

Factors Shaping Philippines-North Korea Relations

By Aaron Rabena

The Republic of the Philippines' relations with North Korea are influenced by four critical factors: political alignment with the United States, realpolitik, international norms, and risks to Philippine national security and interests. In other words, historical, functional, normative, and strategic factors have been of greater or lesser significance at different junctures in the nearly twenty-year formal Philippines-North Korea relationship.

The initial interaction between the Philippines and North Korea occurred as state-to-state conflict due to the Korean War (1950-1953), which was a byproduct of the Cold War. The Philippines, being a liberal democracy, showed the flag and sent boots on the ground by deploying the "Philippine Expeditionary Force to Korea" (PEFTOK) to join the United Nations (UN) coalition forces under the leadership and operational command of the United States to defend democratic South Korea against an invasion by the Communist North.

It was in the 1970s when Manila, in spite of its different political system and values vis-à-vis Pyongyang, negotiated the establishment of diplomatic relations. The negotiation of official ties was not unprecedented because the Philippines had done the same with the Soviet Union and the Eastern European Socialist Bloc in the 1970s where Manila's intent was to diversify economic partners.

However, because of North Korea's links with the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its armed faction, the New People's Army (NPA), it was not until the post-Cold War period, specifically July 12, 2000, that official ties were established. The Philippines currently has diplomatic relations with other Communist countries such as China, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam.

As far as public perceptions are concerned, a 2017 survey by the Pew Research Center revealed that 50 percent of Filipinos hold a positive view of North Korea. The positive views may be because many Filipinos do not know that the Philippines has reportedly become a site for North Korean illegal activities such as the illegal drug trade and money laundering.

For current Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, North Korea's potential economic reform and opening-up under Kim Jong-un is consistent with his "independent foreign policy" thrust of developing relations with non-traditional partners. Hence, the employment of party-to-party diplomacy where the President's political party, the Partido Demokratiko Pilipino — Lakas ng Bayan (PDP-Laban) — was tapped to meet and sign a cooperation agreement with its counterpart, the Worker's Party of Korea (WPK), just as it had done with the Communist Party of China (CPC) and United Russia.

Aaron Rabena, Associate Fellow at the Philippine Council for Foreign Relations, explains that "because of North Korea's links with the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its armed faction, the New People's Army (NPA), it was not until the post-Cold War period, specifically July 12, 2000, that official ties were established."

The Philippines played a pivotal role in socializing North Korea with the international community by facilitating the latter's admission into the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) under its chairmanship in 1998. It is notable that this, together with the formalization of ties with Pyongyang, coincided with then South Korean President Kim Dae-jung's "Sunshine Policy" of constructive engagement. In addition, the Philippines as a signatory to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), is in line with the international community's desire to see North Korea denuclearize and refrain from further rocket and ballistic missile tests for any purpose. In the wake of Pyongyang's repeated nuclear and missile tests under Kim Jong-un, the Philippines complied with UN Security Council resolutions sanctioning the regime. For example, in 2016, the Philippines impounded and inspected North Korean cargo ships (M.V. Jin Teng and Theresa Begonia) for restricted goods, weapons, and contraband. And in 2017, Manila suspended trade with Pyongyang.

This is consequential for North Korea because based on the 2017 trade data published by the European Commission, the Philippines had been North Korea's largest trading partner in ASEAN and fourth largest in the world after China, India, and Russia. According to the Philippine Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), primary exports to North Korea are bananas, computers, computer chips, integrated circuited boards, and women's undergarments. The Philippine stance on North Korea is also reflected in ASEAN through joint diplomatic statements that condemn the Hermit Kingdom's nuclear and missile activities. Apart from sanctions and rebukes, a 2015 study by Christopher J. Dawe found that the Philippines had become an international transit site for North Korean refugees, which can be attributed to the country being a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. For the Philippines, peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula is important because a Second Korean War, just as in the First Korean War, might involve other actors important to the country such as China and US-ally Japan. There are around 60,000 Filipinos living in South Korea, more than 250,000 in Japan, and about 20,000 Filipinos in China. Aside from being key sources of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) remittances, China, Japan, and South Korea are major trading partners, investors, and tourist markets of the Philippines. Therefore, any serious instability or conflict on the Korean peninsula would have enormous domestic political and economic impacts on the Philippines.

Conflict on the peninsula also poses an indirect risk to the Philippines because of the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT) with the U.S. North Korea made a statement that they would not hesitate to target any country that would support US military actions against them, and Kim Jong-un has threatened to strike Guam where there are over 50,000 Filipino citizens. Given all the potential risks including the implications of a nuclear war, President Duterte — although in favor of maximum pressure — rejects military solutions against Pyongyang.

Presently, Philippine engagement with North Korea is taking place within the framework of the Trump-Kim détente and the North-South Korea rapprochement. There are two major issues in the Korean Peninsula: denuclearization and reunification. Assumptions about reunification might be premature, but the goal of denuclearization is more plausible. This is especially true considering that during the Third Plenary Meeting of the Seventh Central Committee of the WPK last year, North Korea expressed its desire to digress from isolationism and prioritize economic modernization and active engagement with neighboring countries, and South Korean President Moon Jae-in announced plans to develop three economic belts (Pan Yellow Sea Belt, Pan East Sea Belt, DMZ Belt) that would link South Korea with North Korea, China, and Russia.

With these prospects, the Philippines and ASEAN can formulate a North-facing policy by factoring in a normalized North Korea in a more integrated Northeast Asia.

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