

## It's Time for South Korea to Acknowledge Its Atrocities in Vietnam

Seoul and Hanoi can no longer ignore a fraught part of their history.

By **Dien Luong**, a visiting fellow at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore.

Vietnamese President Nguyen Xuan Phuc's three-day state visit to South Korea earlier this month began with a 21-gun salute and ended on a sunny note. Phuc and his South Korean counterpart, Yoon Suk Yeol, decided to elevate bilateral ties to "a comprehensive and strategic partnership"—the pinnacle of Vietnam's diplomatic hierarchy. Before South Korea, Vietnam had forged this level of partnership with only three countries: China, India, and Russia.

Such pomp and circumstance, however, obscures how the two countries have dealt with a fraught part of their history: South Korea's involvement in the Vietnam War, which ended in 1975. Although civilian killings by South Korean soldiers during the war are well documented, Seoul has been adamant that there is no evidence of such atrocities. Meanwhile, the Vietnamese government has never publicly pushed for an official mea culpa, much less reparations, from South Korea. A recent reminder of this reality—and how neither country has addressed this wartime baggage—came from a South Korean drama series that sparked controversy in Vietnam.

In October, Vietnamese authorities demanded that U.S. streaming giant Netflix remove *Little Women*, a K-drama about three sisters living in modern-day Seoul, from its lineup in Vietnam. Their rationale could be boiled down to several lines in episode eight of the 12-part series, which featured a war veteran bragging about South Korean troops' kills. "In our best battles, the kill-to-death ratio for Korean troops was 20:1. That's 20 Viet Cong killed for one Korean soldier dead," the character said, referring to the communist-led army and guerrilla force supported largely by North Vietnam during the war. He added that the ratio was even higher among his country's most skilled soldiers.

Vietnamese authorities claimed that the K-drama distorted the events of the war, but it appears that the series was axed because the lines, in Hanoi's perspective, callously reopened the wounds of the conflict.

Between 1964 and 1973, South Korea deployed around 320,000 troops to Vietnam to fight alongside the U.S. army in exchange for U.S. aid to resuscitate the then-ailing Korean economy. On the ground, like their U.S. counterparts, South Korean soldiers quickly established themselves as a brutal fighting force. They have since been accused of committing mass killings of Vietnamese civilians and are estimated to have slaughtered as many as 9,000 innocent Vietnamese in massacres throughout the country, according to one study by a South Korean researcher who interviewed survivors and witnesses.

Yet no South Korean president has ever acknowledged any such massacre in Vietnam. On a visit to Hanoi in 2018, then-South Korean President Moon Jae-in expressed only "regrets over an unfortunate past." Meanwhile, South Korea's Ministry of National Defense and National Intelligence Service have repeatedly stonewalled academic and activist attempts to access relevant documents, thwarting any comprehensive investigation.

In 2018, the South Korean government dismissed the ruling of a mock tribunal that found it guilty of war crimes in Vietnam. (The trial's verdict was non-binding as it was convened by a civic movement.) This past August, two Vietnamese became the first to appear before a South Korean court to testify about the atrocities committed by South Korean troops during the war. At the trial, representatives from Seoul sought to discredit the testimony, which concerned a 1968 massacre in Phong Nhi and Phong Nhat villages. They regurgitated a narrative that accuses Vietnamese soldiers, masquerading as South Koreans, of having carried out the massacres—an argument first floated by a South Korean military commander back in 1968, when the massacre was subject to scrutiny.

Vietnamese survivors have pushed for accountability, but without much success. In a 2019 petition directed to Moon, 103 Vietnamese victims called for a thorough investigation into the massacres committed by South Korean soldiers and a sincere official apology from Seoul. The survivors lamented that no South Korean official had even bothered to ask them whether they wanted an apology.

South Korea's default position on the war has been amplified by the Vietnamese government's reticence. The reasons are not hard to fathom at a time when geopolitics and trade all too often take precedence in foreign policy. Besides forging one of the closest partnerships in East Asia, South Korea has remained the largest source of foreign direct investment in Vietnam. The two countries are looking to boost bilateral trade to \$100 billion next year and to \$150 billion by 2030, up from \$80.7 billion in 2021.

South Korean multinational company Samsung is also the biggest single foreign investor in Vietnam, wielding outsized influence on the export-oriented country. Samsung has pumped some \$18 billion into six factories in Vietnam, at least two of which specialize in smartphones. The electronics giant has for years churned out about half of its smartphones in Vietnam, making up nearly one-fifth of the country's overall exports. As a corollary, Samsung's recent scaled-back production in Vietnam has taken a toll on the country's smartphone exports.

Granted, it might be a stretch to say that South Korea's investment has been able to exert great influence over the way Vietnam has dealt with the war baggage that involves both countries. But Hanoi officials have, in fact, watered down their account of the war in exchange for Seoul's largesse in the past.

In 2000, a monument was on the verge of opening in Ha My, a village in Vietnam's central province of Quang Nam where South Korean soldiers killed 135 civilians in 1968. But before the monument to that massacre could open, the *Guardian* reported, local officials told villagers that some adjustments to the design had to be made at the behest of South Korean diplomats.

The South Korean officials had pushed back on a poem at the back of the memorial stone that vividly recalled what happened during the 1968 massacre. By the 2000s, South Korea had already become a major foreign investor in Vietnam, and its officials offered to fund a local hospital if the poem was hidden from public view, according to the *Guardian* article. Vietnamese officials yielded to that request. Without the poem, it is unclear to visitors what happened to the Vietnamese adults and children whose names are engraved in a large gravestone in the monument. Heonik Kwon, a prominent Korean anthropologist who wrote [a book](#) about the Ha My massacre, cited one villager who called that concealment “killing the memory of the killing.”

To be sure, there is nothing wrong with a forward-looking Vietnam embracing ties with South Korea despite a troubling past. Vietnam has been able to successfully navigate such a relationship with the United States. But advancing bilateral ties by sugarcoating history will fly in the face of the very “comprehensive” nature of the new strategic partnership, leaving its foundation standing on shaky ground.

Indeed, as the two countries are celebrating the 30th anniversary of diplomatic ties, the time has never been riper for atonement.

For South Korea, what is long overdue is acknowledgement of its wartime atrocities, an official apology to Vietnamese victims, and reparations that include financial damages for the survivors and the erection of memorial projects at massacre sites. Granted, it has never been easy for South Korea to eat humble pie in this regard—particularly since it has viewed itself as an unacknowledged, or not properly acknowledged, victim of Japanese aggression during Japan’s colonial rule. But just as South Korea has pushed Japan to address its wartime atrocities, it should acknowledge its own victims in Vietnam.

For Vietnam—a country where many younger people have remained largely unaware of South Korea’s involvement in wartime atrocities—it is time Hanoi became more transparent about this shared history and seek justice for survivors. Absent further action from Hanoi to press Seoul harder, the façade of toughness in removing *Little Women* is likely to ring hollow to the Vietnamese public. At best, it could come across as a half-baked effort to demand official atonement from South Korea. At worst, it could be seen as a politically expedient ploy to paper over a skeleton in the closet that Hanoi cannot afford to confront head-on.

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