

North Korean views on Vietnam: From fraternal friendship to economic development model

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Abstract

North Korea and North Vietnam were Cold War socialist allies, sharing the mentality of divided nation. Pyongyang provided economic and military assistances to Hanoi during the Vietnam War because, in the view of North Korean leader Kim Il Sung, the prospect of Korean unification depended largely on the victory of North Vietnam over the United States. However, Pyongyang's relations with Hanoi after 1975 deteriorated because of the latter's tilt towards the Soviet Union and invasion of Cambodia, while the former adhered to the principle of non-alignment. Furthermore, Hanoi's institution of Doi Moi reform in 1986 led to the establishment of diplomatic relations with South Korea in 1992. By the early 2010s, North Korea regained her interest in Vietnam as economic development model, albeit with some constraints.

Keywords: economic development, military assistance, North Korea, Vietnam

1. Introduction

North Korea and Vietnam share historical similarities. They became colonies of the imperialist powers at the turn of the 20th century before gaining independence after the Second World War. With the emergence of the Cold War in the late 1940s, both shared the mentality of divided nation. The two newly-independent countries were ideologically divided into two parts. South Korea and South Vietnam became allies of the United States, while North Korea and North Vietnam were members of the socialist bloc, bound by friendship, solidarity, and fraternity. The article will analyse the wax and wane of Pyongyang – Hanoi relations during the Cold War, and North Korea's interest in Vietnam as economic development model in the early 21st century.

2. Research Questions and Methods

The author aims to answer two questions. Firstly, what factor led to the emergence of fraternal relations between North Korea and Vietnam during the height of the Cold War? Secondly, what factor resulted in the deterioration of bilateral ties after 1975? Using documentary research method, the author utilizes primary sources, including North Korea's official publications and the newly-available Cold War archive from Wilson Center's History and Public Policy Program, along with scholarly studies and news reports to explore Pyongyang's views on Hanoi.

3. North Korea's Relations with Vietnam during the Height of the Vietnam War

After establishing diplomatic relations with each other in January 1950, Pyongyang and Hanoi became

close allies. President Ho Chi Minh made a state visit to North Korea in July 1957 and Premier Kim Il Sung reciprocated in the following year. North Korea provided to North Vietnam 50,000 rubles of the relief aids for flood victims in August 1957. The two countries signed an agreement of technical assistance for the first time in November 1964 [1]. In addition, the Friendship Kindergarten was established in 1965 with North Korean funding. It was designated to facilitate mutual understanding between the two peoples. Presently, it is still considered one of the best kindergartens in Hanoi [2].

When the Vietnam War and the conflict within the socialist bloc, especially the ideological conflict between China and the Soviet Union, were intensified in the mid-1960s, North Korea supported the struggle of the Vietnamese people and urged for the unity of socialist countries against American imperialism. In other words, North Korea saw the Vietnam War as a potential stepping stone to the restoration of intrabloc unity [3]. Therefore, when First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish Workers' Party Wladyslaw Gomulka made a proposal in December 1965 for the earliest possible convocation of the conference of the communist and workers' parties of the countries of the Warsaw Treaty as well as the socialist countries of Asia, with the goal of discussing the coordination of assistance to North Vietnam in its war against American aggression, Kim Il Sung gave his unequivocal support for the proposal in these words:

“At a time when the US imperialists are escalating their attacks on a socialist country—the Democratic Republic of Vietnam—and expanding the war, the socialist countries should not even hesitate to break all relations with American imperialism. If all socialist

countries indeed take such common steps, they would deal a powerful blow to American imperialism, thus giving real help to the Vietnamese people. In the course of such action, the existing divergences among the fraternal parties could be gradually overcome and the conditions for convening the conference of the parties of socialist countries that you propose could be created. We believe that under the present circumstances this is the right way of both demonstrating support for the struggle of the Vietnamese people and defending the unity of the socialist camp. Our party will also in the future make every effort to strengthen the unity of our camp and the cohesion of the international communist movement [4].”

Although the proposal was rejected and the Sino-Soviet split continued, North Korea still developed active political, economic, and military ties with North Vietnam. During the visit of North Vietnamese economic delegation headed by Le Thanh Nghi to Pyongyang in January and September 1966, North Korea signed agreements on granting North Vietnam 12,300,333 rubles of free aids. In addition, North Korea agreed to deliver small arms, ammunition, clothing, tractors, and vehicles to North Vietnam free of charge. It also sent North Vietnam about 100 Korean pilots, and several Korean military leaders visited North Vietnam to study the experience of the ground forces, air forces, and navy. Besides, there were 400 Vietnamese students in North Korean educational institutions at the latter's expense in 1966 [5]. Fourteen North Korean soldiers killed in the Vietnam War from 1965 to 1968 have been honored in a mausoleum in Bac Giang Province. Information from the archive of foreign policy of the Russian Federation reveals that North Korea still called for coordinating the aid of the socialist countries to North Vietnam and criticized the Chinese for their rejection of cooperation. The reason was:

“The Korean comrades view the Vietnamese events primarily from the point of view of their possible consequences for Korea. In their opinion, the security of the DPRK, an expansion of the aggression of the American imperialists in Asia, and the prospects for the revolutionary movement in South Korea depend to a large degree on the outcome of developments of the war in Vietnam [5].”

4. North Korea's Reaction to the Nixon Doctrine and the Unification of Vietnam

After years of military quagmire in Vietnam, on 25 July 1969, U.S. President Richard Nixon announced the so-called “Nixon Doctrine,” i.e., the U.S. troops would begin to withdraw from Vietnam and the South Vietnamese had to take over the defense of their own country. On 4 August of the same year, the peace negotiation between U.S. National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger and North Vietnamese Politburo member Le Duc Tho began in Paris and, finally, the Peace Accords on “Ending the War and Restoring

Peace in Vietnam” were signed on 27 January 1973, officially ending direct U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. In Kim Il Sung's opinion, the Nixon Doctrine did not lead to any change in the policy of U.S. imperialism or any turn in the solution of the Vietnam question because the United States was still an imperialist power in nature with the ambition for world domination [6]. On 17 September 1972, he answered the questions on foreign policy raised by journalists of the Japanese newspaper Mainichi Shimbun, in these words:

“As you know, in recent years U.S. imperialism has repeatedly sustained great setbacks in the Vietnam War and has undergone a serious political, economic and military crisis at home and abroad. To find a way out of this dead end, the U.S. imperialism produced the so-called “Nixon doctrine.” This is a more crafty and insidious policy of aggression aimed at making Asians fight Asians in Asia and Africans fight Africans in Africa [7].”

The unification of Vietnam by North Vietnamese forces in April 1975 was applauded by North Korea, who called it “a common victory of the socialist countries, the peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America and the peace-loving people the world over” [1]. After hearing the news of the upcoming revolutionary victory in Vietnam, Kim made a hurried trip to China in that month during which he reportedly asked for Beijing's assistance in liberating the South by launching the second Korean War. However, since the beginning of the 1970s, the Chinese leadership had decided to ally with the United States against the Soviet Union. Therefore, they rejected the North Korean leader's request [8].

5. Deteriorating Relations After 1975

Relations between North Korea and the newly unified Vietnam began to sour after the latter, supported by the Soviet Union, invaded Cambodia in 1978. North Korea not only accused Vietnam and, to a lesser extent, the Soviet Union of challenging both national independence and peace within the socialist bloc, but also provided Prince Sihanouk of anti-Vietnamese coalition government with its continuing support. Kim Il Sung's report to the Sixth Congress of the Workers' Party of Korea on the work of the Central Committee on 10 October 1980 condemned both the United States and the Soviet Union in these words:

“Owing to **the great powers'** manoeuvres to maintain and expand their domination, the present international situation is very complicated and tense. Because of their manoeuvres, a succession of tragedies takes place in which the sovereignty of the newly independent countries is violated, the destinies of the peoples trifled with, and in many parts of the world, peace and security are undermined and international tensions aggravated [9, emphasis added].”

In addition, in mid-February 1983, Kim Il Sung gave an interview to a correspondent of Agence France-

Presse (AFP), in which he declared that the Non-Aligned Movement should return to its original objectives and keep a distance from both blocs. He also called for the withdrawal of foreign troops from every country. In the view of the Vietnamese, the interview showed North Korea's submission to the Western efforts and directed against the Soviet Union and Vietnam. Besides, Vietnam considered the line of the Korean Workers' Party contrary to Marxism-Leninism because Kim Il Sung had selected his own son, Kim Jong Il, as successor in 1980 [10].

North Korea – Vietnam relations further deteriorated after the latter's decision to establish diplomatic relations with the former's arch-rival, South Korea, in 1992. Then, in 1996, with North Korea in the midst of famine, Pyongyang failed to pay Hanoi for 20,000 tons of rice with the value of 18 million U.S. dollars. Presently, the volume of trade between the two countries is so small that the Vietnam Customs has never included North Korea in its annual reports on merchandise trade statistics [2].

6. Vietnam as a Model for North Korean Economic Development in the 21st Century

Since the 2000s, North Korea has tried to reform its autarkic economy by studying the experience of other socialist countries including Vietnam, which instituted economic reforms called Doi Moi in 1986, achieved growth rate up to 10 percent, and became the world's second largest exporter of rice in the 1990s. It is obvious that North Korea's interest in Vietnam has risen in recent years. A delegation of the Korean Workers' Party led by head of its Central Committee for International Affairs Kim Yong Il visited Vietnam's northern province of Thai Binh to study the model of rural area development in June 2012. Kim Yong Il spoke highly of Thai Binh's economic development, especially in agricultural production, poverty reduction as well as employment and social welfare [11]. Two months later, North Korean President of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly Kim Yong Nam visited Hanoi for the first time in a decade and expressed his pleasure to witness the achievements the country has made socio-economic development and national construction, considering them as an encouragement to North Korea in its national construction and development process [12].

However, there are some constraints preventing North Korea from becoming the next Vietnam. Kang H. Park argues that, for capital poor countries lacking natural resource endowments, rapid increase in exports would not be possible without foreign direct investment (FDI). But North Korea has not responded favourably to external demand for transparent legal protection of investment assets and freedom of business activities in North Korea and has restricted FDI activities within specific free trade zones. In addition, North Korean bureaucracy is not pro-reform minded [13]. Besides, Gerhard Will, Asia expert with the German Institute

for International and Security Affairs, holds the view that, unlike Vietnam, North Korea lacks the necessary allies. i.e., the Koreans living abroad who would forge the links with the world market in the initial stage of reform [14].

7. Conclusion

During the Cold War, North Vietnam was regarded by North Korea as ally, emphasizing socialist friendship, solidarity, and fraternity. In addition, both countries shared the mentality of divided nation, which was a result of the confrontation between the socialist and capitalist worlds and the partition of their countries after gaining independence. Therefore, Pyongyang not only supported the struggle of the Vietnamese people against American imperialism and for the liberty and independence verbally, but also provided economic and military assistances to Hanoi, especially during the height of the Vietnam War in the second half of the 1960s. In the view of Kim Il Sung, the founder of North Korea, socialist countries should reconcile their conflicting views and unequivocally become a united front against the Americans in Vietnam. Also, he opined that the security of his country and the prospect of Korean unification depended to a large degree on the outcome of developments of the war in Vietnam.

After the victory of North Vietnam and the unification in 1975, Pyongyang's relations with Hanoi gradually deteriorated because of the latter's tilt towards the Soviet Union and pursuit of regional hegemonic policy by invading Cambodia in 1978, while the former adhered to the principle of non-alignment. Furthermore, Hanoi's institution of Doi Moi economic reforms in 1986 led to the rise of Vietnam's economic ties with South Korea, which eventually resulted in the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 1992. By the early 2010s, seeing Vietnam as a successful example of market economy with authoritarian rule, North Korea regained her interest in Vietnam as economic development model. However, there are some constraints preventing North Korea from becoming the next Vietnam.

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