

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Diplomacy, migration, and employment: The historical approach to Malaysia–Indonesia relations

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Abstract

Malaysia and Indonesia share long-standing diplomatic relations rooted in common historical, cultural, and linguistic ties, which have fostered cooperation in economic, political, security, educational, and sociocultural affairs. This study examines the economic dimension of these relations, focusing on labor migration. Rather than measuring changes in migration flows, it adopts a historical approach that interprets Memoranda of Understanding and irregular migration issues as instruments of migration diplomacy. Indonesia remains the largest source of migrant workers in Malaysia, helping to address labor shortages in the 3D sectors—dirty, dangerous, and difficult—while remittances contribute to Indonesia's economy. However, disputes over Memoranda of Understanding and the persistence of irregular migration (*pendatang asing tanpa izin*, or illegal foreign migrant) have at times created diplomatic tensions. Despite these challenges, both governments consistently demonstrated a commitment to resolving issues through dialog and cooperation. Historical ties continue to provide a vital foundation for sustaining Malaysia–Indonesia relations and for strengthening their ability to address migration-related conflicts constructively.

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1. Introduction

Strong diplomatic relations are essential for fostering meaningful cooperation across social, cultural, religious, economic, and political spheres (Muhammad, 2014). This is particularly critical for neighboring states, where unresolved border disputes can escalate into broader diplomatic and security challenges. The geographical proximity of bordering countries also encourages patterns of cross-border migration (Harun, 2009), which—if not managed effectively—can generate tension and undermine stability. Consequently, cooperation is not merely desirable but necessary for advancing national interests in areas such as economic growth, political stability, and security. In the contemporary era, modernization has

further intensified interdependence and integration among states, making bilateral engagement a strategic imperative rather than an option (Irdayanti, 2013).

Malaysia attaches great importance to maintaining strong diplomatic relations by adhering to the principles of negotiation, openness, and cooperation in the economic, social, and political affairs with other countries. One of the countries with which Malaysia shares close diplomatic relations is its closest neighbor, Indonesia (Abdullah *et al.*, 2011). The fraternal relationship between Malaysia and Indonesia has been established since before independence. For example, people from the Malay Peninsula once joined the volunteer forces to support Indonesia's struggle for independence from the Netherlands (Nik Mahmud, 2000). After Malaysia achieved independence in 1957, diplomatic relations between Malaysia and Indonesia were officially formalized. The Malaysian representative, Senu Abdul Rahman, was sent to Indonesia, which became the first country selected as a non-Commonwealth diplomatic partner (Ab Ghani & Paidi, 2010).

The concept of migration diplomacy provides a crucial framework for understanding the intersection between foreign policy and international migration, emphasizing three core elements: (i) interstate relations influenced by migration, (ii) migration as a diplomatic tool, and (iii) the management of migration as an international issue (Tolay, 2022). It describes how states leverage cross-border mobility to influence international relations, connecting migration with security, economic interests, and national identity, while employing bargaining strategies based on their roles as migration-sending, receiving, or transit states (Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019). Migration diplomacy often involves bilateral and multilateral agreements aimed at externalizing borders and managing migration flows, such as visa exchanges for skilled migrants from the Global South and the repatriation of undocumented migrants, alongside policies promoting development and dual citizenship (Wihtol de Wenden, 2023). Overall, migration diplomacy strategically utilizes international migration governance as part of a state's foreign policy, highlighting the role states play in shaping diplomatic relations through migration management (Ahlborn, 2019).

The interdependence of Malaysia and Indonesia in employment matters has not hindered their cooperation but has instead created mutual benefits. Malaysia relies heavily on Indonesian workers to address labor shortages, particularly in low-skilled sectors, while Indonesia views labor migration as a means of addressing domestic unemployment and strengthening its economy through remittances (Balakrishnan, 2013). Reflecting this dynamic, Malaysia has consistently ranked among

the top 10 destinations for international migrants in the Asia-Pacific region and the second highest in Southeast Asia (United Nations, 2013). Several factors contribute to Malaysia's attractiveness as a migration hub, including its geographic proximity to sending countries, political stability, and sustained economic growth (Ajis, 2015). Against this backdrop, examining Malaysia–Indonesia relations through the lens of labor migration is crucial for understanding how both nations navigate the opportunities and challenges of their deep-rooted economic and social interdependence. This study does not evaluate migration flows or quantify the outcomes of agreements on migration numbers. Rather, it adopts a historical–diplomatic approach to evaluate how migration issues became embedded in bilateral relations. In this context, Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) and irregular migration are viewed less as instruments for regulating flows than as tools of migration diplomacy—mechanisms through which both states negotiate cooperation, assert authority, and manage bilateral tensions.

2. Background of Malaysia–Indonesia relations

Following Malaya's attainment of independence in 1957, the Indonesian Foreign Minister, Dr. Subandrio, commemorated this significant milestone in Kuala Lumpur, viewing it as the commencement of a new chapter in Malaysia–Indonesia relations (Muniandy, 1996). Upon Malaya's emergence as a sovereign state, Indonesia demonstrated its respect by instructing Radio Republik Indonesia to refrain from broadcasting the song *Terang Bulan*, which had been adapted into *Negaraku*, the national anthem of Malaya at that time (Sunarti, 2014). Furthermore, Indonesia's support for Malaysia was exemplified through its endorsement of Malaysia's admission into the United Nations. This diplomatic goodwill was reciprocated by Malaysia, which welcomed collaborative engagements with Indonesia across social, cultural, and economic affairs through formal agreements and reciprocal visits by their respective leaders. The cordial relations between the two nations were further reinforced by shared ideological affinities, rooted in historical and fraternal ties (Esa *et al.*, 2022).

Diplomatic ties between Malaysia and Indonesia grew closer with the signing of the Treaty of Friendship on April 17, 1959, which symbolized fraternal relations and sought to strengthen kinship between the two nations (Ab Ghani & Paidi, 2010; Harun, 2009; Nik Mahmud, 2000). The treaty was followed by various cultural and educational exchanges that deepened bilateral cooperation. For instance, Indonesia sent a troupe of artists to Malaya in

November 1960, staging 41 performances over 21 days, and also sent Bing Slamet to Radio Malaya to train local artists. That same year, Malayan teachers visited Indonesia to study its education system, and four Malays received scholarships to undergo civil aviation training at the Jakarta Aviation Academy. In 1961, Indonesia's Minister of Religious Affairs led a delegation to Kuala Lumpur for a Quran recitation competition (Muniandy, 1996). Despite these cooperative initiatives, relations later deteriorated due to personal and political conflicts, culminating in Indonesia's confrontation with Malaysia and the severance of diplomatic ties on September 16, 1963 (Abdul Razak *et al.*, 2013; Nik Mahmud, 2000).

The confrontation marked a turning point in relations between Malaysia and Indonesia, transforming their previously close ties into a period of hostility. During this time, all forms of cooperation were suspended, and tensions escalated through acts of boycott and protest. In Indonesia, for instance, employees of the Chartered Bank—the British-owned Bank—and the Singapore-owned Overseas Chinese Bank launched an anti-Malaysian strike. Similarly, the Airport Workers' Union refused to service aircraft belonging to Malaysia Airways, British Overseas Airways, and Canadian Pacific that landed in Jakarta, as a demonstration against the formation of Malaysia. In retaliation, the President of the Malaysian Railway Workers' Union, Donald Uren, urged Malaysian transport workers to boycott Indonesian vehicles. These confrontations further strained economic cooperation, particularly after Indonesia severed diplomatic ties with Malaysia following the KOTOE meeting on September 21, 1963 (Abdul Razak & Wan Azhar, 2021). Relations gradually improved after the fall of Sukarno and the rise of Suharto in 1966. Under Suharto's leadership in Indonesia and Tun Razak's administration in Malaysia, both countries moved toward reconciliation, strengthening bilateral relations and restoring diplomatic ties that had been disrupted during the confrontation era (Harun, 2006; Yaakub, 2009).

Cooperation between the two countries extended across multiple sectors, particularly employment. Malaysia has long relied on workers from Indonesia in various sectors such as construction, manufacturing, and agriculture. However, after the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998, marking the beginning of the Reform Era, a new chapter in the relationship between the two countries was created when both countries were involved in the conflict over the Sipadan and Ligitan Islands. The international court ruled in 2002 in favor of the Malaysian government. However, the conflict of these two islands caused Indonesians to show their protest and dissatisfaction (Ismail & Govindasamy, 2019; Maksum, 2021). Although the conflict had an

impact on the Indonesian community, the two countries still have a strong relationship in cooperation regarding foreign workers. The dependence of both countries on employment matters does not prevent cooperation from being held in providing benefits to their respective countries. These countries need each other, as Malaysia is in dire need of foreign workers to fill job vacancies, and Indonesia is trying to curb the unemployment problem. In addition, sending its citizens to Malaysia as workers is also seen as a significant contributor to its country's economy through remittances (Balakrishnan, 2013).

3. The trends of international migration to Malaysia

The rapid pace of globalization has influenced the economic development of both developed and developing countries. In addition, the effects of globalization have widened the gap between developed and developing countries (Idris & Yussof, 2009). The demand for foreign workers in Malaysia became evident as Malaysia began to develop its economic sector. Malaysia's economic development can be categorized into four phases, starting with the initial phase of independence (1957–1970), the New Economic Policy (1971–1990), the National Development Policy (1991–2000), and the National Vision Policy (2001–2010) (Sayed, 2014). These policies reflect the government's efforts to transform Malaysia into a developed country. For example, Malaysia's economic development during the 1970s, with the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) from 1971 to 1990, introduced export-oriented industrialization and public sector expansion (Esa *et al.*, 2022). The goal of this policy was to eradicate poverty in Malaysia regardless of race and to restructure Malaysian society by addressing racial economic imbalances (Wong, 1988).

The implementation of this policy stimulated growth in industrial sectors, especially manufacturing, followed by trade, services, and government. These sectors expanded primarily in urban areas, creating numerous job opportunities and causing population migration. This migration involved two groups, namely domestic and international migration. Internal (domestic) migration refers to individuals from rural areas migrating to cities to seek better economic opportunities, particularly among the younger generation (Sayed Mahadi & Osman, 2020).

Rapid economic transformation has required foreign workers to meet the increasing demand for labor (Aziz & Saad, 2022). Malaysia is also one of the top countries receiving foreign workers in the Asian region. Malaysia has opened its doors to the arrival of foreigners since the early 20th century through the liberal immigration policy introduced by the British Colonial government, with the

entry of immigrants from China, India, and Indonesia (Ahmad *et al.*, 2014; Iruthayaraj & Pappusamy, 2014). The implementation of the NEP served as a mechanism for shaping the Malaysian economy by transforming its economic structure from agriculture to industry (Avila, 2015; Hugo, 1995). The NEP created numerous job opportunities for the local population. However, there were several sectors that locals were reluctant to fill, particularly those involving 3D (dirty, dangerous, and difficult) jobs in rural areas. Vacancies in these sectors prompted the government to recruit foreign workers, including those from Indonesia (Fauziyah, 2015; Robertson, 2009). Indonesia also recorded the highest foreign exchange earnings from Malaysia (Balakrishnan, 2013).

The announcement of the NEP transformed Malaysia into a labor-intensive country, particularly for semi-skilled and unskilled workers. The demographic differences and economic gaps between Malaysia and its neighboring countries contributed to the emergence of a second-generation group of migrants in Malaysia. In the 1970s, many migrants were brought in informally in small numbers to meet labor demands in the rural plantation sector. With sustainable development and the rapid expansion of the industrial sector and economic modernization in Malaysia at that time, dependence on foreign workers increased significantly. Between 1988 and 1997, the Malaysian economy grew rapidly, at approximately 8% per year, and this situation transformed unemployment in the mid-1980s into abundant employment opportunities by the early 1990s (Lim, 1981; Crouch, 1993; Kanapathy, 2006).

Malaysia recorded a low unemployment rate and an increase in the educational attainment of its youth. As the level of education increased, it led to a competitive wage demand among local workers, and many local workers became unwilling to work in low-skilled sectors such as agriculture, construction, and plantations (Abella, 2013). According to the World Bank Report (1995), 14 million new jobs were created between 1987 and 1993, and the labor market growth rate was 3.9%, while the local labor growth rate was 3.1%. This indicates that the Malaysian government's dependence on foreign workers was unavoidable during that period.

Malaysia has experienced a shortage of local labor, especially in the agricultural sector, since the 1970s. Labor shortages occurred in the rubber and oil palm plantation sectors, particularly in southern Johor, land-clearing areas on the east coast of the Peninsula, rice cultivation areas, and the construction industry (Lim, 1996; Said *et al.*, 2002). According to Stahl (1984a; 1984b), labor shortages in the agricultural sector at that time were caused by a shift in plantation crops from rubber to oil palm. Oil palm

plantations do not require a large number of laborers per hectare of land. In addition, structural unemployment among women and children persisted because oil palm plantations required male laborers with greater physical strength compared to that needed for rubber plantations.

The entry of foreign workers into Malaysia occurred in two ways: (i) legally, through a registered agency under the Malaysian Immigration Department, and (ii) illegally, where their entry did not go through any registered agency (Ajis *et al.*, 2014), following the implementation of the New Economic Policy in 1970 (Kassim, 1987). At that time, the number of work permits issued by the Immigration Department also increased from 3,484 in 1985 to 24,152 in 1990 (Kanapathy, 2001). The New Economic Policy attracted foreign investors, particularly in the industrial sector. Therefore, the implementation of the New Economic Policy resulted in a surplus of jobs (S. Othman & Rahim, 2014), especially in the construction and services sectors (Ajis, 2015). The high demand for foreign workers was also due to the reluctance of local citizens to take up jobs in the plantation, manufacturing, mining, and construction sectors (Azed, 2014). According to Kanfur & Mustafa (1998), one of the most significant labor shortages occurred in the plantation sector, as evidenced by a study by the United Planters Association of Malaysia (UPAM), which found that the rubber and oil palm plantation sub-sectors suffered losses of MYR 370 million between 1980 and 1985 due to a shortage of workers in the sector.

According to Kassim (2014), the distribution of foreign worker entry varies across sectors and states in Malaysia because their entry is influenced by economic development, which can be classified into three localities. Peninsular Malaysia has attracted foreign workers to the manufacturing sector due to developments in the industrial and manufacturing sectors at that time, while Sabah and Sarawak have attracted foreign workers to agriculture and plantations because both regions continued to focus on agriculture as an economic activity. Foreign workers find it relatively easy to secure jobs in countries such as Malaysia. This can be attributed to two factors: first, their willingness to accept non-exclusive jobs, such as working in 3D conditions, compared to local workers. This situation leads employers to prefer foreign workers, as they are more willing to work under dangerous and uncomfortable conditions. Second, foreign workers are willing to accept lower wages for unskilled jobs compared to local workers (Athukorala & Devadason, 2011; Robertson, 2009). However, employers must employ foreign workers in accordance with the policies and procedures set by the government, ensuring they hold valid passports and visas and have passed the required health checks (S. Othman & Rahim, 2014).

3.1. Indonesian labor migration to Malaysia

Malaysia is a popular destination for foreign workers due to its geographical factors, political stability, and economic development (Ajis, 2015). Of the 15 recognized foreign-labor source countries in Malaysia, Indonesia is the largest sender of foreign labor (Devadason & Meng, 2014; Fauziyah, 2015). The first migration of Indonesians to Malaya before the colonial era is difficult to determine, as there are no detailed records of their migration until the colonial period (Muniandy, 1996). According to Asgar (2012), the entry of Indonesian labor into Malaysia is not recent, as it began in the 19th century, during the Dutch East Indies era, around 1887, when they worked as laborers.

During the colonial era, the Javanese community was the third largest migrant group brought into Malaysia after India and China, serving as temporary laborers and also becoming permanent residents (Karim *et al.*, 1999; Sayed, 2014). The influx of Javanese workers increased around 1930. In 1947, the Javanese community was recorded at 307,150 people in Malaya, and by 1957, the number had grown to 2,427,834. These migrants constituted a significant portion of Malaya's population. However, this number fluctuated due to the effects of World War II and the confrontation between Indonesia and Malaysia (Asgar, 2012; Fauziyah, 2015).

In 1970, the number of Indonesian foreign workers migrating to Malaysia increased again due to the modernization that occurred with the implementation of the NEP, which required a large number of foreign workers to fill job vacancies in several major sectors (Fauziyah, 2015; Liow, 2004). Around 1980, the number of Indonesian foreign workers had reached an average of 50,000 people. The Workforce Division at the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Kuala Lumpur released official data reporting that a total of 1,309,480 Indonesians were registered as foreign workers in Malaysia until December 2014 (Jizal *et al.*, 2015). Meanwhile, around 1990, the recruitment of Indonesian foreign workers continued to fill vacancies in the construction, plantation, and domestic sectors due to local labor shortages that occurred in the late 1980s (Liow, 2004). Indonesian foreign workers, or *Tenaga Kerja Indonesia* (TKI), who enter Malaysia are divided into two situations: documented and undocumented. However, the number of undocumented foreign workers exceeds the number of documented workers. However, the exact number of undocumented foreign workers cannot be ascertained, as no agency has complete data on them (Haris *et al.*, 2015).

The presence of Indonesians as workers in Malaysia is driven by pull and push factors (Harun, 2006). Among the pull factors encouraging Indonesians to migrate to Malaysia are the similarity in general demographics

between the two countries; the network of labor agents institutionalized through the 1984 Medan Agreement; the high demand for labor supply in Malaysia; the network of linguistic connections, such as culture and history (Balakrishnan, 2013; Jizal *et al.*, 2015); the proximity of the countries (D. Handayani *et al.*, 2015); ease of communication; the assumption that Malaysia is a country that is easy to enter illegally (Sulistiyono, 2016); and the presence of intermediary networks—such as brokers and labor agencies—in facilitating the flow of immigrants to Malaysia (Balakrishnan, 2013; Fauziyah, 2015).

In addition, according to Kassim (1997), two factors attract TKIs to work in Malaysia. First, the implementation of the NEP created many job opportunities in the industrial and service sectors, prompting local Malaysians to migrate to cities to work in these sectors for higher wages. This policy encouraged Indonesians to fill labor vacancies in the agricultural sector outside the cities. Second, the demand for Indonesian female labor remains high. This is because the NEP created job opportunities in the formal work sector for highly educated Malaysian women. In addition, Malaysian women who are not highly educated are more likely to choose jobs in the industrial sector due to the higher wage benefits. This has resulted in a gap between sectors, which encouraged the recruitment of female workers from Indonesia (*Tenaga Kerja Wanita*) as domestic workers (Azed, 2014; Balakrishnan, 2013; Mei, 2006).

Meanwhile, the identified push factors are the economic and political conditions in Indonesia, which are not sustainable and stable, making it difficult to provide jobs for all its citizens. In addition, the population of Indonesia is also among the highest in the world, exacerbating the unemployment problem (D. Handayani *et al.*, 2015). This unemployment problem has forced Indonesians to migrate to Malaysia and fill the job opportunities available there. Support from Indonesian leaders also influences the migration of Indonesian workers to Malaysia, where, apart from helping to reduce the unemployment problem, the Indonesian government views the sending of Indonesian workers as a way to improve Indonesia's economy through foreign exchange (Mei, 2006).

Among the initiatives of the Indonesian government is the introduction of the Inter-National Employment Program in 1970, which falls under the portfolio of the Ministry of Human Resources. This program is considered successful in overcoming the serious unemployment problem in Indonesia. Among the destination countries for TKI are Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore (Fauziyah, 2015). Among the Association of Southeast Asian Nations countries,

Malaysia is a popular destination for TKIs due to historical ties, affinity, culture, easy-to-understand language, and a large diaspora. Singapore is less attractive to TKIs because some consider the country's migration enforcement laws to be very strict (Ahmad *et al.*, 2014).

4. Malaysia–Indonesia diplomatic relations in the context of foreign workers: Issues and challenges

Malaysia is the preferred destination for Indonesia to send its workers. Among the factors are historical ties, cultural affinity, and the close border distance between the two countries. Weiner (1985) also stated that a country tends to accept immigrants from another country because of certain historical relationships. In addition, a country tends to allow open entry to foreign immigrants who have close ethnic ties. According to Hugo (1993), during the colonial period, the British treated Indonesian immigrants differently compared to other immigrants from China and India. This was because they shared racial similarities, namely the Malay race, with the population of Malaya at that time. Many Indonesians entered Peninsular Malaysia voluntarily to find work and eventually settled permanently, assimilating into the local culture. Among the early Indonesian immigrants who came to Malaysia were the Minangkabau from Sumatra, the Bugis from Sulawesi, and the Javanese from Java. These groups came to Malaya via sea routes. While the Bugis and Sumatrans initially entered as traders, the Javanese were mostly contract laborers and smallholders (N. Othman, 1986). Several key issues related to diplomatic relations between Malaysia and Indonesia are discussed in the subsequent sections.

4.1. Memoranda of Understanding on foreign labor: Managing Indonesia–Malaysia migration relations

In the 1980s, the number of Indonesian foreign workers increased to the point where it became difficult to manage, causing an influx of undocumented Indonesian foreign workers, often referred to as illegal immigrants or *pendatang asing tanpa izin* (PATI). This problem became a focus for both countries, especially Malaysia, due to the increasing number of Indonesian foreign workers who tend to create problems in Malaysia. Consequently, the two countries began to cooperate and engage in diplomacy in managing the entry of Indonesian foreign workers by entering into a bilateral agreement in 1984, namely the Medan Agreement (Azed, 2014; Fauziyah, 2015; Kassim, 2012). The Medan Agreement became the starting point for official Malaysia–Indonesia diplomatic relations in the context of employment. It was signed in 1984 by Malaysia and Indonesia in Medan, Indonesia, as an initiative to establish formal and legal channels for the hiring of

foreign workers. Through the agreement, Indonesia agreed to supply workers according to the number and categories requested by Malaysia from time to time in six employment sectors, particularly in the agricultural and domestic service sectors. As a result, it facilitated the mass entry of Indonesian immigrants into Malaysia (Ajis *et al.*, 2010; Devadason & Meng, 2014; Rashid *et al.*, 2018).

However, the Medan Agreement did not fully achieve its intended goal, as Malaysia began to be flooded with PATI. This was influenced by the increasing demand from employers for unskilled labor at lower cost rates (Kanapathy, 2006). Malaysia and Indonesia also have Diplomatic Notes and MoUs regarding formal and informal workers. These regulations are influenced by international laws such as the United Nations Convention on the Protection of Migrant Workers and their Families (1990), the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, and others (Azed, 2014).

In mid-2004, Malaysia conducted a massive repatriation process of illegal immigrants to Indonesia. This served as a warning from Malaysia to Indonesia regarding the dumping of illegal immigrants in the country. Consequently, in May 2004, Malaysia and Indonesia jointly signed an MoU to outline the procedures that Indonesian citizens must follow to work in Malaysia (Mei, 2006). This memorandum, in 2004, represented an initial step for Malaysia and Indonesia to reduce the number of illegal immigrants. Although this memorandum aimed to curb the entry of illegal immigrants, it was seen as a violation of the rights of foreign workers (Hadi, 2008), as it did not take into account the rights of domestic workers (Rahayu & Ramdlany, 2016; Go, 2007; P. Handayani, 2014). This agreement was formalized by both countries, with Malaysia represented by the Minister of Human Resources, Dr. Fong Chan Onn, and Indonesia represented by the Minister of Manpower and Transmigration, Mr. Jacob Nuwa Wea (Rashid *et al.*, 2018).

As the 2004 MoU was seen as a violation of the rights of foreign workers, especially domestic workers, an amendment was made through the 2006 MoU. It was signed by Malaysia and Indonesia on May 13, 2006, in Bali, Indonesia. This memorandum aimed to strengthen the mechanisms for the agreement and recruitment of Indonesian domestic workers in Malaysia. It outlined several guidelines to qualify Indonesian citizens to work in Malaysia as domestic workers. Among the guidelines, a domestic worker must follow every law, regulation, and policy set by the Malaysian government, especially immigration laws. In addition, domestic workers must meet age qualifications, have knowledge of local culture, possess communication skills, and maintain good health

and mental health before being allowed to work in Malaysia (see <https://www.ilo.org/resource/labour-migration-asia-and-pacific>).

However, the 2006 MoU is considered to have yet to achieve a significant impact on the protection needs of TKIs in Malaysia, especially domestic workers, as the memorandum contains several weaknesses: there are no minimum standard requirements for a job, workers cannot join trade unions, workers cannot keep their passports, and the rights of domestic workers are not fully addressed (Malahayati, 2015).

Therefore, in 2011, another amendment was made by both countries through the 2011 Memorandum Amendment Protocol. The protocol states that Indonesian workers are given the right to keep their passports. Apart from that, this memorandum also addresses the right to a day off, sets the minimum wage, and requires that wages be paid through a bank. Both countries responded positively to this amendment (Rahayu & Ramdlany, 2016). In addition, in April 2022, both countries agreed to sign an MoU regarding the protection of Indonesian domestic workers. The MoU was signed by the Malaysian Minister of Human Resources, M. Saravanan, and the Indonesian Minister of Manpower, Ida Fauziyah, and was witnessed by the Prime Minister of Malaysia. In this MoU, both parties agreed to ensure that all recruitment processes and Indonesian domestic workers protection mechanisms would be implemented comprehensively by the relevant parties, in accordance with policies and legislation in both countries (Zin, 2022).

The protection agreed upon in the MoU covers various aspects, such as wages, which are to be paid at the minimum wage rate of MYR 1,500. In addition, it involves the protection of Indonesian domestic workers in relation to the rights to notice of termination of contract, paid annual leave, weekly rest leave, and social protection, including insurance (Bernama, 2023). In this memorandum, both parties agreed to use the One Channel System for the recruitment of TKIs to work in Malaysia. However, in July 2022, the Indonesian Ambassador claimed that the Malaysian Immigration Department was still using the Maid Online System, which clearly violated the agreed MoU. As a result, Indonesia imposed a temporary freeze on their citizens from working in Malaysia. However, the freeze was lifted when the leaders of both countries successfully resolved the dispute (Prianto *et al.*, 2023). Indonesian Foreign Minister, Retno Marsudi, admitted that throughout Joko Widodo's administration, disputes related to borders and the protection of foreign workers with the Malaysian government were among the diplomatic successes achieved. It is also evidence of the commitment

of both countries to maintaining peace and increasing cooperation in the Southeast Asian region. Although there were some tense situations exacerbated by provocations from certain parties, both countries were able to reach an agreement through diplomacy (Alhadjri, 2024).

4.2. Issues concerning the employment of Indonesian migrant workers

Apart from the memorandum issue, problems arising from TKIs also pose a challenge to Malaysia–Indonesia diplomatic relations. This is because the influx of foreign immigrants has created a negative environment and several problems for the destination country. The problems caused by foreign workers are not new to any country. According to Ali (1997), the influx of foreign immigrants in Western European countries has also had a negative impact, although the region used to depend on immigrants from North Africa and Turkey for economic development. In addition, foreign immigrants in Germany and France have also been the subject of sensitive political issues, sometimes leading to riots. According to Cornelius & Tsuda (2004), the increase in illegal immigrants in a country has created a policy gap, which ultimately leads to various consequences that the host country must address. A policy gap occurs when policy outputs cannot achieve the policy goals that have been outlined. The implications that must be addressed are diverse, such as increased enforcement costs, reduced job opportunities for residents, and security threats. In this scenario, the “gap” exists when the government is trying to serve two interests: businesses that demand low-wage workers and a public that may fear cultural change or job competition.

An example of the impact of security threats is the riot among Indonesian workers in Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, in 2002. This incident caused the then-Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamed, to order a freeze on the recruitment of Indonesian workers, but he withdrew his statement just a few days after announcing it. As a result of the incident, Malaysia reduced the quota for the employment of foreign workers from Indonesia and opened the door to foreign workers from other countries, such as Bangladesh, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Vietnam (Devadason & Meng, 2014; Kassim, 2012; Khor & Mitra, 2013). A critical examination reveals that immigration raids and declarative policy announcements—such as the former Prime Minister's initial call for a freeze on recruitment—can be interpreted as a form of political theater. These actions perform a symbolic function, staged to project an image of state authority and decisive control to the domestic public, particularly in response to crises that threaten the perception of order. However, the swift retraction of such pronouncements lays bare the performative nature

of these gestures. The change demonstrates that these stringent political stances are ultimately untenable when they conflict with foundational economic structures. The nation's reliance on a pliable, low-cost foreign labor force constitutes a powerful economic imperative that consistently supersedes rhetorical political posturing. This pattern underscores a fundamental policy contradiction: the state's performative enforcement of restriction exists in tension with its tacit sanctioning of a migration system designed to supply essential labor.

Although the contribution of foreign workers is critical to the economic and development aspects of the country, more effective and comprehensive migration control measures need to be implemented to curb the implications of the entry of migrants, especially from Indonesia. This issue of foreign workers is essential to address because both countries need to maintain diplomatic relations in terms of employment due to the mutual dependency in this field. In addition, the issue of foreign workers also tends to be a source of tension for other issues and can affect the relationship between Malaysia and Indonesia (Avila, 2015). Among the issues related to foreign workers are illegal immigrants or PATI (Kassim, 2005), abuse issues, protection and welfare issues, minimum wage issues (Brettner-Litherland, 2016), and threats to local citizens. Issues and implications caused by foreign workers can pose a threat to the receiving and sending countries and are also considered an issue of international security affairs (Liow, 2004).

According to Ahmad *et al.* (2014), the migration of people across national borders (international migration) tends to affect security in the international relations of both countries (sending and receiving countries). The threats caused by international migration can be divided into three dimensions: (i) foreign immigrants can pose a threat to the receiving country in terms of economic well-being, social order, cultural values, religion, and political stability; (ii) migrants also have the potential to create tension and place a burden on bilateral relations, thereby impacting regional and international stability; and (iii) illegal migration tends to have an impact on human security.

The entry of illegal immigrants from Indonesia has been detected since around the 1970s. At that time, most of them worked in the agricultural sector, while some were involved in the construction sector in urban areas. In the 1980s, most of these illegal immigrants began to venture into other sectors in urban areas, such as the service sector, manufacturing, and domestic services (Kassim, 2014). Several factors contributing to the emergence of illegal immigrants in Malaysia include the role of smuggling syndicates, social networks, border

encroachment, close border distances, factors of affinity, historical factors, and overlapping legal systems between documented and undocumented immigrants (Kassim, 1987; Ajis, 2015). According to Asis (2004), irregular migrant entry channels, ineffective migration policies, and insufficient information are also factors facilitating the entry of foreign immigrants. For example, in Indonesia, all processes of sending Indonesian workers in and out are monopolized by *Celo* and *Tekong*. Migration policies are also seen as impractical to implement due to bureaucratic constraints that complicate the process of managing the migration of foreign workers (Rani, 2012). Most foreign workers who enter legally but end up becoming PATI are due to two factors: (i) some employers forget to send them back, or the employers assume that the workers themselves will carry out the repatriation process. There are some situations where employers deliberately contact the authorities to arrest foreign workers whose permits have expired; and (ii) workers themselves, where the foreign workers involved flee before being sent back by the employer because they want to continue working in Malaysia (Ajis, 2015).

As discussed previously, the role of agents, also known as *Celo*, is very influential. According to P. Handayani (2014), among the factors contributing to the influx of PATI in Malaysia is the influence of middlemen such as *Celo* and bureaucratic factors in both Indonesia and Malaysia. She suggested that the process of sending TKI to the destination country should not involve middlemen or agents but should function more as a government-to-government affair. In addition, the bureaucratic aspects and procedures for managing foreign workers abroad by the sending and receiving countries need to be reviewed and implemented more flexibly. This is because some foreign workers, when faced with bureaucratic red tape, will seek help from agents, especially illegal agents, to manage their shipment to the destination country through smuggling. The widespread entry of illegal immigrants has caused various negative effects by creating a sense of insecurity and discomfort for local people. Among the negative effects involving illegal immigrants are settlement problems, impacts on the rights of local people, the outflow of national money, competition for local workers, and the encouragement of criminal activities (Brettner-Litherland, 2016).

This influx of undocumented foreign workers has been considered a criminal activity. Liow (2004) states that Malaysian law enforcement considers Indonesian illegal immigrants a threat to national security. In 2001, a total of 1,051 Indonesian foreign workers were arrested for criminal acts such as rape, theft, robbery, and murder.

In addition, some Indonesian illegal immigrants were detected in possession of firearms, which were successfully seized from their homes. These illegal immigrants' crimes have been detected in Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia (Liow, 2004). In fact, some Indonesian illegal immigrants have used fake identity cards to apply to join the Malaysian army. This situation is considered very serious as it involves aspects of national sovereignty, potentially threatening the national defense system (Ajis *et al.*, 2009).

Recently, the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency shot at a boat carrying five Indonesian illegal immigrants, resulting in the death of one individual. Authorities claimed that the boat had rammed a Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency patrol boat and that the occupants attempted to attack the authorities with a weapon (Mohamed, 2025). The incident led to a demonstration at the Malaysian embassy in Jakarta, where protesters threw eggs at the embassy building and demanded that the authorities involved be punished (Ayu, 2025). Consequently, the Indonesian Foreign Ministry sent a diplomatic note to the Malaysian government urging a fair investigation into the possible use of excessive force by the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (Berita Harian, 2025). The incident also involved the intervention of the heads of state of both countries, with the Malaysian Prime Minister assuring that a transparent and thorough investigation would be carried out. He also urged Malaysians not to react in any way to the demonstration at the Malaysian embassy in Jakarta, Indonesia (Muhamad Lokman, 2025).

5. Conclusion

Migration diplomacy between Malaysia and Indonesia is grounded in their long-standing historical relationship, which predates independence and is reinforced by cultural, linguistic, and social similarities. Since the 1980s, when Malaysia shifted its economic orientation from agriculture to the industrial sector, Indonesia became the first country to formalize labor migration through an MoU. This institutionalized the supply of Indonesian workers to Malaysia's manufacturing, construction, and plantation sectors, reflecting the mutual dependence of both countries. For Malaysia, Indonesian labor has been essential in sustaining labor-intensive industries and addressing shortages in low-skilled sectors. Conversely, Indonesia views labor migration as a strategy to mitigate unemployment and generate foreign exchange through remittances. This economic interdependence has elevated labor migration to a central aspect of bilateral diplomacy, making it both a necessity and a sensitive issue in the broader context of Malaysia–Indonesia relations.

Despite its benefits, labor migration has also created significant diplomatic challenges. The presence of undocumented workers, weak enforcement of labor rights, and occasional mistreatment of Indonesian migrant workers or TKIs have triggered domestic discontent in Indonesia. Media coverage of abuses has fueled public pressure, at times straining bilateral ties. Moreover, maritime security disputes and cross-border incidents have further complicated the management of migration issues. To address these tensions, both governments have employed MoUs, bilateral negotiations, and diplomatic channels as mechanisms of migration diplomacy. While these agreements provide frameworks for regulating recruitment, employment, and worker protection, their implementation has often been inconsistent. Nonetheless, diplomatic engagement has prevented disputes from escalating, with both governments demonstrating pragmatism in resolving crises for the sake of broader bilateral cooperation.

Migration diplomacy remains a critical tool for managing Malaysia–Indonesia relations. Strengthening its effectiveness requires reforms in three key areas: (i) improving the protection of workers' rights, (ii) enhancing the monitoring and enforcement of bilateral agreements, and (iii) promoting effective dispute resolution mechanisms. By transforming labor mobility from a source of tension into a structured and mutually beneficial arrangement, migration diplomacy can contribute to long-term stability and reinforce the strategic partnership between the two countries. The analysis is situated within the concept of migration diplomacy, which emphasizes how countries use migration-related issues and agreements as instruments in foreign relations. Accordingly, this study does not rely on quantitative migration data, but rather on historical and diplomatic sources to trace how migration was positioned in bilateral negotiations. This study focuses on the diplomatic functions of agreements and MoUs, rather than their statistical impact on migration flows.

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