean Peninsula using the unification flag. Apart from that, the seriousness of reunification can be seen from the official website of the Korean Union institution, which focuses on inter-Korean cooperation, humanitarian assistance, human rights, inter-Korean mutual interaction, and various policies to pursue Korea as one region. Bearing the image of the Korean Peninsula in blue against a white background, during the opening ceremony at Bung Karno Main Stadium, the Korean athletes and officials walked into a loud ovation from the stadium, and South Korean Prime Minister Lee Nak-yeon and North Korean Deputy Prime Minister Ri Ryong-Nam got up from their seats in the VIP box, holding and raising their hands together [18].

In the opinion of the Indonesian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Retno Marsudi, the Asian Games held in Indonesia were not merely a sporting event, but had become a momentum to bond friendship and world peace. Regarding the participation of the two Koreas, her strong comments were very clear. "There was a feeling of pride that as host of the Asian Games 2018, Indonesia has been appreciated not just in Asia, but also in the world. This is because the Asian Games are not just a sporting competition but also one that binds the friendship between North Korea and South Korea" [18].

Since then, ASEAN officials praised such development as a positive sign, that sports can show the true nature of the two Koreans, who are willing to have a cultural bond to work hand in hand, which spirit may enlighten their people to have a unification in the future.

## 4. Conclusion

For South Korea and also ASEAN countries, North Korea's ever-growing missile provocations and nuclear threats pose a direct and real security threat. Consequently, South Korea and the 10 ASEAN members are expected to increase inter-regional cooperation to signal to the DPRK that a rules-based international order can be firmly rooted in their relations, contributing to better governance on the Korean Peninsula. ASEAN and the South Korean government have made many efforts to build the basis for a peaceful unification on the Korean Peninsula. Nevertheless, further international cooperation is needed, among others, to take into account the success of German unification in the 1990s, replicating the reunification process of East and West Germany, where the process was carried out gradually, fairly, and with mutual sympathy.

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