

The Problem of Vietnam and Indonesia's North Korea Diplomacy

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At the October 10 military parade marking the 80th anniversary of the founding of the Korean Workers' Party (KWP), North Korean leader Kim Jong Un declared his determination to continue his country's nuclear program and aggressive military policy. North Korea has caused problems for the international community, having violated the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and more than 10 United Nations Security Council resolutions, and committed various cybercrimes, including cryptocurrency theft. Nevertheless, 11 countries—including China, Russia, Vietnam, Laos, and Indonesia—sent diplomatic delegations to the military parade. Celebrating the founding of the KWP which is responsible for the North Korea's collapse would not have been pleasant even for them.

As of 2024, North Korea's gross domestic product (GDP) of ₩37 trillion was only 1.6% of South Korea's GDP. North Korea is heightening tensions on the Korean Peninsula by intensively increasing its tactical nuclear capabilities, showcasing its long-range missiles capable of striking the United States, as well as improving its conventional forces.

According to the Korea Institute for National Unification's *White Paper on Human Rights in North Korea 2024*, North Korea operated 10 political prison camps in the past and still operates four camps holding approximately 65,000 political prisoners. Moreover, it continues to impose information and ideological control over the general population. In 2022, the regime publicly executed a 22-year-old man in South Hwanghae Province for watching and distributing South Korean films.

Among the countries that sent delegations to the military parade, Vietnam, Laos, and Indonesia received around \$300 million in official development assistance (ODA) from South Korea, 9.3% of the \$3.16 billion total ODA. In 2024, South Korea's trade with Vietnam

amounted to \$86.761 billion, which is 6,600 times larger than the \$13 million trade volume between North Korea and Vietnam. Likewise, trade between South Korea and Indonesia reached \$20.5 billion, which is 22,580 times larger than the \$908,000 trade with North Korea. Their behavior is a classic example of ‘opportunistic cherry-picking diplomacy’ as they seek to maintain relations with North Korea while also benefiting from South Korea’s aid.

Vietnam justifies its stance on the grounds of “historical solidarity between socialist ‘brother nations’” dating back to the Cold War. Meanwhile, Indonesia is a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which sought to distance the Third World from the Western and Eastern blocs respectively led by the United States and Soviet Union, and it has maintained ties with North Korea under the pretext of “neutral diplomacy.”

More importantly, these countries are engaged in defense industrial cooperation with South Korea. Indonesia participated in the joint development of the KF-21 fighter jet, but has paid only ₩400 billion of the agreed ₩1.7 trillion, and it has also faced allegations of leaking related core technologies. Despite signing a contract to purchase South Korea’s K9 Thunder self-propelled howitzers in August, Vietnam also signed an agreement with North Korea to cooperate on foreign affairs, defense, and healthcare. This raises concerns over the potential leakage of sensitive South Korean military technologies to North Korea.

If South Korea tolerates this sort of pro-North diplomacy by these countries, it will become an obstacle for South Korea to make the necessary security environment for the peaceful unification of the Korean Peninsula. During the Cold War, West Germany constrained East Germany’s diplomacy under the “Hallstein Doctrine,” which declared that it would break off diplomatic relations with any country that established diplomatic relations with East Germany. This effectively prevented East Germany’s diplomatic expansion and strengthened West Germany’s international position and diplomatic status.

The situation facing South Korea today is similar. If South Korea turns a blind eye to countries that maintain diplomatic relations with North Korea without setting any standards, it would be like justifying the illegal activities of the North Korean regime. The Hallstein Doctrine remains a valuable reference for South Korean diplomacy today.