

## **RESEARCH ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VIETNAM AND NORTH KOREA SINCE THE 2000s**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In this article, we analyze the relationship between Vietnam and North Korea since the beginning of the 21st century, using secondary sources such as books, scientific articles, and previous research. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, these two countries pursued different strategic options: Vietnam with its "Doi Moi" reform policy opened up its economy but maintained a one-party political system, while North Korea continued its isolation due to its nuclear weapons development policy and international sanctions. The relationship between the two countries has gone through many fluctuations, especially after Vietnam established diplomatic relations with South Korea. The study explores Vietnam's role as a mediator, helping to reduce tensions and strengthen trust on the Korean Peninsula, as well as supporting North Korea's process of international integration. Finally, the report emphasizes the opportunities and challenges in balancing the relationship between North Korea and other countries, such as South Korea and the USA, while also discussing Vietnam's role in promoting regional stability and development.

**Keywords:** Vietnam-North Korea relations post-2000, foreign policy approaches of Vietnam-North Korea, prospects and challenges in Vietnam-North Korea relations.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Vietnam established diplomatic relations with North Korea in 1950. North Korea was the third country (after China and the Soviet Union) to recognize the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and establish diplomatic ties. The relationship between the two countries saw substantial developments during the Vietnam War. Despite experiencing fluctuations, such as Vietnam's establishment of diplomatic relations with South Korea, Vietnam has

maintained traditionally favorable relations with North Korea. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Vietnam and North Korea were among the few nations that continued to uphold socialist regimes. The collapse of the Soviet Union was a significant shock to all socialist countries, especially those that were weaker and smaller, and dependent on Soviet aid, like Vietnam and North Korea. Each country made different choices to navigate this "political earthquake." As analyzed in the study "A Study of Decision Making by North Korea and Vietnam when Facing Economic Upheaval" by Danh Hoang Thanh Nguyen and Casey Robinson (2017, pp. 19-37), Vietnam chose the path of reform, moving away from a centrally planned economy towards a market-oriented socialist economy. Conversely, under the leadership of the Kim family, North Korea has maintained a strong isolationist policy for decades, refusing to implement economic and political reforms that could potentially undermine their familial regime. As a result, North Korea has become increasingly isolated due to its nuclear weapons development and has been unable to develop economically due to international sanctions. This could be a valuable lesson for North Korea. Similar to Vietnam, North Korea needs to develop its economy towards a market-oriented socialist economy and progress with the international community. To achieve this, Vietnamese and North Korean experts must meet to assist each other in the future. Vietnam needs to seek opportunities to demonstrate this role and analyze the challenges that this role presents for the country. In this study, we aim to highlight the opportunities and challenges for Vietnam in its role as a neutral country, maintaining and developing relations with both sides of the Korean Peninsula.

In our recent research on the relationship between Vietnam and North Korea, we consulted five previous studies to establish a theoretical and methodological foundation, each of which provides deep insights into the relations between Vietnam and North Korea, as well as the factors influencing the foreign policies and economic development of the two countries.

#### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The study by Tran Quang Minh and Nguyen Thi Tham examines Vietnam-North Korea relations over three key phases. From 1950 to 1975, the nations enjoyed a solid socialist camaraderie with active diplomatic exchanges. Post-Vietnam War, up to 1995, the rapport faced hurdles influenced by internal and international dynamics. Since 1996, there's been a revitalization of ties, indicating progressive relations. This research provides a comprehensive review of the historical and political nuances shaping this bilateral relationship.

A related study on this topic is "Vietnam's Relations with the Two Countries on the Korean Peninsula" (2022) conducted by the Northeast Asian Research Institute. The study focuses on the international situation, Vietnam's relations with South Korea and North Korea, and Vietnam's role in promoting peace and cooperation on the Korean Peninsula. It also highlights Vietnam's crucial role in easing tensions and building trust between the two Koreas, as well as encouraging North Korea to reform, open up, and integrate. Additionally, specific policies are proposed to enhance Vietnam's relations with the two countries on the Korean Peninsula.

The article in the "International Journal of Korean Unification Studies" titled "Designing Economic Reforms: The Cases of North Korea and Vietnam" authored by Geetha Govindasamy, Chang Kyoo Park, and Er-Win Tan, analyzes the economic reform measures in North Korea under Kim Jong-un compared to Vietnam following the Đổi Mới reforms. Following the death of Kim Jong-il in December 2011, Kim Jong-un has continued to develop both the nuclear weapons program and economic reforms. However, these reform measures have tended to differ from his predecessor due to pressures from international sanctions and diplomatic isolation. Kim Jong-un has chosen a distinctive path by emphasizing Juche ideology-based self-reliance, while simultaneously attempting to improve the economic lives of the citizens by reducing food shortages and enhancing the circulation of consumer goods. The study also indicates that under the leadership of Kim Jong-un, North Korea has made efforts to look southward, particularly towards ASEAN countries like Vietnam, in search of a suitable economic reform model. The Đổi Mới model of Vietnam is assessed as having the potential to adapt to the social and economic circumstances of North Korea.

The study "Vietnam-North Korea Relations: Still a Special Relationship?" by Lye Liang Fook and Ha Hoang Hop focuses on the relationship between Vietnam and North Korea, often described as "special" or "brotherly." Interest in this relationship has significantly increased following the second Trump-Kim Summit and Kim Jong-un's bilateral visit to Vietnam. During this visit, Kim Jong-un chose Vietnam for an "official friendship visit," a term that indicates a higher level of importance compared to his previous visits to China. Vietnam treated Kim's visit with the protocols reserved for a state visit. Despite the uniqueness of the relationship, the authors argue that it is important not to overemphasize the solidarity between these two nations. Historically, even during their best times, Vietnam and North Korea have not always agreed on every issue. There are discussions suggesting that Vietnam could serve as a developmental model for North Korea, but there are also clear limitations to this comparison.

The study titled "Does North Korea Follow Vietnam's Path?: Institutional Constraints" by Kang H. Park focuses on analyzing and comparing the economic reform processes of North Korea with those of Vietnam to assess whether North Korea can emulate Vietnam's economic development model. This research compares the economic reform measures of North Korea with Vietnam's Đổi Mới policy, initiated in 1986. Vietnam has achieved robust

economic growth and successfully integrated into the global market, while North Korea is still in the process of implementation and faces numerous challenges. The study also analyzes the differences in economic conditions, competitive positions, and economic reforms between the two countries, and investigates the institutional barriers that may hinder North Korea's progress towards economic prosperity like that of Vietnam. The study concludes by summarizing its findings and drawing several key conclusions. Through this evaluation, the author aims to provide an insightful perspective on the potential and challenges North Korea faces in its process of economic reform and international integration.

Our research on the relationship between Vietnam and North Korea since 2000 features distinct characteristics and differences compared to previous studies, offering a new perspective on the opportunities and challenges for Vietnam in promoting relations with North Korea.

#### **METHODOLOGY**

This study aims to explore and analyze the relationship between Vietnam and North Korea since the year 2000, with the objective of providing new insights into the opportunities and challenges that Vietnam faces in promoting relations with North Korea. The analysis focuses on Vietnam's role as a mediator that fosters regional peace and stability, as well as Vietnam's ability to leverage its relationships with major powers to expand exchanges with North Korea. The methodological approach in this research includes the analysis of secondary data from previous studies, including academic articles, books, and official reports related to foreign policy and the bilateral relations between the two countries. Additionally, the study relies on the analysis of historical and current events to assess the impact of foreign policies on the bilateral relations.

#### **I. VIETNAM-NORTH KOREA RELATIONS AFTER 2000**

Since Vietnam and North Korea established official diplomatic relations in 1950 until the end of the Cold War, the relationship between the two countries was akin to a brotherly bond within the socialist system, founded on the principles laid down by the great leaders of each nation, President Ho Chi Minh and President Kim Il Sung.

During that period, Vietnam and its partner shared a close friendship, evidenced by high-level state visits, a shared commitment to Marxist-Leninist ideology, and mutual support within the framework of the socialist bloc led by the Soviet Union. However, after Vietnam unified, these relations began to grow more complex. This complexity was partly due to Vietnam's relations with China. Vietnam had confronted China over the "Cambodian issue" and the "border war" in 1979, and North Korea's stance was supportive of China. Consequently, the relationship between North Korea and Vietnam became strained. Furthermore, in 1991, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, both countries lost Soviet support, which was a significant shock and led them to face serious crises.



Both Vietnam and North Korea adopted distinct policies to tackle this challenge. Vietnam pursued the Doi Moi (Renovation) policy at the Sixth National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1986, transitioning to a market economy and expanding international relations, which enabled recovery and development post-crisis. Meanwhile, North Korea pursued the Songun (Military-First) policy, focusing on nuclear weapons development, and faced economic and food difficulties after losing support from the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries. During this period, North Korea was nearly completely isolated from the international community. North Korea regarded Vietnam as having "betrayed" socialism.

Later, in 1992, when South Korea established diplomatic relations with Vietnam, North Korea opposed this development. These events negatively impacted the relationship between North Korea and Vietnam, leading to a cooling of relations until around 1995.

The relationship saw some improvement following two significant visits. The first was the visit to Vietnam by Mr. Lee Sung-gi, Chairman of the North Korean Foreign Economic Committee, in April 1996. This marked an effort by North Korea to enhance and maintain relations with Vietnam amidst a shifting international landscape. This visit can be viewed as a diplomatic act aimed at restoring and strengthening traditional ties after a long period of stagnation, especially as North Korea was seeking international support during a time of isolation.

A year after Mr. Lee Sung-gi's visit, the Vietnamese Foreign Minister, Nguyen Manh Cam, made an official visit to North Korea in May 1997. During this visit, the two sides signed a Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation between their foreign ministries, reflecting both parties' interest in maintaining and developing their relationship. This agreement was not only a positive diplomatic move but also provided a legal basis for future cooperative activities between the two nations.

Following these events, annual high-level and ministerial visits between the two countries were conducted. These diplomatic activities and visits helped maintain a channel for dialogue and exchange between Vietnam and North Korea. Although the relationship was no longer as high a priority as during the Cold War era, these efforts demonstrated a consistent intent by both sides to maintain and develop diplomatic ties. This reflects the reality that both countries recognize the importance of preserving traditional relationships and seeking mutual support within the framework of multilateral relations. Particularly in the 2000s, through high-level visits, the relationship between the two countries improved and cooperation expanded across several sectors. In this study, we wish to categorize these areas into three main sectors: "Political-Diplomatic-Security"; "Economic"; "Cultural-Social".

## 1. Politics - Diplomacy - Security

The relationship between Vietnam and North Korea improved entering the 2000s. In August 2000, Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Dy Nien visited North Korea at the ministerial level and discussed bilateral relations. Subsequently, in July 2001, National Assembly Chairman Kim Yong-nam visited Vietnam and the following year (2002), President Tran Duc Luong visited North Korea. Through these high-level meetings, the relationship between the two countries gradually recovered. The years 2007-2008 marked the highest number of visits in the history of diplomatic relations between the two countries. In 2007, members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam, the Chairman of the Vietnam Fatherland Front, and General Secretary Nong Duc Manh visited North Korea, and the Prime Minister of North Korea visited Vietnam. In 2008, the Deputy Foreign Minister and the Minister of Public Security of Vietnam visited North Korea twice, and the Minister of People's Security and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of North Korea visited Vietnam twice. These series of visits reflect an increasingly close relationship between the two countries and are opportunities to promote cooperation in various fields.

**Table 1: High-level diplomatic visits between Vietnam-North Korea from 2000 to 2019**

Year	Event
2000	- August 2000: Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Dy Nien visited North Korea - March 2000: North Korean Foreign Minister Baek Nam-soon visited Vietnam
2001	- April 2001: Alternate member of the Politburo, Secretary of the Central Committee, Chairman of the Supreme People's Assembly Choi Tae-bok visited Vietnam to attend the 9th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam - July 2001: Chairman of the Standing Committee of the Supreme People's Assembly of North Korea Kim Yong-nam visited Vietnam
2002	- May 2002: President Tran Duc Luong visited North Korea
2003	- December 2003: Trang A Pao, Chairman of the National Assembly's Ethnic Council visited North Korea
2006	- July 2006: Head of the Central Committee's Commission for External Relations Nguyen Van Son visited North Korea

2007	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- April 2007: Central Committee member, Editor-in-Chief of Nhan Dan Newspaper Dinh The Huynh visited North Korea</li> <li>- September 2007: Chairman of the Vietnam Fatherland Front Pham The Duyet visited North Korea</li> <li>- October 16-18, 2007: General Secretary Nong Duc Manh paid an official friendship visit to North Korea</li> <li>- October 2007: North Korean Cabinet Premier Kim Yong-il visited Vietnam</li> <li>- November 28, 2007: A high-level delegation of the Democratic Women's Union of Korea led by President Park Sun-hwi visited the Vietnam Women's Union</li> </ul>
2008	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- June 25-27, 2008: Minister of People's Security Choo Sang-seung visited Vietnam</li> <li>- July 26-28, 2008: Foreign Minister Park Il-jun visited Vietnam</li> <li>- May 7-9, 2008: Deputy Foreign Minister Vu Dung visited North Korea</li> <li>- October 6-9, 2008: Politburo member, Minister of Public Security, Le Hong Anh visited North Korea</li> </ul>
2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- August 14, 2009: Deputy Foreign Minister Yong-il visited Vietnam</li> <li>- February 23-27, 2009: Nguyen Thi Thanh Hoa, President of the Vietnam Women's Union visited North Korea</li> </ul>
2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- July 21-25, 2010: Foreign Minister Park Il-jun visited Vietnam</li> <li>- June 2010: Mr. Kim Young-in, candidate for the Politburo, Secretary of the Central Committee, Chairman of the International Committee, visited Vietnam</li> </ul>
2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- April 13-16, 2011: Politburo member, Minister of Public Security, Le Hong Anh visited North Korea</li> <li>- August 15-20, 2011: Deputy Minister of Defense Nguyen Chi Vinh visited North Korea</li> <li>- September 13, 2011: A delegation of the Women's Union of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea led by President Noh Seong-sil visited Vietnam</li> <li>- October 2011: Central Committee member, Head of the Central Commission for External Relations Hoang Binh Quan visited North Korea</li> </ul>

2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- June 9-13, 2012: Mr. Kim Yong-il, Alternate member of the Politburo, Secretary of the Central Committee, Chairman of the International Committee, visited Vietnam</li> <li>- August 5-7, 2012: Chairman of the Standing Committee of the Supreme People's Assembly of North Korea Kim Yong-nam visited Vietnam</li> <li>- September 5-11, 2012: Secretary of the Central Committee, President of the Vietnam Fatherland Front Huynh Dam visited North Korea</li> </ul>
2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- July 2013: Secretary of the Central Committee, Chief of the Central Office Tran Quoc Vuong visited North Korea</li> </ul>
2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- August 6, 2014: North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Su-yong visited Vietnam</li> </ul>
2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- January 29 - February 1, 2015: North Korean Deputy Foreign Minister Ki Rin-seng visited Vietnam</li> <li>- July 9, 2015: Vice Chairman of the National Assembly Huynh Ngoc Son visited North Korea</li> <li>- October 8-12, 2015: Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam Ha Thi Khiet visited North Korea at the invitation of the Workers' Party of Korea</li> </ul>
2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- September 8-10, 2018: Secretary of the Central Committee, Chairman of the Vietnam Fatherland Front Committee Tran Thanh Man visited North Korea on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of North Korea's National Day</li> <li>- November 5, 2018: A delegation of the Socialist Women's Union of Korea led by comrade Jang Chun-shin visited Vietnam</li> <li>- November 29 - December 2, 2018: North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho visited Vietnam</li> </ul>



2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- February 12-14, 2019: Vietnamese Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh visited North Korea</li> <li>- February 26, 2019: North Korean leader Kim Jong-un arrived in Vietnam to attend the 2019 US-North Korea summit</li> <li>- March 1-2, 2019: North Korean leader Kim Jong-un paid an official friendship visit to Vietnam</li> <li>- March 26, 2019: A delegation of the North Korea-Vietnam Friendship Association led by comrade Ri Kang Juk visited Vietnam</li> <li>- May 6-10, 2019: A delegation of the Vietnam Women's Union led by Central Committee member, President of the Union Nguyen Thi Thu Ha visited and worked in North Korea at the invitation of the Socialist Women's Union of Korea</li> </ul>
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Source: The author consulted various sources<sup>1</sup>.

The high-level visits between the two countries show that both sides highly value diplomatic relations and the traditional good relationship between Vietnam and North Korea continues to be strengthened after more than 70 years of establishment. Despite ups and downs, to this day both sides still maintain people-to-people exchanges from the high level to the ministries with the goal of cooperation, exchanging development experiences between the two countries. Vietnam also continually encourages North Korea to break away from isolation and is ready to share economic development experiences with North Korea. North Korea also sends many delegations to Vietnam to exchange and learn economic development experiences, and Vietnam is enthusiastic in sharing the knowledge it has acquired.

As shown in the table above, the period 2007-2008 and 2011-2012 seem to be a "warm period" in the relationship between Vietnam and North Korea. In the period 2016-2017, high-level meetings between the two countries were limited due to US and UN sanctions related to North Korea's nuclear issue. In 2018, when the inter-Korean relationship improved, it also positively impacted the Vietnam-North Korea relationship and there were several meetings between the two countries before and after the US-North Korea summit held in Hanoi in 2019. The negotiations between North Korea and the United States ended without reaching any agreement, and due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, high-level officials from both countries did not visit directly but were still frequently in contact with each other through means such as congratulatory messages. Particularly, exchanges

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<sup>1</sup>Nguyen Thi Tham & others (2022), "Relations between Vietnam and the Two Countries on the Korean Peninsula," Hanoi: Social Sciences Publishing House, pp. 144-148; Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI) - Committee on International Relations, "North Korea Market Profile", pages 7~8; and internet data.

between the Vietnam Women's Union and the North Korean Women's Union are expected to be useful in enhancing women's rights and protecting children in North Korea.

In the table below, we summarize major exchange events between the two countries from 2020 to 2023 through data collected from the internet.

**Table 2: Exchange events between Vietnam and North Korea from 2020 to 2023**

Year	Event
2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- General Secretary and President Nguyen Phu Trong, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, and National Assembly Chairwoman Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan exchanged congratulatory messages with Chairman of the Workers' Party of Korea and Chairman of the State Affairs Commission of North Korea Kim Jong Un, North Korean Premier Kim Jae Ryong, and Chairman of the Supreme People's Assembly Pak Thae Song on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries (January 31, 1950 - January 31, 2020)</li> <li>- Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Pham Binh Minh exchanged congratulatory messages with North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Son Kwon</li> </ul>
2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- October 20, 2021: The Vietnam - North Korea Friendship Association (Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations) held a National Congress for the 2021-2026 term in a combination of direct and online formats</li> <li>- July 9, 2021: Mr. Li Ho-jun, interim representative of the Embassy of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in Vietnam, visited the Central Vietnam Women's Union</li> </ul>
2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- February 10, 2022: On the occasion of the 72nd anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the 65th anniversary of the first meeting between President Ho Chi Minh and President Kim Il-sung, the Vietnam News Agency (VNA) coordinated with the Embassy of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in Vietnam to organize a photo exhibition themed "Traditional Vietnam-North Korea relations and the imprints of the two countries' leaders"</li> </ul>

2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- February 1, 2023: On the occasion of the 73rd anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between North Korea and Vietnam (January 31, 1950 - January 31, 2023), the Korean Central Broadcasting Station published an article praising the unchanging friendship between the two countries over time</li> <li>- November 28, 2023: At the Vietnamese Embassy in Pyongyang, North Korea, a photo exhibition was opened to commemorate the 65th anniversary of Chairman Kim Il-sung's official visit to Vietnam (November 28, 1958 - November 28, 2023)</li> </ul>
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Source: The author compiled based on data from the internet.

As can be seen in Table 2, even under challenging circumstances for exchanges, Vietnam and North Korea continue to maintain communication and preserve their traditional relationship. This once again demonstrates Vietnam's "neutral diplomacy" policy in the relations between the two Koreas.

Beyond the bilateral relations, Vietnam actively supports North Korea in regional issues and multilateral negotiations. Vietnam welcomes recent moves towards peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula, including North Korea's suspension of nuclear missile tests, focus on economic development, and improved relationships with South Korea and the United States. Vietnam also supports North Korea's participation in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and hosting reconciliation talks between Japan and North Korea<sup>2</sup>. A notable event was when Vietnam was chosen as the venue for the 2019 US-North Korea summit, which not only reflected the trust that the involved parties have in Vietnam but also demonstrated Vietnam's goodwill in resolving issues on the Korean Peninsula. These efforts by both sides are expected to lead to new developments in the future.

In the context of the increasingly complex and changing political-security situation in East Asia, Vietnam and North Korea have recognized the importance of strengthening their cooperative relationship. History has shown that this region is not only a strategic focal point but also a crossroads among major powers. With the end of the Cold War and changes in the global balance of power, East Asia has increasingly taken a central position in the foreign policies of many countries.

Vietnam and North Korea, as smaller nations in the region, are seeking not only to protect their national interests but also to strengthen foreign relations to stand firm against pressure from major powers. The cooperation and mutual support between the two countries extend not only to regional issues but also to other important international matters. North Korea seeks support from Vietnam in the peaceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula

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<sup>2</sup>Nguyen Thi Tham & co-authors (2022), op. cit.

and hopes that Vietnam can serve as a bridge to help it escape isolation. Conversely, Vietnam also expects support from North Korea, especially on issues related to sovereignty in the South China Sea.

These factors, along with a shared understanding of the importance of forming a solid alliance within the region, will drive the political and diplomatic relations between Vietnam and North Korea to develop more strongly in the future. Vietnam and North Korea are moving towards a new stage of cooperation, not only for their own benefits but also for the stability and development of the East Asian region.

## **2. Economy**

According to the Northeast Asia Research Institute, since the early 2000s, there have been several economic cooperation agreements between Vietnam and North Korea, including (1) the Maritime Transport Agreement (2002/05), (2) the Trade Agreement (2002/05), (3) the Agreement on Encouragement and Protection of Investments (2002/05), (4) the Agreement on Avoidance of Double Taxation and Prevention of Fiscal Evasion (2002/05), and (6) the Air Transport Agreement (2014/11)<sup>3</sup>.

Despite a solid foundation in traditional political and diplomatic relations and clear cooperation mechanisms suitable to each country's circumstances, economic cooperation between Vietnam and North Korea remains relatively limited and largely mediated through China. During the severe food crisis in the 1990s, North Korea purchased 20,000 tons of Vietnamese rice, and Vietnam participated in a rice-for-arms exchange program. However, since 1996, the two countries have had very few direct trade transactions, with some exchanges occurring through intermediaries. Vietnam's exports to North Korea increased from \$16.5 million in 2009 to \$10 million in 2010, \$15 million in 2012, and \$12.4 million in 2013. Bilateral trade in 2014 amounted to \$11.6 million in 2015 (exports: \$6.13 million, imports: \$6.47 million), reaching \$2.99 million in 2016, but Vietnam's exports to North Korea were the only significant figures. Preliminary statistics from 2017 show that Vietnam exported \$7.322 billion (mainly food and snacks) to North Korea, with no import data from North Korea. Vietnam's exports to North Korea mainly include rice and consumer goods, while Vietnam imports raw materials and agricultural products<sup>4</sup>.

Regarding investment, in the 1990s, the two sides established a joint venture for a sericulture plant in Hai Duong, but Vietnam withdrew from the joint venture in 1994, and North Korea sold the plant back to Vietnam in 2001. Currently, there are two North Korean restaurants in Hanoi: 'Binh Duong Quan' and 'Hu'u Nghi Quan'. In 2008, the two sides signed five Memoranda of Understanding, including in the mining sector. Experts from industries such as oil, gas, and agriculture have visited to share experiences and exchange ideas. In 2010, a North Korean

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<sup>3</sup>Nguyen Thi Tham & co-authors (2022), op. cit., p. 154.

<sup>4</sup>Nguyen Thi Tham & co-authors (2022), op. cit., p. 154-155.



government delegation led by the Deputy Minister of Commerce of North Korea visited Vietnam, proposing cooperation in areas such as agriculture, aquaculture, genetic research, stem cell research, energy cooperation, and hydroelectric power plant construction. As a result, several cooperation programs are being implemented in areas such as mining and ore processing, including power transmission lines, material production, cement production, and mining. In 2012, a North Korean delegation led by Mr. Kim Yong-il visited Vietnam to share construction experiences. Particularly, Vietnam is actively engaging in agricultural production and the new rural model. However, in reality, investments between the two countries have not yielded significant results, and currently, Vietnam has no investment projects in North Korea<sup>5</sup>.

In terms of aid, Vietnam primarily provides food assistance and essential goods to North Korea. Vietnam's support for North Korea is as follows: 1995: 100 tons of rice, 1997: 130,000 tons of rice, 2000: 1,000 tons of rice, 2001: 5,000 tons of rice, 2002: 5,000 tons of rice, 2005: 1,000 tons of rice + 5 tons of raw rubber, 2007: \$50,000 (emergency aid) + 2,000 tons of rice, 2009: 3,000 tons of rice, 2010: 500 tons of rice, 2011: 200 tons of rice, 2012: 5,000 tons of rice<sup>6</sup>.

The economic cooperation relationship between Vietnam and North Korea is built on significant past achievements and is expected to be further strengthened and vigorously promoted under the influence of the regional environment and the situation of both countries.

East Asia is a region distinct in geography, scale, and economic growth rate, currently the most dynamic in the world. Bilateral and multilateral economic cooperation forums in this region are being organized more actively than ever. Vietnam is a very active member of these forums. With an economic renovation policy oriented towards the market and active economic integration with the region and the world, Vietnam has achieved significant milestones in economic cooperation with countries in the region. Based on the experience from the international economic integration process and the achievements in economic relations with North Korea, Vietnam has the advantages and favorable conditions to vigorously promote multifaceted economic cooperation with North Korea in the future.

Although North Korea remains isolated from the world due to nuclear issues, it has undertaken economic reforms and urgently needs to promote economic cooperation with countries in the region. North Korea has established Free Economic Zones (FEZs) and tourism zones aimed at attracting foreign investment and developing the tourism service industry. It is likely that North Korea will continue to push for economic cooperation with other countries. Recent economic progress in North Korea indicates that domestic economic reforms and the trend of

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<sup>5</sup>Nguyen Thi Tham & co-authors (2022), *op. cit.*, p. 156.

<sup>6</sup>International Relations Department (VCCI), "North Korea Market Profile", p. 9.



regional and global economic integration are inevitable. What is happening in North Korea today can be compared to what happened in Vietnam in the late 1980s when Vietnam began its economic renovation process. Vietnam's experience will be a useful reference for North Korea, and North Korea truly hopes to study and refer to Vietnam's experience. This is a clear factor that will help North Korea promote and strengthen economic cooperation with Vietnam in the future.

### 3. Culture and Society

In the 1960s, during the period of warm relations between North Korea and North Vietnam, particularly during the Vietnam War, hundreds of envoys were sent to North Korea for Korean language training<sup>7</sup>. This practice has continued to the present day, though on a much smaller scale, with students primarily attending public schools in both countries. A notable example is diplomat Ri Ho-jun, who interpreted for Chairman Kim Jong Un at Dong Dang station and during his return to the hotel at the US-North Korea Summit in 2019<sup>8</sup>. Ri Ho-jun, an alumnus of Hanoi National University (1984-1988), currently works at the North Korean Embassy in Hanoi and holds the position of Acting Ambassador<sup>9</sup>. Similarly, Rion Jong-gon, a student at Hanoi National University of Foreign Studies, recalls meeting Chairman Kim Jong-un in Hanoi. In this way, both countries are nurturing human resources to maintain and enhance their bilateral cooperation. Additionally, a significant educational institution representing the Vietnam-North Korea relationship is the Vietnam-North Korea Kindergarten, established in 1978 with North Korean support<sup>10</sup>.

In terms of culture and society, we will explore through the article *"The high-level visit rekindles the Vietnam-North Korea bond after three decades, narrated by a former Vietnamese Ambassador to North Korea"*<sup>11</sup>. The high-level visit to North Korea mentioned here is the trip by President Tran Duc Luong in 2002. This visit not only warmed up the relations between the two countries but also rekindled the romance between a Vietnamese man and a North Korean woman after 31 years of waiting. This refers to Ms. Ri Yong Hui and Mr. Pham Ngoc Canh.

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<sup>7</sup>International Relations Department (VCCI), "North Korea Market Profile", p. 9.

<sup>8</sup><https://ulis.vnu.edu.vn/nam-sinh-trieu-tien-noi-tieng-viet-troi-chay-tu-tin-di-cho-o-ha-noi/>, accessed on 2024.04.10.

<sup>9</sup><https://nhandan.vn/ky-niem-65-nam-chuyen-tham-chinh-thuc-viet-nam-cua-chu-tich-trieu-tien-kim-nhat-thanh-post786033.html>, accessed on 2024.04.10.

<sup>10</sup><https://baotintuc.vn/thoi-su/ngoi-truong-bieu-tuong-cua-quan-he-huu-nghi-viet-nam-trieu-tien-20190224084624194.htm>, accessed on 2024.04.10.

<sup>11</sup>Do Thi Hoa - Vietnamese Ambassador to North Korea from 2000 to 2004, first went to North Korea in 1964 as a student and left North Korea in 2004 after finishing her ambassadorship. Over those 40 years, her life and career were closely connected with this country. Speaking about her deep connections with North Korea, Ms. Hoa described it as "the beginning and also the end."

International marriage is not permitted in North Korea, and this was the only case where a North Korean woman was allowed to marry a foreigner, which has become a symbolic link in the Vietnam-North Korea relationship.

The Vietnam Ministry of Culture regularly sends art troupes to North Korea to participate in the April Spring Art Festival held in Pyongyang. In 2012, the Vietnamese team won one gold cup and three silver medals<sup>12</sup>. Meanwhile, many North Korean coaches have helped train the Vietnamese national teams in areas such as taekwondo and women's soccer. In 2011, North Korea and South Korea jointly organized the photo exhibition "President Ho Chi Minh, the national liberation hero and outstanding cultural figure" in North Korea.

In April 2012, to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the birth of President Kim Il Sung, the North Korean Revolution Museum and the Ho Chi Minh Museum collaborated to organize a photo exhibition about North Korea's country and people at the Ho Chi Minh Museum. Additionally, in commemoration of the 65th anniversary of President Kim Il Sung's official visit to Vietnam in 2023, the North Korean Embassy in Hanoi hosted a reception on the evening of December 5, marking 65 years since President Kim Il Sung's official visit to Vietnam (November 28 – December 2, 1958)<sup>13</sup>.

Regarding people-to-people diplomacy, the two sides have established the Korea-Vietnam Friendship Association and the Vietnam-Korea Friendship Association to promote and develop friendly relations between the two countries and encourage participation in friendly exchange activities. Due to North Korea's "closed-door" policy and the sanctions imposed on it for its nuclear weapons development, the conditions for people-to-people exchanges between the two countries have not been fully developed, and the number of tourists visiting each other through official exchanges is very limited.

According to the results above, since the 2000s, there have been more exchanges in politics, diplomacy, and security between North Korea and Vietnam than in economics, society, and culture. This can be explained for the following reasons:

First, North Korea and Vietnam maintain and value their "traditional alliance" relationship. Since the unification of Vietnam (1975), the North Korea-Vietnam relationship became somewhat "cold" due to the Cambodia issue, Vietnam's opening reforms, and the diplomatic relations between South Korea and Vietnam. However, the two countries still strive to preserve this relationship by considering it a "traditional" relationship.

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<sup>12</sup>International Relations Department (VCCI), "North Korea Market Profile", p. 9.

<sup>13</sup><https://nhandan.vn/ky-niem-65-nam-chuyen-tham-chinh-thuc-viet-nam-cua-chu-tich-trieu-tien-kim-nhat-thanh-post786033.html>, accessed on 2024.04.10.

Second, North Korea is under international sanctions due to its development of nuclear weapons and missiles. And Vietnam, as a responsible member of the international community, strictly implements these sanctions. Therefore, in this situation, economic exchanges between North Korea and Vietnam are certainly limited.

Third, North Korea adopts a "closed-door" policy due to its "brinkmanship" foreign policy. Therefore, cultural and social exchanges not only with Vietnam but with other countries are also very limited.

## **II. PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES IN VIETNAM-NORTH KOREA RELATIONS**

### **1. Prospects**

As we discussed in Section II, the exchanges between Vietnam and North Korea in each sector are not very vibrant. However, in the situation where cooperation is limited due to the sanctions against North Korea, these exchanges are very meaningful. They are important factors that can not only maintain the traditional relationship between North Korea and Vietnam but can also develop the relationship between the two countries in the future. Especially, this will be an opportunity for dialogue with the isolated North Korea.

North Korea is currently under economic sanctions from the United States and the United Nations. The country has been in a long-term shortage of food, mainly rice and consumer goods. Vietnamese agricultural products and consumer goods are reasonably priced and of quality that meets the urgent needs of the North Korean market. These are favorable conditions for enhancing the export of food and consumer goods from Vietnam to North Korea. Moreover, the experience of building a market-oriented socialist economy that Vietnam has developed over the past 30 years also presents exchange opportunities for the two countries. At the Inter-Korean Summit at Panmunjom on April 27, 2018, North Korean Chairman Kim Jong-un stated that he 'likes' the Vietnam-style reforms<sup>14</sup>.

Of course, as each country has its own characteristics, neither the "Vietnamese model" nor the "Chinese model" would necessarily be the right fit but rather a "North Korean-style" reform, taking into account the specific traits of the country. Vietnam can share its experiences in this process. However, the most crucial aspect is to encourage North Korea to undertake reforms and open up, to abandon its nuclear program, and to maintain peace and stability in the region. Before North Korea can reform and open up, resolving the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula will be a prerequisite. There are many factors that make solving the North Korean nuclear issue challenging, but among them, North Korea views nuclear weapons as a means of survival. In other words, to persuade North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons, the security of its regime must be guaranteed. Although

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<sup>14</sup>POSCO Research Institute, "What are the characteristics of Vietnam-style Reform and Opening Up favored by North Korea?", p.2 (포스코경영연구원, 은 무엇인가 ).

Vietnam has undergone reforms and opening up, it has maintained its socialist regime and the sole leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam. This could be a typical example for North Korea.

Additionally, North Korea and Vietnam share a border with China. Due to ideological and economic interests alignment, North Korea and Vietnam have close relations with China but at the same time try to escape from China's influence. Especially, as a country under sanctions and more dependent on China, North Korea must be particularly vigilant towards it. And since China is also very concerned about the expansion of US influence in Northeast Asia. China's military involvement in the Korean War (1950-1953) shows the geopolitical importance of North Korea to China. North Korea and Vietnam share a common stance as small countries facing a powerful country like China and have a history of being dominated by China in the past; this could be an opportunity for cooperation in security between the two countries.

## **2. Challenges**

The year 2023 was a successful one in terms of diplomacy for Vietnam. On September 10, 2023, Vietnam and the United States officially upgraded their relationship to a “comprehensive strategic partnership.” Subsequently, on November 27, 2023, Vietnam and Japan declared they would elevate their relationship to a “comprehensive strategic partnership for peace and prosperity in Asia and the world.” Earlier, in December 2022, the relationship between Vietnam and South Korea was upgraded to a “comprehensive strategic partnership.” Vietnam’s relationship with China and Russia is also characterized as a “comprehensive strategic partnership.” Thus, Vietnam has good relations with countries directly involved in addressing the issues of the Korean Peninsula. As the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Nguyen Phu Trong, affirmed in his closing speech at the 13th Party Congress: “Our country has never before attained the wealth, potential, position, and international prestige that it enjoys today.”<sup>15</sup> Vietnam has created a favorable international environment for its development. For Vietnam, this is both an opportunity and a challenge in developing relations with North Korea because while Vietnam has good relations with these major powers, it is also dependent on and influenced by them in many respects.

As we mentioned in Section II, Vietnam considers its relationship with North Korea as a “traditional relationship” and is one of the few countries to have an embassy in Pyongyang, with North Korea also having an embassy in Hanoi. This is significant for dialogue, exchanges, and cooperation with North Korea. In the future, Vietnam will need to further develop the reform and opening policies it currently maintains to achieve more results, aiming to positively influence North Korea towards reform and openness. However, in this process, Vietnam needs the consensus from major countries directly involved in resolving the issues of the Korean Peninsula. Therefore, in

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<sup>15</sup>[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TK\\_PAFNDeds](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TK_PAFNDeds), accessed on 2024.04.10.



its policy towards North Korea, Vietnam must clearly state its stance and seek support from related countries. To effectively play this role, Vietnam must first enhance its international standing in the coming period.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

The relationship between Vietnam and North Korea since the 2000s can be summarized as maintaining “traditional relations” and “limited friendly exchange and cooperation.” North Korea, a country adopting a “closed” policy due to its “war brinkmanship” foreign policy, is isolated from the international community and subjected to economic sanctions. In this situation, Vietnam still maintains exchanges with North Korea across various sectors, including politics, diplomacy, security, economy, social issues, and culture. Among these, the most positive exchanges occur in the fields of politics, diplomacy, and security.

In the future, the prospects for North Korea-Vietnam relations have the greatest potential in terms of economic cooperation and security cooperation. For North Korea, which is facing food shortages, Vietnamese products—affordable and of good quality—would meet its national needs. As a small country, Vietnam has implemented reform and opening policies to move beyond the end of the Cold War and has achieved significant results, the most important reference point for North Korea being that Vietnam still maintains a one-party system. This could aid North Korea in finding solutions for the task of “securing the internal political system of North Korea.” Also, as a small country sharing borders with China, North Korea and Vietnam, which share socialist ideologies, can exchange security policies regarding China.

However, Vietnam needs to clearly identify the challenges and opportunities in maintaining and developing relations with both regions of the Korean Peninsula. Vietnam needs not only to seek opportunities to demonstrate this role but also to be prepared to face the challenges that this role entails.

Finally, Vietnam needs to effectively play its role in encouraging reform and opening in North Korea as a bridge between North Korea and the international community. To achieve this, Vietnam needs to:

First, enhance its diplomatic role. Vietnam could leverage its historical and robust diplomatic relations with North Korea to establish a reliable dialogue channel. In terms of diplomacy, Vietnam could host multilateral or bilateral meetings to promote dialogue and reduce tensions. The 2019 US-North Korea Summit in Hanoi is a prime example of how Vietnam can facilitate a dialogue space, finding a peaceful solution to the issues of North Korea.

Second, share economic development experiences. Vietnam could provide a useful reference model for North Korea in carrying out economic reforms and market opening without weakening the political system. To do this, Vietnam must further develop the reform and opening policies it is pursuing to enhance its international standing and serve as a reference example for North Korea.



Third, promote investment and trade. Economic cooperation could be an important means to strengthen relations and reduce tensions. Vietnam could encourage domestic and international businesses to recognize the potential of the North Korean market. Actively organize workshops and conferences related to sectors where North Korea has urgent needs, such as agriculture and food. Maximize opportunities for contact, meetings, and cooperation under conditions where North Korea is subject to sanctions. Indeed, enhancing economic exchanges not only brings economic benefits but can also improve political and social relations between countries.

Thus, closer cooperation between Vietnam and North Korea could provide many opportunities to influence North Korea to "remove barriers" and undertake reformative opening up to the world. This would have profound significance not only for the people of North Korea but also make a significant contribution to peace and stability in Northeast Asia in particular, and the world in general. Given these significant implications, Vietnam truly needs to promote its role, advocating for support from major countries in its policy towards North Korea for the sake of peace and human progress.

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