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Forgiving Without Forgetting: Vietnam's Peace Diplomacy over South Korean Atrocities in the Vietnam War

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In December 2022, Vietnam and South Korea agreed to elevate their 30-year-old ties to a comprehensive strategic partnership. Screenshot from Arirang News on YouTube, 5 December 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-fDVCFMGMaA> reporting on the development of a deeper relationship between both countries.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- South Korea's participation in the Vietnam War was marked by various atrocities, including massacres and sexual violence against thousands of Vietnamese civilians.
- Despite South Korea's refusal to acknowledge these atrocities, Vietnam's peace diplomacy — which involves shelving historical issues to promote cooperative and peaceful interactions with former foes — allowed for bilateral relations to flourish.
- At the same time, Vietnam has allowed local commemoration of Korean massacres and, on rare occasions, challenged South Korea's contentious historical narratives.
- Vietnam's peace diplomacy towards South Korea is under strain, given Vietnamese victims' growing demand for accountability and acknowledgement from the South Korean government.
- To encourage South Korea's acknowledgement and rectification of past atrocities, Vietnam needs to frame the issue as an area for collaboration and establish an organisation to represent and support the victims.

INTRODUCTION

In December 2022, Vietnam and South Korea agreed to elevate their 30-year-old ties to a comprehensive strategic partnership based on the spirit of “heading towards a bright future”.¹ However, this promise was soon tested when, on 7 February 2023, the Seoul Central District Court ordered the South Korean government to pay 30 million won (US\$23,730) in compensation to Nguyen Thi Thanh, a Vietnamese woman who survived a massacre committed by Korean soldiers during the Vietnam War.² Thanh had previously filed a lawsuit against the South Korean government in 2020, testifying that Korean marine soldiers killed her family members and shot her in the stomach as they attacked the Phong Nhat - Phong Nhi village in Quang Nam Province in 1968.

This ruling is significant as it marks the first legal acknowledgement of Korean troops’ atrocities during the Vietnam War. However, South Korea’s Defense Minister Lee Jong-sup quickly denied that Korean troops committed massacres in Vietnam, and the South Korean government filed an appeal.³ In response, Vietnam’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed deep regret, calling on Seoul to respect historical truth and take practical steps to address the consequences of war.⁴ Hanoi also stressed that its policy of “shelving the past and looking towards the future” does not mean denying “the truth or history”.

This policy of “shelving the past and looking towards the future” is a reflection of Vietnam’s long tradition of *ngoại giao hòa mục, hòa hiếu* (peace diplomacy). Despite a long history of wars with foreign powers, Vietnam has typically avoided humiliating defeated adversaries or politicising war legacies. Instead, it has prioritised restoring and maintaining peaceful and harmonious bilateral relations to foster conducive conditions for national development.⁵ Such an approach undergirded Vietnam’s resumption of diplomatic ties with the United States and its allies, including South Korea in 1992.⁶ But as the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ recent statement connotes, Vietnam has forgiven but not forgotten South Korea’s past aggression, trying to balance between moving beyond the past and pushing back against South Korea’s denial of past misdeeds. This predicament will likely worsen as the issue of Korean atrocities resurfaces in the wake of Thanh’s lawsuit.

This article first provides an overview of South Korea’s atrocities during the Vietnam War, followed by an analysis of Vietnam’s peace diplomacy towards South Korea and a discussion of Vietnamese victims’ quest for justice. It concludes by providing recommendations on how Vietnam can encourage South Korea’s cooperation in addressing this war legacy.

KOREAN ATROCITIES DURING THE VIETNAM WAR

Between 1965 and 1973, the Republic of Korea (ROK) deployed 320,000 troops to support the U.S.-backed South Vietnam in their fight against communist North Vietnam. Then, under President Park Chung-hee’s authoritarian rule, South Korea was motivated to demonstrate its commitment to the anti-communist cause in order to obtain American security assurances and financial aid to bolster the country’s economic development.⁷

Despite the South Korean government's glorification of its participation in the war as a valiant defence against communist aggression, eyewitness accounts and historical materials have revealed a multitude of brutal acts committed by the ROK Army. In 1999, activist Ku Su-jeong and journalist Koh Kyoung-tae published a series of articles in *Hankyoreh 21*, a monthly South Korean magazine, that exposed the atrocities committed by Korean troops, including civilian massacres, sexual violence, and the burning of houses, through photographic evidence and survivor interviews. Ku Su-jeong also initiated the "Sorry, Vietnam" campaign, a grassroots movement that aimed to acknowledge and apologise for the harm caused by South Korea's participation in the war.

South Korean activists and researchers have been striving to accurately identify the number of Vietnamese victims of the ROK Army. At the 2000 Jeju Human Rights Academic Conference, Ku Su-jeong reported that there were approximately 80 cases of civilian mass killings, resulting in around 9,000 deaths.⁸ Two decades later, South Korean civil society's search for more victims and *Hankyoreh 21*'s field reports released new figures, indicating 130 massacres and up to 10,000 deaths. Notable atrocities include the slaughter of 430 civilians in Binh Hoa Village (Quang Ngai Province), 74 in Phong Nhi - Phong Nhat villages (Quang Nam Province), and 135 in Ha My Village (Quang Nam Province).⁹

Additionally, there are accounts of Korean soldiers' sexual violence, with up to 10,000 Vietnamese women and girls being abducted, sold, raped, and coerced into prostitution.¹⁰ It is estimated that about 800 of them are still alive today, and tens of thousands of children were born as a result of these Korean sexual assaults. These children are referred to as *Lai Đại Hàn* (mixed Korean parentage).¹¹

The South Korean government has long denied allegations of war crimes committed by its troops during the Vietnam War and has refused to investigate them. Moreover, the Ministry of Defense and the National Intelligence Service have repeatedly blocked access to records related to South Korean troops' operations in the war.¹² Several South Korean liberal presidents have expressed regrets for the suffering caused by their country's involvement in the war,¹³ but have fallen short of acknowledging any Korean atrocities. Nonetheless, Vietnam's peace diplomacy has prevented the issue from becoming a source of tension between the two countries.

VIETNAM'S PEACE DIPLOMACY TOWARDS SOUTH KOREA

With the onset of *Đổi Mới* economic reform in 1986 and the collapse of the Soviet-led communist bloc in the early 1990s, Vietnam recognised the need to diversify its external affairs in order to attract foreign investments for economic revitalisation. As such, Vietnam actively sought to normalise relations with former adversaries, with South Korea being a priority due to its impressive economic achievements and intention to expand to Southeast Asian markets.¹⁴ During the negotiations for bilateral normalisation, some Vietnamese leaders voiced critical views of South Korea.¹⁵ For example, in a visit to Seoul in 1991, then-Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Vu Khoan mentioned "the guilt of the South Korean army" in relation to the Vietnamese people.¹⁶ However, these sentiments did not impede the negotiation process.

In fact, Vietnam's urgent need to establish cooperation with South Korea to promote economic development led Vietnamese leaders to become more flexible with their demands. For example, in 1991, Vietnam demanded war reparations from South Korea during the first round of negotiations. However, when South Korea rejected this request, Vietnamese leaders softened their stance in the second meeting in 1992. Instead, they proposed that South Korea provide official development assistance (ODA) and increase economic cooperation to help alleviate the resentment of Vietnamese people hurt by Korean wartime actions.¹⁷

Since bilateral normalisation in 1992, Vietnam has put the issue of Korean involvement in the Vietnam War on the back burner. During a meeting with South Korea's then-Foreign Minister Lee Sang-ok in 1992, Vietnam's then-Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet noted the Vietnamese people's animosity towards South Korea's participation in the war, yet he also remarked that "[i]t was only a very short period of time and irrelevant to the will of the people."¹⁸ He therefore suggested that both countries focus on the future instead of dwelling on the past. In 2000, when asked about the alleged South Korean war crimes, Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded that "South Korean troops committed crimes against Vietnamese people. With humanitarian and peaceful neighbourly traditions, it is Vietnam's policy to put the past aside."¹⁹

As a result, South Korea was able to invest in Vietnam without facing the consequences of its wartime actions, while Hanoi received the much-needed financial aid for economic development. Over the past three decades, bilateral ties between the two former foes have flourished, with South Korea now being one of Vietnam's top foreign investors and ODA providers. They recently set ambitious goals of increasing their bilateral trade turnover to US\$100 billion by 2023 and US\$150 billion by 2030.²⁰ South Korean *chaebols* such as Samsung, LG, Hyundai, and Lotte have a major influence on Vietnam's economy. In northern Vietnam alone, Samsung has invested about US\$20 billion into various projects, making up around 13.6% of Vietnam's total industrial output value in 2022.²¹

Vietnam has also been receptive of South Korean humanitarian aid given to communities affected by war legacies. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) implemented a scheme to allocate significant resources towards assisting several provinces in central Vietnam.²² By 2002, this initiative had resulted in the construction of around 40 new schools and multiple hospitals in regions where large numbers of civilians had been killed by the ROK Army, even though the aid was officially designated to serve any area in Vietnam in need of these facilities.²³ The KOICA-sponsored program could be seen as an attempt by South Korea to ease Vietnam's lingering resentment about its atrocities without officially admitting responsibility.

More recently, from 2018 to 2021, KOICA provided approximately US\$20 million under the Korea-Vietnam Mine Action Project (KVMAP) to remove unexploded ordinance (UXO) and support UXO victims in Binh Dinh and Quang Binh provinces.²⁴ In 2022, building upon the successes of KVMAP, KOICA partnered with the Vietnam office of the United Nations Development Programme to implement the Korea-Vietnam Peace Villages Project (KVPVP) in three central provinces — Binh Dinh, Quang Ngai, and Thua-Thien Hue.²⁵ KVPVP involves removing UXO, supporting UXO victims, and helping their communities attain sustainable

development and climate change resilience. With a budget of US\$25 million from KOICA, KVPVP will run from 2022 to 2026.

Although the Vietnamese government avoids revisiting South Korea's past aggression, it does allow for local commemoration of massacres committed by Korean soldiers. Memorial monuments have been erected, and annual commemoration ceremonies are organised in the places where the atrocities occurred.²⁶ State media reports on these activities, as well as stories of South Koreans coming to Vietnam to pay respect to the victims.²⁷

Vietnam has also occasionally rebuked Korean accounts of the war. For example, in 2017, Hanoi objected to South Korea's then-President Moon Jae-in's remarks honouring South Korean veterans who had fought in Vietnam.²⁸ More recently, in October 2022, Vietnamese authorities demanded that Netflix Vietnam take down the Korean drama series "Little Women", citing historical inaccuracies, which had been criticised by Vietnamese netizens as an offensive glorification of Korea's role in the Vietnam War.²⁹ However, in both instances, the Vietnamese government did not explicitly mention Korean atrocities or their victims. Vietnam's objection to South Korean narratives seemed to be driven more by the desire to avoid humiliation than by concerns for the victims whom South Korea had never acknowledged.

This is further evidenced by two other lesser-known incidents, in which Vietnam quietly compromised in the realm of commemoration, in order to avoid upsetting South Korea. In 2000, a monument funded by South Korean veterans was built in Ha My village to commemorate victims of a Korean massacre in 1968. The monument initially contained a statement that incriminated Park Chung-hee's troops. However, the ROK embassy in Hanoi requested its removal, and Vietnamese authorities acquiesced.³⁰ They invoked Vietnam's official slogan of "shelving the past without forgetting it" in justifying the need to erase the statement to Ha My villagers.³¹

In 2016, the "Vietnam Pieta", or "Last Lullaby", a miniature version of a sculpture created by two South Korean artists to honour mothers and children killed by Korean soldiers, was donated to the Da Nang Museum. Initially, the sculpture was intended to be a memorial installation in Vietnam, but the Vietnamese government ultimately turned down the proposal, reportedly due to pressure from the South Korean government.³²

Vietnam can be seen as struggling to balance between shelving the past and acknowledging the sufferings of its citizens during the war. Ultimately, due to its need for South Korea's economic cooperation, Vietnam has largely refrained from confronting South Korea on its past atrocities. But such an exercise of peace diplomacy is becoming increasingly tenuous as certain Vietnamese victims continue their quest for justice.

VIETNAMESE VICTIMS' QUEST FOR JUSTICE

In recent years, some survivors of Korean atrocities have asserted their agency in shaping memories of the war. One of them is Nguyen Thi Thanh, who had been fighting for justice even before the 2020 lawsuit. In 2018, Thanh and another survivor testified at the People's

Tribunal on War Crimes by South Korean Troops during the Vietnam War, which demanded that the South Korean government compensate the plaintiffs and launch a thorough investigation into the allegations.³³ A year later, 102 survivors joined Thanh in submitting a petition to the South Korean government, demanding a formal apology and reparations. However, the South Korean Ministry of Defence rejected the petition, claiming that there was no proof of any misdeeds committed by its troops.³⁴ Subsequently, Thanh sued the South Korean government in 2020 after exhausting all other options to get its attention.

In addition, survivors of sexual violence perpetrated by Korean troops have come forward to share their stories. One of them was Tran Thi Ngai, who was 24 when a Korean soldier stormed into her house and raped her. In 2015, eighty-one-year-old Ngai, along with other rape victims, wrote a letter to then-South Korean President Park Geun-hye, urging her administration to apologise and provide reparations.³⁵ That same year, another victim started an online petition on Change.org with the same demands, gathering more than 34,000 signatures.³⁶ Many *Lai Đại Hàn* descendants are also seeking justice from the South Korean government. Notably, Tran Dai Nhat, son of Tran Thi Ngai, founded the “Justice for Lai Đại Hàn” campaign to urge South Korea to acknowledge both the sexual violence experienced by Vietnamese women and the tens of thousands of children born as a result of rapes by Korean soldiers.³⁷

All these victim-led movements share the common goals of recognition, truth-seeking, and restoration of the victims’ dignity. For decades, the Vietnamese government’s lack of support and South Korea’s refusal to accept responsibility have left these survivors with little recourse. But Thanh’s recent legal victory has created a legal precedent that might offer hope and inspiration for more victims to follow suit.

LESSONS FROM VIETNAM-U.S. RECONCILIATION

In light of Seoul’s continued denial of responsibility and the growing demand for justice from the victims, Hanoi needs to confront the issue rather than ignore it. However, taking a confrontational stance against its newest comprehensive strategic partner is not a realistic option, given Vietnam’s weaker bargaining position. Instead, Vietnam should channel its peace diplomacy towards encouraging South Korea to come to terms with the past.

Vietnam has a long history of successfully addressing complex war legacy issues, especially in its relations with the United States.³⁸ The U.S. has come to appreciate that resolving war legacy issues was critical for a complete and mutually beneficial relationship with Vietnam.³⁹ This was exemplified by America’s shift from denying the health effects of Agent Orange used in Vietnam to providing assistance to Vietnamese people with “disabilities that may be related to the use of Agent Orange”.⁴⁰ Persistent lobbying efforts by key Vietnamese and American actors from both the private and public sectors played a key role in changing Washington’s stance on the issue.⁴¹

Drawing from these lessons, two factors could help mitigate the bargaining power imbalance between Vietnam and South Korea. First, Vietnam should frame resolving historical issues with South Korea as an area for future-oriented cooperation. For instance, Vietnam could signal to South Korea that addressing war legacies is a prerequisite for a stronger bilateral defence

partnership, as they have done vis-à-vis the U.S.⁴² Additionally, Vietnam could point to the ongoing cooperation with South Korea in clearing UXO and providing support to UXO victims as an example of how addressing war legacies can be beneficial for the relationship.

Second, the establishment of a Vietnam Association for Victims of War Atrocities (VAVWA),⁴³ akin to the Vietnam Association for Victims of Agent Orange, is necessary for empowering the victims. By providing a platform for survivors to connect and share their experiences, VAVWA could raise domestic and international awareness of the issue, thereby indirectly putting pressure on the South Korean government. VAVWA could collaborate with victims' allies in South Korea, such as Democratic Party lawmaker Kang Min-jung, who has been spearheading a bill with 24 other lawmakers to create a special investigation committee on the atrocities committed by the ROK Army against Vietnamese civilians.⁴⁴ Furthermore, cooperation with South Korean civil society groups involved in the matter is also crucial, as they have played a significant role in raising awareness in South Korea, fostering people-to-people reconciliation, and amplifying the voice of victims like Thanh.

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