Korean Unification
from an International Perspective

Friday, July 20, 2012
Schubert Hall, Hotel President, Seoul
KOREAN UNIFICATION: The Indonesian Perspective

Dinna Wisnu\(^2\) (Paramadina University)

It is fair to say that nearly everyone in the region, even almost certainly the world, envisions a better North Korea. The Indonesians included. Why? Better in what sense? Is it because they know what’s going on in North Korea?

Most people never visit or meet ordinary North Koreans. Even Indonesian embassy staffs stationed in Pyongyang have very limited access to go outside their embassy building. They also have very limited opportunity to talk to North Koreans; at best only the translators, drivers or assigned military staff who are rotated to work and talk to the Indonesians in Pyongyang. Barely anyone had the chance to meet and go to areas in North Korea. For most Indonesians with no blue passport, the only North Koreans they know are the military leaders visiting Jakarta or whom they see on TV. North Korea is fully closing itself from the world and is isolated. Its government has been keeping such policy for decades. A better North Korea would be a North Korea that more people know and connect.

It is been too long that we hear and see are sad and eerie news coming from North Korea. The pictures are too gloomy that it doesn’t make much sense. Are the things happening in North Korea real? Is it that bad? We hear famine, malnourished children, people with limited access to information and modern facility, as well as dying people during winter due to absence of electricity and proper heating. On the other hand we hear and see very proud regime. Seemingly massive military force, determined and united leaders who

\(^1\) Presented in Joint International Forum organized by Korea Political Science Association (KPSA) and Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU) to promote Unification of Korea, Seoul, President Hotel, 20 July 2012.

\(^2\) Dinna Wisnu is the founder and director/dean of the first and only one Graduate School of Diplomacy in Indonesia, Paramadina Graduate School of Diplomacy at Paramadina University. She can be reached at dinna.wisnu@paramadina.ac.id or dinnawisnu@gmail.com
are adored by its people, and has firm desire to conquer the world’s attention with its nuclear capacity.

Puzzled and troubled. That will be the description of how Indonesians feel about North Korea. Bad news that is combined with no direct access of information had led people to believe that the North Koreans are suffering beyond what anyone can imagine. Unbelievable but true. So when the word “reunification” with South Korea is re-voiced, the response is positive but curious. How? When?

This paper is dedicated to provide two things. First, a description on the perception on North Korea, South Korea and the Unification idea from an angle seen by Indonesians. I certainly can’t claim that the description represents everyone’s perception. This is more of an effort to list the array of perceptions as spoken. Second, a humble assessment on the future of North Korea and ways to engage it productively, possibly toward unification.

Interested but Cautious

The bilateral relations between Indonesia and North Korea dated back to 1961. The diplomatic relations between these two nations has continued, no break whatsoever, despite very limited human interaction between the two countries. The strongest link between the two began in the era of President Sukarno of Indonesia and Kim Il Sung of North Korea.

President Sukarno, denouncing the West and its model of governance, were attracted to “the East” to look for a more suitable model of governance. He initiated many ideas to keep Indonesia unique and having bargaining leverage with the West. Sukarno developed “Guided Democracy”, complete with its political manifesto and ideology (Indonesian socialism, guided economy, guided democracy, nationalism and their relevance to the 1945 Constitution). The culmination was the 1964 Independence Day Speech, when Sukarno publicly denounced the United States, banned everything Americans and vowed to stop all American aid. In August 1965, Indonesia withdrew from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank and announced the Jakarta-Phnom Penh-Hanoi-Peking-Pyongyang Axis. This policy did not receive support from the Indonesian Army, and was questioned by Indonesian
friends in the Non-Aligned Movement, but this was the landmark policy that keeps Indonesia and North Korea attached to one another to this day.

Sukarno is remembered dearly in North Korea. Sukarno's descendants keep the admiration from North Korea to Indonesia alive through regular contacts with the North Korean regime. The Indonesian embassy in North Korea said that the family of Sukarno has special treatment every year they visit the country. And who could have forgotten, that Sukarno named an orchid after "The Great Leader" of North Korea? The orchid is called the Kimilsungia. The hybrid *dendrobium* is now the national flower of North Korea, praised as immortal flower, for it blooms in all five continents of the world.

The romanticism of Sukarno's era trickles down to all Indonesian Presidents. Not to mention Sukarno's daughter, President Megawati Sukarnoputri, of course. In the more current context, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, an army general, reportedly has a strong interest in the North Korean Peninsula (*The Jakarta Post*, May 1, 2012). He believes that Indonesia has a strong moral position to convince the North Korean leadership to return to the negotiation table, abandon its nuclear-weapons plan, and to convince the leadership to open to international community.

Yet, to many in Indonesia, there are more caution than enthusiasm with regard to the prospect of Indonesia bridging North Korea out of its closed political and economic system. The following reasons support the cautionary approach of Indonesia to the Unification idea in the Korean Peninsula.

*First*, North Korea has been putting itself in an isolated pocket of statehood for decades. In fact, most North Koreans today never see or imagine different life outside the totalitarian Communist regime. Their mindset on power, authority, social order, weapons, and society, therefore, should be very different from what most world citizens understand. And not only that. The 24.5 million North Koreans, over 68% of whom are in productive age, have limited exposure to modern living, jobs, skills, network or knowledge.

Although illiteracy may be minimized due to the compulsory 11-year state-paid education, the types of information passed along in schools would not be as any typical schools. Daily NK (14/9/10) reported that since Kim II
mechanisms uniting the two systems gradually, with the condition that North Korea accepts the presence of US in Korean peninsula. This scenario expects injection of capitalist logic and practice, followed by development of trans-border pipelines and railway which will support the injection of capitalist logic. Meanwhile, in the Anti-Utopian scenario, the idea is to rely on the US to push North Korea in leaving Communism.

These scenario, can’t work properly for several reasons. Unification is a political and security process as well as a social one. Furthermore, the political process is not isolated to the relationship between the North and South Korea and how one is willing to give up its totalitarian communism and the other is willing to keep injecting capitalist logic, practice, (and of course) money and living. It is not even determined by what the US is willing to do in the peninsula. We should be brave to say that “the trigger factor” for immediate unification would remain a mystery. In fact, the trigger for immediate unification may rests far from what one can imagine. We should learn from how the Berlin Wall fell and Soviet Union collapsed. What we need to discuss, therefore is the perspectives in engaging North Korea.

Existing views on Unification has been heavy on power contestation or absorption. Analyses have been founded on security alliance, ideological war, nuclear containment, and structural barriers for ordinary people to make a difference. Indeed there are reasons for focusing on these aspects, but this approach undermines the importance of transnational networking in making change in global politics.

Transnational networking is a perspective in international relations that are characterized by voluntary, reciprocal and horizontal patterns of communication and exchange (Keck and Sikkink, 2005). Major actors in advocacy network may include international and domestic nongovernmental research and advocacy organizations, local social movements, foundations, the media, churches, trade unions, intellectuals, parts of regional and intergovernmental organizations, and parts of the executive or parliamentary branches of government. Advocacy network have been effective in bridging change in tough issues such as slavery, segregationist policy and genocide. The networking model allows the issues to be dealt in sustainable manner, for longer time period, and by engaging broader audience.
KOREAN UNIFICATION: The Indonesian Perspective

The approach is worth considering for several reasons. First, the current scale of external engagement from North Korea to the rest of the world is limited but there are underground activities to get away from the isolationist policy. Indeed, it is almost impossible to imagine unification with no change in the isolationist policy. As time goes by, we have seen more and more North Koreans “running away” from their government order. There are artists, students and even security personnel in North Korea who allows foreign influence to penetrate in North Korea. Andrei Lankov (2009) mentioned the booming black market for all kinds of consumer goods in North Korea, which provides opportunity for prohibited goods such as tunable radios, DVDs or other information technology to enter the territory. Hence, the timing is right to engage and entice the North Koreans to make a difference in their own lives.

Second, leadership evolves and time changes views. No leadership is the same, even if they come from the same family and guarded by the same sets of rules or norms. Kim Jong Un as the third generation of leader in North Korea has been dividing his authority to several people. Kim Jong Un (the youngest son of Kim Jong II) as the current supreme leader is handling the party and economic affairs; Kim Jong Nam (the eldest son of Kim Jong II) is handling cabinet and foreign affairs, and a senior general loyal to Kim Jong Il is handling the military affairs. It is no secret that the sons of Kim Jong II are not as united in the supremacy of one leader in North Korea. Each wants their own status as elite. And Kim Jong Un, as a young leader, is among the North Korean who has been exposed to external world. He went to school in Switzerland, loves basketball, studies computer science and reportedly dating a pop star. All means that the potential for change from within the leadership in North Korea is not so remote after all. Youngsters like Kim Jong Un may share the same passion to connect with the world, and this is an entry point for transnational network to develop.

As mentioned earlier, the realization of the transnational networking in North Korea would hinge on the willingness of South Korea to facilitate. After all, South Korea already has the entry point to engage the North and knows the nitty-gritty of the current North Korea.
The Nuclear Factor

Nuclear ambition is the biggest barrier to Korea Unification. Bigger Korea, parallel with ambitious North Korea, would mean bigger military and nuclear capacity, thus more threats to the neighbors and the world. In the world where the US is losing its sphere of influence in Asia due to series of economic trouble that it has been experiencing, the US is divided in its view towards engaging Pyongyang. The optimists on the nuclear factor favors talks and compromise with Pyongyang while the pessimist would rather impose coercion (Andrei Lankov, 2009).

One note to consider, however, is that the nuclear ambition depends on facilitation from South Korea to materialize into real threats. What North Korea has at this point is the ambition and some tools, but no more. The homework is therefore with South Korea to develop means of confidence building measures with its neighbors on the nuclear factor. China, which presumably prefers a non-nuclear Korea, is no different from ASEAN who would also disagree with nuclear-seeking Korea. The measures of ASEAN Regional Forum, for instance, should be used as reference and tools to maintain peace and stability in the region.

A group of experts calling itself “the International Commission on Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament” led by Gareth Evans of Australia and Yoriko Kawaguchi of Japan issued a report (2009) calling for elimination of nuclear threats. They noted that the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) system has been under severe strain in recent years where the International Atomic Energy Agency is struggling with verification, compliance and enforcement failures. They also noted indication of the intent and capacity to create massive nuclear destruction by terrorist groups, although there are countries demanding rights to peaceful use of nuclear energy. They suggest that the key policy should be to delegitimise nuclear weapons; creating new perception on the role and utility of nuclear weapons into a marginal one, while minimizing the numbers of warheads, agreeing to “no first use” doctrine and force deployments and alert status reflecting that doctrine.

The report indicates that the future of using nuclear weapons as leverage in international relations is gone. The agreements among experts (they engaged experts from Saudi Arabia, Russia, Norway, South Africa, France,
KOREAN UNIFICATION: The Indonesian Perspective

Pakistan, India, Germany, US, China, UK, Indonesia and Mexico) is to persuade states that nuclear weapons will not advance their national security or other interests. While in practice there are still resistance from politicians to let go of the nuclear weapon leverage, it is worth disseminating all over the world, including to North Korea, that there is no charm anymore in using nuclear weapons as bargaining chips.

South Korea also needs to openly discuss its plan on Korea Unification. What is the form of governance that would engage the North? What plan would be proposed and developed with the North? Is it going to be a confederation as many have suspected? If yes, what's the authority and power division that would be proposed?

At the end of the day, in engaging North Korea one should pay less attention to the nuclear factor and start giving more attention to the development potentials in that territory. North Korean regime should be convinced that their isolationist policy is not sustainable. The world have changed rapidly that all kinds of ways of running an economy is put into question, hence dialog with other countries and people-to-people contacts would be beneficial to the future of North Korea.

After all, sooner or later, North Korea must face some sort of transitional period because leadership evolves. Any transitional period would not be easy. No regime has been proven capable of handling sudden implosion from inside, and it may happen if the government of North Korea fails to channel the passion of its citizens to be connected with the world. Thus open-minded dialog on the new era in the Korean peninsula must be started sooner or later and with less restraint from either the North or the South.
References


