



From Close Allies to Distant Comrades: The Ups and Downs of the Vietnam-North Korea Relationship

By **Khang X. Vu**

In 2019, more than five decades after North Korean President Kim Il-sung's last official trip to Vietnam in 1964, Kim's grandson, North Korean Chairman Kim Jong-un, visited the country at the invitation of the Communist Party of Vietnam General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong. In a welcoming [speech](#), Trong described the relationship, "although the road is long, our hearts are close." Kim responded to Vietnamese hospitality, saying North Korea would "staunchly preserve and forever honor the North Korea-Vietnam friendship from generation to generation."

Khang X. Vu, a doctoral candidate in the Political Science Department at Boston College, explains that the "evolution of the Vietnam-North Korea relationship since 1948 demonstrates the importance of Party ideology and state interests in their bilateral ties and why a "shared communist ideology alone was insufficient to keep Vietnam and North Korea together after 1975."

Vietnam and North Korea are among the world's last five communist party states, along with China, Laos, and Cuba. As such, it is no surprise that the two leaders emphasized common communist values and a shared history of struggle against US imperialism in their speeches. Still, despite the amicable words extolling the longevity of the traditional friendship, both leaders avoided mention of Vietnam's conflict with the North Korea-backed Khmer Rouge and subsequent occupation of Cambodia from 1978 to 1989. Vietnam's war with Cambodia was a facet of intra-communist bloc conflicts that spanned the whole of East Asia. Despite Hanoi and Pyongyang's shared communist ideology, intra-bloc tensions [eroded the friendship between the two nations](#). What were the reasons behind this dramatic shift in bilateral relations?

The answer concerns the nature of Vietnam and North Korea's party-state structure. Both Vietnam and North Korea are single-party communist states in which the ruling communist party "[monopolizes](#) state power over the direction and control of society." Party organizations run parallel to state governing bodies, which allows the Party to exert its ideological control over the politically neutral state. Importantly, such parallelism gave rise to a class of dual-role elites, who are both Party members handling the promulgation of party ideology and state bureaucrats managing daily governing tasks. These elites represent the Party's ideology and state interests in external relations. Subsequently, they will not sacrifice either as they need the party-state to survive. Privileging Party ideology over state interests can weaken the Party's ability to govern domestically and spread its ideology internationally, while pursuing state interests alone puts the Party's ideological control and legitimacy at risk. Consequently, [Vietnam and North Korea were close allies](#) when their state interests and ideological values aligned. When either of them was incompatible, Vietnam and North Korea would not become allies, or they would exit the alliance. This explains why the shared communist ideology alone was insufficient to keep Vietnam and North Korea together after 1975.

The evolution of the Vietnam-North Korea relationship since 1948 demonstrates the importance of Party ideology and state interests in their bilateral ties. Both North Vietnam and North Korea were founded under the guidance of a Marxist-Leninist party, and their close communist ties made North Korea one of the first countries to establish diplomatic relations with North Vietnam in January 1950 after the Soviet Union and China. Nevertheless, before the Korean Armistice dividing Korea in 1953 and [the Geneva Accords dividing Indochina in 1954](#) Hanoi and Pyongyang were not military allies. Relations were measured because the two nations did not share any geopolitical interests, although they shared the same communist ideology. Hanoi and Pyongyang

allied after 1954 when both countries were divided with US-backed regimes in their respective southern halves. In 1958, North Vietnam and North Korea released [a joint declaration](#), committing one another to the united cause of building socialism and opposing the US military presence in South Vietnam and South Korea. Kim Il-sung even [proposed sending volunteer forces to help North Vietnam](#) defend itself against the United States and fight the US-backed South Vietnam, [a promise that he later fulfilled](#) with the participation of approximately 200 North Korean pilots in the Vietnam War. However, Kim's generosity was not simply due to communist solidarity. He [drew a geopolitical connection between Korea and Vietnam](#) that posited a military setback in Vietnam would relieve US military pressure on North Korea. North Korea also sent generous economic aid and helped train North Vietnamese students in preparation for post-War reconstruction.

However, soon after the massive withdrawal of the US military from Indochina in 1973, [North Korea reduced its aid to North Vietnam](#) because they no longer shared the same enemy. Hanoi's victory in 1975 and its [design of an "Indochina Federation"](#) incorporating Laos and Cambodia clashed with [North Korea's close friendship with Cambodia](#). Importantly, Hanoi's victory also [allowed Vietnam to affirm its ideological superiority](#) over North Korea's Juche, further aggravating their relationship's downward spiral. When China invaded Vietnam in 1979, North Korea kept silent. However, [Vietnam publicly condemned North Korea](#), asserting that Pyongyang had shown hostility toward it by supporting Pol Pot and China's aggression against Vietnam. In an interesting turn of history, North Korea was now on the same side as the US ally Thailand opposing the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. Vietnam and North Korea mended their fences in the late 1980s [after Hanoi began to withdraw from Cambodia](#). However, relations stalled again after Vietnam established diplomatic ties with South Korea in 1992.

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After almost a decade of estrangement, Vietnam and North Korea began to reestablish high-level bilateral contact with the visit of North Korea's foreign minister Paek Nam-sun to Hanoi in 2000. North Korea has since shown an interest in Vietnam-style market reforms, and thus Vietnamese leaders were keen to show the North Korean delegation one of the country's major factories during Kim Jong-un's 2019 visit. North Korea and Vietnam also committed to boosting tourism by [allowing The Amazing Race Vietnam to film one of its legs in Pyongyang in 2019](#), the first time North Korea permitted a reality TV show to be filmed in the country. Although the summit between US President Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un was a failure, Kim's official visit to Vietnam was a success as it rekindled Vietnamese interest in investing in North Korea despite heavy international sanctions.

Still, despite a significant uptick in bilateral ties after 2019, Vietnam and North Korea will not become allies as they were during the Vietnam War. Although sharing the same communist ideology, Hanoi and Pyongyang significantly differ regarding the US presence in the Indo-Pacific. While North Korea wants the United States to withdraw, Vietnam prefers it to stay to check China's expansion. Hopefully, Hanoi and Pyongyang will not find themselves on opposing ends of regional geopolitics as they did in the late 1970s and 1980s. And if one day North Korea decides to adopt major market reforms, Vietnam will be able to offer its expertise and capital.

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