

# Contemporary Vietnam-Japan Relations from Regional Perspectives



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ベトナムと日本は2014年以来、戦略的パートナーとして良好な関係を築いてきた。中国の覇権主義的な動きに対抗する上でも、この良好な関係を維持・発展させることが重要だ。

## Abstract

The diplomatic relations between Vietnam and Japan was elevated to the higher level of extensive strategic partnership for peace and prosperity in Asia in 2014, reflecting the mutual political trust and deep development in the bilateral cooperation and marking Tokyo as Hanoi's first extensive strategic partner. The political trust rooted in no conflict in national interests and no political uneasiness, the cultural similarities, interest compatibility, and economic interdependence has helped to build up the bilateral relationship between Vietnam and Japan. Besides, the new challenges arising from the China's assertiveness in the East and South China Seas have brought considerable regional security concerns in general and placed Vietnam and Japan under pressure in protecting their maritime territorial sovereignty in particular. The two countries have been closely working in the field of security in bilateral level, as well as under the regional framework to counter China's hegemony in Asia Pacific region. With its geostrategic position as the hub of sea routes connecting Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific, maritime conflicts in the South China Sea attract attentions of all relating parties, especially big powers in preserving freedom of navigation and regional peace. This paper examines the internal and external factors in tightening the Vietnam-Japan relations and highlights the importance of multilateral cooperation to protect the regional peace and prosperity.

## Keywords

Vietnam-Japan relations, diplomacy, maritime conflict, East Asian security

## Introduction

Vietnam was chosen to be the first official foreign visit when Suga Yoshihide became the Japan's head of government in 2020, which was the same choice for Abe Shinzo in 2013. This visit can be seen as a continuation of Abe's foreign policy in Suga's administration and reaffirms the importance of Vietnam in Japan's South Policy and its links with ASEAN countries to ensure regional peace and security. Unlike complicated relations of neighboring countries in the region such as between Japan and China, or between Japan and Korea, the Vietnam-Japan relations has been extended to a new height with various areas. Upon welcoming Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo in his first overseas visit to

Vietnam in 2013, the then Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung declared that the Party and Government of Vietnam showed strong determination in intensifying and consolidating the cooperative relationship with Japan. Prime Minister Nguyen also added that the bilateral tie is not only the "consistent guideline and top priority of the foreign policy but also the strategic choice" of Vietnam. It can be explained that the Vietnamese people share a common consensus of opinion on the problem-free relationship with Japan while a closer move to China or the United States can bring domestic arguments such as territorial disputes with China or ideological differences with the United States. On the Japanese side, the extensive cooperation with

Vietnam is in accordance with its looking south policy, which carries out the stronger engagement with ASEAN countries. With this approach, this paper aims to analyze factors which consolidate the Vietnam- Japan relations with two sections. The first section provides an overview of the bilateral relations with the internal factors. The second one explores the regional political landscape with external factors, focusing on the strategies of China and the United States.

## **Internal factors**

### ***Cooperation for development***

Vietnam and Japan relations can be said to be in such intimate period that never ever experienced in past history. It is the common judgment of leaders, diplomats, researchers, and entrepreneurs of the two countries. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations on September 21, 1973, the two countries have constantly cultivated to build and consolidate bilateral friendship and cooperation, with an important milestone being establishing the relationship “Vietnam-Japan extensive strategic partnership for peace and prosperity in Asia” in March 2014. The milestone is significant in strengthening trust and deepening furthermore the strategic partnership between the two countries, not only in the field of economics, but also in politics, diplomacy, and national security. The partnership was lifted to the new height, thus ushering in the prospects of trustfulness in politics, and comprehensiveness, effectiveness in economics.

Japan is the country with the 3rd biggest economy in the world, and is assessed as a partner with cultural similarity, interest compatibility and economic interdependence with Vietnam. There is no political uneasiness between the two countries, which consolidated the highly mutual political trust. The two countries focus on cooperation to strengthen political trust, promote economic connection and support in international issues. Japan is a leading and long-term strategic partner and now occupies an especially important role in Vietnam’s industrialization and modernization strategies.

Economically, Japan has prioritized economic development aid for Vietnam. ODA funds are about 100 billion yen for North-South expressway projects, seaport

projects. The focus areas of development include transport infrastructure development, energy, supporting industries, human resource training, and agriculture. Infrastructure is one of the top priorities in Vietnam’s development strategy. The projects supported by Japan contribute positively to promoting socio-economic development and modernization of infrastructure in Vietnam. Currently, through JICA, Japan is actively supporting Vietnam in implementing projects to promote economic growth and enhance international competitiveness in three main areas: transportation, electricity, energy, and human resource training. Outstanding projects such as Nhat Tan Bridge, North-South expressway, Hoa Lac hi-tech park, Tan Vu cross-sea bridge have become vivid symbols of Vietnam-Japan friendship. In Ho Chi Minh City, the first urban railway project (line 1) of the subway line is under construction. JICA is currently supporting the construction of 5 important international ports with ODA since 1990. The Lach Huyen Port construction project inaugurated in 2018 is the first PPP project between Vietnam and Japan. Regarding electricity and energy, if including the generating plants in the construction process, the electricity output of power plants built from Japanese ODA will reach 4640 MW, accounting for nearly 10% of the total output of electricity produced throughout Vietnam. So far, Japan has implemented 6 projects to build thermal power plants, 6 hydroelectric power plants, including Da Nhim plant, built with war compensation money in the 1960s. In terms of human resources, Vietnam Japan University established in 2014 is a symbol of the Vietnam-Japan strategic partnership with the hope of becoming the leading prestigious research university in Asia in various fields, especially in advanced technology and interdisciplinary sciences aiming at promoting the strengths of Vietnam and Japan.

Japan has been involved in all economic fields of Vietnam not only as investors but also created a favorable investment environment to attract investors from Japan and other countries. Japan- Vietnam joint initiative to improve Vietnam’s investment environment since 2003 has resulted with significant efficiency. The economic connection is one of the key points in bilateral

cooperation, in which the two sides aim to make up for their weaknesses, promote their advantages and share difficulties for mutual development. In other word, the economies of Vietnam and Japan are connected to complete each other. Vietnam is in its industrialization process requiring for advanced science- technology, high production capacity, good development strategies and skilled human resources which are Japan's advantages. For the connection in development strategy, Japanese experts continue to help Vietnam draw up the line of industrial strategy and planning schemes for specific fields as following Vietnam's industrialization strategy within Vietnam-Japan cooperation framework to 2020, vision to 2030. The two countries have agreed on six selected industries including electronics, agricultural machinery, agricultural and fisheries product processing, shipbuilding, environment and energy saving, production of auto and auto spare parts.

Namely in the field of agriculture, the two sides agreed on signing the "vision on mid-term and long-term cooperation" to connect the two countries' economies in the hope of promoting Vietnam's potential and Japan's strengths in agriculture. While Japan can only self-supply less than 40% of food, Japanese investors are encouraged to directly invest in agricultural production in chains, and apply Japanese hi-tech and then export products to Japan. This helps to increase Vietnamese product quality and price, thus increases Vietnam's export turnover. Japan now has a tendency to transfer some production sectors to other countries including high-tech agriculture due to the fact that the Japanese's life span is getting higher and the number of farmers is, thus, gradually reducing. Moreover, Vietnam is helping to ease Japan's very serious labor shortage: around 300,000 Vietnamese people live and work in Japan. The number of Vietnamese 'technical trainees' is the largest among foreign workers and the number of Vietnamese students is the second largest after China.

### ***Regional security environment***

In terms of security, Vietnam with its geopolitical significance and its firm position in ASEAN has been put into an important place in Japan's diplomatic

strategy. As explained by Japanese Ambassador to Vietnam Kunio Umeda, the first reason for the strengthened bilateral relation is that the importance of Vietnam has been increasing for Japan. Both Japan and Vietnam share fundamental maritime principles that are important in the South China Sea, one of the most important sea-lanes for Japan. Therefore, the two sides supported and promoted measures to strengthen political trust, connect two economies, support sustainable development, promote cooperation in national defense and security, and enhance cooperation in regional and international issues.

Apart from the similarity in national interests, Vietnam and Japan share the common awareness about the current situation of the region and the world. The two countries have no conflict in interest, thus cooperation is for mutual interest and contributes to ensure security and safety of the region and the world. Therefore, the two sides have strengthened their activities in order to raise the spirit of respecting the law in maritime security, ensuring freedom of navigation and overflight. With the goal of building a peaceful, stable, cooperative and developing Asia-Pacific region, the two countries work closely on regional and international security forums to resolve disputes through peaceful means in line with international law.

In the year of 2020, when the world is facing with the pandemic of Covid19, Vietnam was seen as a symbol of success in curbing the virus spread and chosen as the first destination to visit for the new Japanese Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide. The visit to Vietnam in the context of the global pandemic has shown the position of Vietnam and ASEAN in the Japan's foreign affairs strategies after the Abe Shinzo's administration. In his speech, the new Prime Minister affirmed the ASEAN Outlook with its common points with the Free and Open Indo-Pacific, which showed Japan's strong support and commitment to work in hand with ASEAN countries to build up "a peaceful and prosperous future".

### ***Enhancing national position***

The effective cooperation with Vietnam affirms Japan's southern policy in the context that Japan does

not have a peaceful neighborly relationship with China, North Korea and South Korea. Vietnam and Singapore are countries publicly supporting Japan as a permanent member of the United Nations. Geographically, Vietnam, with its geopolitical advantage, is the gateway to the Asian continent and serves as the bridgehead on the mainland of the sea and air trade route across the Pacific. Building strategic relations with Vietnam ensures the enhancement of Japan's political role in the region. As Japanese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Yutaka Yokoi said on the visit to Vietnam by Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, "For Japanese people, Vietnam is always a good choice." Strategic cooperation with four ASEAN countries, including Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines, which attaches special importance to relations with Japan. In ASEAN, Vietnam as the 2nd populated country after Indonesia with its growing market is an attractive destination for Japanese investors. Moreover, Vietnam is actively deploying economic reforms which have gained big achievements and gradually affirms its important positions in the region. Cementing cooperation with Hanoi is a part of Tokyo's looking south policy with the aim of gaining trust and confidence from Southeast Asian countries.

In the view of the Japanese people, North Korea is one of the biggest threats to national security. The conflict between Japan and North Korea relating to the abduction of Japanese citizens from 1977 to 1983 has not been solved yet due to the North Korean closure. Recently, Vietnam has shown its ability in settling international disputes with successfully hosting the 2nd meeting between US President Donald Trump with North Korean Chairman Kim Jong Un in Hanoi. With the traditional relationship with North Korea as communist countries, Vietnam can be considered to be an unofficial middleman between Japan and North Korea. Some reports declared about the secret meeting between Japanese and North Korean representatives in Hanoi.

On the Vietnamese side, Japan is an important partner, apart from the socialist bloc that helped Vietnam integrate. In 1973, despite the objections of the United States before the end of the Vietnam War, Japan had secretly negotiated bilaterally to establish diplomatic

relations with Vietnam since 1973 by with an analysis that a united Vietnam will contribute to stability and development of Southeast Asia. Bilateral relations experienced ups and downs, especially relating to the Cambodia issue. However, when the issue was settled, Japan started taking initiatives to make economic recovery of Indochinese countries. As early as 1992 when the United States still surrounded Vietnam's embargo, Japan took the first bold step out of the shadow of the cold war by resuming ODA development assistance to Vietnam, and establishing a friendly relationship with Vietnam. The promotion of relations with Japan in the following years helped Hanoi break the difficult situation caused by the USA's embargo. Japan is the first G7 Group, which supports Vietnam to join the World Trade Organization by recognizing the market economy status. Being an official full member of the WTO in 2007 remarked Vietnam's integration period into the global economy.

## **External factors**

### ***Rising threats from China's rise***

Since Xi Jinping came to power in November 2012, China has been pursuing two foreign policy principles which are the "path of peaceful development" and "protection of core interests." The former is manifested with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the latter shows the ambition of not hesitating to engage in conflicts with a slogan of "major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics." Global observers see it as China's aspiration to re-organize the international order. As the second-largest economy, China has muscled up its military as a great power and called for a "new security outlook" and the construction of a "new type of international relations" and the "community of a shared future for mankind." The conception of China's core interest has expanded from domestic issues to sovereign territorial constraints in the East China sea (Senkaku Islands) and South China sea (Spratly and Parcel Islands). China has translated economic strength into military power by its rapidly growing defense budget. China as of 2015 outspent Japan in defense two and a half times over and with its annual 9% of increase China now is ranking as

the 2nd highest military spending nation after the US. Beijing's willingness to use its emerging maritime power to put pressure on Tokyo over conflicting territorial claims in the East China Sea has been manifested as of the primary maritime challenge to Japan's security. Additionally, China's territorial claim enforcement in the South China Sea has strengthened Japan's conviction about the coercive inclination and the challenge to change the current regional order.

As a maritime state, Japan has voiced its concern about Chinese growing assertiveness in the South China Sea, especially in relation to its own tensions about the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. There is a general perception of the Japanese government that China is trying to change the current maritime regional order by force with salami slicing tactic strategy with increasing its presence in both the South and the East China Sea, and carrying out militarization of islands in these regions. China attempts to change the status quo by force but not by international law or norms supported by other countries, which raises great concern to Japan. In September 2010, the incident of a Chinese fishing boat crashed into a Japan Coast Guard vessel near Senkaku became thorny in two countries diplomatic relations. Two years later, the situation even became more severe when Japan declared to nationalize the Senkaku Islands. The decision of the Japanese government led to large-scale protests against Japan, which fueled the burning nationalism in China. Thousands of Chinese took to the streets to protest, lighted flags, destroyed cars imported from Japan, and chanted the slogan "turning Japan into a province of China". In 2013 alone, more than 200 anti-Japanese films were produced by China. China declared that the maritime identification zone in the East China Sea covering the archipelago, the disputed entity with other countries including Japan. Beijing escalated to challenge Tokyo by sending its Coast Guard vessels into Japan's waters around the Senkaku Islands, which urged Tokyo to respond with measures to protect its territorial sovereignty. The recognition about China's aggressive reactions recently becomes firmly with incidents in the South China Sea. The Japanese government has seen the linkage between these two conflicting areas

in China's strategic thinking. In the 2017 white defense book, the Japanese Ministry of Defense expressed "strong concerns over China's activities in the East and South China Seas, where China "continues to display what may be described as heavy-handed attitude, including its attempts to alter the status quo by force." Explaining for the rapid progress in Vietnam – Japan relations, H.E. Mr. Kunio Umeda, Japanese Ambassador to Vietnam has pointed out that the first reason is the increasing importance of Vietnam to Japan while the two countries share fundamental maritime principles in the South China Sea. While the conflicts in the East China Sea are directly associated with Japanese territorial rights, those in the South China Sea in Tokyo's view are relating to trade, and regional stability. Clearly, as a trading nation with heavy dependence on imports for the supply of foods and resources, Japan needs to protect maritime security. The US Energy Information Administration in its 2015 report showed that Japan conducted 81% of its crude oil imports, 75% of its total supply through the South China Sea. Moreover, Japanese leaders can see that if China can persuade other claimants in the South China Sea about the so-called claimed historical rights, and made it as international legal norms, they could do the same in the East China Sea relating to the Senkaku Islands. In sum, to protect its own interests as well as to protect the regional security environment, Japan cannot be seen as an outsider ignoring Chinese displays of expanding maritime ambitions.

As a neighbor with China, Vietnamese leaders see threats from the North as main challenges, allies in the safeguarding of the nation. While the border issues between the two communist comrades have been settled through arduous negotiations, thorny concerns now focus on maritime conflicts. China's ambition in the South China Sea has been increased since 2007 with the establishment of the prefecture-level city of Sansha to administer the Spratly, the Parcel and Macclesfield Bank. In May 2009, the China government officially presented a nine-dash-line map to the United Nations as a basis of its maritime claim. The so-called nine-dash-line map covering most of water which is shared between many other ASEAN countries. In 2011, The Chinese

ships cut seismic cable of Vietnam's survey vessel Binh Minh 02 and Viking 2 within Vietnam's exclusive economic zone. One year later, China opened international bids for 9 blocks within Vietnam's EEZ and allowed Hainan police to board and search ships in disputed waters in the South China Sea. The two-country relations went badly in 2014 when China anchored its Haiyang Shiyu 981 in Vietnamese EEZ and deployed over 80 vessels including naval warships to protect the rig. Recently, China has continuously constructed artificial islands in Spratlys, which changed the status quo. In October 2019, when Vietnam extended the operation of the Japanese-owned semi-submersible Hakuryu-5 oil drilling rig on Vanguard Bank, China sent Haiyang Dizhi 8 survey ship accompanied by at least two China Coast Guard vessels to the southern area of the South China Sea that violated Vietnam's exclusive economic zone and continental shelf (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019). It is likely to say that China will continue to send its ships and oil rigs to the South China Sea to prevent Vietnam and other countries from conducting legal operations inside its own economic exclusive zone.

#### ***Asia's pivot strategy of the United States of America***

From the viewpoint of American government, their interests in the South China Sea are at risk due to China's economic and military rise. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared in 2011 that "the future of politics will be decided in Asia" and reiterated the US's national interests in protecting the freedom of navigation. It can be interpreted that if there is any maritime conflict leading to blockage or interference in this region, the US government will intervene to protect its own interests. With the geostrategic position as the throat of the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea is the hub of sea routes for world trade accounting for USD 1.2 trillion annually. This area called as "the second Persian Gulf" is estimated to provide oil reserves of seven billion barrels, and about nine hundred trillion cubic feet of natural gas. Aiming at containing China's growing power, the American government has made efforts to build stronger bilateral security and defense with Vietnam through annual bilateral non-combat

naval exercises in 2010, and signed a Memorandum of Understanding on advancing bilateral defense cooperation in 2011. As a traditional alliance of the USA in the Asia Pacific, Japan's approach to close cooperation with Vietnam is in accordance and complement the USA's Asia rebalancing. Japan aims to protect and strengthen the US-led liberal order in East Asia. Vietnam was chosen as Abe Shinzo's first destination in his first overseas trip during the second term as Japanese Prime Minister. In this visit, Japanese Prime Minister pledged to follow 5 principles to protect free and open seas as public goods, governed by the rule of law and not by use of force as well as supporting the U.S rebalancing toward the Asia Pacific. In line with the alliance with the U.S., Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force vessels were sent to the South China Sea for joint operations with the United States Navy for the first time in 2015 to emphasize its interest in freedom of navigation to face with China's militarization of disputed features.

The United States has been actively tightening the defense-security cooperation with a variety of measures. Especially after the declaration of Hilary Clinton at ARF 2010, two former foes have been speeding up their security cooperation with initiates on maritime and organizing high-level defense dialogues as mentioned in the 2011 Memorandum of Understanding on U.S.-Vietnam Bilateral Defense Cooperation. The focus of cooperation includes maritime security, search and rescue program, peace-keeping, humanity and disaster relief. Vietnam is opening a part of Cam Ranh port to let it be an international civil and commercial port. Cam Ranh welcomed the U.S Minister of Defense in 2012 and other visits of US Navy's warships in recent years. Explaining for the growing defense ties, Dr. Tran Viet Thai shared in an interview that the mutual political trust and the importance of Vietnam as an important partner in the US's Asia Pivot consolidated bilateral defense cooperation. The Obama administration in 2016 declared to remove the ban on lethal arms sales to Vietnam, which represented for the full normalization between the two former allies and give Vietnam another option for satisfying its defense needs. In 2018, USS Carl Vinson anchored Da Nang port as the U.S biggest

military appearance in Vietnam since 1975. This visit sent a clear message that the South China Sea is an open space in which all parties with interests need to respect maritime freedom to maintain regional security and peace. On the other hand, the Asia pivot strategy is one way to counter the China's rise and its hegemony in the regional maritime disputes. Observing the Chinese assertiveness in the Haiyang Shiyou 981 incident, Defense Secretary Ashton Carter in his 2015 visit, expressed the confirmation for funding Vietnam Coast Guard to enhance its maritime enforcement capabilities. Following that, six patrol boats with total worth of USD 12 million was delivered to Vietnam Coast Guard in April 2019. The two Hamilton-class cutters, the largest classes of vessel in U.S Coast Guard have been transferred to Vietnam with the hope "to enable Vietnam to assert its sovereignty and deter China."

Free and Open Indo-Pacific is a remarkable strategy initiated by Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo to engage the US, India, Australia, ASEAN, Europe and Middle East countries to improve the connectivity of Africa and Asia with ASEAN as "the hinge of two oceans." Aims at promoting the freedom of navigation for economic prosperity and protecting peace and stability, this initiative focuses on the engagement of the US. It was ratified by the Trump Administration and used as a regional strategy with the stronger cooperation of U.S, Japan, Australia and India (or Quad). The initiative is a counter to their Belt and Road Initiative by calling for open logistics and infrastructure and oppose to Chinese hegemony with an emphasis on freedom of navigation. In terms of security, attending ASEAN-U.S. Ministerial Meeting in Singapore in August 2018, Secretary of States Mike Pompeo informed a \$300 million security funding to express the US's commitment in the Indo-Pacific region. He repeated his concerns about China's growing militarization in the South China Sea and reaffirmed the importance of maintaining the rule of law.

## Conclusion

Through the examination of the internal and external factors that play crucial roles in tightening the

Vietnam-Japan relations, it can be concluded that the convergence of national interests between Vietnam and Japan is the main motivation for the bilateral relations enhancement in all fields. Vietnam sees Japan as a trustful partner proving source of funds, technology for its industrialization and economic innovation. In turns, Japan looks at Vietnam as a promising market with its competitive advantage of cheap labor costs and the population of 97 million. On one hand it is the political trust rooted in no conflict in national interests and no political uneasiness, the cultural similarities, interest compatibility, economic interdependence which have built up the bilateral relationship between Vietnam and Japan. On the other hand, sharing a convergence of interests in countering the China's rising threat to territorial sovereignty is another reason for the cooperation of Vietnam and Japan especially in terms of defense and security. Vietnam places an important position in ASEAN countries thanks to its geopolitical significance and also experiences in the long history in fighting against Chinese hegemony. However, it would be a tough choice for both Vietnam and Japan in the competition with China as their big trade partner. In the context of the current US- China tensions, both countries cannot make the economic relation curve but need to stabilize their connection with China but not compromise with the maritime sovereignty.

Additionally, it is complicated for Japan to consider to pursuit different ways to protect its sovereignty based on alliance with the USA or self-reliance. From the China side, it can be seen that its government also needs to calculate about the economic benefits and its territorial assertiveness which can make Vietnam and Japan become closer to the United States, a scenario that China never wants to face. The American engagement in settling the disputes in the Asia Pacific region is still under question and depends on each administration in the competition with China. Japan and Vietnam are suggested to promote both traditional and non-traditional security cooperation to adapt with constant changes, volatility, and unpredictable events. The traditional security cooperation helps the two countries protect their national interests which are directly related to

territorial sovereignty facing with unfriendly hegemony from the giant neighbor – China. While the world is facing with new threats, non-traditional security cooperation contributes to protect human beings, living environment, as well as economy and culture. Generally, due to shifts in Asian strategic order, each country with its own national interests is adapting its strategies flexibly to avoid being disoriented in the chess board of big countries. It is of utmost importance for Vietnam and Japan to accelerate their diversified cooperation for the mutual benefits and more broadly for the regional peace and stability.

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