

The Origins of Vietnam's and South Korea's Diverging International Strategies

Boxi Liu

School of Music and Film, Tianjin Normal University, Tianjin, 300000, China

2230150077@stu.tjnu.edu.cn

Abstract. Both Vietnam and South Korea were historically tributary states to China and shared similar cultural and political influences. However, in the modern era, their international policies have diverged significantly. Existing research provides detailed analysis on various topics such as the U.S.-South Korea alliance, the role of the U.S. in re-establishing the international order, and the political situations of South Korea and Vietnam. This paper examines the differences in the international policies of Vietnam and South Korea to analyze the background and non-material factors related to social concepts. Based on this analysis, it explores the hierarchical order between major and minor powers within the international environment. The paper argues that despite their historical similarities, differing political backgrounds have led these two countries down markedly different paths. Moreover, internal innovation and domestic conditions are essential factors for national development, as depending on major powers for legitimacy leads only to short-term gains and undermines a country's potential for sustainable, long-term progress.

Keywords: Social hierarchy, socialist thought, Neo-Confucianism, multilateral policy, power hierarchy.

1. Introduction

In ancient history, both Vietnam and Korea were tributary states. However, after the Cold War, their domestic development and international policies have diverged significantly. Following the Cold War, the United States, as the leading power, re-established the international order. In this context, South Korea chose a diplomatic policy of alliance with the United States. Conversely, Vietnam opted for communism and pursued an independent development path. In today's international order, South Korea is positioned within a prominent hierarchical relationship with the United States, while Vietnam maintains a principle of neutral and diverse engagement.

Existing research provides detailed analysis on various topics such as the U.S.-South Korea alliance, the role of the U.S. in re-establishing the international order, and the political situations of South Korea and Vietnam. The liberal international order is a system of international cooperation established under U.S. leadership. After World War II, the United States surpassed "old Europe" to become the world's strongest power. To maintain its international status and continue expanding its influence, the U.S. first established liberal order arrangements in Western Europe, Latin America, and parts of East Asia, as these regions shared similar liberal democratic values with the U.S. [1]. Bilateral alliances are a core component of U.S. relations with South Korea and a key part of its alliance system in the Asia-Pacific region, even being considered one of the most important "model alliances" [2]. Since the 21st century, the Communist Party of Vietnam has developed a systematic theoretical knowledge of socialist construction in Vietnam through over 30 years of reform practice and theoretical research, applying and developing these theories in practice to ensure the direction of Vietnamese socialism [3].

However, there is relatively little research on the hierarchical order between great powers and small states in international relations [4]. Scholars like Lake emphasize that if great powers do not receive recognition of their authority from small states, their authority ceases to exist. Authority and hierarchy are rooted in a contract where the dominant state provides a set of order, protection of the small state's property, security, and territorial integrity, in exchange for which the small state cedes part of its sovereignty, resulting in mutual benefits [4]. While existing research often focuses on the

formation and maintenance of such hierarchical orders, there is a lack of in-depth analysis specific to superpowers and weak states. Additionally, comparative studies of the international relations between South Korea and Vietnam are not thoroughly comprehensive [5]. Scholars have mainly analyzed the individual foreign policies of Vietnam and South Korea, with limited exploration of the reasons behind the similarities and differences between the two countries. Currently, there are significant differences in the international strategies of Vietnam and South Korea.

Therefore, this paper will compare the international orders in which Vietnam and South Korea are involved, and further analyze how the United States, as a great power, balances its interests in economic, political, and military domains with the small state of South Korea. Simultaneously, this paper will explore the reasons why small states accept unequal hierarchical orders (i.e., exchanges of national interests and legitimate recognition) and their choices regarding external security threats in the context of international situations and alliances with great powers. Finally, beyond economic, political, and military factors, this study will also delve into non-material aspects related to social and ideological viewpoints. For example, it will examine how Vietnam's shift toward communism and the continuation of Marxist thought contrasts with the development of Neo-Confucianism in South Korea and its impact on Korean society. This series of factors will be discussed in relation to the diplomatic preferences of both countries.

2. Differences in International Relations Strategies

Vietnam has chosen a neutral and multilateral international engagement policy, whereas South Korea has opted for an alliance with the United States. After World War II, Vietnam quickly achieved independence and, through a series of domestic wars, gradually completed its unification. In contrast, the Korean Peninsula was divided into North and South by the United States and the Soviet Union immediately after World War II, a division that persists to this day.

After World War II, the United States leveraged its political, economic, and military advantages to rebuild the international order, shifting from pure power politics to a system of interest exchange and legitimacy construction. Countries, in turn, moved away from the balance-of-power politics and increasingly viewed the U.S. as a "benevolent hegemon," following its lead and leading to the formation of a U.S.-led international hierarchy. In East Asia, South Korea is a typical example of this trend, showing a degree of legitimacy recognition and alignment with the United States. The alliance between the two countries initially focused on the issue of the Korean Peninsula. However, as international and regional circumstances evolved, the issues have expanded beyond the Korean Peninsula. For example, the THAAD issue illustrates a confrontation involving U.S.-China relations, South Korea-China relations, and U.S.-Russia relations from the perspective of South Korea's national security and sovereignty. On May 21, 2021, the leaders of the U.S. and South Korea held a summit, with President Moon Jae-in becoming the second foreign leader to visit the U.S. after Japan's Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga since President Biden's inauguration. The summit marked a further development in the U.S.-South Korea relationship and the beginning of a "new chapter," considered a significant milestone in the evolution of the U.S.-South Korea alliance [6]. The summit further solidified the alliance's external relations, ensuring the continuation of a "comprehensive strategic alliance," and strengthened South Korea's alliance stance in East Asia. In the process of developing mutual interests, the alliance's external choices are crucial for the common interests and development of both countries.

After World War II, the world was divided into two major blocs led by the U.S. and the Soviet Union. During this Cold War period, Vietnam became a focal point of Cold War political struggles, which had a significant impact on its development. The Ninth Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam elevated the country's diplomatic strategy to a higher and more comprehensive level: "Consistently adhering to independence, self-reliance, openness, multilateralism, and diversification in diplomatic relations. Vietnam is willing to be a trustworthy friend and partner in the international community, striving for peace, independence, and development" [7]. The convening of several

congresses marked important stages in the Communist Party of Vietnam's continuous refinement and innovation along socialist lines. Its foreign policy has progressively become clearer and more refined, with an increasing emphasis on diversification, reflecting Vietnam's urgent desire to integrate into the international community.

3. Domestic Factors

3.1. The Impact of Social Order on International Policy

Vietnam has gradually moved away from the hierarchical order it experienced during its time as a vassal state, advocating for equality and autonomy. This shift is evident from the individual level to society and even to the national level, with the concept of hierarchical order gradually diminishing. In contrast, South Korea continues to strictly adhere to hierarchical order, with its external choices at the individual, societal, and national levels closely following hierarchical principles.

In Vietnam's legal system, the revolutionary and class-based nature is strictly maintained, serving as an effective tool to ensure that people fulfill their roles as sovereign citizens. The legal framework prioritizes the importance of people's status and deeply ingrains the concept of equality among individuals. Legal development is aligned with moral adherence and the promotion of national cultural values. Vietnam, being a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural country, maintains a strong national character and a unified yet diverse advanced Vietnamese culture. The development of cultural diversity and integration is emphasized, with inclusiveness and acceptance prevailing in society. Old systems, ideologies, and cultures are undergoing reforms. Concepts such as gender equality and employment equality are gradually expanding. The development of culture aims at personal perfection, and personal development is key to cultural progress, building a well-rounded Vietnamese citizenship [8]. In recent decades, Vietnam's development path has been characterized by comprehensive and autonomous development. Even today, Vietnam's foreign strategy remains diverse, multilateral, and independent.

On the other hand, South Korea's social order remains quite strict. For instance, in the subway system, people of all ages strictly adhere to the designated seats for the elderly, disabled, and pregnant individuals. Regardless of how crowded the subway car is, these seats are always reserved for those who need them. The rules also extend to the use of elevators and escalators in subway stations. In South Korean society, there are also notable gender disparities, with women historically occupying a lower status. It is only in the 21st century that women's self-awareness has begun to challenge these hierarchical norms. Throughout South Korean society, from individuals to the nation, the adherence to hierarchical order is evident. This mirrors South Korea's international relations, where a similar hierarchical order is observed, reflecting the idea of small countries subordinating themselves to larger powers.

3.2. The Different Impacts of Communist Ideology and Neo-Confucian Thought on the Two Countries

The development of communist ideology has significantly influenced Vietnam's pursuit of independence and self-reliance, with a focus on people-centered governance. The Vietnamese congress emphasizes maintaining national independence, adhering to Marxism and Ho Chi Minh Thought as guiding principles, and aligning reforms with people's interests and practical needs [9]. The combination and development of Marxist principles with Vietnam's national conditions, along with the guidance of communist ideology, have led to a stable and positive progression in Vietnam's domestic politics, economy, and culture. This has also created a need for a stable international environment. Thus, independence and diversified foreign development have allowed Vietnam to progress domestically while gradually integrating into the international community. It no longer relies solely on major powers but has autonomously established its own place in the global environment.

In contrast, the development of New Confucianism in South Korea emphasizes family ethics and social order, shaping the country's mindset and behavior. New Confucianism has also influenced

South Korea's foreign strategies. Traditional Confucian thought, when exposed to global cultural interactions, has adapted by integrating Western ideas, creating a modernized form of Confucianism.

Modern New Confucianism involves absorbing various Western academic ideas to reinterpret traditional Confucian thought, integrating Eastern and Western scholarly perspectives, and thus advancing Confucianism in step with the times. With its modern reinterpretation, Confucianism has achieved modernization and even revival [10]. According to scholar Tu Wei-ming, Confucian ethics emphasize social responsibility, social unity, and cooperative spirit. This ethical framework has creatively responded to the impact of Western culture and has helped the East find its latecomer advantages. "This new Confucian ethics has integrated some values traditionally considered Western into its own ethical structure" [11].

4. International Aspects

4.1. Impact of the Cold War

During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union represented two distinct ideologies and political systems—capitalism and socialism. The confrontation between the two superpowers forced Vietnam and Korea into this global struggle, making them battlegrounds for U.S. and Soviet interests in East Asia. The Cold War had a profound impact on Vietnam, and the Vietnam War had significant repercussions on international relations. The conflict highlighted the vulnerability of small nations to the manipulations of superpowers, which further propelled Vietnam toward communism. Meanwhile, the Korean Peninsula experienced internal turmoil and division during the Cold War, with South Korea ultimately aligning with the capitalist path of the United States.

4.2. Exchange of National Interests

Today, the U.S. and China, as major powers, are in a confrontational relationship in the international arena. South Korea faces security threats from North Korea and a significant power disparity with China to the west. For South Korea, the alliance with the U.S. provides security and support, making it an inevitable choice. Since the end of the Cold War, Vietnam has adopted a communist path, implementing a socialist economic and political system. This choice aligns with the socialist bloc in the international political landscape. During this period, balancing international relations became crucial for Vietnam, as external stability was essential for domestic development.

Different interests and exchanges influenced the international strategies of the two countries. They chose paths towards socialism and capitalism, respectively: South Korea showed legitimacy and alignment with the United States in the international arena, while Vietnam maintained a neutral and balanced position, focusing on independent development.

5. Conclusion

As Vietnam and South Korea have developed over time, both countries remain small players in the international arena. Despite their historical similarities, differing political backgrounds have led them down markedly different paths. Regardless of the international strategies adopted, countries should continually learn from historical experiences and adapt to changing times by updating their strategies. Moreover, national development requires aligning with domestic conditions and relying on internal innovation and effort. Constantly depending on the interests of major powers for legitimacy may only yield short-term benefits and fleeting success, rather than achieving long-term, stable development.

In future, researchers should continue to delve into the essence of the issues, explore new research methods and technologies, and focus on the practical application value of theoretical studies. This helps refine a comprehensive analysis and comparison of Vietnam-South Korea international relations. Further investigation into the social and living environments of both countries will enable

a more detailed analysis of their similarities and differences, linking them to their external international relations and exploring their fundamental aspects.

References

- [1] Wang Chuanjian, Wu Fang, Li Jingou. "The U.S.-South Korea Alliance Under the Perspective of a Free International Order: From the Trump Administration to the Biden Administration." *Contemporary Korea*, 2022 (04): 3-21.
- [2] Michael O'Hanlon. "The Long-Term Basis for a U.S.-Korea Alliance." *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 4, 2018, 108-112.
- [3] Wu Wenfu, Pan Jinge, Zhou Zengliang. "New Developments in the Practice and Theory of Socialist Construction by the Communist Party of Vietnam: Based on 30 Years of Reform Practice and Theoretical Research." *People's Forum: Academic Front*, 2019, (16): 40-44.
- [4] Meng Wanzhan. "The Conditions for the Formation of the Ancient East Asian Hierarchical System." *International Political Science*, 2016, 1 (03): 91-124.
- [5] Tao Lijiao. "Research on the Hierarchical System of U.S. Influence in Southeast Asia After World War II." Xiangtan University, 2019.
- [6] Wang Chuanjian, Wu Fang, Li Jingou. "The U.S.-South Korea Alliance Under the Perspective of a Free International Order: From the Trump Administration to the Biden Administration." *Contemporary Korea*, 2022 (04): 3-21.
- [7] Communist Party of Vietnam: "Documents of the Ninth National Congress," Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 2001, 119.
- [8] Wu Wenfu, Pan Jinge, Zhou Zengliang. "New Developments in the Practice and Theory of Socialist Construction by the Communist Party of Vietnam: Based on 30 Years of Reform Practice and Theoretical Research." *People's Forum: Academic Front*.
- [9] Communist Party of Vietnam: "Documents of the Ninth National Congress," Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 2001, 119.
- [10] Gao Xingai. "Research on the Development of Modern Neo-Confucianism in South Korea: Focusing on the Philosophical Thoughts of Park Jong-hong." *Journal of Yanbian University (Social Science Edition)*, 2019, 52 (02): 13-21 + 139.
- [11] Song Zhiming. "Overseas Neo-Confucianism and Ethical Globalization." *Journal of the Ningbo Municipal Party School of the Communist Party of China*, 2015, 37 (04): 45-50.