

North Korea and the Vietnam War: Air Force Deployment and Post-War Implications

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1. Introduction

The Vietnam War was a war that began around 1960 and lasted until 1975, triggered by a military conflict between South Vietnam (Republic of Vietnam), which governed the area of southern Vietnam of the Vietnamese Demilitarized Zone based on the 17th parallel north, and the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (NLFSV), which opposed that government. North Vietnam (Democratic Republic of Vietnam), which governed the area of northern Vietnam of the Vietnamese Demilitarized Zone, also fought against South Vietnam and supported the NLFSV. The Vietnam War ended with the fall of Saigon, the capital of South Vietnam, by North Vietnam and the establishment of what is now the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

The Vietnam War was not just a war between North and South Vietnam. The Vietnam War spread to Laos and Cambodia, further complicating the Laotian Civil War and contributing to the outbreak of the Cambodian Civil War. Also, during the Cold War, when the world was divided into two opposing blocs, the US and the Soviet Union, various nations sent aid and troops to North and South Vietnam. North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea: DPRK) was one of them. Not only North Korea but also other countries in the Eastern bloc, such as the Soviet Union and China, dispatched troops to North Vietnam.

From June 1965 to July 1970, China (People's Republic of China) sent more than 320,000 troops into Vietnam, including railway soldiers, air defense operation units, defense repair units, and road construction units. From May 1972 to August 1973, China sent troops into Vietnam, mainly to clear mines and transport troops by land and sea. More than 1,100 Chinese military personnel were killed and more than 4,200 seriously wounded in Vietnam.¹

The Soviet Union sent 6,359 Soviet officers and soldiers to Vietnam between July 11, 1965 and

¹ Shu, Ken'ei (朱建榮), *Mao Zedong's Vietnam War(毛沢東のベトナム戦争)*, (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 2001), p. 381 (Japanese).

December 31, 1974, including military advisers, military experts, surface-to-surface missile units, combat units, and technical personnel, resulting in 13 deaths.²

Against North Vietnam and the NLF/SV, countries in the Western bloc, such as the United States, South Korea, Thailand, Australia, New Zealand, and the Philippines, deployed troops to South Vietnam. North and South Korea fought in the Korean War with the support of the Eastern and Western bloc on the Korean peninsula, and each side was divided into two blocs in the Vietnam War, too. The Vietnam War was the first time since the Korean War armistice in 1953 that North and South Korea deployed troops overseas and confronted each other on the battlefield.

This article discusses why North Korea participated in the Vietnam War and then discusses the effects of the Vietnam War on North Korea afterward. Regarding North Korea's participation in the Vietnam War, the declassification of materials in North Korea and Vietnam began gradually in 2000. As a result, research has been conducted in Japan, South Korea, the United States, and Vietnam. In this article, I will discuss the situation as far as I know about North Korea's participation in the Vietnam War based on these studies and materials.

2. Public Access to Materials and Research

Since the time of the Vietnam War, there have been reports in the United States and South Korea that North Korea was involved in the Vietnam War.³ In 1992, KOH Young-hwan, a former North Korean diplomat who defected to South Korea, wrote about North Korea's participation in the Vietnam War in his memoirs.⁴ Despite this, North Korea's participation in the Vietnam War was not well known in Japan, South Korea or the United States, even among experts. It was treated only as a rumor.

This may be because the reality of North Korea's participation in the Vietnam War is not well known. Neither North Korea nor Vietnam publicly acknowledged North Korea's involvement in the Vietnam War until the early 2000s. The 31st volume of the *Complete History of Korea*, which covers the period from October 1966 to November 1970 and is a representative textbook for learning the history of the Korean peninsula in North Korea, states that North Korea expressed its determination to deploy its troops to Vietnam but made no mention of the actual deployment of

² V.A., Zolotarev (B.A., Золотарева) ed., *Russia (USSR) in Local Wars and Military Conflicts of the Second Half of the 20th Century (Россия (СССР) в локальных войнах и военных конфликтах второй половины XX века)*, (Москва: Кучково поле: Полиграфресурсы, 2000). с. 98, с.481 (Russian).

³ *The New York Times*, December 22, 1966; *Chosun Ilbo*, December 23 1966 (Korean); Dong-A Ilbo, September 18, 1967 (Korean).

⁴ KOH Young-hwan, *Pyongyang 25 Hours (평양 25 시)*, (Seoul: Koryowon, 1992), p.177 (Korean).

troops to Vietnam.⁵

Volume 2 of the *History of Foreign Relations of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)*, which covers the diplomatic history of the DPRK, also describes the DPRK's announcement of its decision to deploy troops to Vietnam but does not mention actual deployment.⁶ The *Brief History of the Workers' Party of Korea* and the *History of the Workers' Party of Korea*, which are the basic historical teaching materials of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK), the ruling party in North Korea, also made no mention of the actual deployment of troops to Vietnam.⁷

Neither the *Selected Works of Kim Il Sung*, published since 1967, nor the *Collected Works of Kim Il Sung*, published since 1979, contain articles and speeches of KIM Il-sung, the then-supreme leader. Even the *Rodong Sinmun*, the organ of the Central Committee of the WPK, did not reveal that North Korea had deployed troops in Vietnam.

In 2000, however, the dignitaries of the DPRK began to take steps to give external recognition to the deployment of North Korean troops in the Vietnam War. On March 26, 2000, the *Yomiuri Shimbun* reported that DPRK Foreign Minister PAEK Nam-sun, who was visiting Vietnam, visited the cemetery of 14 Korean People's Army (KPA) soldiers in Bac Giang province, about 60 km northeast of the Vietnamese capital Hanoi.⁸ It was also reported in the *Yonhap News* in South Korea and the *BBC* in the United Kingdom, making it known to the outside world.⁹

On April 3 (in Korean) and April 7 (in Japanese), the *Choson Sinbo*, the organ of the Central Standing Committee of the General Association of Korean Residents in Japan, reported that from 1964 to 1969, the DPRK supplied 100,000 weapons and one million military uniforms to Vietnam

⁵ The Institute of History of Academy of Social Sciences, *Complete history of Korea(조선전사)*, Vol. 31, (Pyongyang: Science Encyclopedia Publishing House, 1982), pp. 514-517 (Korean).

⁶ RI Chun-hui ed., *History of Foreign Relations of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (조선민주주의인민공화국 대외관계사)*, Vol. 2, (Pyongyang: Social Science Publishing, 1987), pp.27-36 (Korean).

⁷ The Workers' Party of Korea Publishing, *The Brief History of the Workers' Party of Korea(조선로동당략사)*, (Pyongyang: The Workers' Party of Korea Publishing, 1979) (Korean); The Workers' Party of Korea Publishing, *The History of the Workers' Party of Korea (조선로동당력사)*, (Pyongyang: The Workers' Party of Korea Publishing, 1991) (Korean).

⁸ *The Yomiuri Shimbun*, March 27, 2000 (Japanese). Place names, distances, and directions have been changed by the author according to the map.

⁹ *BBC*, 31 March 2000, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/696970.stm> (Accessed on December 10, 2012); *JoongAng Ilbo*, March 30, 2000 (Korean).

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and deployed air force and engineering units there.¹⁰

Moreover, during a visit to the United States in October 2000, JO Myong-rok, first vice chairman of the DPRK National Defense Commission, surprised U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright by entering the White House wearing a Vietnam War medal.¹¹

Although PAEK Nam-sun's visit to the cemetery and JO Myong-rok's awarding of the Medal of Honor were not reported in North Korea, North Korea began to disseminate information to the outside world about the deployment of troops to Vietnam. In April 2001, Volume 37 of the *Complete Works of Kim Il Sung* was published, containing KIM Il-sung's speeches to the soldiers of the 203rd Division sent to Vietnam.¹² In addition, the 38th volume of the *Complete Works of Kim Il Sung*, published in June 2001, included a congratulatory letter to the 203rd for its achievements in Vietnam.¹³ On July 6, 2001, the *Korea Central Broadcasting* reported the fact that North Korean troops had been participants in the Vietnam war.¹⁴ KIM Yong-nam, chairman of the Standing Committee of the Supreme People's Assembly of the DPRK, also visited the cemetery of the KPA in Bac Giang Province, Vietnam, on July 12, 2001, as reported in the *Rodong Sinmun*.¹⁵ The remains of the officers and soldiers of the KPA killed in the Vietnam War were returned to North Korea on September 20, 2002, by KIM Yang-chom, vice-director of the DPRK's Ministry of the People's Armed Forces, and laid to rest at the Heroic Martyrs' Cemetery of the KPA.¹⁶

It is believed that North Korea began disseminating information to the outside world about its participation in Vietnam in tandem with Vietnam. According to research by Merle Pribbenow, an expert on the Vietnam War, it was not until 2001 that Vietnamese government authorities acknowledged that North Korean air force pilots had entered the Vietnam War in 1967.¹⁷ North

¹⁰ *Choson Sinbo*, April 3, 2000 (Korean); *Choson Sinbo*, April 7, 2000 (Japanese).

¹¹ Madeleine Albright, *Madam Secretary: A Memoir*, (New York: Miramax, 2003), p.584.

¹² KIM Il-sung, "Supporting the Struggle of the Vietnamese People Becomes a Noble Internationalist Duty of the Communists. Talk with soldiers of the 203rd unit of the Korean People's Army, October 19, 1966 (월남인민의 투쟁을 지원하는것은 공산주의자들의 숭고한 국제주의적의무로 된다. 조선인민군 제 203 부대 군인들과 한 담화, 1966 년 10 월 19 일)," *The Complete Works of Kim Il Sung*, Vol. 37 (Pyongyang: The Workers' Party of Korea Publishing, 2001), pp.373-384 (Korean).

¹³ KIM Il-sung, "Congratulatory Letter: To the Combatants of Unit 203 of the Korean People's Army, May 30, 1967 (축하문 조선인민군 제 203 부대 전투원들에게 1967 년 5 월 30 일)," *The Complete Works of Kim Il Sung*, Vol. 38 (Pyongyang: The Workers' Party of Korea Publishing, 2001), pp.462-465 (Korean).

¹⁴ Radiopress, *North Korea Policy Trends*, 2001, No.10 (August 2001), p.80 (Japanese).

¹⁵ *Rodong Sinmun*, July 13, 2001 (Korean).

¹⁶ *Rodong Sinmun*, September 21, 2002.

¹⁷ Merle L. Pribbenow, "The 'Ology War: Technology and Ideology in the Vietnamese Defense of Hanoi, 1967," *The Journal of Military History*, Vol. 67, No. 1, (January 2003), p.185, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/40492/pdf> (Accessed on February 10, 2024).

Korea probably began disseminating information to the outside world accordingly. North Korea's participation in the Vietnam War was the first overseas deployment of the KPA and an important event in understanding North Korea's subsequent overseas military cooperation.

Satoru Miyamoto began researching North Korea's troop deployment to Vietnam as soon as it became public knowledge. Miyamoto published an article in 2003.¹⁸ According to LEE Sin-jae's research, this was the first research article published on North Korea's troop deployment to Vietnam.¹⁹ Miyamoto has since researched North Korea's troop deployment in Vietnam.²⁰

Pribbenow also published his article and English translation of material from Vietnam in 2011 as part of the Woodrow Wilson Center's North Korea International Documentation Project.²¹ Pribbenow has published two more papers by 2019.²² James F. Durand published an article in 2019 that used newly obtained documents from Russia and other sources to examine the North Korean air force and psychological operations groups that North Korea sent to North Vietnam, as well as South Korean prisoners of war sent to North Korea.²³ Balázs Szalontai discusses the impact of the Vietnam War on North Korea's policy toward South Korea.²⁴

LEE Sin-jae of the Institute of Military History, MND in South Korea, has also published excellent research articles and a book on North Korea's participation in the Vietnam War, using

¹⁸ Satoru Miyamoto(宮本悟), "The Dispatch of the DPRK Troops to Vietnam (朝鮮民主主義人民共和国のベトナム派兵)," *The Journal of Contemporary Korean Studies*, No. 2 (February 2003), pp. 58-67, <http://www.ackj.org/wp/jcks/002/007.pdf> (Accessed on February 10, 2024) (Japanese).

¹⁹ LEE Sin-jae, "The North Korean Air Force's Participation on Vietnam War (북한 공군의 베트남전쟁 참전)," *Review of North Korean Studies*, Vol. 19, No.3, (December 2016), p. 9 (Korean).

²⁰ Satoru Miyamoto, "The DPRK and the Vietnam War (1) (朝鮮民主主義人民共和国とベトナム戦争(1))," *Bulletin, Seigakuin University General Research Institute*, No. 55 (March 2013), pp. 292-310 (Japanese); Satoru Miyamoto, "The DPRK and the Vietnam War (2) (朝鮮民主主義人民共和国とベトナム戦争(2))," *Bulletin, Seigakuin University General Research Institute*, No. 57 (March 2014), pp. 211-237 (Japanese).

²¹ Merle Pribbenow, "North Korean Pilots in the Skies over Vietnam," *The North Korea International Documentation Project*, E-DOSSIER #2, November 2011, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/NKIDP_eDossier_2_North_Korean_Pilots_in_Vietnam_War.pdf (Accessed on January 30, 2024).

²² Merle Pribbenow, "North Korean Psychological Warfare Operations in South Vietnam," *The North Korea International Documentation Project*, March 19, 2018, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/north-korean-psychological-warfare-operations-south-vietnam> (Accessed on January 30, 2024); Merle Pribbenow, "North Korean Military Engineer Regiment Helped Build Secret Underground Headquarters Complex during the Vietnam War," *The North Korea International Documentation Project*, January 22, 2019, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/north-korean-military-engineer-regiment-helped-build-secret-underground-headquarters> (Accessed on January 30, 2024).

²³ James F. Durand, "Partisans, Pilots, PSYOPS, and Prisoners: North Korea's Vietnam Odyssey," *International Journal of Korean Studies*, Vol. 23, Issue 1, (Spring/Summer 2019), pp.43-70.

²⁴ Balázs Szalontai, "In the Shadow of Vietnam: A New Look at North Korea's Militant Strategy, 1962-1970," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (Fall 2012), pp. 122-166.

Vietnamese and Korean documents and papers.²⁵ Do Thanh Thao Mien of the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam has also published articles and a book in Korean on North Vietnam-North Korea relations, using Vietnamese materials.²⁶ KIM Sang-beom, a professor of the Kyungnam University Institute for Far Eastern Studies, published articles on Vietnamese students who studied in North Korea during the Vietnam War and on North Korean foreign policy through North Korean statements.²⁷ HK Research Professor of the Institute of Humanities for Unification at Konkuk University (currently Professor of the National Institute for Unification Education), KIM, Jin-hwan, discusses North Korea's foreign policy during the Vietnam War.²⁸

In Vietnam, as well as history books from official institutions, Nguyễn Thị Mai Hoa, associate professor at Vietnam National University, Hanoi, and Dr. Nguyễn Văn Quyền have published history books and research papers.²⁹

²⁵ LEE Sin-jae, "The North Korean Air Force's Participation on Vietnam War," pp. 6-51; LEE Sin-jae, *The participation of North Korea in the Vietnam War (북한의 베트남전쟁 참전)*, (Seoul: Institute for Military Compilation, MND, 2017) (Korean); LEE Sin-jae, "Battle between the Two Koreas in Vietnam: An Analysis of Participation in the Vietnam War by the North Korean Psychological Warfare Unit and Propaganda Leaflets," *S/N Korean Humanities*, 4(1), (February 2018), pp.75-97.

²⁶ Do Thanh Thao Mien, *Red Blood Pledge. Pyongyang, Hanoi and the Vietnam War* (붉은 혈맹. 평양, 하노이 그리고 베트남전쟁), (Seoul: Seoul National University Press and Culture Center, 2022) (Korean); Do Thanh Thao Mien, "The End of the Vietnam War in 1975 and the North Korea's Strategic Responses: Focusing on Vietnamese Materials (1975 년 베트남전 종전과 북한 정부의 대응: 베트남자료를 중심으로)," *Ewha History Research(이화사학연구)*, Vol. 48 (January 2014), pp.93-133 (Korean); Do Thanh Thao Mien, "The Vietnamese Sources of Materials Related to North and South Korea, focusing on the Vietnam War period(1954-1975) (베트남 소재 남-북한 관련 자료: 베트남전쟁기(1954-1975)년을 중심으로)," *The Military History(군사)*, No. 96 (May 2015), pp.323-362 (Korean); Do Thanh Thao Mien, "Vietnam's Academic Research Trends and Issues on North and South Korea during the Vietnam War (1954-1975) (베트남 학계의 남-북한 연구 동향 및 쟁점: 베트남전쟁 시기(1954-1975)년을 중심으로)," *Ewha History Research(이화사학연구)*, Vol.50 (January 2015), pp.307-350 (Korean); Do Thanh Thao Mien, "North Korean Support for the War in Vietnam in the 1960s - Revelations from the Vietnamese Archives - (1960년대 북한의 베트남전 지원과 공군 · 심리전 전문가 파병: 새로 발굴한 베트남자료를 중심으로)," *Ewha History Research(이화사학연구)*, Vol. 59 (January 2019), pp.225-263 (Korean).

²⁷ KIM Sang-bum, "A Study on North Korea's Social and Cultural Exchange with Vietnam in the 1960s: Focusing on solidarity events and supporting international students and trainees (1960년대 북한의 대베트남 사회·문화 교류에 대한 연구: 연대 강화 행사와 유학생·실습생 교육을 중심으로)," *Reunification and Peace(통일과 평화)*, Vol.13, No.1, (June 2021), pp.163-206 (Korean); KIM Sang-bum, "A Study on the Statement Diplomacy of North Korea(1964-1972) (베트남전쟁기 북한의 성명서교 연구(1964-1972)), " *The Military History(군사)*, Vol.127, (June 2023), pp.179-230 (Korean).

²⁸ KIM Jin-hwan, "North Korea's Diplomatic Policy during the Vietnam War Era (베트남전쟁 시기 북한의 대외정책)," *Society and History(사회와역사)*, Volume 105, (January 2015), pp. 41-70 (Korean).

²⁹ The Military History Institute of Ministry of National Defense Vietnam (Bộ Quốc Phòng Viện Lịch Sử Quân Sự Việt Nam), *History of the resistance war against America to save the country 1954 - 1975, Tap.5 - General attack and uprising in 1968 (Lịch sử kháng chiến chống Mỹ cứu nước 1954 - 1975, Tap.5 - Tổng tấn công và nổi dậy năm 1968)*, (Hà Nội: Chính trị Quốc gia, 2015) (Vietnamese); Nguyễn Văn Quyền,

By 2022, researchers in Japan, South Korea, the United States, and Vietnam will have developed their own research on North Korea's participation in the Vietnam War through new materials. In this article, in addition to the accumulation of numerous studies, we will also use new Vietnamese sources to provide a more complete picture of North Korea's participation in the Vietnam War, with a focus on North Korean air force units.

3. Factors that led North Korea to send troops to Vietnam.

In this chapter, we will examine the factors that led North Korea to send troops to Vietnam at three levels. These are (1) factors of the Cold War structure, (2) bilateral factors, and (3) factors of South Korea's deployment of troops to South Vietnam. These have been discussed in many studies. Here, I would like to organize the results of these studies.

(1) The factors of the Cold War structure

A major factor in North and South Korea's decision to send troops to Vietnam was the Cold War structure of the U.S.-Soviet conflict. North Korea was a member of the Eastern Bloc, led by the Soviet Union, in conflict with the U.S. and South Korea. South Korea was a member of the Western bloc, led by the U.S., in conflict with the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea.

As members of their respective Cold War blocs, North and South Korea needed to increase their value by cooperating in the war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Their value in the blocs was also a guarantee that the Eastern Bloc would defend North Korea and the Western Bloc would defend South Korea. In addition, South Korea was promised massive economic aid by the U.S. for sending troops to Vietnam. North and South Korea were not under orders or pressure from the U.S., China, or the Soviet Union but were forced to enter the Vietnam War for their survival within the Cold War structure.

*Vietnam took advantage of military aid from socialist countries in the war of resistance against the US to save the country (1954 - 1975)(Việt Nam tranh thủ nguồn viện trợ quân sự của các nước xã hội chủ nghĩa trong cuộc kháng chiến chống Mỹ, cứu nước (1954 - 1975)), (Hà Nội: Chính trị Quốc gia, 2022) (Vietnamese); Nguyễn Văn Quyền, Vietnam took advantage of support and help from socialist countries in the years 1954 - 1968 (Việt Nam tranh thủ sự ủng hộ, giúp đỡ từ các nước xã hội chủ nghĩa những năm 1954 - 1968), (Hà Nội: Quân đội nhân dân, 2020); Nguyễn Thị Mai Hoa, Socialist countries supported Vietnam's resistance against the US to save the country (1954-1975)(Các nước xã hội chủ nghĩa ủng hộ Việt Nam kháng chiến chống Mỹ, cứu nước (1954-1975)), (Hà Nội: Chính Trị Quốc Gia Sự Thật, 2013) (Vietnamese); Nguyễn Thị Mai Hoa, "Contribute to learning more about the aid provided by socialist countries to Vietnam in the resistance war against the US and to save the country (Góp phần tìm hiểu thêm về chi viện của các nước xã hội chủ nghĩa cho Việt Nam trong kháng chiến chống Mỹ, cứu nước)," *Tạp chí Lịch sử Quân sự*, 5 (281),(May 2015), pp.38-42 (Vietnamese).*

In the case of North Korea, the split in the Eastern bloc that began in the late 1950s as a result of the Sino-Soviet split was a significant factor in the country's decision to enter the Vietnam War. For North Korea, whose neighbors were the Soviet Union and China, both major powers in the Eastern bloc, it was desirable to have good Sino-Soviet relations and for China and the Soviet Union to work together to protect North Korea. For North Korea, Sino-Soviet support for North Vietnam was part of the communist movement and a symbol of Sino-Soviet cooperation in the anti-American struggle. North Korea also supported Sino-Soviet cooperation in supporting North Vietnam and sent its troops to North Vietnam to maintain the Eastern Bloc.³⁰

(2) Bilateral factors

The bilateral relationship between North Korea and North Vietnam is another factor in North Korea's decision to send troops to North Vietnam. North Korea and North Vietnam first became close in the 1950s, before the Sino-Soviet split began. Initially, however, North Vietnam was just one of many states in the Soviet Union-led Eastern bloc for North Korea. Diplomatic relations between North Korea and North Vietnam were established on January 31, 1950. This was also when diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and North Vietnam were established. However, diplomatic relations between China and North Vietnam were established on January 18. North Korea established diplomatic relations with North Vietnam not because China recognized North Vietnam but because the Soviet Union recognized North Vietnam.

Bilateral relations between North Korea and North Vietnam developed after Ho Chi Minh, president of North Vietnam, visited Pyongyang from July 8 to 12, 1957.³¹ He was the first foreign leader to visit North Korea. KIM Il-sung, prime minister of the DPRK, also led a North Korean government delegation to North Vietnam from November 28 to December 2, 1958.³²

North Korean support for North Vietnam also began with a visit by Ho Chi Minh, who was so impressed by the collective housing complexes during his 1957 visit that he asked KIM Il-sung to build them in Hanoi. Kim Liên City was designed by North Korean engineers and built in Hanoi between 1959 and 1965. The Kim Liên Collective Housing Complex had 38 buildings, from Building Group A to Building Group C.³³ Although North Korean engineers designed the

³⁰ Miyamoto, "The DPRK and the Vietnam War (1)," pp. 211-215. LEE Sin-jae also cites Indonesia's transition from a pro-communist to an anti-communist regime through a military coup as a factor (LEE Sin-jae, *The participation of North Korea*, pp.62-64).

³¹ *Rodong Sinmun*, July 9, 1957; *Rodong Sinmun*, July 13, 1957.

³² *Rodong Sinmun*, November 29, 1958; *Rodong Sinmun*, December 3, 1957.

³³ Phan Dương, "Korean imprint in a 60-year-old dormitory in Hanoi (Dấu ấn Triều Tiên trong khu tập thể 60 năm ở Hà Nội)," *VnExpress*, 02/03/2019, từ <https://vnexpress.net/au-an-trieu-tien-trong-khu-tap-the>

Kim Liên Collective Housing Complex, its construction was paid for out of the North Vietnamese state budget.³⁴ Although the Kim Liên Collective Housing Complex is aging and has been partially rebuilt, it can still be seen in the past in Kim Liên City, Dong Da District, Hanoi, in 2024.

In 1958, North Vietnamese students also began to study in North Korea. The first students were only two.³⁵ From 1958 to 1967, 684 students were sent to North Korea.³⁶

Nevertheless, in the 1950s, North Korea could hardly be said to have had particularly close relations with any of the Eastern Bloc states other than the Soviet Union and China. When China and the Soviet Union began to confront each other in the late 1950s, North Korea was forced to balance between them. For this reason, it signed the Mutual Aid and Cooperation Friendship Treaty with the Soviet Union and China in July 1961.

When the Cuban missile crisis erupted in October 1962, the WPK, perhaps convinced that the Soviet Union would abandon a small country like Cuba, criticized the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1963 and deepened its relations with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

The value of North Vietnam and its ruling party, the Workers' Party of Vietnam (WPV), became more valuable to the WPK, which sought to include the WPV in its criticism of the CPSU's leadership.

The WPV also criticized the CPSU's leadership at the 9th Plenary Session of the Third Central Committee on December 19, 1963.³⁷ However, there were signs of Sino-Soviet rapprochement when Nikita Khrushchev, the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and supreme leader of the Soviet Union during the Cuban crisis, who was dismissed on October 14, 1964.

In November, KIM Il-sung visited China to discuss his policy toward the Soviet Union. During his visit to China, KIM Il-sung also visited North Vietnam, so it is believed that he also discussed

60-nam-o-ha-noi-3887895.html (Accessed on January 30, 2024) (Vietnamese).

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ Nguyễn Thuý Quỳnh, "Socialist countries with the reception of education and training of Vietnamese international students in the resistance war against America and national salvation (1954 - 1975) (Các nước xã hội chủ nghĩa với việc tiếp nhận giáo dục và đào tạo lưu học sinh Việt Nam trong kháng chiến chống Mỹ, cứu nước (1954 - 1975))," *Historical Research (Nghiên cứu Lịch sử)*, Vol.11, No.475, (November 2015), p. 52 (Vietnamese).

³⁶ *ibid.*, p.56.

³⁷ Miyamoto, "The DPRK and the Vietnam War (1)," pp. 302-306.

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policy toward the Soviet Union there.³⁸ KIM Il-sung's second visit to North Vietnam was on November 11, 1964, but we do not know when he left North Vietnam.³⁹ This is because KIM Il-sung's second visit to North Vietnam was not reported then. He was in China on November 16 and said he returned to Hanoi from the Vietnamese countryside on November 14, indicating that KIM Il-sung returned to China on November 14 or 15.⁴⁰

According to Nguyễn Văn Quyền, North Korea was reluctant to support North Vietnam until 1964. KIM Il-sung's second visit to North Vietnam was the catalyst for North Korea to begin actively supporting North Vietnam. He said this was because he found a commonality between North Korea's struggle against the U.S. and South Korea and North Vietnam's struggle against the U.S. and South Vietnam.⁴¹ North Korean aid to North Vietnam from 1954 to 1964 totaled 442 tons (442 tons of industrial products) for only 120,000 rubles, while North Korean aid to North Vietnam from 1965 to 1975 totaled 842 tons (12 tons of raw materials and 830 tons of industrial products) for 18,842,000 rubles.⁴² However, some data show 33,500,000 rubles from 1965 to 1968 (not including military aid).⁴³ Since it depends on the calculation of exchange rates, it is difficult to say which is closer to the actual situation, but there seems to be no doubt that North Korea's aid increased sharply from 1965. The *Choson Sinbo* reported that the DPRK supplied 100,000 weapons and 1 million military uniforms to North Vietnam from 1964 to 1969, but the figures are vague.⁴⁴

North Korea's and North Vietnam's rapprochement with the Soviet Union may also have been a factor in North Korea's willingness to support North Vietnam. North Korea and North Vietnam reconciled with the Soviet Union when Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin visited North Korea, China, and North Vietnam in February 1965. However, China and the Soviet Union could not reconcile, and North Korea was once again forced to balance between the feuding China and the Soviet Union. North Korea, therefore, turned its attention to supporting North Vietnam in the Vietnam War. Since the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964, the United States had been directly

³⁸ Wu Lengxi, *Ten Years' Controversy: Memoirs of Sino-Soviet Relations, 1956-1966* (十年论战：1956-1966 中苏关系回忆录), (Beijing: The Central Party Literature Press, 1999), pp.883-888 (Chinese).

³⁹ Báo tàng Hồ Chí Minh, "President Ho Chi Minh received a delegation of the WPK led by Chairman of the Party Central Committee KIM Il-sung to visit Vietnam (Chủ tịch Hồ Chí Minh tiếp Đoàn đại biểu Đảng Lao động Triều Tiên do Chủ tịch Ban Chấp hành Trung ương Đảng Kim Nhật Thành dẫn đầu sang thăm Việt Nam)," *Báo tàng Hồ Chí Minh*, (November 11, 1964), từ <https://baotanghochiminh.vn/danh-sach-bien-nien-tieu-su/p-868.htm> (Accessed on March 3, 2024) (Vietnamese).

⁴⁰ Wu Lengxi, *Ten Years' Controversy*, pp.883-884.

⁴¹ Nguyễn Văn Quyền, *Vietnam took advantage of support*, pp.149-150.

⁴² Nguyễn Văn Quyền, *Vietnam took advantage of military aid*, pp.273-274.

⁴³ Nguyễn Văn Quyền, *Vietnam took advantage of support*, p.114.

⁴⁴ *Choson Sinbo*, April 3, 2000; *Choson Sinbo*, April 7, 2000.

involved in the Vietnam War, and China and the Soviet Union had cooperated to some extent in supporting North Vietnam despite their mutual antagonism. North Korea sought to maintain friendly relations with both China and the Soviet Union by joining in the aid to North Vietnam.⁴⁵

(3) Factors Caused by South Korea's Deployment of Troops to South Vietnam

After rapprochement with the Soviet Union, North Korea declared in a government statement on March 26, 1965, that it would send aid, including arms, to the NLFV. It also made clear that it would send troops as reinforcements if requested.⁴⁶ The fourth Plenary Session of the Third Supreme People's Assembly was held in North Korea on May 20. It was decided that aid should be sent to North Vietnam and the NLFV.⁴⁷ Since KIM Il-sung later said that he sent people to North Vietnam to build bomb shelters and underground facilities after the Gulf of Tonkin incident, it is likely that the decision to send the engineering troops was made at this meeting.⁴⁸ Weapons and other military supplies were sent not only to North Vietnam but also to Cambodia.⁴⁹ However, North Korea had not yet sent combat troops to Vietnam.

One of the factors that led North Korea to send combat troops to North Vietnam was the deployment of South Korean troops to South Vietnam. South Korea had originally sent non-combat troops to South Vietnam in 1964. On May 9, 1964, the U.S. asked the ROK government to send non-combat troops. In response, on July 31, the 13th plenary session of the 44th National Assembly ratified a request for approval to send non-combat troops. Thus, the decision was made to send South Korean troops to South Vietnam. The first units to be sent were the 1st Mobile Surgical Hospital and the Taekwondo Instructor Corps, dispatched on September 11.⁵⁰

The United States requested the Korean government to send additional personnel on December 18, 1964. As a result, Korea requested approval to send personnel, ratified by the Seventh Plenary Session of the 47th Extraordinary National Assembly on January 26, 1965. The second unit to be sent was the Dove Unit of the Military Assistance Mission, a non-combat unit. The Dove Unit

⁴⁵ Miyamoto, "The DPRK and the Vietnam War (2)," pp. 211-215.

⁴⁶ *Rodong Sinmun*, March 27, 1965.

⁴⁷ *Rodong Sinmun*, May 21, 1965.

⁴⁸ KIM Il-sung, "Supporting the Struggle of the Vietnamese People," p. 375; KIM Hyok-mo and RI Kwang-sam, *Comrade KIM Il-sung, the Great Leader of the Great Work of Independence* (자주위업의 위대한 수령 김일성동지), Vol. 8 (Pyongyang: Social Science Press, 2011), p. 201 (Korean).

⁴⁹ KIM Il-sung, "Talk with the Delegation of the Southwest African People's Organization' on November 23, 1975 (서남아프리카인민조직대표단과 한 담화 1975년 11월 23일)," *The Complete Works of Kim Il Sung*, Vol. 58 (Pyongyang: The Workers' Party of Korea Publishing, 2005), p. 245 (Korean).

⁵⁰ National Institute for Defense Military History, *50 Years of the Founding Military* (건국 50 년사), (Seoul: National Institute for Defense Military History, 1998), pp. 202-205 (Korean).

arrived in South Vietnam on March 16.⁵¹

On June 24, 1965, the South Korean government received a request from the United States to send a division of South Korean troops to South Vietnam.⁵² On July 8, the DPRK issued a government statement opposing the deployment of South Korean combat troops and declaring that it would send to the NLFSV weapons and equipment capable of arming an army equal to the number of South Korean troops.⁵³

The third Korean contingent consisted of the Tiger Division, which consisted of two Army regiments, and the Blue Dragon Division, which consisted of a Marine brigade. The Blue Dragon Division arrived in South Vietnam on October 9, 1965, and the Tiger Division arrived between October 22 and November 2, 1965.⁵⁴ The DPRK Foreign Ministry issued a statement by a spokesman on January 18, 1966, criticizing the PARK Chung-hee administration for sending combat troops to South Vietnam and citing the massacre of Vietnamese villagers by South Korean troops in Vietnam that allegedly had occurred on December 22.⁵⁵

On January 1, 1966, U.S. Vice President Henfrey visited Korea and asked the Korean government to send more Korean troops to South Vietnam.⁵⁶ An agreement was reached on February 25 between Winthrop G. Brown, U.S. ambassador to Korea, and YI Dong-won, minister of foreign affairs, which promised to modernize the ROK military, provide technical assistance for exports, and provide loans as a condition for sending more South Korean troops to South Vietnam.⁵⁷ Brown delivered the agreement to YI Dong-won as an official document on March 7.⁵⁸

On March 7, 1966, North Korea issued a government statement opposing the deployment of South Korean troops to South Vietnam and criticizing the deployment of South Korean troops to South Vietnam as an act of provocation against North Korea.⁵⁹ However, the deployment of South Korean troops to South Vietnam was carried out. The fourth deployment consisted of the 26th Regiment of the Capital Division, which consisted of an army regiment, and the White Horse Division, which consisted of an army division. The 26th Regiment of the Capital Division arrived

⁵¹ *ibid.*, pp.205-207.

⁵² *Chosun Ilbo*, June 27, 1965.

⁵³ *Rodong Sinmun*, July 9, 1965.

⁵⁴ National Institute for Defense Military History, *50 Years of the Founding Military*, p. 212.

⁵⁵ *Rodong Sinmun*, January 18, 1966.

⁵⁶ *Dong-A Yearbook*, 1967 Edition (Seoul: The Dong-A Ilbo Company, 1967), p. 248 (Korean).

⁵⁷ *Chosun Ilbo*, February 26, 1966.

⁵⁸ *Chosun Ilbo*, March 8, 1966.

⁵⁹ *Rodong Sinmun*, March 8, 1966.

in South Vietnam on April 16.⁶⁰ The White Horse Division arrived in Vietnam between September 5 and October 8.⁶¹

North Korea criticized South Korea whenever it sent combat troops to South Vietnam. North Korea began to view the Vietnam War not only as a war between the Eastern Bloc and the West Bloc but also as a war between North and South Korea. In addition, North Korea declared that it would send reinforcements to North Vietnam if North Vietnam requested them. North Korea had to decide to send combat troops to North Vietnam if North Vietnam requested it.

4. North Korean Air Force Deployment

According to North Korean documents, North Vietnamese President Ho Chi Minh requested the air force deployment in a personal letter.⁶² *Destiny*, a North Korean historical novel published in 2012, indicates that KIM Il-sung received Ho Chi Minh's letter of intent on May 5, 1966.⁶³ On August 27, KIM Il-sung told local leaders of the WPK to prepare for war with the US because an escalation of the Vietnam War could lead to a Korean War.⁶⁴ It is believed that by this time, KIM Il-sung had decided to send an air force to North Vietnam.⁶⁵

Representatives of North Korea and North Vietnam signed an agreement to send an air force to North Vietnam on September 30, 1966.⁶⁶ The report's content was as follows (translated by Merle Pribbenow):⁶⁷

⁶⁰ National Institute for Defense Military History, *50 Years of the Founding Military*, p. 215.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, p.216. The withdrawal of South Korean troops from Vietnam was completed on March 23, 1973.

⁶² KIM Il-sung, "Talks with the Head of the French Socialist Party, February 14-15 1981 (프랑스사회당 당수와 한 담화 1981년 2월 14-15일)," *The Complete Works of Kim Il Sung*, vol. 73 (Pyongyang: Workers' Party Press, 2007), p.76(Korean); JONG Ki-jong, *Destiny (운명)*, (Pyongyang: Literary Art Publishing House, 2012), pp.262-270 (Korean).

⁶³ *ibid.*, p.262.

⁶⁴ KIM Il-sung, "On Some Requirements for Improving Economic Projects in North Pyongan Province. Conclusions of the Meeting of the North Pyongan Provincial Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea, August 27, 1966 (평안북도의 경제사업을 개선하기 위한 몇가지 과업에 대하여조선로동당 평안북도위원회 전원회의에서 한 결론 1966년 8월 27일)," *The Complete Works of Kim Il Sung*, vol. 37 (Pyongyang: The Workers' Party of Korea Publishing, 2001), p.175 (Korean).

⁶⁵ LEE Sin-jae also examines in detail the process of North Korea's involvement in the Vietnam War (LEE Sin-jae, *The participation of North Korea*, pp.85-94). In this paper, however, we have chosen to use the Vietnamese and North Korean sources as primary sources and the defectors' testimonies only as a reference.

⁶⁶ Merle Pribbenow, "North Korean Pilots in the Skies over Vietnam," (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, November 2011), http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/NKIDP_eDossier_2_North_Korean_Pilots_in_Vietnam_War.pdf (Accessed on March 21, 2013).

⁶⁷ "Signing of a Protocol Agreement for North Korea to Send a Number of Pilots to Fight the American Imperialists during the War of Destruction against North Vietnam September 30, 1966," *The Wilson Center Digital Archive*, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/signing-protocol-agreement-north>

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There is an argument that North Vietnam did not ask North Korea to send an air force unit, but North Korea proposed to send an air force unit and North Vietnam accepted.⁶⁸ This is based on the discussion of the Central Military Commission of the Communist Party of Vietnam on September 21, 1966, a matter of public record.⁶⁹ However, this content is false in two respects. First, it is a normal procedure for the sponsored side to ask for support from the sponsoring side. It is unthinkable for the supporting site to request support from the supported site. Second, the date of this meeting was just before the air force's deployment, which is too late to decide on support. The content of the discussion would be considered a procedural matter within the Central Military Commission of the Party.

The 203rd Military Unit, a regiment of the Korean People's Air Force, was to be deployed to North Vietnam.⁷⁰ KIM Il-sung stressed the need to support North Vietnam at the Second Representatives Conference of the WPK held from October 5 to 12, 1966.⁷¹ On October 12 the "Statement of the WPK Representatives' Conference on the Vietnam Question" was issued, revealing the possibility of supporting and deploying troops to North Vietnam.⁷²

KIM Il-sung met the soldiers of the 203rd Military Unit on October 19, 1966.⁷³ The U.S. New York Times reported on December 22 that North Korean pilots had been detected in North Vietnam six weeks earlier. Thus, the U.S. knew of the North Korean air force deployment in 1966.⁷⁴

According to Nguyễn Thị Mai Hoa's article, 384 North Korean military personnel (including 96

korea-send-number-pilots-fight-american-imperialists (Accessed on February 27, 2024); "September 30 Signed Protocol on North Korea sending a number of pilots to fight against US imperialism in the war of sabotage against North Vietnam (Ngày 30 tháng 9 Ký Nghị định thư về việc Triều Tiên cử một số phi công sang chiến đấu chống đế quốc Mỹ trong cuộc chiến tranh phá hoại đối với miền Bắc Việt Nam)," *Vietnam Military History (Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam)*, từ <https://www.quansuvn.net/index.php/topic,5366.0.html> (Accessed on February 27, 2024) (Vietnamese).

⁶⁸ LEE Sin-jae, *The participation of North Korea in the Vietnam War*, p.91; Do Thanh Thao Mien, *Red Blood Pledge. Pyongyang, Hanoi and the Vietnam War*, p.170.

⁶⁹ "September 21 General Võ Nguyên Giáp's conclusion on North Korea's proposal to send a number of pilots to fight in Vietnam (Ngày 21 tháng 9 Kết luận của Đại tướng Võ Nguyên Giáp về đề nghị của Triều Tiên cử một số phi công sang Việt Nam chiến đấu)," *Lịch sử Quân sự Việt Nam*, từ <https://www.quansuvn.net/index.php/topic,5366.0.html> (Accessed on February 27, 2024) (Vietnamese).

⁷⁰ KIM Il-sung, "Supporting the Struggle of the Vietnamese People," p. 396; KIM Hyok-mo, *Comrade KIM Il-sung*, p.396. The North Korean air force unit is believed to have been a regiment, as it was commanded by a regimental commander.

⁷¹ KIM Il-sung, "The Current Situation and Our Party's Tasks(현재정세와 우리당의 가업)," *Rodong Sinmun*, October 6, 1966.

⁷² *Rodong Sinmun*, October 13, 1966.

⁷³ KIM Il-sung, "Supporting the Struggle of the Vietnamese People," pp. 373-384.

⁷⁴ *The New York Times*, December 22, 1966.

pilots) arrived in North Vietnam on October 20, 1966, the day after the meeting with KIM Il-sung, in addition to 35 enemy operations and radio experts. The unit began its combat mission on December 15 with 12 MIG-17C fighters. From the beginning of the combat mission to the end of 1967, the North Korean pilots took off 106 times and fought 99 engagements per aircraft, shooting down 23 enemy aircraft and burning 700 tons of fuel. Ten of them were killed (eight in dogfights). Ten aircraft were shot down and 23 aircraft were damaged on the ground (6 were completely destroyed).⁷⁵ By December 1968, the total number of North Korean military personnel in North Vietnam had been reduced to 185 (including 46 pilots). By December 1968, North Korean troops stationed in North Vietnam had undergone five unit changes, leaving 159 (31 pilots). They eventually shot down 26 U.S. aircraft. However, 12 of them were killed (two of them non-combatants), and 43 aircraft were damaged (25 were totally destroyed).⁷⁶

However, different information was reported in Vietnam. According to the electronic newspaper *Tiền phong*, nearly 150 North Korean air force troops entered North Vietnam in 1966. The troops who entered North Vietnam were placed under the control of the 923rd Regiment under the command of the North Vietnamese Air Force. The regimental commander was KIM Chang-son. The North Vietnamese provided fighter planes, food, medicine, etc. Fourteen men served in Mig 17Bs and 10 in Mig 17Cs. One hundred thirteen men were assigned to support, logistics, administration, etc. From 1966 to early 1969, the North Vietnamese Air Force shot down 222 U.S. aircraft and captured 51 enemy pilots. North Korean pilots shot down 26 U.S.

aircraft. Fourteen North Korean officers and soldiers were killed, the youngest of whom was WON Hong-sang, who was 19 years old (East Asian age reckoning, 21 in the year of the count)⁷⁷ He was North Korea's first soldier killed.

There is some common information between the two, such as 26 U.S. aircraft shot down, but there is also different information, so it is impossible for me to determine which is correct. However,

Figure 1. Tombstone-shaped monuments of North Korean air force officers and soldiers killed in action (author's photo, August 7, 2019)



⁷⁵ Nguyễn Thị Mai Hoa, "Contribute to learning more about the aid provided by socialist countries," p.42.
⁷⁶ *ibid.*

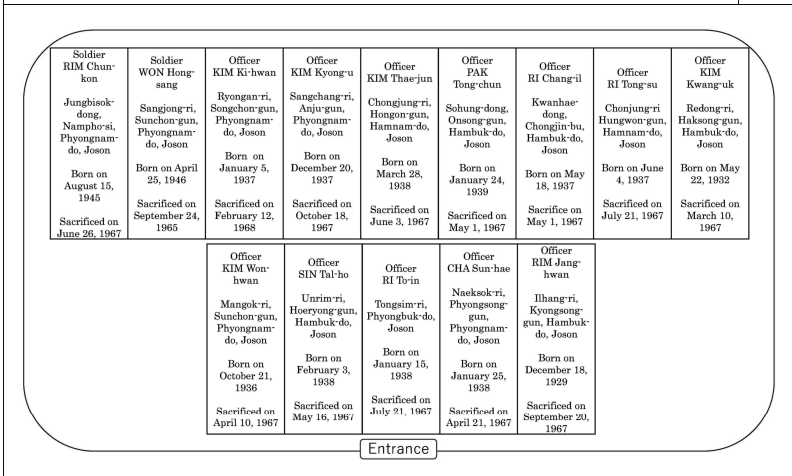
⁷⁷ "Korean soldiers' resting place (Nơi các chiến binh Triều Tiên nằm lại)," *Tiền phong*, August 6, 2012, từ <http://www.tienphong.vn/Page/PrintView.aspx?ArticleID=587223> (Accessed on March 03, 2024) (Vietnamese).

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Nguyễn Thị Mai Hoa's article is wrong about the number of dead. The number of dead North Korean officers and soldiers is not 12, but 14, as confirmed by their cemeteries and monuments. Of the 14, 2 were soldiers (ground personnel) and 12 were officers (pilots).⁷⁸ One of the causes of death of the North Korean pilots was that they were not equipped with parachutes or other escape devices. Some had their legs pinned to the seats of their fighter planes.⁷⁹

Their cemetery was located on Hoang Forest Hill (Tân Đình commune, Lạng Giang District, Bắc Giang province), about 60 km northeast of Hanoi. After the remains were repatriated to North Korea on September 20, 2002, the original cemetery now contains tombstone-shaped monuments. The 14 monuments are arranged as follows. The entrance faces northeast, indicating North Korea.⁸⁰

Figure 2: Layout of tombstones (monuments) of the dead of the North Korean air force



The actual number of North Korean officers and soldiers killed may be higher than 14. On March 26, 2019, the *Choson Sinbo* reported, “The remains of 14 soldiers of the People's Army who died in the Vietnam War were transferred from Vietnam to Korea in September 2002 and laid to rest at

⁷⁸ “Korean Martyrs Cemetery in Bac Giang (Nghĩa trang liệt sĩ Triều Tiên ở Bắc Giang),” *VN Express*, August 6, 2012, từ <https://vnexpress.net/nghia-trang-liet-si-trieu-tien-o-bac-giang-2238967.html> (Accessed on March 3, 2024) (Vietnamese).

⁷⁹ Hà Anh Dương, Văn Hải, “14 chiến binh Triều Tiên trên bầu trời Việt Nam,” *Tuổi Trẻ cuối tuần*, August 17, 2008, từ <https://cuoituan.tuoiitre.vn/14-chien-binh-trieu-tien-tren-bau-troi-viet-nam-273979.htm> (Accessed on March 3, 2024) (Vietnamese).

⁸⁰ The author visited the site on August 7, 2019.

the Heroes and Martyrs Cemetery of the Korean People's Army (Soonae-dong, Mangyongdaeguok). In July 2013, the remains were transferred to the Martyrs' Cemetery of the Victory in the Fatherland Liberation War, which was completed on the 60th anniversary of the victory in the Fatherland Liberation War. At present, 27 heroes and martyrs are buried here".⁸¹ It is not known if these 27 were North Korean officers and soldiers who died in the Vietnam War or if they included casualties from other wars. North Korea also sent non-air force units, so it is possible that the dead from those units were also buried here. It is still difficult to determine that only 14 people died in the Vietnam War.

There were three airports where North Korean air force units were based. They were Kep Military Airport (Bac Giang Province), Yen Bai Military Airport (Yen Bai Province), and Sao Vang Airport (Thanh Hoa Province).⁸² It is not clear when the North Korean air force units were withdrawn from North Vietnam. However, Vietnamese reports only record the shooting down of U.S. aircraft by North Korean air force units until early 1969, so it is believed to have been around that time.⁸³ An April 3, 2000, article in the *Choson Sinbo*, which indirectly reported on North Korean materials, also reported that support for Vietnam lasted from 1964 to 1969, so it is believed that North Korean air force units were withdrawn around 1969.⁸⁴ However, according to a former air force pilot who defected from North Korea to South Korea, North Korean air force units were stationed in North Vietnam until 1972.⁸⁵ However, this is not confirmed by North Korean or Vietnamese documents.

North Korea's deployment to North Vietnam was not limited to engineering and air force units. According to LEE Sin-jae, North Korea may have sent the Psychological Operations Group, special operations forces, and Anti-aircraft Artillery to North Vietnam.⁸⁶ Of these, there is no doubt that the Psychological Operations Group was sent from North Korea to North Vietnam. The Psychological Operations Group was advertised as a betrayal to South Korean soldiers, and several documents remain in Vietnam and South Korea.⁸⁷ Nguyễn Thị Mai Hoa's article also

⁸¹ *Choson Sinbo*, March 26, 2019 (Japanese).

⁸² The manager told the author when the author visited the monument on August 7, 2019.

⁸³ "The story of 14 graves of Korean pilots in Bac Giang (Chuyện về 14 ngôi mộ lính phi công Triều Tiên ở Bắc Giang)," *Dân trí*, March 5, 2019, từ <https://dantri.com.vn/xa-hoi/chuyen-ve-14-ngoi-mo-linh-phi-cong-trieu-tien-o-bac-giang-20190220104708906.htm> (Accessed on March 3, 2024) (Vietnamese).

⁸⁴ *Choson Sinbo*, April 3, 2000 (Korean); *Choson Sinbo*, April 7, 2000 (Japanese).

⁸⁵ *Chosun Ilbo*, September 14, 1998.

⁸⁶ LEE Sin-jae, "The participation of North Korea," pp.80-216.

⁸⁷ Do Thanh Thao Mien, "North Korean Support for the War in Vietnam in the 1960s - Revelations from the Vietnamese Archives," pp. 248-253; James F. Durand, "Partisans, Pilots, PSYOPS, and Prisoners: North Korea's Vietnam Odyssey," pp.50-53; Merle Pribbenow, "North Korean Psychological Warfare Operations in South Vietnam,"

mentions the arrival of 35 enemy operations and radio experts in North Vietnam on October 20, 1966, which may refer to the Psychological Operations Group.⁸⁸ There is only fragmentary information about special operations forces and Anti-aircraft Artillery, and no reliable documentation has yet been found.

According to KOH Young-hwan, a former counselor at the North Korean embassy in the Republic of Congo who defected to South Korea in 1991, North Korea sent infantrymen, transport soldiers, chemical soldiers for handling chemical-technical equipment and personnel of the No. 3 Office Building, a department for operations against the South, to North Vietnam in addition to air force troops.⁸⁹ However, these are also unconfirmed by North Korean and Vietnamese documents.

Aid to North Vietnam continued even after the Air Force was deployed, and on August 11, 1967, an agreement was signed in Pyongyang to send military assistance to North Vietnam free of charge.⁹⁰ In addition, an agreement was signed on November 19, 1970, under which North Korea would provide North Vietnam with free economic and military aid, so it is believed that military aid continued for some time after the withdrawal of the air force units.⁹¹

(1) North Korean officers and soldiers after returning to their home country

What Happened to North Korean air force Officers and Soldiers Who Fought in the Vietnam War? JO Myong-rok, who became the first vice chairman of the National Defense Commission in the KIM Jong-il regime, entered the White House during a visit to the United States in 2000 wearing a medal of honor awarded during the Vietnam War and met with U.S. President Bill Clinton and U.S. Secretary of State Albright. He is therefore believed to have been one of the North Korean air force officers and soldiers who participated in the Vietnam War. At the time of his death on November 6, 2010, JO Myong-rok was the first vice chairman of the National Defense Commission, the second most important position after KIM Jong-il. In the KPA, he held the key position of Director General of the General Political Bureau and was one of the heavyweights of the KIM Jong-il regime, having the military title of Vice Marshal.⁹² He was a military officer who rose through the ranks after the Vietnam War.

⁸⁸ Nguyễn Thị Mai Hoa, "Contribute to learning more about the aid provided by socialist countries to Vietnam in the resistance war against the US and to save the country," p.42.

⁸⁹ KOH Young-hwan, *Pyongyang 25 Hours*, p.177.

⁹⁰ *Rodong Sinmun*, August 12, 1970; KIM Hyok-mo, *Comrade KIM Il-sung*, p.205; JONG Ki-jong, *Destiny*, p.429.

⁹¹ *Rodong Sinmun*, November 20, 1970.

⁹² *Rodong Sinmun*, November 7, 2010.

However, little is known about the fact that JO Myong-rok was one of the officers and soldiers who participated in the Vietnam War. The only North Korean publication that showed that JO Myong-rok had anything to do with the Vietnam War was the historical novel *Destiny*.⁹³

There are no known officers and soldiers of the KPA who participated in the Vietnam War. This suggests how North Korean officers and soldiers who participated in the Vietnam War were treated in North Korea.

North Korean officers and soldiers who participated in the Vietnam War were not welcome back home. This is also depicted in the 2009 North Korean film *White Jade*. In this film, an air force regimental commander who participated in the Vietnam War was criticized for failing to retrieve the bodies of the dead.⁹⁴ The real reason, however, may be different. North Vietnam had sent officers and soldiers from China and the Soviet Union, which were in conflict with each other. In addition, after reunification, Vietnam came into conflict with North Korea. North Korean officers and soldiers who participated in the Vietnam War interacted with Chinese, Soviet, and North Vietnamese soldiers and came into contact with their political propaganda may have been treated as political obstacles in North Korea. It was not until 2002, more than a quarter of a century after the end of the Vietnam War, that the bodies of the North Korean war dead and their graves were repatriated to North Korea. This means that along with the restoration of relations between North Korea and Vietnam, the fallen of the Vietnam War were finally treated as heroes.

How did JO Myong-rok, who was involved in the Vietnam War, get ahead? I am not sure. But at least we can assume that his involvement in the Vietnam War did not help his career. Even if the North Korean officers and soldiers who participated in the Vietnam War were not as welcome in North Korea as their service, the success of North Korea's air force units in the Vietnam War had the effect of promoting North Korea's military power to the outside world. It may not have been so recognized in the Western bloc, but it was recognized among some elites in the socialist states and non-aligned countries. In 1973, North Korean air force units were sent to Egypt and Syria to participate in the October War.⁹⁵

⁹³ JONG Ki-jong, *Destiny*, p.440.

⁹⁴ *White Jade* (흰옥), KIM Moon-son, Film Literature, Korea 4.25 Art Movie Studio, 2009, 13:57 to 15:08, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UKb0deTel8w> (Accessed on March 3, 2024) (Korean).

⁹⁵ Satoru Miyamoto, "DPRK Troop Dispatches and Military Support in the Middle East: Change from Military Support to Arms Trade in the 1970s," *EAST ASIA*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (August 2010), pp.345-359.

(2) North Korea's relations with Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos after the Vietnam War

North Korea also developed relations with Cambodia and Laos, which U.S. forces had bombed during the Vietnam War. North Korea sent military aid not only to North Vietnam but also to Cambodia and Laos. North Korea also signed an agreement to send military assistance to Cambodia on March 16, 1972.⁹⁶ In addition, to send military aid to Laos, an "Agreement to Restore Peace and Establish Ethnic Reconciliation in Laos" was signed in February 1973.⁹⁷ However, North Korea's relations with Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in the post-Vietnam War era were complex.

The Paris Peace Accords were signed in 1973, and North and South Vietnam were unified in 1976, but war continued in Vietnam. The Cambodian-Vietnamese War broke out in May 1975 when Cambodia attacked Vietnamese territory, and on December 25, 1978, Vietnam invaded and occupied Cambodia with a large military force. With the end of the Vietnam War, socialist ideals were abandoned, and raw nationalism fueled conflict on the Indochina peninsula.

The Soviet Union recognized the Heng Samrin regime established in Cambodia on January 9, 1979, by Vietnam, which occupied Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, as a result of the Cambodia-Vietnam War. However, China and North Korea did not recognize it. On January 12, the WPK published an article in the *Rodong Sinmun* criticizing Vietnam.⁹⁸ Relations between North Korea and Vietnam have cooled, and the DPRK's ambassador to Vietnam has been downgraded to the level of acting ambassador.⁹⁹

It is said that relations between North Korea and Vietnam began to improve in the mid-1980s when the DPRK's new ambassador to Vietnam was sent on June 24, 1984.¹⁰⁰ From September 5 to 11, 1988, Vietnamese head of state Võ Chí Công, chairman of the State Council, visited North Korea to participate in the celebrations of the 40th anniversary of the founding of the DPRK.¹⁰¹ He met with North Korean President KIM Il-sung on Sept. 6.¹⁰² Even after the end of the Cold War, however, relations between North Korea and Vietnam remained delicate. Vietnam established diplomatic relations with South Korea on December 22, 1992, but North Korea

⁹⁶ KIM Hyok-mo, *Comrade KIM Il-sung*, p. 243; *Rodong Sinmun*, March 17, 1972.

⁹⁷ KIM Hyok-mo, *Comrade KIM Il-sung*, pp.251-252.

⁹⁸ *Rodong Sinmun*, January 12, 1979.

⁹⁹ *Mainichi Shinbun*, June 26, 1984.

¹⁰⁰ *Mainichi Shinbun*, June 26, 1984.

¹⁰¹ *Rodong Sinmun*, September 6, 1988; *Rodong Sinmun*, September 12, 1988.

¹⁰² *Rodong Sinmun*, September 7, 1988.

remained silent.

In the 2000s, the two countries began to recognize North Korea's involvement in the Vietnam War, and the restoration of relations has made significant progress. Since then, relations between North Korea and Vietnam have generally been good, and the visit of Nông Đức Mạnh, General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, to North Korea on October 16-18, 2007, the first visit by a Vietnamese supreme leader in 50 years, symbolized the restoration of relations between the two countries.¹⁰³

However, the relationship between North Korea and Vietnam has sometimes been problematic. In 2016, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Sanctions Committee Panel of Experts reported that Vietnam had violated sanctions against North Korea. It said that a Vietnamese police academy had been providing military-related training by North Korean trainers since 2012.¹⁰⁴

Relations between North Korea and Vietnam cooled temporarily after the February 13, 2017, murder of KIM Jong-nam in Malaysia, which was masterminded by a North Korean and led to the arrest of a Vietnamese woman as the perpetrator. However, the restoration of relations between the two countries had begun before the US-North Korea summit, with North Korean Foreign Minister RI Yong-ho visiting Vietnam from November 29 to December 1, 2018.¹⁰⁵ North Korea's supreme leader, KIM Jong-un, will visit Vietnam from February 26 to March 2, 2019, with the U.S.-North Korea summit taking place in Hanoi from February 27-28 and the North Korea-Vietnam summit on March 1.¹⁰⁶ This will be the first visit to Vietnam by a North Korean supreme leader since November 1964, some 54 years ago.

When the 8th WPK Congress convened on January 5-11, KIM Jong-un declared that he would conduct diplomacy in opposition to the United States and defined relations with Vietnam as a “special comradely and strategic relationship.”¹⁰⁷ North Korea treats Vietnam as a friendly nation on the same level as Cuba, after China and Russia. It can be said that North Korea expects Vietnam to be a comrade fighting against the U.S., as it was during the Vietnam War.

The friendship between North Korea and Cambodia was strengthened by the personal friendship between KIM Il-sung and Norodom Sihanouk, Cambodia's head of state. Sihanouk visited North

¹⁰³ *Rodong Sinmun*, October 17, 2007; *Rodong Sinmun*, October 19, 2007.

¹⁰⁴ The Panel of Experts, *Report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to resolution 1874 (2009)*, United Nations Security Council, (February 24, 2016), pp.43-44.

¹⁰⁵ *Rodong Sinmun*, December 3, 2018.

¹⁰⁶ *Rodong Sinmun*, March 2, 2019.

¹⁰⁷ *Rodong Sinmun*, January 9, 2021.

Korea 44 times between 1965 and 2006.¹⁰⁸ Sihanouk was the most frequent foreign leader to visit North Korea. The friendship between KIM Il-sung and Sihanouk remained unchanged throughout his life.

Sihanouk is known to have lived in exile for a long time during the Cambodian Civil War. Sihanouk was overthrown by Prime Minister Lon Nol on March 18, 1970, while visiting Beijing. This was the beginning of the Cambodian Civil War, and he returned home on September 9, 1975, after Phnom Penh fell to Pol Pot's forces on April 17, 1975. Soon, however, Sihanouk was stripped of real power and placed under house arrest. The Cambodian-Vietnamese war led him to defect abroad again on January 6, 1979, just before the fall of Phnom Penh to Vietnamese forces. On May 20, 1979, Sihanouk visited North Korea, where he strongly criticized Vietnam at a welcoming banquet held that day.¹⁰⁹ He returned to Cambodia on November 14, 1991, following the signing of the Agreements on a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodian Conflict on October 23. Meanwhile, KIM Il-sung continued to protect and support Sihanouk by providing him with a residence in Pyongyang. As a result, Sihanouk was a frequent visitor to North Korea.

Military aid to Cambodia, which had been provided during the Vietnam War, resumed around the time the Cambodian civil war ended. Sihanouk visited Pyongyang from June 19 to August 11, 1990, and after meeting with KIM Il-sung on June 21 and requesting military training, Cambodian military trainees began training in North Korea in July.¹¹⁰ When a high-level delegation from the Ministry of National Defense of the Kingdom of Cambodia visited North Korea from March 21 to 25, 1994, requesting Cambodian military assistance for weapons equipment, royal palace guards, and training for a capital defense force, KIM Il-sung took it on.¹¹¹

Sihanouk supported North Korea after becoming king of the Kingdom of Cambodia with the promulgation of the new constitution on September 21, 1993, and his accession to the throne on September 24 until his death on October 15, 2012. The ceremony of naming a street in the capital Phnom Penh "Generalissimo Kim Il Sung Street" was held on November 12, 1994.¹¹² Cambodia normalized diplomatic relations with South Korea on October 30, 1997. However, even before that, Sihanouk had expressed his opposition, although his real power was weak because he was a

¹⁰⁸ *Rodong Sinmun*, October 16, 2012.

¹⁰⁹ *Rodong Sinmun*, May 21, 1990.

¹¹⁰ *Rodong Sinmun*, June 20, 1990; *Rodong Sinmun*, June 22, 1990; *Rodong Sinmun*, August 12, 1990; KIM Hyok-mo, *Comrade KIM Il-sung*, p.244.

¹¹¹ *Rodong Sinmun*, March 22, 1994; *Rodong Sinmun*, March 26, 1994; KIM Hyok-mo, *Comrade KIM Il-sung*, p.244.

¹¹² *Rodong Sinmun*, November 15, 1994.

constitutional monarch.¹¹³ Cambodia's subsequent relationship with South Korea strengthened under Prime Minister Hun Sen, and North Korea's influence was minimal. Bolstered by the friendship between KIM Il-sung and Sihanouk, relations between the two countries weakened after KIM Il-sung's death on July 8, 1994.

The relationship between North Korea and Laos is less obvious, but like Cambodia, Laos, which was involved in the Vietnam War, has close ties to North Korea. The de facto supreme leader of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, established on December 2, 1975, after the end of the Lao Civil War, was Kaysone Phomvihane, who headed the Lao People's Revolutionary Party. Kaysone died on November 21, 1992. In response, the Lao government procured 20 statues of Kaysone, the work of North Korean sculptors, and placed them as monuments in all provincial capitals and tourist attractions. On December 13, 2000, to commemorate the 80th anniversary of Kaysone's birth, his giant bronze statue made by North Korean sculptors was unveiled in Vientiane, the capital of Laos. The statue was erected in front of the Kaysone Phomvihane Museum, 6 km from the city center.¹¹⁴



¹¹³ *Rodong Sinmun*, March 27, 1996.

¹¹⁴ Kham Vorapheth, *Politics and Economy of Contemporary Laos: 1975-2006* (現代ラオスの政治と経済: 1975-2006), translated by Kazuhiro Fujimura and Mayuko Ishikawa (Tokyo: Mekon, 2010), p. 190 (Japanese). [Original book: Kham Vorapheth, *Laos: La redéfinition des stratégies politiques et économiques (1975-2006)*, (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2007)]. During the author's visit to the Kaysone Museum on August 2, 2019, a museum employee explained that the museum cost US\$7 million to build, US\$4 million of which was supported by Vietnam. He also explained that the Kaysone statue was originally made in North Korea, however it was replaced by a larger Chinese statue in 2002. There is no documentation to support these facts. However, the relief next to the statue is clearly in the North Korean architectural style, and the museum staff confirmed that it was made by North Koreans.

2. North Korea and the Vietnam War: Air Force Deployment and Post-War Implications

In military cooperation with Southeast Asia, since KIM Jong-il took power, relations with Laos have stood out. From March 22 to April 5, 2011, a KPA delegation led by PAK Jae-gyong, vice minister of the People's Armed Forces, visited Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos, where North Korea provided military support during the Vietnam War.¹¹⁵ The KPA delegation met with defense ministry delegations and other officials from the three countries to exchange views on friendly relations. Lao Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Douanchay Phichit, who met with the delegation on March 31, went a step further, saying Lao intends to further develop exchanges and cooperation with the KPA.¹¹⁶

A delegation of the General Staff of the Lao People's Army visited North Korea from July 27-29, 2011. It held talks with a military delegation of the KPA on July 28 to exchange views on further developing the friendly relations between the two militaries.¹¹⁷ Choummaly Sayasone, President of the Lao PDR, who visited Laos from September 21-23, met with KIM Jong-il on September 23, with KIM Jong-un in attendance. He is the first foreign head of state KIM Jong-un has met with since he was proclaimed KIM Jong-il's successor. He was also the last foreign head of state that KIM Jong-il met with. Together with KIM Jong-il and KIM Jong-un, Chunmalee toured the exhibition hall to learn the history of the development of the military equipment of the KPA and showed interest in North Korean weapons.¹¹⁸

UNSC Resolution 2397, adopted on December 22, 2017, requires countries to repatriate North Korean workers by December 22, 2019. The North Korean-run Angkor Panorama Museum in Sherimup, Cambodia (grand opening December 4, 2015; construction began August 11, 2011; construction completed September 6, 2015) and all North Korean restaurants in Cambodia were closed, and North Korean workers were repatriated.

¹¹⁵ *Rodong Sinmun*, March 23, 2011; *Rodong Sinmun*, April 6, 2011.

¹¹⁶ *Rodong Sinmun*, March 30, 2011; *Rodong Sinmun*, March 31, 2011; *Rodong Sinmun*, April 3, 2011.

¹¹⁷ *Rodong Sinmun*, July 28, 2011; *Rodong Sinmun*, July 29, 2011; *Rodong Sinmun*, July 30, 2011.

¹¹⁸ *Rodong Sinmun*, September 22, 2011; *Rodong Sinmun*, September 24, 2011.



Vietnam and Laos are different from Cambodia. In 2023, North Korean restaurants were still operating in Vietnam and Laos, and North Korean workers were still working there. Vietnam reported to the UNSC that it allows North Korean workers to work for humanitarian reasons.¹¹⁹ Laos, however, did not report anything to the UNSC. The difference in the three countries' responses to the UNSC sanctions against North Korea may be due to the nature of their relationship with North Korea since the Vietnam War.

5. Conclusion

Three major factors contributed to North Korea's involvement in the Vietnam War. The first is the structure of the Cold War. North and South Korea, as members of their respective blocs in the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, had to increase their value in the bloc by cooperating in the conflict between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

The second is the bilateral factor between North Korea and North Vietnam. The Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s deepened relations between North Korea and North Vietnam, which was caught between China and the Soviet Union, and North Korea became actively involved in the Vietnam War.

The third is South Korea's deployment of troops in South Vietnam. South Korea, which has close relations with the United States and fought in the Korean War, sent troops to South Vietnam, which led North Korea to deploy troops to North Vietnam.

The military units sent from North Korea to Vietnam can be identified as air force units, engineering units, and a psychological operations group. North Korean or Vietnamese documents

¹¹⁹ The Panel of Experts, *Report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to resolution 1874 (2009)*, United Nations Security Council, (September 7, 2022), p.75.

cannot confirm the other units mentioned in the defectors' information. The air force units were the main combat units. The air force unit was deployed in October 1966. The date of its withdrawal cannot be determined, but it is believed to be 1969, according to North Korean and Vietnamese sources. The size of the Air Force unit cannot be determined as information varies from approximately 150 to 384 personnel. The size of the air force units would have varied according to the time of year because of the rotation system. The number of deaths is reported as 14 in Vietnam and 27 in North Korea. I don't know why the information is different.

North Korean air units were viewed unfavorably after their return. However, the success of North Korean air units in Vietnam was recognized by some elites in the socialist countries and the Non-Aligned Countries. It was also used in North Korea's subsequent military cooperation with the Non-Aligned Countries. North Korea's air force units would now be active in the Middle East.

The Vietnam War had a major impact on North Korea's subsequent relations with Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. North Korea supported all three countries in the Vietnam War. However, Vietnam and Cambodia came into conflict after the Vietnam War. After protecting the Cambodian head of state, Sihanouk, North Korea came into conflict with Vietnam in 1979. Relations with Vietnam gradually recovered after 1984, and around 2000, North Korea officially authorized the deployment of the North Korean air force to Vietnam.

Conversely, relations between North Korea and Cambodia, which had been bolstered by the personal relationship between KIM Il-sung and Sihanouk, weakened after KIM Il-sung's death in July 1994. Laos is believed to have continued military cooperation with North Korea after the Vietnam War. Rather, after the death of KIM Il-sung, signs of military cooperation between North Korea and Laos became more pronounced during the KIM Jong-il era.

North Korea's involvement in the Vietnam War, although complicated since then, led to the establishment of friendly relations not only between North Korea and Vietnam but also with Cambodia and Laos. While North Korea's relations with Cambodia, which were linked by the personal friendship of the Supreme Leader, have weakened with the death of the Supreme Leader, its relations with Vietnam and Laos have recovered and even deepened. This is because the relationship between Vietnam and Laos is not based on the Supreme Leader's friendship but an organizational relationship between the Party and the government. I can say that North Korea established this relationship because of its involvement in the Vietnam War and its support for Vietnam and Laos.

This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number JP20H01470.