

Strategic partnership in international relations: The case of Vietnam and the Republic of Korea¹

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Abstract: *The relationship between Vietnam and the Republic of Korea has gone through more than 30 years, developing comprehensive and extensive cooperation in many fields. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992, Vietnam - South Korea relations have been increasingly upgraded, from partnership and dialogue to comprehensive cooperation partnership (1992-2001), from comprehensive cooperation partner to strategic cooperation partner (2001-2009), and comprehensive strategic partnership on the 30th anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations (2022). Based on theoretical aspect of strategic partnership and significant achievements between the two countries, the article analyzes the development stages of the relationship between Vietnam and South Korea, thereby providing assessments and suggesting directions for promoting this relationship in the future.*

Keywords: Strategic Partnership, Republic of Korea, South Korea, Vietnam

1. Introduction

Globalization and international integration became inevitable trends in the post-Cold War era. Relations between international partners thus have taken various forms, among which strategic partnership has been one of the key cooperation practices adopted by countries and international organizations.

Vietnam officially established its diplomatic relations with the Republic of Korea (South Korea) on December 22, 1992. Both located in the East Asian region, Vietnam and Korea share similarities in geography, natural conditions, culture, and history. The bilateral ties were upgraded to a strategic partnership in 2009 and a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2022, which were the key attributes for reinforcing the influence of South Korea in the Southeast Asia. Research works on the relations of the two countries thus denote both theoretical and practical significance.

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2. Definition of strategic partnership

There is not yet a consensus on the connotation of strategic partnership despite a popular adoption of the concept. Identification of such partnership is therefore of a great scholarly interest. Strategic partnership refers to an important cooperative relationship with both goal-oriented and long-term implications (mutually beneficial relations). This form of cooperation, compared to other conventional forms, is considered of a higher level with more extensive or deeper relations in different fields. Countries with strategic partnership are not necessarily bound by military cooperation or military responsibilities towards partners, which distinguishes this partnership with alliances. In general, a strategic relationship or partnership indicates highly important, cohesive, and long-term mutual relations. However, the significance and solidity of a strategic partnership may not be as strong as an alliance or a special partnership (Nguyen Canh Hue, 2015: 14).

There are fundamental characteristics of strategic partnership, including (i) no limitations in terms of time and space, applicable subjects, or fields of cooperation and no military requirements; (ii) openness and flexibility in cooperation forms (formal or informal, bilateral or multilateral, on a wide or narrow range, extensive or restricted, etc.); and (iii) party-driven structures, activities, formats, and magnitudes (Tran Tho Quang, 2015: 16).

By the reason of today's international relations featured with multilateralism and diversification, strategic partnership could take different forms, such as (i) between major powers, (ii) between superior and inferior countries, (iii) between inferior

countries,, and (iv) between a major power and a group of countries or a regional institution (Nguyen Vu Tung and Hoang Anh Tuan, 2006).

3. Evolution of the Vietnam-South Korea partnership

3.1. Overview of the Vietnam-South Korea partnership

Before 1975, South Korea had been in diplomatic relations with the Republic of Vietnam. However, there was no diplomatic bonds with Vietnam after the unification of the country due to historical legacies. During the Vietnam War (1954-1975), the United States wanted to involve its allies, among those South Korea had sent the largest and most aggressive troop, who also caused massive massacres with the lengthiest stay in Vietnam (Ku Su Jeong, 2008: 215).

In the 1980-1990, the Cold War entered its final phase, marking a shift from confrontation to dialogue and cooperation became certain. Vietnam and South Korea started a discussion on normalization in 1991 and moved towards cooperation agreements and diplomatic relations on the foundation of an understanding that: "The incomplete relationship between the two countries in the past was a consequence of the Cold War. Looking to the future, South Korea will ensure no such recurrences and it is important for the two countries to promote the forward-thinking cooperation to improve mutual understanding and trust" (Lee Han Woo and Bui The Cuong, 2015: 40). Vietnam and South Korea since then continued the dialogue of normalization through their embassies in Bangkok (Thailand). On 22 December 1992, the South Korean Foreign Minister Lee Sang Ok, on behalf of the government, officially

signed the cooperation agreements to establish the ambassador-level diplomatic relations with Vietnam. The event served as a strong testament to the spirit of “closing the past, opening the future” for the common interests of the two nations, which aligned with the international tendency of cooperation and integration to enter a new development era.

In the last decade of the 20th century, there were annual high-level visits both to and from each country, including the visits by the South Korean high-level leaders like Prime Minister Lee Young Dug (August 1994), National Assembly Chairman Kim Soo Han (August 1996), President Kim Young Sam (August 1996), President Kim Tae Chung (December 1998); and by the Vietnamese leaders such as Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet (May 1993), General Secretary Do Muoi (April 1995), National Assembly Chairman Nong Duc Manh (March 1998), President Tran Duc Luong (August 2001). Remarkable agreements in various fields signed during those visits had helped increase the mutual understanding and trust, narrow the difference, and share common interests. South Korea, through active cooperation, has supported Vietnam’s reform policies and participation in different international forums and organizations. Meanwhile, Vietnam has been consistent with its stance of promoting peace, stability, dialogue, and cooperation on the Korean Peninsula and upholding South Korea’s efforts to resolve the nuclear issues through peaceful negotiation.

In August 2001, Vietnam and South Korea had a joint statement on “the 21st century comprehensive cooperation partnership” on the occasion of the visit

by the Vietnamese President Tran Duc Luong. An inclusive companionship in the 21st century was the key to the important bilateral documents, such as promotion of investment and commercial transactions, cultural and artistic exchanges, and youth exchange activities. The Vietnam-South Korea diplomatic relations, since its establishment, have developed with remarkable achievements and prospects and could be seen as a unique example of rapid advancements within a short period of time (Nguyen Manh Cam, 1997: 6).

3.2. From a comprehensive to strategic partnership (2001-2009)

The first decade of the 21st century also witnessed remarkable milestones of the Vietnam-South Korean relations.

On the *political diplomacy* front, the exchange of high-level visits continued to take place in the early 21st century thanks to the new upgrade of the bilateral relations: Prime Minister Lee Handong’s visit to Vietnam in April 2002, First Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung’s visit to South Korea in August-September 2002, Prime Minister Phan Van Khai’s visit to South Korea in September 2003, President Roh Moo-huyn’s visit to Vietnam in October 2004, and First Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Sinh Hung’s visit to South Korea in May 2007. The high-level bilateral meeting between South Korean President Roh Moo-huyn and Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet occurred on 17 November 2006 during the 14th APEC in Hanoi. In particular, the visit by Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung to South Korea during the ASEAN-South Korea Summit in May 2009 marked a new chapter of the bilateral relations - an upgrade from the

comprehensive partnership in 2001 to the strategic partnership.

As for *two-way trade*, the total transactions between the two countries valued at USD2.1 billion in 2001 and approximately USD10 billion in 2009 (Nguyen Van Lan, 2019: 98). South Korea's ODA to Vietnam started in 1991 through the Korean International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) and its non-refundable aid accumulated to USD50.247 million in 2004 for key areas of health, education, research capacity building, technology transfer, and short-term training (Nguyen Hoang Giap, 2009: 153). In the following years of 2006-2009, South Korean increased its annual concessional loan to USD100 million and annual non-refundable aid to USD9.5 million for Vietnam. South Korea only ranked after Japan as Vietnam's second largest ODA provider as of 2009 (*Nhan Dan Newspaper Online*, 2018). Since the establishment of the diplomatic ties, South Korea had become Vietnam's major bilateral sponsor. Practical results in the priority sectors of human resource development, education, training, health, etc. thanks to South Korea's ODA have contributed greatly to Vietnam's economic and social development.

Regarding *cultural and social exchanges*, the first-ever Overseas Korean Cultural Center in the Southeast Asia was founded in Hanoi in November 2006. The two countries also signed the Cooperation Agreement in Education in March 2000 and the Cooperation Agreement in Education and Training in May 2005. There were also joint research projects in *science and technology* and technology transfer from South Korea, as well as visits by the delegations to and from each country for

the purposes of case studies, surveys, and experience sharing in the fields of industry, agriculture, health, and the adoption of atomic energy for peace.

3.3. From a strategic to comprehensive strategic partnership (2009-current)

Since the normalization of relations in 1992 and, in particular, after the upgrade of strategic cooperative partnership in 2009, Vietnam became one of South Korea's important partners and emerging markets in the region. The South Korean government highly appreciated Vietnam's efforts in promoting the market mechanisms through its reform and opening-up policies in more than two decades and recognized Vietnam as a country with the market economy. (Nguyen Hoang Giap et al., 2011: 77). The recognition indicated Vietnam as part of South Korea's policy in the Asia-Pacific region and also an important link in its policy in the Southeast Asia. In April 2011, to kick off the implementation of the strategic partnership, the two countries held their first Diplomatic and Security Strategy Conference at the Deputy Foreign Minister level in Hanoi. Both Vietnam and South Korea joined international forums such as those held by the United Nations, ASEM, APEC, and ARF - the ASEAN Regional Forum which serves as a platform for the region's security issues. South Korea also attended the first ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) held in Hanoi in December 2011. Trade between Vietnam and South Korea is another important component apart from the political diplomacy. Vietnam surpassed Japan in 2015 to become South Korea's third largest export market. The bilateral trade volume grew constantly, exceeding USD10 billion in 2012, then reached

USD20 billion in 2016 and over USD31 billion in 2017 (Nguyen Van Lan, 2019: 101).

The New Southern Policy, which was announced by President Moon Jae-in in 2017, has elevated ASEAN countries and India to be on par with South Korea's major partners of the United States, China, Japan, and Russia. The new policy targets three core values: (i) the people-centered cooperation for the people-to-people links, (ii) the prosperous community for economic development cooperation, and (iii) the peaceful community for security cooperation (Korea Institute for International Economic Policy, 2021: 18). South Korea considers Vietnam as an important partner with great potential for cooperation in the Southeast Asia. The Korean government holds Vietnam in high regard and is keen to continue its support to and cooperation with Vietnam in the country's process of industrialization and modernization (Nguyen Van Lan, 2019: 60). President Moon Jae-in expected Vietnam to play a constructive role regarding the Korean Peninsula issue as the country assumed the ASEAN Chairmanship and non-permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council in 2020 (Yonhap News Agency, 2019).

Vietnam on its side always consistently promotes independent foreign policy, autonomy, peace, friendship, cooperation and development, diversification and multilateralization of partnership to be a friend, a trusted partner, and an active and accountable member of the international communities (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021: 161-162). Vietnam does not see political differences as barriers to strengthening the bilateral relationship

with South Korea. The two countries have regularly exchanged and cooperated in all fields and built consensus and support to each other through bilateral and multilateral forums. In the joint statement on 24 March 2018, both countries agreed to strengthen and deepen the bilateral mechanisms for exchanges, communications, and dialogues between the two governments' agencies, local authorities, national assemblies, political parties, civil societies, and social classes, as well as continue fortifying the foundation for the strategic and cooperative partnership between the two countries (*Nhan Dan Newspaper Online*, 2018). Vietnam continues to promote the relations with South Korea on three key pillars of party diplomacy, public diplomacy, and people diplomacy.

Since the introduction of the New Southern Policy (2017), the bilateral economic and cultural-social relations have undergone significant changes. New projects approved for South Korea in the 2017-2022 period reached 4,427 in number and USD37.4 billion in registered capital investment (Vietnam's Ministry of Planning and Investment, 2016-2022). For Vietnam's investment in South Korea, records showed a total number of 288 projects in 2017-2022 (including 15 projects for 2017, 19 for 2018, 31 for 2019, 11 for 2020, 26 for 2021, and a sudden surge of 186 for 2022) with a total investment value of approximately USD71 million (South Korea's Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy). The Vietnamese community in South Korea as of March 2021 grew to 212,359 people, representing 9 per cent of this country's population. There were above 37,000 Vietnamese workers under South Korea's Employment Permit System

(EPS) program for the four industries of manufacturing, construction, agriculture, and fishing. International enrollments at Korean schools from Vietnam were 59,876 and Vietnamese women in South Korean wedlocks accounted for 28 per cent of the total cross-national marriages in the country (Nguyen Duy Dung, 2022: 157).

4. Reflection and conclusion

Vietnam and South Korea have been in over 30 years of diplomatic relations with remarkable achievements. The partnership had been continuously developed and upgraded to reach the highest level, from the partnership in August 2021 to comprehensive partnership in October 2004, then to strategic cooperative partnership in May 2009, and finally the comprehensive strategic partnership in December 2022. The two countries commit to continue strengthening and building trust, cooperating through high-level visits and practical application of the existing bilateral mechanisms, and supporting each other and seeking mutual interests in multilateral issues both at the global and regional levels through the platforms such as ASEA+1, ASEAN+3, ARF, etc.

The evolution of the Vietnam-South Korea relations has created a foundation and incentives for cooperation in other fields. The economic partnership has been always pivotal to the two countries. The bilateral trade increased significantly in the last two decades. South Korea has been constantly in the top two investors in Vietnam for both project quantity and investment volume. Other fields of science, technology, culture, education, and tourism also saw a rapid growth, resulting in enhanced mutual understanding for the two countries' long-term relations. There have been various

events held by Vietnam and South Korea for cultural and tourism promotion, such as the Vietnam-Korea Food and Culture Festival, Korean Culture Day, Korean Film Week, Vietnam Tourism Roadshow in South Korea, and so forth. More than 30 provinces in both countries have established their partnerships, including major cities like Hanoi-Seoul, Hai Phong-Incheon, Danang-Daegu, etc. South Korea is currently providing support for Vietnam's development of solar energy and green tech parks and the knowledge sharing programs led by the Vietnam-Korean Institute of Science and Technology. The sponsorship by the government, universities, and organizations of South Korea has enabled the improvement of educational infrastructure in Vietnam. Vietnamese students also have opportunities for language and professional training through different scholarship programs offered by the Korea Foundation, Samsung, or Kumho.

There are nevertheless existing issues between Vietnam and South Korea. *Firstly*, the foreign policy towards the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) is considered sensitive to Vietnam and South Korea. Although both countries advocate the denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula, the conflicts between North and South Korea, to whom Vietnam maintains its relations, pose difficulties and obstacles to the Vietnam-South Korea partnership. *Secondly*, the two countries have dissimilarities in the foreign policy thinking due to different political institutions and ideologies. Vietnam advocates strengthening its relations with all countries, particularly traditional partner countries, on the basis of equality and mutual benefits rather than

forming alliances. South Korea, however, adopts a pragmatic foreign policy for a strong alliance with the United States and close relations with both developed and developing countries. In addition, the trade imbalance and development disparity are also problematic to the bilateral ties.

Factoring in both achievements and limitations in the Vietnam-South Korea relationship, the key directions for the two countries could be as follows: (1) to continue to promote the strategic partnership in the three aspects of party diplomacy, public diplomacy, and people diplomacy and to ensure the highest national interests in accordance with the fundamental principles laid out in the United Nations Charter and the international law and on the basis of equality, cooperation, mutual benefits, and proactive and comprehensive integration (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021: 161-162); (2) to regularly exchange diplomatic corps at all levels to enhance political trust, create strategic trust, and mutual understanding in all fields; to consolidate and enhance the potential for cooperation in the field of business investment, effectively implement the trade agreements, such as the Vietnam-Korea Free Trade Agreement (VKFTA) and Partnership Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP); (3) to create favorable conditions for the development of people-to-people links to enhance the bilateral relations and, at the same time, to promote partnerships between the locales in the two countries and exchanges for the youth and in culture and tourism in the spirit of solidarity and friendship; and (4) to promote the strengths of each country and create an

enabling environment for the Vietnam-South Korea comprehensive strategic partnership □

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