

Korea and Vietnam: the Bilateral Relations

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Korea and Vietnam: The National experiences and foreign Policies of Middle Powers

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Introduction

From January this year, there is an exhibition being held in Seoul, entitled “Tinh Ban Friendship of a Millennium,” (천년의 우정). The special exhibit was the first of dozens of commemorations to celebrate the 20th anniversary of ROK-Vietnam diplomatic normalization this year. As the title demonstrates, the contacts between the two peoples can be traced back to 13th century when Prince Ly Long Tuong of the Ly Dynasty self-exiled to the Koryo Dynasty in 1226 AD after a coup d’état by General Tran Hung Dao. About 100 years earlier, in 1127 AD, Prince Ly Duong Con of the same Ly Dynasty, who first defected to the Chinese Song Dynasty, came to Koryo when the Northern Song Dynasty was defeated by the Jin Dynasty and moved its capital to Lin’an in the south. Having settled successfully on the Korean peninsula, Princes Ly Duong Con and Ly Long Tuong created two separate Lee clans - the Jeongseon and Hwasan - in Korea. According to a national census in 2000, their descendants numbered 3,657 and 1,775, respectively. If we include their descendants in the North, the number of Hwasan Lee clan members will be even greater considering that their home county is in North Korea. Senior members of the two Ly clans visited Vietnam in 1995 to make a historic homecoming after 770 years. Since they were warmly welcomed with national attention at their first homecoming, they now attend an annual ceremony on March 15 in Thang Long, present-day Hanoi, to pay tribute to their ancestors, including Ly Cong Uan, the first Emperor of the Ly Dynasty.

The contacts between Korea and Vietnam continued from the 16th to 19th century when envoys of the two dynasties met and exchanged poems in Beijing while on a tributary mission to the Ming and Qing emperors. During the colonial period, in an effort to join hands against colonial rule, exchanges and collaboration were sought between patriotic intellectuals and revolutionaries from each country. They shared sympathies as enslaved peoples and published books on the history of their ruined nations to learn lessons and to enlighten their peoples.

When WWII ended in 1945, the two countries again fell victim to great power politics: Korea became independent but was divided into South and North Korea, and Vietnam followed the same fate in 1954. In the middle of the Cold War, as a staunch ally of the US, Korea participated in the Vietnam War on the side of South Vietnam. More than 300,000 South Korean soldiers have fought against the communists in Vietnam, an issue which later became a hurdle in the negotiation to normalize relations when the Cold War ended. In the late 1980s, Vietnam adopted the Doi Moi-reform policy to transform itself into a socialist-oriented market economy, and South Korea launched its Nordpolitik-Northern Policy to normalize diplomatic relations with socialist countries. The end of the Cold War facilitated rapprochement between the two peoples, who were historically friendly and shared a common cultural heritage of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. Despite the memory of War, the potentially hindering history that the two countries share, both Korea and Vietnam agreed to put historical issues aside and to cooperate for the sake of the future. They first agreed to exchange liaison offices but soon agreed to upgrade those to full-fledged diplomatic missions at ambassadorial level on December 22, 1992, three years ahead of the US-Vietnam diplomatic normalization in 1995. After exchanging Embassies in both capitals, a Korean Consulate-General was also opened, in Ho Chi Minh City, the former capital of South Vietnam.

Status of Korea-Vietnam Relation

Once relations were normalized, the two countries lost no time in catching up and upgrading their relations. During the last 20 years, there have been frequent exchanges of visits of leaders, including 15 top leaders' visits and more than 100 cabinet minister-level visits. When Vietnamese President Tran Duc Luong visited Korea in August 2001, bilateral relations were enhanced to a Comprehensive Partnership, and eventually upgraded to a Strategic Cooperative Partnership in 2009 during Korean President Lee Myeong-bak's state visit to Vietnam. The upgraded partnership between the two countries was confirmed in November last year, when President Truong Tan Sang reciprocated President Lee's visit. The two leaders agreed in Seoul to strengthen strategic cooperation by expanding exchanges in foreign, security and defense and to increase the already substantial cooperation in search and rescue, anti-terrorism, crime prevention, personnel training and defense industries. The two presidents also welcomed "The Overall Joint Proposed Plan," prepared jointly for the peaceful use of atomic energy in Vietnam, which is expected to result in the construction of two more nuclear power plants in the near future. In Vietnam, four reactors are currently in the process of construction by Russia and Japan.

As Korean businesses vigorously invested in Vietnam, Korea has emerged as Vietnam's number one investor, with \$23.5 billion of FDI in more than 3,000 projects. This has created more than 500,000 jobs for the Vietnamese. Samsung Electronics has had its largest mobile phone manufacturing factory in Bac Ninh Province in the suburbs of Hanoi since 2009. POSCO has invested \$2 billion since 2006 to construct steel mills in Ba Ria-Vung Tau Province in the south. Bilateral trade reached \$13.6 billion in 2011, making Korea the fourth-largest trading partner for Vietnam after China, the US and Japan. For Korea, Vietnam is the 9th-biggest trading partner and the 2nd-largest among ASEAN member countries after only Singapore. As Presidents Lee and Sang agreed last November to achieve the \$20 billion target before the

scheduled 2015, and \$30 billion beyond that year, bilateral trade is expected to double and triple before 2020.

Vietnam is also a main beneficiary of Korea's foreign aid. KOICA had already started its aid activity in 1991, one year before diplomatic normalization, and now Korea is ranked 2nd among foreign ODA providers for Vietnam, with more than \$130 million in 35 projects over the last 20 years. Korea has also provided \$1.3 billion of Economic Development and Cooperation Fund (EDCF) in 37 projects. Vietnam is the number one recipient of Korea's EDCF, which is provided to 56 developing nations. As a former recipient and now aid donor country, Korea's development aid to Vietnam is distinctive in that it focuses on socio-economic development by sharing development experience through education and vocational training. Korea has built many vocational schools, including an IT college in Da Nang and hospitals in remote and underdeveloped areas in the central region. Vietnamese farmers are learning about the *Saemaeul* Movement, a new community movement which turned poverty-stricken Korean rural areas into modern farmland in the early 1970s. Korea is also helping Vietnam invest in IT and high-tech industry through the transfer of know-how and experience in these areas. Many developing nations are eager to learn from Korea about the success in science and technology. They know that Korea's success in heavy and hi-tech industries today is mostly attributable to the Korean Government's early investment in this area at the beginning of its economic development in the 1960s.

Cultural exchange between Korea and Vietnam has also been boosted. Sharing a long historical and cultural background in the Sino-centric Confucian order, Koreans and Vietnamese have found no obstacles to promoting cultural exchanges. In addition to frequent exchanges of traditional and contemporary performances and exhibitions, there is widespread enthusiasm for Korean pop-culture, or *Hallyu*, among Vietnamese youth. *Hallyu* in Southeast Asia is said to have started in Ho Chi Minh City, where the first Korean TV drama serials "Feeling" and "Golden Grass" aired in 1997. Today, more than 70% of foreign TV programs in Vietnam are from Korea. There is also increased interest in Korean studies in Vietnam, which now boasts approximately 100 professors at ten universities with about 2,000 students. In Korea, Vietnamese studies are established at four universities, and the numbers are growing.

With deepening bilateral relations in the socio-economic area, people-to-people contacts have also greatly increased. Last year, almost 600,000 Korean tourists visited Vietnam. The number is growing rapidly as tourism-related infrastructure in Vietnam improves. More than 30 municipalities from each country are bound with sisterhood. More than 100,000 Vietnamese, including 65,000 workers, are living in Korea, while about 100,000 Koreans are living in Vietnam.

General Secretary Nong Duc Manh of Vietnamese Communist Party, during his visit to Korea in November 2007, likened relations between the two countries to those between *sadon* (사돈), a word meaning "in-laws" in Korea, apparently a reference to the growing number of intermarriages between Koreans and Vietnamese. More than 50,000 Vietnamese women have married Korean men, making Vietnam the number one source of foreign brides for Koreans. With the number of multicultural families growing, some unfortunate unions have also been reported. Our hope is that Korean-Vietnamese families will contribute to bridging the two

peoples with kinship and also help the mostly homogeneous Korean society diversify culturally with a growing number of intermarriages with other countries.

Korea and Vietnam have also closely cooperated in regional and global issues. Since Vietnam joined ASEAN in 1995, Vietnam has successfully held the rotating presidency of ASEAN twice and has already hosted important summits of ASEAN, ASEAN+3, APEC, ASEM and EAS. As members of all these regional cooperation bodies, the two countries have cooperated and shared the same vision for peace and prosperity in the East Asian region. During President Truong Tan Sang's visit to Korea last year, the two countries agreed to expand their cooperation on major global issues, such as sustainable development, climate change, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, anti-terrorism, the maintenance of peace and stability and the freedom of navigation in the waters in East Asia. As middle powers, their partnership on global issues will contribute greatly to the peace and development of the world.

When Korea normalized relations with Vietnam in 1992, the Korean government had high expectations about Vietnam's future role in bringing reform and openness to North Korea. While attaching importance to economic cooperation with South Korea, Vietnam has maintained traditional friendly relations with North Korea as former Cold War allies and socialist comrades. Vietnam is one of the few countries with which North Korea has regular exchanges and contacts. North Korea sent more than 200 fighter pilots to Vietnam during the Vietnam War, and Vietnam has honored the 14 North Korean war-dead as heroes in a mausoleum in Bac Giang Province. Vietnam has provided rice for North Korea since 1995 and bought military equipment from North Korea. Vietnam's experience as a divided nation places it in a unique position to play a role in ending the hostilities on the Korean Peninsula. Vietnam stresses especially the importance of peaceful reunification, while supporting a nuclear free Korean Peninsula and peaceful resolution of disputes through dialogue. If North Korea were to move forward for reform and opening-up in the years to come, Vietnam could offer itself as one of the best models to follow. This is where Vietnam's valuable contribution is anticipated for peace and security both on the Korean Peninsula and in the region.

Future Tasks

As they celebrate the twentieth anniversary of their diplomatic normalization, Korea and Vietnam can feel proud that they have become close partners with each other. They have achieved much more than they expected in 1992. They have kept the historical legacy on the shelf for the sake of a future-oriented relationship and overcome differences of ideology and social systems. But some obstacles to further progress remain. Some unhappy cases of Korean-Vietnamese intermarriages have damaged the friendly feelings of the two peoples. When the Korean Government brought hundreds of North Korean refugees seeking asylum from Vietnam to Seoul by flying two chartered 747 jumbo jets in 2004, tension rose among the three countries. When the Korean Government in 2009 promoted legislation to honor veterans of the Vietnam War, it was blocked by the strong opposition of the Vietnamese Government. Vietnam argues that such a step would dishonor their national unification war and justify Korea's participation in the war. The veterans are mostly in their sixties and seventies, many of them suffering from the after-effects of Agent Orange exposure. The two countries need to increase mutual efforts to get

over all these hindrances. And, considering the mutually complementary nature of their relations and their geopolitical similarity, they need to expand the scope and content of their collaboration beyond bilateral relations.

East Asia is one of the most dynamic and thriving regions in the world today. We are witnessing a rapid increase in interdependence and exchanges among the countries of the region. However, complex security concerns, deep-rooted differences in perceptions of history, and the ever-worsening territorial disputes inflamed by growing nationalist fever represent obstacles to securing durable peace and prosperity in the region. With the rise of China and the return of the US, uncertainties are growing in East Asia, where a region-wide institutional framework for cooperation to address these challenges is lacking.

As newly emerged middle powers in the region, Korea and Vietnam can play important roles in fostering East Asian cooperation. They need to make joint efforts to enhance regional cooperation leading to integration. We should recall the roles played by the Low Countries of BENELUX in the process of European reconciliation and integration for over 60 years. Korea and Vietnam should find role model in them. The two countries, as facilitators from Northeast Asia and ASEAN, respectively, need to collaborate in playing a bridging role and promoting a greater East Asian community.

Korea and Vietnam are two unique countries that share similar experiences in their relations with China and the US. Sharing borders with China, Korea and Vietnam have maintained relatively peaceful relations with China in the long history of the Confucian tributary system. With unyielding and indomitable spirit, they have endured and survived the many challenges from their neighbors, and succeeded in keeping their national identity and integrity. Today, for these two countries China has become the number one trading partner. In relations with the US, since the US defended the freedom of the Korean people during the Korean War, Korea has been America's key ally in East Asia, economically prospering and sharing same fundamental values and security interests. Vietnam overcame its animosity against the former enemy in 1995 and has emerged as a strategic partner of the US. East Asia is counting on the role Korea and Vietnam will play in the nebulous and complicated geopolitics of the region.

Thank you.