

The colorful history of North Korea-Vietnam relations

From submarines to kindergartens, the two states used to share it all but have since grown apart

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SEOUL – An elite kindergarten in Hanoi is the most prominent remainder of the once-thriving ties between Vietnam and North Korea, and even it may be North Korean in name only.

Sharing aspects of the same ideology, the two states have a history of military cooperation, particularly during the Vietnam War. A number of bilateral agreements have also been signed, as early as the 1950s and as late as the early part of last decade. Ties officially continue and visits between high-level officials are a regularity, but economic ties have halted, with the vast majority of bilateral agreements expiring and common perceptions of the North among the Vietnamese growing more and more negative.

When tracing the decline in relations, it appears that the failure of Pyongyang to pay Vietnam for a large rice shipment in 1996, along with South Korea's growing economic clout, have been turning points.

A SHARED HISTORY

North Korea dispatched approximately 200 fighter pilots to Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Fourteen North Korean soldiers killed in Vietnam War battles from 1965 to 1968 have been honored in a mausoleum in Bac Giang Province. The two Cold War allies also traded weapons and rice other during this period, and entered into 135 bilateral agreements, starting with cultural cooperation in 1957, and continuing with sea transportation as late as 2002.

But signs of strain go back to at least the year after Vietnam and South Korea normalized diplomatic relations. In 1993 North Korea invested \$3.5 million in a joint venture managing a silk factory in Hai Duong, but Vietnam withdrew its involvement the following year. North Korea sold the factory back to Vietnam in 2001.

Then, in 1996, with the North in the midst of its devastating famine following the collapse of the Soviet Union, a setback occurred from which Pyongyang-Hanoi ties have never really recovered: North Korea failed to pay Vietnam for 20,000 tons of rice, which the Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs has valued at \$18 million.

Hoping to make amends, Kim Jong Il sent two Yugo class midget submarines to Vietnam in 1996, and the Vietnamese military still uses them for training in Cam Ranh Bay. Nonetheless, these gifts did not prevent an almost complete stoppage in commercial transactions between the two states. Small private dealers have taken on the trading business ever since, and the volume of trade is so small that the Vietnam Customs has never included North Korea in its annual reports on merchandize trade statistics.

Hanoi retained normal diplomatic relations with Pyongyang, however. At the end of the 1960s North Vietnam would send many students to North Korea, and the Association of Vietnamese Students Alumni in North Korea still facilitates visits and exchanges between the two countries. Vietnam maintained its embassy in Pyongyang and the DPRK-Vietnam Friendship Association carries out visits between the two

countries annually. The Vietnamese government continually donates thousands of tons of rice to North Korea and the nations regularly cooperate in arts, sports, and even martial arts training for state police.

HANOI KINDERGARTENS

Established in 1965 with North Korean funding, the Vietnam-DPRK Friendship Kindergarten in Hanoi was designated to “facilitate mutual understanding” between the two peoples. Starting with 120 students, this school now has 880 enrolled and is considered one of the best kindergartens in Hanoi.

The Vietnam-DPRK Friendship Kindergarten administrators have kept close ties with their Pyongyang counterparts at the DPRK-Vietnam Friendship Kyongsang Kindergarten. Visits between the two institutes are always tied with high-level government officers’ meetings. For example, in 2009, the Vietnamese administrators visited the DPRK to celebrate the 45th anniversary of the Vietnam-DPRK Friendship Association (1965-2010).

In June 2012, as Kim Il Sung’s 100th birthday was being celebrated, North Korean representatives of the DPRK-Vietnam Friendship Association visited the kindergarten in Hanoi with six teachers and 13 students from Kyongsang. The school received a First Class Friendship Medal from the DPRK and the First Class Labor Order from Vietnam

On the event of 35th anniversary of Vietnam-DPRK Friendship Kindergarten in April 2013, the school website wrote:

“The beloved leaders of Vietnam and Korea people, President Ho Chi Minh and President Kim Il Sung have created the foundation for a long-lasting relation of cooperation and friendship between the two nations. This relationship has survived all the challenges of history, and is still flourishing ...”

But official propaganda has not stopped popular perceptions of North Korea from turning negative. Rather than a “socialist brother,” the Western-media-influenced Vietnamese public now view it as an aggressive and irrational state. Kim Joo-il, former North Korean military captain in an interview with BBC commented that in Pyongyang, he had been educated that Vietnam was a friend of his country.

However, after escaping to China and Vietnam in 2005, Kim realized that the reality was completely different, and that only China still remained its relation with North Korea to a certain extent.

In Vietnam today, the most influential online Internet news agencies – and thus the most prone to state censorship – such as Vnexpress.net and dantri.com usually mention North Korea in a very cautious and neutral manner. But in unofficial channels such as personal blogs and social media, forums and smaller private online magazines, a clear distaste for the North Korean regime is much easier to spot, regardless of the writers’ background.

The DPRK-Vietnam Friendship Kindergarten has a very good reputation locally for its facility and education quality, but there is no mention whatsoever of North Korea in the curriculum. Ironically for a school designed to celebrate relations between states espousing Marxist ideology, it is now one of the most elitist kindergartens in the country, and as a forum for young mothers in Hanoi revealed, unless one has some “inside connections,” their kids will likely not be accepted.

BETWEEN NORTH AND SOUTH

Key to the decline in Vietnam’s relations with the North, and the change in how the North is perceived there, has been the rise of the South Korean economy and the decline in the North’s influence.

South Korea is now the biggest investor in Vietnam with a total foreign direct investment of 10.33 billion. The South also remains a crucial market for a variety of Vietnamese products and shows a continuing increase in trade values, according to Vietnam’s Ministry of Industry and Trade. The two

countries also initiated research and negotiations on a bilateral FTA in 2010. In contrast to the stagnant economic activities with the North, Vietnam enjoys a dynamic economic boost when cooperating with the South.

And with North Korea's downward slide, the defectors issue has created new headaches for Asian nations such as Vietnam who attempt to maintain ties with both sides of the DMZ.

An October 2006 publication by the International Crisis Group pointed to Vietnam as a major point in the "southern route to South East Asia" for North Korean defectors. This itinerary via Vietnam has grown in popularity due to the increasing risk along the China route and the fact that it is a rarity in Southeast Asia in that it has more plains than mountains. The fact that South Koreans ran four large safe houses in Vietnam is another factor attracting defectors.

However, this changed in July 2004, when the South Korean government sent a flight to Vietnam to fetch 468 defectors. Thereafter, Vietnam has tightened border controls to avoid a falling out with the North, yet the destination has never been fully discarded.

"The Korean government had high expectations about Vietnam's future role in bringing reform and openness to North Korea" upon the normalization between South Korea and Vietnam in 1992, academic and former South Korean diplomat Park Joon-woo said in March 2012. In addition to keeping regular contacts with North Korea, Vietnam also enjoys "a unique position" in contributing to the reunification of the Korean Peninsula due to its history as a divided nation during the Cold War. Park states that "Vietnam could offer itself as one of the best models" once North Korea starts to open up

It seems that the hopes Seoul entrusted in Hanoi have been a bit too high. After the tension generated by the unpaid-for rice in 1996, Hanoi and Pyongyang no longer maintain tight economic relations. Other cooperation mostly stopped at the level of maintaining a diplomatic protocol. In the years since 2004, when South Korea took hundreds of North Korean refugees from Vietnam to Seoul, Vietnam has been especially cautious to avoid the risk of having to publicly choose between Pyongyang and Seoul. However, "as the Vietnamese economy becomes more open, there are growing reasons for Hanoi to side quietly with Seoul on the refugee issue rather than Pyongyang," the International Crisis Group said in 2006.

Such an assumption is not groundless, regarding the fast-growing cooperation between Vietnam and South Korea lately, especially in terms of trade and commerce. If Vietnam wishes to continue its impressive growth over the last decade, it is likely that Hanoi will lean toward its popular and promising Southern trading partner in foreign affairs, rather than its unreliable former comrade in the North