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Vietnam-North Korea Relations: Still a Special Relationship?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The second Trump-Kim Summit and more significantly Kim Jong-un's bilateral visit to Vietnam have thrown the spotlight on Vietnam's relations with North Korea which is often described as "special" or "fraternal" in nature.
- Kim chose Vietnam to embark on an "official friendship visit", a term that connotes a higher status than was the case for his previous visits to China. Kim's treatment in Vietnam was akin to that accorded to a state visit.
- Yet, it is prudent not to overstate the solidarity between the two countries. Even during the best of times, Vietnam and North Korea did not always see eye to eye.
- There is increasing talk that Vietnam can be a reference model for North Korea's development, and in certain areas, this may be valid. However, there are inherent limits as well.

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INTRODUCTION

The Second Trump-Kim Summit, despite having reached no agreements, has thrown the spotlight on Vietnam's role in providing a neutral and acceptable venue for the leaders of the United States and Vietnam to meet. While much has been written on how Vietnam and the United States, as former warring foes, have turned the corner and become partners, relatively little attention has been focused on ties between Vietnam and North Korea.

As a result of the summit, there is renewed attention being paid to the Vietnam-North Korea relationship, and questions being paid to where it is likely to go from here. Ties between the two countries has been described as "special" or akin to "fraternal" relations due in large part to their past ideological solidarity as exemplified by the economic and military assistance North Korea extended to North Vietnam during the Vietnam War.¹ In turn, Vietnam has supplied rice and hard currency to North Korea for decades. Today, with North Korea growing more interested in developing its economy, Vietnam is seen as a possible reference model.

This paper reviews the state of Vietnam-North Korea ties especially in the wake of Kim Jong-un's visit to Hanoi in February-March 2019. It examined how "special" this relationship is and whether this distinct aspect of the relationship will continue.

KIM JONG-UN'S VIETNAM VISIT

Kim Jong-un did not embark on any foreign visit in the initial few years after he succeeded his father Kim Jong-il in December 2011. This practice follows that of his father who only went on his first overseas trip to China in 2000, six years after he took over the helm. Likewise, Kim Jong-un's first overseas visit was to China in March 2018, more than six years after he succeeded his father.

But unlike his father who only visited China and Russia, Kim Jong-un has travelled to four different countries so far, namely China, South Korea, Singapore and Vietnam (see table in [Annex](#)). Kim actually visited China a total of four times in less than a year, in March 2018, May 2018, June 2018 and January 2019.² Apart from discussing bilateral matters, these visits have a lot to do with Kim trying to engage China in preparation for his first and second summits with US President Donald Trump in June 2018 and February 2019 respectively.

All of Kim's four visits to China were officially described as a "visit", with the first one in March 2018 being accorded an "unofficial visit".³ The initial cautious term could be because Kim's first visit to China took place just after North Korea conducted a series of nuclear and missile tests which even China, its traditional ally, had expressed misgivings about.⁴

Although Kim also travelled to South Korea and Singapore, they are not considered visits in the bilateral sense as Kim was there essentially for summit meetings with South Korean President Moon Jae-in and US President Trump in April 2018 and June 2018 respectively.

Therefore, apart from China, the only other country that Kim had travelled to on a bilateral visit was to Vietnam, which occurred immediately after his second summit with US President Trump in Hanoi. The visit was described by Vietnam as an "official friendship

visit” while the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), the official news agency in North Korea, called it an “official goodwill visit”,⁵ both of which suggest that the visit was of a higher level than the past four “unofficial visit” and “visits” that Kim had undertaken to China. In a way, this shows the importance North Korea attaches to its relations with Vietnam even though it does not match the frequency of his visits to China.

SIGNIFICANCE OF KIM’S VISIT

Kim Jong-un’s “official friendship visit”, which occurred on 1-2 March 2019, is significant for the following reasons. Firstly, the trip is the first time a North Korean leader had visited Vietnam in 55 years. Kim Jong-un’s grandfather, Kim Il-sung, visited Vietnam twice, once in 1958 and subsequently in 1964. The 1958 visit was meant to reciprocate Ho Chi Minh’s first visit to North Korea in 1957. Apart from discussing bilateral relations, the 1958 visit saw Kim Il-sung and Ho Chi Minh exchanging views on the activities of the United States in South Vietnam and the changes taking place in the Soviet Union. Kim Il-sung took the occasion of his visit to persuade Ho Chi Minh to denounce what he regarded as Khrushchev’s revisionism.⁶ Kim Il-sung’s second trip in 1964 was not considered an official visit.⁷ If so, Kim Jong-un’s 2019 visit may be considered to be of greater importance as it was the first official visit by a North Korean leader to Vietnam in 61 years (if one were to start counting from 1958 instead of 1964).

Secondly, Vietnam went all out to make Kim Jong-un feel at home. During his visit to Vietnam, Kim was given treatment reserved for a state visit. Kim was invited by Vietnam’s General Secretary and President Nguyen Phu Trong in his capacity as Chairman of the Workers’ Party of Korea and Chairman of the State Affairs Commission of the DPRK. When Kim arrived at Vietnam’s border town station of Dong Dang by train on 26 February 2019, he was given a red carpet welcome before he departed for Hanoi by car.

On the first day of his “official friendship visit” on 1 March 2019, Kim met with the top Vietnamese leadership, namely Nguyen Phu Trong, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc and Chairwoman of the National Assembly Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan. In particular, upon his arrival at the Vietnamese Presidential Palace, Kim was warmly greeted with hugs by Nguyen Phu Trong at the lawn and the two then proceeded to a podium where a red-carpet military welcome parade was held. Kim reviewed the guard of honour of the three armed services of the Vietnam People’s Army together with Nguyen Phu Trong, before they adjourned indoors for a meeting.⁸ In addition, during the Trump-Kim summit, Kim’s motorcade was provided with a 13-man outrider escort, the same as that accorded to US President Trump.

Thirdly, the visit was high in symbolism especially in terms of its emphasis on the strong historical and fraternal ties between Vietnam and North Korea. A highlight of the visit was Kim’s laying of a wreath at the Vietnamese Monument to War Heroes and Martyrs on 2 March 2019. This event was a reminder of the strong economic and military support North Korea rendered to North Vietnam during the Vietnam War.⁹ More significantly, Kim visited the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum. Footages of the visit showed Kim paying due respect by straightening the drapers on a wreath and bowing his head in a moment of silence.¹⁰

Some have pointed out that Kim's visit to the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum was a rare gesture as there has so far been no reports of Kim going to Mao Zedong's Mausoleum despite his four past visits to China.¹¹ This showed that North Korea and Vietnam are playing up the foundation laid by the founding fathers of the two countries, namely Ho Chi Minh and Kim Il-sung, and are committed to building relations on this basis. In addition, before Kim met with Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc for talks, he was led by the latter into the governmental hall where the photos of Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il and the present Kim were on display.

Interestingly, Kim did not visit other localities in Vietnam as his grandfather did in his 1958 and 1964 visits. During his 1958 visit, Kim Il-sung toured a textile factory in Nam Dinh Province (reportedly the largest in Southeast Asia at that time), a farming cooperative and a military academy. On his second trip to Vietnam in 1964, Kim Il-sung visited the tourist site of Halong Bay.¹²

This time round, a North Korean delegation of senior officials visited Halong Bay as well as toured the facilities of Vietnamese companies with a global presence such as Vingroup's car-making facility in Haiphong, Viettel global telecommunication center in Hanoi and An Phat plastic production factory in Hai Duong.¹³ Contrary to media reports before Kim's visit, there were no plans for Kim to visit Halong Bay, Haiphong or Hai Duong.¹⁴ In any case, the visit by North Korean senior officials to these localities took place around the same time as Kim's summit meeting with Trump, i.e. on 27 and 28 February 2019. This showed that Kim had intended to focus on the summit meeting with Trump while leaving his senior officials to do the site visits.

VIETNAM AS DEVELOPMENT MODEL?

There is much talk about Vietnam as a development model for North Korea. North Korea's interest in Vietnam's development experience appears to have picked up after Kim Jong-un began to stress the importance of building a "thriving socialist country" and an "era of prosperity" after he assumed the helm in December 2011.¹⁵

In June 2012, a delegation led by Kim Yong-il (head of the Workers' Party of Korea Central Committee Commission for International Affairs) visited a rural area in the northern province of Thai Binh where he reportedly commended the progress made in agricultural production, poverty reduction as well as employment and social welfare.¹⁶ More recently, when Kim Jong-un met Moon Jae-in at their April 2018 summit, South Korean media reported that Kim told Moon that North Korea sought Vietnam-style reforms. US President Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo have also urged North Korea to realize its growth potential by looking to Vietnam. Vietnam itself has expressed its willingness to share its development experience with North Korea.¹⁷

Yet, what North Korea can learn from Vietnam and, more importantly, to what extent North Korea is willing to do so, remains debatable. Those who argue that North Korea can learn from Vietnam point to some similarities the two countries share. For instance, when Vietnam launched its economic renovation in 1986, it faced a difficult external environment due to its occupation of Cambodia in 1978. It was only when Vietnam withdrew from Cambodia in the 1990s that its economy picked up. Presently, North Korea is grappling with

international sanctions due to its missile and nuclear weapons program. If North Korea were to give it up or accept some form of restraint, it could end its isolation and grow its economy. Others point to Vietnam's success in turning the page on relations with the United States from a wartime foe to a key partner. Likewise, they argue North Korea could do the same with the United States if it makes the right move.

More specifically, on the economic front, North Korea could learn from Vietnam in terms of how it has developed the private sector, welcomed foreign trade and foreign direct investments, and maintained financial stability and a sustainable monetary policy. Indeed, past North Korean delegation visits to Vietnam's rural areas, tourism spots, and successful Vietnamese companies such as Vingroup, Viettel and An Phat do show that North Korea finds value in learning from Vietnam in specific areas.

Yet, caution is called for on the relevance of Vietnam's experience to North Korea. For one, North Korea is unlikely to completely give up its missile and nuclear program which serves as an effective bargaining chip vis-à-vis the United States and China, and central to North Korea's sovereignty and Kim's political legitimacy. At best, North Korea may be willing to accept some form of restraint and, even then, what North Korea puts on the table may not be readily acceptable to the United States.

Secondly, Vietnam's political system is considered rather fragmented compared to the North Korean model that revolves around the Kim dynasty where one individual essentially holds sway. In Vietnam, there is a division of power among the top leaders with Nguyen Phu Trong as General Secretary and President, Nguyen Xuan Phuc as Prime Minister and Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan as Chairwoman of the National Assembly. There is intense jostling for power among the Politburo members, especially nearing the dates of the five-yearly party congresses, which affects the line-up for the top leadership. Moreover, Vietnam's national assembly or parliament allows deputies to pose tough questions to various government ministers and the debates are telecasted live. It is hard to imagine how such a fragmented and, to some extent, "combative system" will appeal to Kim.

Thirdly, a related issue is that if North Korea were to open up its economy sufficiently, its citizens would come to know more about the outside world particularly how their counterparts in South Korea are faring. This could lead to rising expectations for political change in North Korea which Kim is likely to be averse to.

Fourthly, even purely from the economic angle, there are doubts over how far North Korea is willing to go to open up its economy. In the visits by various North Korean delegations to Vietnam, they seemed primarily interested in Vietnam's own local experience including how Vietnamese companies compete locally as well as internationally. What is apparently missing from the equation is how foreign companies, who bring in the much-needed capital, technology and know-how, are able to compete as well in a Vietnamese setting. A sustainable market economy invariably comprises both local and foreign actors competing with each other. At this juncture, it is difficult to imagine North Korea publicly acknowledging the value of learning from the experience of MNCs or even their South Korean counterparts.

Fifthly, there are seemingly different interpretations behind the calls for North Korea to engage in economic reforms. For North Korea, Vietnam is merely one of the more popular

reference models (but not the only one) with the ultimate goal of preserving one-man rule. For the United States, its apparent goal is to put a halt to North Korea's missile and nuclear program in exchange for economic largess, without much apparent consideration of the implications for Kim's regime. For China, it seems in favor of economic reforms in North Korea so as to prevent a regime collapse which will have an adverse impact on China. The different interpretations above therefore calls for caution in over stating the relevance of the Vietnam model for North Korea.

CONCLUSION

Vietnam and North Korea have made a conscious effort to maintain signs of their "fraternal" or "special" relations built by their founding fathers in the 1950s and 1960s. These signs were again in full display during Kim Jong-un's bilateral visit. Kim chose Vietnam to be the first country to embark on an "official friendship visit", a term that connotes a higher status than his previous four visits to China. Vietnam also went out of the way to accord Kim treatment equivalent to a state visit.

However, beyond the semantics, the reality is that there is little substantive cooperation between the two countries. Certainly, the two countries do have exchanges in a number of fields such as culture, science and technology, trade and maritime cooperation, healthcare, security and law enforcement cooperation. Occasionally, Vietnam supplies rice and hard currency via various official and even unofficial channels to North Korea. There is now increasing expectations that Vietnam can be a development model for North Korea in some areas. Yet, such exchanges can be more accurately described as normal state-to-state relations.

Furthermore, it is worth recalling that relations between the two countries have not always been trouble-free as North Korea was opposed to North Vietnam embarking on peace talks with the United States in the late 1960s as well as Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in the late 1970s. In other words, rather than view their ties purely from the "fraternal" perspective, it may be more prudent to regard their relations from the national interest perspective. Of course, it does not harm that from time to time, both sides choose to hype up how North Korea had helped Vietnam in its past war of resistance and liberation and that Vietnam has in turn provided aid to North Korea.

Vietnam will also want to continue to play a role to promote peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. Although the Trump-Kim summit failed to produce an agreement, the fact that the summit was held in Hanoi reaffirms Vietnam's importance in regional affairs. It is also a recognition of Vietnam's success in positioning itself as an acceptable and even trusted partner to both the United States and North Korea.

Annex

Kim Jong-un's Overseas Visits

<u>Date</u>	<u>Type of Visit</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Mode of Travel</u>	<u>Remarks</u>
25-28 March 2018	Kim Jong-un paid an "unofficial visit" to China	Beijing	By train	Kim Jong-un's first visit to China; also Kim's first foreign visit since taking office in 2011. Kim was reported to have briefed Chinese President Xi Jinping on the developments taking place on the Korean Peninsula out of "comradeship and moral responsibility" (<i>Xinhua News</i> , 28 March 2018).
27 April 2018	Inter-Korean Summit	Panmunjom (South Korean side)	By car and foot	Kim Jong-un crossed the Military Demarcation Line into South Korea to meet Moon Jae-in; they held talks at Peace House on the southern side of Panmunjom; this is the first time a North Korean leader has set foot in South Korea.
7-8 May 2018	Described as a "visit"	Dalian, China	By air	Second meeting between Kim Jong-un and Xi Jinping in China in just over 40 days since their first meeting in March 2018.
26 May 2018	Inter-Korean Summit	Panmunjom (North Korean side)	By car and foot	Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un hold their second summit in Tongilgak on the northern side of Panmunjom. [Note: this is not a bilateral visit but is included here to show that the leaders of North and South Korea had met after their April 2018 summit].
12 June 2018	Summit	Singapore	By air	Trump-Kim first summit in Singapore; also the first meeting between a US President and a North Korean leader.
19-20 June 2018	Described as a "visit"	Beijing	By air	Kim Jong-un's third visit to China in less than three months; Kim apparently briefed Xi on the

				outcome of the Trump-Kim Summit.
18-20 September 2018	Inter-Korean Summit	Pyongyang, North Korea	By air	This is Moon Jae-in's third encounter with Kim Jong-un in less than five months. [Note: this is not a bilateral visit but is included here to show the frequency of exchange between North and South Korea].
7-10 January 2019	Described as a "visit"	Beijing	By train	Kim Jong-un's fourth visit to China; 2019 marks the 70 anniversary of the establishment of China-DPRK relations; the two leaders reportedly engaged in an "in-depth exchange of views on China-DPRK relations and issues of common concern, and reached important consensus" (<i>Xinhua News</i> , 10 January 2019).
27-28 February 2019	Summit	Hanoi, Vietnam	By Air	Trump-Kim second summit; the summit ended earlier on 28 February 2019 with no joint statement issued.
1-2 March 2019	Described as "official friendship visit"	Hanoi, Vietnam		Kim Jong-un met with Vietnamese leaders and visited the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum. ¹⁸

Source: Various published sources

¹ "A brief rundown of North-Korea-Vietnam relations", *The Hankyoreh*, 8 February 2019.

² The first two visits, in March 2018 and May 2018, took place before Kim's June 2018 summit with US President Trump. The third visit, in June 2018, was intended for Kim to brief Chinese President Xi Jinping on the outcome of the summit. The fourth visit, in January 2019, took place just before Kim's second summit with Trump.

³ "Guoji shehui gaodu guanzhu Jing Zhen En dui Zhongguo jinxing fei zhengshi fangwen" (International community highly anticipates Kim Jong-un's unofficial visit to China), *Xinhua News*, 28 March 2018.

⁴ A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson had expressed China's "grave concern and opposition" after North Korea successfully tested a Hwasong-15 Intercontinental Ballistic Missile in November 2018. See "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang's Regular Press Conference", China's foreign ministry, 29 November 2017.

⁵ “DPRK Chairman to pay official friendship visit to Vietnam”, *Nhan Dan*, 24 February 2019 and “Kim Jong Un to stay in Vietnam through March 2 for ‘goodwill visit’: KCNA”, *NK News*, 27 February 2019.

⁶ A key feature of Khrushchev’s revisionism that North Korea objected to was Khrushchev’s argument that socialist and capitalist states could co-exist peacefully. In his view, the Soviet Union did not have to foment violent revolutionary struggle and would instead ‘compete’ with the capitalist nations to show the strength of socialism.

⁷ Even though this was not an official visit, Ho Chi Minh made a special effort to welcome Kim Il-sung. He went to great lengths to arrange for Kim to savor the best dog meat meal at Vietnam’s Ministry of Defense guesthouse in Hanoi. General Phung The Tai, then Commander of Vietnam’s Air Defense-Air Force Command, was assigned by Ho to look into the arrangements. See “Chuyện Tướng Phùng Thế Tài làm món thịt chó đãi ông Kim Nhật Thành” (The Story of General Phung The Tai making preparations for a dog meat meal for Kim Il-sung), *Báo Dân Việt*, 25 February 2019.

⁸ Toàn cảnh Lễ đón Chủ tịch Kim Jong-un thăm chính thức Việt Nam (Overview of the ceremony to welcome President Kim Jong-un on his official visit to Vietnam), Vietnam Television Corporation (VTC) 1, 1 March 2019.

⁹ During the Vietnam War, from 1966 till 1969, North Korea was reported to have sent around 200 military personnel (with a majority of them pilots) to North Vietnam. Fourteen of them died and their bodies were buried in Bac Giang province, near Hanoi. In 2002, the remains of these soldiers were returned to North Korea although their tombstones can still be found in Bac Giang. North Korea also provided financial aid, fertilizers, medicine, construction materials, tools and automobiles to Vietnam during the war. In addition, several hundreds of Vietnamese students were given scholarships to study in North Korea. See “The Origins of North Korea-Vietnam Solidarity: The Vietnam War and the DPRK”, Publication by Wilson Center, 21 February 2019.

¹⁰ “Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un Lays Wreath before Mausoleum of President Ho Chi Minh”, *Rodong Sinmun*, 3 March 2019.

¹¹ “North Korea's Kim pays tribute to Ho Chi Minh on Vietnam visit”, *CNA*, 2 March 2019.

¹² “What format is Kim Jong-un’s ‘official friendly visit’ to Vietnam to take?”, *The Hankyoreh*, 28 February 2019.

¹³ “[An Phat Holdings welcome the delegation of North Korean leader KIM JONG UN](#)”, An Phat Holdings, 1 March 2019.

¹⁴ “Kim to check out Vietnam for himself before Trump summit: report”, *VN Express International*, 15 February 2019.

¹⁵ “DPRK Leading Newspapers Publish Joint New Year Editorial”, *KCNA*, 1 January 2012.

¹⁶ “DPRK Party delegation visits new rural area model”, *Nhan Dan*, 13 June 2012.

¹⁷ “Vietnam promises to share development experience with North Korea”, *VN Express International*, 14 February 2019.

¹⁸ In November-December 2018, North Korea’s Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho visited Vietnam, and in February 2019, Vietnam’s Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh visited Pyongyang to discuss bilateral relations and the upcoming visit by Kim Jong-un to Vietnam in the last week of February. The North Korean leader chose to visit Vietnam in February – March because he had agreed with Trump to hold the summit in Hanoi.

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