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Opening Channels to the Eastern Bloc: The First Indonesia-Yugoslavia Trade Contacts, 1953-1956

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menjelaskan dinamika diplomasi perdagangan antara Indonesia dan Yugoslavia pada periode 1953-1956 sebagai bagian dari upaya awal Indonesia memperluas hubungan perdagangan dengan negara-negara Blok Timur setelah kemerdekaan. Penelitian ini dilakukan menggunakan metode sejarah dengan pendekatan diplomasi ekonomi untuk menganalisis keterkaitan antara kebijakan luar negeri dan kepentingan ekonomi nasional. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa pada awal tahun 1950an, Yugoslavia adalah negara *terra incognita* bagi perdagangan luar negeri Indonesia. Pemerintah mengirim misi dagang yang dipimpin oleh R.A Asmaun, berusaha menembus pasar Eropa Timur dan menemukan mitra dagang baru sekaligus ahli industri untuk mendukung program rehabilitasi ekonomi nasional. Kesepakatan penting dicapai melalui *Trade and Payment Agreement* tahun 1953, yang menjadi dasar pertukaran barang senilai 7,25 juta dolar AS dan membuka jalan bagi kerja sama lebih lanjut dalam bidang industri, permesinan, serta pengembangan infrastruktur.

Kata kunci: perdagangan, indonesia-yugoslavia, blok timur.

Abstract

This study aims to explain the dynamics of trade diplomacy between Indonesia and Yugoslavia during the period 1953-1956 as part of Indonesia's early efforts to expand its trade relations with Eastern Bloc countries after independence. This research employs the historical method combined with an economic diplomacy approach to analyze the interplay between foreign policy and national economic interests. The findings show that, in the early 1950s, Yugoslavia was still terra incognita within Indonesia's foreign trade landscape. In response, the Indonesian government dispatched a trade mission led by R.A. Asmaun to penetrate the Eastern European market and secure new trading partners at a time when industrial expertise was urgently needed to support national economic rehabilitation programs. An important milestone was achieved through the 1953 Trade and Payment Agreement, which formed the basis for a goods exchange valued at 7.25 million USD and opened the way for further cooperation in industrial development, machinery, and infrastructure projects.

Keywords: *economic diplomacy, indonesia-yugoslavia, eastern bloc.*

INTRODUCTION

The structure of Indonesia's income in the early 1950s relied heavily on foreign trade, especially during the Korean War rubber boom. At the beginning of the Sukiman Cabinet, which took office in April 1951, the government benefited from a sudden surge in commodity prices, particularly rubber and oil, which at their high point accounted for about two-thirds of export revenues. In addition to a favorable surplus in the balance of payments, trade taxes in 1951 also generated a budget surplus. (Dick, Houben, Lindblad, & Thee, 2002: 174). Unfortunately, this benefit from the Korean Rubber Boom, which had created the surplus, endured for only one year and subsequently generated new problems when world rubber prices began to decline.

Although Indonesia obtained recognition of sovereignty from the Netherlands in 1949, this did not mean that the country had achieved full economic independence. In reality, vital sectors of the economy remained controlled and dominated by the Dutch. Indonesia's foreign trade was still heavily dependent on the Netherlands and Western Bloc countries. The United States, the Netherlands, and Singapore were Indonesia's main export destinations, while the Netherlands, Japan, and the United States served as the principal sources of imports (Kano, 2008: 77-78). This was due to the economic structure that remained essentially the same as the colonial economy, a consequence of the Dutch recognition of Indonesian sovereignty at the Round Table Conference. Therefore, throughout the 1950s, the Indonesian government undertook a series of nationalization measures aimed at transforming the colonial economy into a national economy. The primary target of Indonesian economic nationalism in the early 1950s was the elimination of Dutch dominance, particularly in the modern economic sector(Kian Wie, 2012: 25). In the realm of foreign trade networks, Indonesia also carried out a decolonization process by opening new trade routes.

Indonesia's foreign trading partners during the Sukiman Cabinet were still very limited and remained dominated by Western countries. Moreover, pressure from the United States for Indonesia to participate in the embargo against China further narrowed the market for Indonesian products. Although rubber exports contributed significantly to Indonesia's foreign trade and the prices of other commodities were generally favorable, they were not sufficient to offset the negative impact of the decline in rubber prices (Thomas & Panglaykim, 1966: 71). Moreover, Indonesia experienced a balance of payments deficit in 1952 as import demand outpaced export revenues (Dick, Houben, Lindblad, & Thee, 2002: 174). The economic crisis triggered by the United States embargo policy encouraged Indonesia to seek alternative solutions by expanding its markets and establishing new trade connections with other countries. From late 1952 to 1953, the government actively opened trade relations with countries in Latin America and the Eastern Bloc.

Furthermore, political motivations also played an important role in the effort to expand Indonesia's trade partnerships. Although Indonesia adhered to a free and active foreign policy, it had not yet fully implemented this principle in the field of foreign trade; most commercial contacts up to this period still originated from the

Western bloc. From within the country, various forms of encouragement were directed at the government to immediately diversify its trading partners. For example, S.M. Abidin from the Labor Party faction submitted a proposal to Prime Minister Wilopo during the parliamentary session on 9 May 1952, urging the government to promptly expand foreign trade to regions in the Americas and the Soviet Bloc. At the same time, an investigation into technical–commercial factors was being conducted to assess the material and political costs and benefits for the state in its implementation (Ministry of Information, 1952: 110). Furthermore, in 1953, the Indonesian government sent a trade mission to Eastern Bloc countries, led by the Chief of the Directorate of Foreign Economic Relations at the Ministry of Economic Affairs, R.A. Asmaoen, including a visit to Yugoslavia.

The decline in the prices of major export commodities such as rubber and tin on the international market following the end of the Korean War, along with the desire to avoid dependence on the West, encouraged Indonesia to develop economic relations with the Eastern bloc countries (Sutopo, 1985: 660). In this context, Yugoslavia became a strategic partner for Indonesia because, although socialist-oriented, the country had ceased to be under Soviet domination since 1948. In the early 1950s, both Indonesia and Yugoslavia shared similar positions as states attempting to define their national identity and conduct independent foreign policies amidst the competition between the two major blocs the Western Bloc led by the United States and the Eastern Bloc led by the Soviet Union.

As far as this study is concerned, research on relations between Indonesia and Yugoslavia has been extensive. However, most major studies have focused on political and ideological aspects within the framework of the Non Aligned Movement, while the economic dimension and the dynamics of trade diplomacy between the two countries in the early 1950s remain rarely explored in depth. The economic interactions between the two nations have not yet received sufficient scholarly attention, despite the fact that Indonesia and Yugoslavia maintained a very close friendship.

This paper aims to analyze the background behind Indonesia’s expansion of trade to Yugoslavia, its dynamics, and the implications of Indonesia–Yugoslavia trade diplomacy during the period 1953–1956. This study seeks to fill the historiographical gap concerning the economic aspects of Indonesia–Yugoslavia relations by situating them within the framework of trade diplomacy as part of Indonesia’s broader strategy to expand its economic orientation toward the Eastern Bloc at the beginning of the Cold War.

METHODS

This research employs the historical method and an economic diplomacy approach to understand the relationship between Indonesia's foreign policy and its nationalist economic interests in the early 1950s. The historical method is carried out through the stages of heuristics (source collection), verification (source criticism), interpretation, and historiography (Kuntowijoyo, 2003). The economic diplomacy approach is used to analyze how Indonesia's foreign policy was directed toward achieving national economic interests, in which diplomatic activities served as instruments for advancing economic objectives, and conversely, economic interests became a central motive in the conduct of foreign diplomacy. According to Kishan S. Rana (2007), economic diplomacy is a process in which states employ diplomatic instruments to maximize national gains in trade, investment, and other forms of economic exchange. In the context of this study, economic diplomacy is understood as the Indonesian government's effort to expand trade relations and economic cooperation through diplomatic channels, in support of its independent and active foreign policy in the early years of independence.

The sources used in this study consist of both primary and secondary materials. Primary sources include diplomatic documents from the *Archives National Armed Forces of the Republic of Indonesia (ANRI)*, as well as materials from the Yugoslav Archive in Belgrade, which have been declassified and published in English in the form of trade reports and diplomatic notes related to Indonesia-Yugoslavia economic relations during the period 1953–1956. Additional data were obtained from *Harian Abadi*, *Kedaulatan Rakyat*, and *Suara Merdeka*. Secondary sources include books, journals, and other scholarly works relevant to the themes of economic diplomacy and Indonesia-Yugoslavia relations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Initiative Expansion Trade and early Diplomatic Contacts (1952-1953)

The initial efforts of the Indonesian government to expand export markets to the communist countries of Eastern Europe began in early March 1952 through the dispatch of a trade mission led by R.A. Asmaun, Head of the Directorate of Foreign Relations at the Ministry of Economic Affairs. For Indonesia's trade and economic relations in the early 1950s, the communist countries were still regarded as *terra incognita* (Abdul Gani, 1956: 29), namely regions that were unfamiliar and largely unexplored. This perception emerged because Indonesia had not yet established direct trade relations with these countries. Limited diplomatic access, as well as the dominance of Indonesia's economic relations with Western countries an inheritance from the colonial economic system shaped the orientation of Indonesia's exports and imports, which remained concentrated on Western markets. However, after independence, particularly during the Wilopo Cabinet, the Indonesian government began to see opportunities to establish relations with Eastern Bloc countries, especially Yugoslavia, as an initial step in diversifying its commodity markets.

Eastern European countries responded positively to this initiative because they viewed Indonesia as a strategic supplier of primary commodities essential for their industrial development. Their enthusiasm for Indonesian commodities had in fact been evident from the beginning, as shown by their initiative to contact the Chairman of MAPI (a semi-governmental forum for industry and trade) during the Moscow Economic Conference in March 1952. They expressed a willingness to purchase Indonesian commodities and even offered higher prices compared to those available in Western Europe.

The enthusiasm of the Eastern Bloc countries facilitated the work of RA Asmaun's trade mission. In addition to exploring opportunities for improving trade and commercial relations, the mission was also directed to identify potential development partners capable of fulfilling Indonesia's needs for rehabilitation and the further expansion of national production facilities. During the mission's travels, the Indonesian delegation sought to establish cooperation with experts in highway development, machinery construction, and other technical fields from Eastern Europe that were required to support Indonesia's early industrialization efforts.

Efforts to establish direct trade relations with Yugoslavia had been undertaken since 1952. At the end of September of that year, the Indonesian diplomatic representative in Bonn, West Germany, Dr. Zain, informed the Yugoslav Ambassador Mladen Iveković that the Indonesian government was interested in the development of Yugoslav industry and wished to obtain more detailed information regarding commodities that could be traded directly. In response, Iveković forwarded this communication to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Belgrade through an official letter. On December 3, Aleš Bebler, a senior official at the Yugoslav Ministry of Foreign Affairs, replied and stated that the Yugoslav government was likewise interested in the Indonesian market.

Aleš Bebler further explained that Yugoslavia at that time possessed a sufficiently developed industrial base, particularly in the fields of shipbuilding and heavy machinery. Its industries were capable of producing vessels of various tonnages and exporting a wide range of industrial products such as centrifugal pumps, diesel engines, metal-processing machines, agricultural machinery, hydro turbines and turbo generators, transformers above 500 kW, three-phase electric motors, crankshaft machines, woodworking engines, and others. In his letter, Bebler also suggested that if the Indonesian government was interested in Yugoslav industry, it could directly contact the Yugoslav Federal Chamber of Commerce in Belgrade, located at Studentski trg 15, P.O. Box 47, to arrange the possibility of further cooperation.

Although politically Yugoslavia was an independent state and was not aligned with either the Western or the Eastern Blocs during the Cold War, in matters of Indonesian trade policy the country continued to be treated in the same manner as the communist states of the Eastern Bloc. This situation persisted until the Indonesian government issued the Decree of the Minister of Trade No. 234 of 1979 concerning Trade Procedures with the Eastern Bloc, which explicitly stated that Yugoslavia was no longer categorized as a country within the Eastern Bloc (Soesastro, 1989: 328).

Trade and payment agreement 1953 and its implementation

On May 18, 1953, official trade negotiations between the Indonesian delegation, chaired by R.A. Asmaun, and the Yugoslav delegation were held in Jakarta. This meeting marked the beginning of a formal framework for bilateral economic relations between Indonesia and Yugoslavia following their early, and still limited, diplomatic contacts. Despite the low volume of trade between the two countries during 1950–1952 (see Table 1), both sides demonstrated a strong political will to advance more substantive economic cooperation.

On June 11, 1953, the two delegations successfully reached and signed a trade agreement based on a Trade and Payment Agreement, which became effective from July 1, 1953, to July 1, 1954. Under the terms of this agreement, both countries committed to exchanging goods valued at USD 7.250.000. Indonesia agreed to export primary commodities such as tin valued at USD 2.5 million, copra valued at USD 2 million, rubber valued at USD 1.5 million, as well as several other commodities including hard fibers, hides, palm oil, coffee, tea, and spices.

Conversely, Indonesia would import from Yugoslavia iron and steel products worth USD 1.45 million, machinery worth USD 800.000, lighters worth USD 800.000, paper worth USD 250.000, electro-technical equipment worth USD 700.000, textiles worth USD 500.000, and various other goods.

The agreement was not merely a commercial transaction, but was also linked to the Indonesian government's long-term development projections as it approached the First Five-Year Development Plan (1956–1960). The government targeted the development of 92 pilot industrial projects, 61 power plant projects, as well as various infrastructure rehabilitation and expansion programs, including railway lines, highways, and ports across the Indonesian archipelago (Kian Wie, 2002: 379). Economic cooperation with Yugoslavia was therefore essential, as Indonesia did not yet possess an adequate domestic base for iron and steel production to support the planned projects of the 1956–1960 Development Plan. Meanwhile, Yugoslavia held comparative advantages in the production of capital goods without the political alignments of major blocs, consistent with Indonesia's independent and active foreign policy.

Financially, the payment agreement with Yugoslavia was conducted in US dollars (USD), differing from payment mechanisms with other Eastern European countries, which were generally settled using sterling. The choice of the dollar as the means of payment was driven by British government restrictions on sterling transfers (Hollinger, 1956: 193). This reflected the flexibility of cross-bloc trade cooperation with Yugoslavia during the Cold War.

Balance Sheet Trade and Implications Diplomacy economy (1954-1956)

The 1953 Trade and Payment Agreement was the first formal economic and political cooperation between the Indonesian government and Yugoslavia. Prior to the 1953 agreement, Indonesia and Yugoslavia had been bound by trade and payment arrangements concluded by the Dutch government during the period of the Republic of the United States of Indonesia. In the provisions concerning the transfer of sovereignty negotiated at the Round Table Conference in late 1949, it was stipulated that Indonesia would assume all rights and obligations previously negotiated on its behalf in the twenty-six trade and payment agreements that were in force at that time.

Table 1 Balance Sheet Indonesia-Yugoslavia trade
1950-1954 (in Rupiah)

Year	Export	Import	Remainder
1950	-	35.000	35.000
1951	15.000	112.000	97.000
1952	-	556.000	556.000
1953	213.000	233.000	20.000
1954	3.486.000	249.000	+ 3.237.000

Source : BPS. Imports and Exports According to Trade by Commodity 1950-1954

The export–import data between Indonesia and Yugoslavia in the early 1950s, as shown in Table 1, illustrate that Indonesia's trade position was in deficit from 1950 to 1952. This indicates an imbalance between the value of exports and imports. In 1950, trade relations were still non-reciprocal, with records showing only imports from Yugoslavia amounting to Rp. 35.000 and no exports from the Indonesian side. This condition persisted until 1952. The trade deficit further widened, particularly in 1952, when imports from Yugoslavia reached Rp. 556.000 without any corresponding Indonesian exports.

After the signing of the Trade and Payment Agreement, significant changes began to occur in 1953–1954. In 1953, Indonesia started exporting goods to Yugoslavia valued at Rp. 213.000, while imports amounted to Rp. 233.000. The peak was reached in 1954, when the trade balance recorded a surplus of Rp. 3.323.700. This surplus reflects the positive impact of the bilateral trade agreement and represents an important turning point in the economic relations between Indonesia and Yugoslavia in the early 1950s.

The visit of the Indonesian Minister of Education, Mr. Mangunsarkoro, and the Indonesian diplomat in Rome, Mr. Wiryopranoto, to Belgrade on 29 October 1953 further strengthened the bilateral relationship. During their meeting with President Josip Broz Tito, both parties discussed opportunities for deeper economic and trade cooperation. Tito expressed his interest in Indonesia's scarce tin resources and encouraged Indonesia to consider the gradual mechanization of its agrarian sector in order to improve industrial efficiency and national productivity.

He warned that industrialized countries that had already advanced often posed risks to agricultural nations like Indonesia, as they did not wish to see less-developed countries reach the same level of industrial progress. Mechanization through the importation of machinery, he argued, was one of the necessary steps to advance national industry. Tito also emphasized that Yugoslavia did not have colonial ambitions like the Western industrial powers, and therefore economic cooperation with his country could be conducted on the basis of equality and solidarity among developing nations.

Although the actual export and import figures in 1954 were still far from the amounts stipulated in the agreement, Milan Bartoš from the Yugoslav Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that this first trade agreement served as an important mechanism for expanding Yugoslavia's foreign markets. The agreement created new opportunities for Yugoslavia to obtain essential goods that were of strategic significance to the Yugoslav economy and were highly demanded and valued on the world market.

Table 2. Yugoslavia-Indonesia trade 1953-1958 (In millions of Yugoslavian dinars)

Year	Import From Indonesia	Export to Indonesia	Remainder
1953	29.3	1.44	-27.86
1954	101.9	19.62	-82.28
1955	242.5	121.6	-120.9
1956	168.9	65	-103.9

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1957	8	126	+118
1958 (until August)	129	6	-123

Source : Yugoslav-Indonesia Archive

Since the implementation of the 1953 Trade and Payment Agreement, the value of direct trade between the two countries increased significantly compared to the previous years. Nevertheless, as shown in Table 2 above, the economic relations between Yugoslavia and Indonesia during the period 1953–1958 remained fluctuating. Throughout these years except in 1957, Yugoslavia consistently experienced a trade deficit with Indonesia, with the value of its imports exceeding that of its exports. The highest volume of trade was recorded in 1955, with imports amounting to 242.5 million dinars and exports reaching 121.6 million dinars. The data also indicate that Yugoslavia maintained a strong interest in Indonesia's primary commodities.

In 1957, Yugoslav exports to Indonesia rose sharply by +118 million dinars, while imports declined drastically to only 8 million dinars. The imbalance in the trade accounts that year was closely related to the nationalization of Dutch enterprises by the Indonesian government. A direct consequence of this policy was the shortage of transportation facilities for shipping Indonesian goods overseas, due to the weakness of the national maritime sector, which still depended heavily on Dutch-owned vessels, including those operated by KPM (*Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij*). Indonesia's reduced export capacity affected its trade with various countries, including Yugoslavia. Nonetheless, the Indonesian government began to identify solutions to these transportation issues in the following year.

As a continuation of the earlier initiatives, on 6 June 1954 the Yugoslav Government sent a second trade delegation led by M. Popović, Head of the Economic Section of the Yugoslav Parliament, accompanied by Krsto Bulajic, Yugoslav Ambassador to Burma, and A. Sakonoc from the Yugoslav Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The delegation met with Indonesian Foreign Minister Sunaryo to discuss the further expansion of trade relations between the two countries.

Indonesia's trade relations with Yugoslavia developed further after President Sukarno's meeting with President Josip Broz Tito in September 1956, which resulted in a joint statement as a form of mutual commitment to open avenues for broader bilateral cooperation in the fields of economics and engineering, trade, and culture. In that meeting, the Yugoslav side showed greater interest in enhancing economic cooperation, while Sukarno placed more emphasis on advancing scientific and cultural relations through the exchange of student and professional delegations. Meanwhile, Tito expressed a desire to strengthen economic and technical cooperation through increased trade exchanges and joint geological exploration.

A month after Sukarno's visit, the Indonesian government sent a trade negotiation delegation to Yugoslavia with the aim of following up on the planned cooperation initiatives agreed upon with Tito. The composition of the Indonesian delegation included representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bank Indonesia, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Economic Affairs, and the Ministry of Transportation. The delegation was led by Sudomo Prawirodirdjo (Deputy Head of the Directorate of Inter-State Economics at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Jakarta).

The members of the delegation included: HR Saleh (Senior Official at the Directorate of Inter-State Economic Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Jakarta), H. Djajakusuma (Bank Indonesia staff), Mr. G. Junus (Head of the Foreign Monetary Division/General Supervisor of the State Treasury at the Ministry of Finance), Nurdin Pasaribu (Head of the Trade Development Section at the Foreign Office of the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Jakarta), F.W. Sinaulan (Industrial Bureau Inspector in Makassar under the Ministry of Economic Affairs), F.J. Kojongian (Kadin supervisory official from the Department of Education at the Ministry of Transportation), and Adiwoso Abubakar (Head of Division at the Directorate of Inter-State Economic Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs). Indonesian officials negotiated the technical aspects of trade to be implemented in the following year, including export–import tariffs, quotas, and non-tariff barriers. In addition, they negotiated issues related to market access in both countries. These negotiations resulted in a Free Trade Agreement signed on December 14, 1956. The agreement, which came into force on June 7, 1957, became the foundation for intensifying economic relations during the Guided Democracy era.

CONCLUSION

Indonesia's trade relations with Yugoslavia in the early 1950s reflected the initial dynamics of Indonesian economic diplomacy in its efforts to break away from dependence on Dutch colonial markets and structures. Through the 1952 trade mission and the signing of the 1953 Trade and Payment Agreement, the Indonesian government demonstrated a new direction in its foreign economic policy namely, expanding markets and trade partners beyond the Western Bloc. Yugoslavia, as a socialist country pursuing an independent foreign policy, emerged as an important economic partner for Indonesia. Although the value and volume of trade during 1953–1956 remained modest and did not reach the targeted USD 7.5 million stipulated in the agreement, the arrangement marked the beginning of mutually beneficial direct economic relations outside the influence of the major blocs of the Cold War. Through this agreement, Indonesia gained access to capital goods and industrial technologies necessary to support its national development plans, while Yugoslavia obtained raw materials and a new market for its industrial products in Southeast Asia, in addition to strengthening its standing as a politically independent state.

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