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South Korea and Vietnam: A New Strategic Partnership?

By Sukjoon Yoon

Synopsis

South Korean President Park Guen-hye's third overseas trip to Vietnam was surprising and seems to have been about more than just boosting trade. Does South Korea now have a "Vietnam card" to play amid China's growing regional dominance?

Commentary

SOUTH KOREAN President Park Guen-hye's visit to Vietnam on 7-11 Sept 2013, coming after her recent trips to the United States and China, may well be a turning point in Seoul-Hanoi relations as she pursues her diplomacy of *trustpolitik*.

If Hanoi supports her confidence-building strategy, Seoul can help it in other ways to rebuild trust between them. Focused on economic and technological cooperation, including a nuclear power plant project, both countries now prefer to downplay South Korea's past involvement in the Vietnam War. Economic issues are trumping ideology as they seek to identify other shared interests.

South Korea's strategic options

South Korea seeks to establish itself as a recognised middle power and supports a stronger Vietnam as part of a more integrated East Asian community. Ideological constraints were set aside when Park paid her respects to Ho Chi Minh at the National Memorial Hall and she also met senior members of Vietnamese Communist Party and government. Indeed Vietnam's Doi Moi policy of the 1980s has much in common with South Korea's "Let's live well" campaign of the 1960s. Both countries are also the objects of China's good neighbour policy towards countries on its periphery.

Since the late 1990s China has been warming towards ASEAN with a comprehensive and diversified strategy. The "One Axis, Two Wings" concept included China's role in the Mekong Delta and Myanmar Corridor projects, while the Chiang Mai Initiative has helped stabilise Asian economies - with Beijing's support - following the 1998 financial crisis.

China has forged a Free Trade Agreement with ASEAN, with whom South Korea and China, along with Japan, are engaged in regular dialogue through the ASEAN+3 (APT). South Korea, China and Japan are also negotiating a trilateral FTA among themselves. At the same time, both Vietnam and South Korea are co-

members, with China, of the ASEAN-driven ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus) and the East Asia Summit (EAS).

The Vietnam factor in Seoul's China policy

Still, the asymmetry in relations between China and its neighbours is obvious. Vietnam is relevant to South Korea's China policy for several reasons.

First, ASEAN, of which Vietnam is a member, has sought to balance Chinese influence and preserve neutrality in regional security issues through the mutual support of groupings like the ASEAN+3, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and ADMM Plus. There is a lesson here for South Korea, which is currently seeking to develop its bilateral security alliance with the US into a larger security partnership, perhaps by cooperating with Japan.

Second, the rise of China has impacted all its neighbours, so that Southeast and Northeast Asia can no longer be considered separate security entities. There is now an interconnected discourse on East Asian security. In response to China's regional strategy, these two sub-regions must work together to counter Chinese assertiveness in the East Asian seas. Vietnam and South Korea are well placed to play a leading role in bridging Southeast and Northeast Asia and assembling a multilateral security mechanism.

Third, China's influence on ASEAN provides an impetus for South Korea to improve its relations with ASEAN. Until recently ASEAN had tried to remain neutral between the two Koreas, but it is now adopting a more flexible strategy in response to North Korea's continued testing of nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missiles.

Hedging against Chinese hegemony

South Korea's policy of diversifying production around the region has led to increasing economic complementarity with Vietnam, but they also share a mutual concern over the rise of China. Two components can be identified in China's regional strategy: southward to embrace ASEAN, and northward to break free from the cordoning effect of the US-led security alliance. With the decline in US military power being accelerated by budgetary constraints, an ever more confident China confronts both Vietnam and South Korea.

Chinese "core interests" range from the South China Sea, where it disputes Vietnam's claim to the Paracels and Spratlys, to the East China Sea where it disputes Japan's claim to the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. They may eventually extend to the Korean Peninsula with the ultimate aim of displacing the US military from the region. President Park's visit to Vietnam has not only galvanised economic cooperation, but has also laid the groundwork for a deeper geostrategic partnership between Vietnam and South Korea as a hedging strategy to deflect China's hegemonic intentions. Historically they have had very limited capacities to counter China's power and influence, but by working together, perhaps with other like-minded nations, they could do much to bolster the security of China's weaker neighbours.

South Korea and Vietnam, at the Northern and Southern approaches to China, may have different parts to play in shaping and responding to China's regional strategy, but there are also many similarities between them. Despite their economic interdependence with China, both countries are seeking to expand their strategic autonomy to counter the negative impact of China's rise, while continuing to rely on security assurances from the US.

Historically, these two countries were both subject to China's regional tributary system from which they learnt an invaluable lesson: that economic dependence upon China is no bad thing, but these countries cannot afford to rely upon China for their security.

Balancing a Middle Kingdom mindset?

A new style of great-power relations is now emerging between China and the US. Vietnam and South Korea, at China's periphery, are of secondary importance. From the Middle Kingdom era to more recent times China has struggled to subdue its peripheral domains: China invaded Vietnam in 1979 and intervened in the Korean War from 1950-53, from which both its neighbours retain bitter memories. And currently, China has maritime boundary and jurisdictional disputes with Vietnam, and remains suspicious of South Korea's security alliance with Washington and its impact on North Korea.

China's attitude toward its periphery is essentially to have a friendly neighbourhood from which "No news is good news." Since the normalisation of relations between Seoul and Beijing in 1992 they have been in a strategic cooperative partnership, and since 1991 Hanoi and Beijing have enjoyed "Thick and Confident Ties".

It may be expecting too much for all three countries to come together in closer relations; but these existing

bilateral relationships, if supplemented by closer relations between South Korea and Vietnam seem likely to provide considerable mutual benefit. At the least, they will allow the weaker nations to work together in balancing the resurgence of a middle kingdom mindset in China.

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