

Maritime cooperation in the South China Sea:¹

A case study of Japan and Vietnam

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Abstract

This paper examines the marine cooperation between Vietnam and Japan, with a specific emphasis on three key issues: (i) the basis for the two countries' maritime cooperation; (ii) previous cooperation Vietnam and Japan have pursued in the maritime domain; and (iii) suggestions for the two countries to further leverage their maritime cooperation. The present study argues that, although marine security cooperation continues to be of utmost importance, an unexplored opportunity exists for enhancing maritime cooperation on other fronts. By examining the historical and geopolitical settings, this paper demonstrates how Vietnam and Japan have successfully developed significant maritime synergy. Nevertheless, it is essential to note that the focus of these efforts has primarily been on the enhancement of maritime security, while advancements in other prospective domains have been very modest. The paper highlights notable possibilities for Vietnam and Japan to enhance and broaden their collaboration, specifically on non-security marine cooperation. This entails maximizing the use of collective resources, improving the quality of trade connections, and investigating potential cooperation in marine sciences for research and development purposes. This paper suggests how both countries might effectively utilize this potential to strengthen their bilateral relations and positively contribute to regional peace and development.

Keywords: Vietnam-Japan, maritime cooperation

¹ The South China Sea is called the “East Sea” in Vietnam. For the sake of convenience (to distinguish it from the East China Sea), the author will use the term “South China Sea” throughout this paper.

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Introduction

In 2023, Vietnam and Japan celebrate the 50th anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations on September 21, 1973, the friendship and cooperation between the two countries have continuously developed in many fields. The two countries have repeatedly upgraded their bilateral relations to meet the need for stronger mutual cooperation in adapting to the region's geopolitical dynamics. Bilateral relations between the two countries are currently flourishing in many fields, including maritime cooperation. Both Vietnam and Japan are coastal countries with interests in the South China Sea. With the situation in the South China Sea becoming more and more complicated with changes in the balance of power among superpowers in the region, China's increasingly assertive policy in the disputes in the South China Sea and the absence of effective multilateral frameworks for resolving disputes in the region push Vietnam and Japan to strengthen their maritime cooperation.

1. Basis for maritime cooperation between Vietnam and Japan

Considered “the Century of the Ocean”, the 21st century is characterized by the maritime interests of nations and the development of marine policies and strategies. Many nations have implemented marine strategies to protect their sovereignty, manage resources, and ensure territorial security. International relations are currently dominated by a trend of international cooperation, which no country can avoid in the context of intense globalization and international integration. Specifically, coastal nations are increasingly interested in international maritime cooperation. The maritime cooperation between Vietnam and Japan is not unusual and is based on strong foundations.

1.1. Legal basis

Part IX on "Enclosed or Semi-Enclosed Seas" of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) outlines the obligations of states that border semi-enclosed seas such as the East China Sea and South China Sea. Article 123 states that "States bordering an enclosed or semi-enclosed sea should cooperate with each other in the exercise of their rights

and performance of their duties under this Convention."³ These responsibilities include coordinating “the management, conservation, exploration, and exploitation of living resources” in the marine environment,⁴ as well as clarifying the relevant parties' rights and responsibilities for protecting and preserving the marine environment. States should also seek support and cooperation from "other interested states or international organizations" in carrying out these responsibilities.⁵

The "duty to cooperate" of all state signatories to the UNCLOS is also stated multiple times throughout the Convention. For example, Articles 63 and 64 stipulate cooperation between coastal states and other fishing states for the conservation and "optimal utilization" of fish stocks found within the exclusive economic zones of coastal states and adjacent areas.⁶ Additionally, Articles 192, 194, 197, 198, 199, and 200 require all state parties to work together to prevent marine pollution and protect the marine environment.⁷

Importantly, in the context of the South China Sea and the East China Sea, states are obligated to cooperate in disputed areas, specifically where their EEZs and continental shelves overlap. The obligations are outlined in the following language in paragraphs 3 of Articles 74 and 83: "Pending agreement on the delimitation of the exclusive economic zone/continental shelf between states with opposite or adjacent coasts, the states concerned, in a spirit of understanding and cooperation, shall make every effort to enter into provisional arrangements of a practical nature and, during this transitional period, not to jeopardize or hamper the reaching of the final agreement. Such arrangements shall be without prejudice to the final delimitation."⁸

Paragraph 3 of Articles 74 and 83 commonly outlines two obligations of state parties that are widely acknowledged. The first obligation is to exercise restraint, while the second obligation is to negotiate sincerely in order to reach "provisional arrangements of a practical

³ United Nations (1982). *The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*. Pp. 67.

https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf

⁴ United Nations (1982). *The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*. Pp. 67.

https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf

⁵ United Nations (1982). *The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*. Pp. 67.

https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf

⁶ United Nations (1982). *The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*. Pp. 47-48.

https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf

⁷ United Nations (1982). *The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*. Pp. 100, 102.

https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf

⁸ United Nations (1982). *The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*. Pp. 52, 56.

https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf

nature."⁹ Initiating negotiations in a trustworthy manner and with the aim of achieving tangible results is also an indication of cooperation at the beginning of these responsibilities.

The Convention barely provides any information regarding the contents and procedures of maritime cooperation initiatives. In fact, paragraph 3 of Articles 74 and 83 does not specify the type of "provisional arrangements of a practical nature" that the involved states should consider. This allows for ample capacity for experimentation, as demonstrated by existing maritime cooperation practices.

Participating regional countries have undertaken a variety of cooperation initiatives, including security and defense, maritime scientific research, marine environmental surveys and conservation, resource exploitation and development, and search and rescue operations.

Vietnam and Japan, as parties to UNCLOS 1982, have demonstrated their dedication to adhering to the fundamental principles and provisions of UNCLOS. In accordance with the stipulations set forth in UNCLOS 1982, Vietnam enacted the Law of the Sea of Vietnam in 2012.¹⁰ As one of the initial signatories to UNCLOS 1982, Vietnam has consistently demonstrated its commitment to adhering to the Convention's obligations. Over time, Vietnam has continuously improved its domestic legal frameworks and policies concerning the delineation of maritime boundaries with neighboring nations, as well as the utilization of marine resources and collaboration with other countries in relevant maritime domains. These efforts align with the principles outlined in UNCLOS, emphasizing the preservation and sustainable utilization of marine resources to support long-term development objectives. For its part, Japan has made significant contributions to the establishment and maintenance of a rules-based maritime order through its active participation in norm-making processes such as embracing the formal proclamation of the Three Principles of the Rule of Law at Sea in 2014, which affirms that states need to ground their claims on international law, refrain from resorting to force or coercion in the pursuit of their claims, and instead strive for the resolution of disputes by peaceful methods.¹¹ The pledges made by both nations to UNCLOS 1982 form the legal basis for their collaborative endeavors in the marine sphere.

⁹ United Nations (1982). *The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*. Pp. 52, 56.

https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf

¹⁰ Bộ Ngoại giao Việt Nam (2019). "Việt Nam tích cực đóng góp trong xây dựng, thực thi Công ước Luật Biển". Báo Điện tử Chính phủ. <https://baohinhphu.vn/viet-nam-tich-cuc-dong-gop-trong-xay-dung-thuc-thi-cong-uoc-luat-bien-102259303.htm>

¹¹ Ishii, Yurika (2022). "Cooperation, challenges and charms: The UNCLOS for Japan". *FULCRUM*. <https://fulcrum.sg/cooperation-challenges-and-charms-the-unclos-for-japan/>

1.2. Practical basis

The current state of affairs has a significant effect on the demand for cooperation between Vietnam and Japan in general and maritime cooperation between the two countries in particular.

1.2.1. Current states of the world and the Asia-Pacific region

As the twenty-first century commenced, the United States retained its position as the foremost global superpower; however, its power has become increasingly fragmented. The United States has been compelled to allocate additional resources towards countering the actions of Russia and China due to the latter's pursuit of the "Chinese dream" and the former's initiation of a military offensive against Ukraine. The aggregate capabilities of the United States have consequently experienced a relative decline in comparison to other nations, posing a challenge to America's position of global leadership. The contemporary international system has witnessed significant shifts in relative power and influence due to the emergence of China and India, as well as the relative decline of Russia and the stagnation of the European Union. The existing global order exhibits a fluctuation between a "bipolar" and "multipolar" configuration, with a tendency towards the latter. As a result of this trend, nations, particularly those that are medium-sized and larger, can acquire a reasonably ample "strategic space" to establish themselves as an autonomous "pole," despite their overall capabilities remaining far inferior to those of the United States and China. They actively promote strategic autonomy to advance an international multipolar world order based on established laws, aiming to maximize their own national interests. The enhancement of multilateral and bilateral cooperation is facilitated by both formal and informal channels.

The Asia-Pacific region is experiencing significant and ongoing development, resulting in a growing significance in geo-economic, political, and strategic terms. Prominent nations develop their competitive strategies within the region, resulting in intense friction and conflicts between the United States and its allies on one side, and China on the other. The nascent global power aspires to augment its sphere of influence and attain regional leadership. The strategic tension between the United States and China is evident in the respective initiatives and strategies pursued by both nations, exemplified by the United States' Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Despite the continued dominance of the United States in the region, the ascent of China poses a formidable challenge

to American leadership and influence. The regional order is progressively approaching a state characterized as “bipolars, multipowers”.¹² The intensification of competition between the United States and China has resulted in increased instability of the regional architecture relative to other regions. The region also encompasses several areas of potential geopolitical tension, including Taiwan (China), the South China Sea, and the Korean Peninsula, among others. Nevertheless, the region currently lacks a comprehensive mechanism that possesses the capability to effectively manage and address conflicts. Conflicts can be addressed solely through the employment of dialogue-based mechanisms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+), and the Shangri-La Dialogue.

In light of the prevailing circumstances, nations within the region are actively enhancing collaboration and affiliation with one another in order to advance their strategic independence and optimize their respective national interests within the volatile and intricate regional landscape. Vietnam and Japan are not exempt from this phenomenon.

1.2.2. Importance of the South China Sea to Vietnam

As one among the claimants in the South China Sea, Vietnam has vital interests in the South China Sea.

The South China Sea holds significant economic, sociopolitical, defense and overall security importance for Vietnam. The South China Sea serves as a crucial conduit for facilitating Vietnam's connectivity with both the regional and global spheres. Vietnam possesses a coastline spanning approximately 3,260 km in a north-to-south direction.¹³ This extensive coastal expanse has facilitated the establishment of a highly interconnected sea traffic network within the country's continental shelf. Consequently, seaports have been effectively linked with coastal areas and inland regions, thereby fostering the facilitation of trade and commerce between various regions within Vietnam. This network has significantly contributed to the expeditious and convenient transportation of commercial goods throughout the nation.

Furthermore, the South China Sea possesses a significant abundance of diverse and economically valuable natural resources, particularly marine plants and minerals. In the

¹² The concept of "bipolars, multipowers" refers to the prevailing notion that the United States and China persist as the primary poles in the region, while other nations within the region also hold significant influence.

¹³ TS. Nguyễn Anh Dũng (2007). “Việt Nam sẽ trở thành quốc gia mạnh về biển, làm giàu từ biển”. *Nhân dân*. <https://nhandan.vn/viet-nam-se-tro-thanh-quoc-gia-manh-ve-bien-lam-giau-tu-bien-post439272.html>

waters of Vietnam, numerous sedimentary basins containing oil and gas have been identified, exhibiting anticipated reserves of approximately 10 billion tons of oil equivalent. Among these reserves, the exploitable portion amounts to roughly two billion tons, with the volume of natural gas, which possesses significant potential, estimated to be approximately 1,000 billion cubic meters.¹⁴ Vietnam has presently identified numerous oil and gas fields possessing substantial reserves, with approximately ten fields already operational. These fields collectively yield millions of tons of oil and billions of cubic meters of gas on an annual basis. This significant output has played a constructive role in the country's development, facilitating economic growth and serving the people of Vietnam.

The marine resources found in Vietnam's sea area are characterized by their abundance, diversity, and economic value, particularly in relation to seafood commodities such as shrimp, crab, squid, sea cucumber, and seaweed. Marine ichthyologists have documented the discovery of over 2,000 species of fish, with more than 100 of these species being of significant economic importance. Based on data provided by the Vietnamese Ministry of Fisheries in 2003, it was reported that Vietnam's aquatic resources encompassed a seafood reserve estimated to be within the range of 3-4 million tons. This reserve facilitated an annual exploitation capacity of approximately 1.6 to 1.7 million tons. Moreover, the waters of Vietnam boast a diverse array of marine life, including approximately 2,500 species of mollusks, 1,647 species of crustaceans, 700 species of sea worms, and 300 species of corals, among others. Notably, these waters are home to numerous rare and unique animal species.¹⁵

Vietnam's geography, characterized by an elongated shape stretching from north to south with a narrow width (ranging from approximately 50 km to 600 km), imposes limitations on its defense capabilities in the context of the South China Sea. Hence, the South China Sea assumes a pivotal role in the nation's defense and security strategy, serving as a significant maritime barrier to safeguard against potential incursions by external forces. In addition, Vietnam is compelled to allocate additional resources due to the presence of non-traditional maritime security challenges, including piracy, illegal fishing, smuggling, natural disasters, and climate change.¹⁶ Hence, the imperative for Vietnam to seek cooperation in the South China Sea is of considerable magnitude.

¹⁴ ThS. Nguyễn Thị Thơm (2015). “Tiềm năng kinh tế biển Việt Nam”. Cổng thông tin tỉnh Cà Mau.

¹⁵ PGS. TS. Nguyễn Thị Quê (2017). “Vai trò của biển Đông đối với các nước có tuyên bố chủ quyền, khu vực và thế giới hiện nay”. *Cảnh sát biển Việt Nam*. <https://canhsatbien.vn/portal/nghien-cuu-trao-doi/vai-tro-cua-bien-dong-doi-voi-cac-nuoc-co-tuyen-bo-chu-quyen-khu-vuc-va-the-gioi-hien-nay>

¹⁶ Anh Duc Ton (2018). “Vietnam’s maritime security challenges and regional defense and security cooperation”. *Sea Power Centre*. March

1.2.3. Importance of the South China Sea to Japan

Even though Japan has no direct involvement in any conflicts nor any territorial claims in the South China Sea, Japan does have significant interests here and is “an important stakeholder” in the South China Sea.¹⁷

Japan is a nation comprised of more than 6,800 islets in Northeast Asia,¹⁸ adjacent to the East China Sea and in proximity to the South China Sea. Japan is geographically situated within the Asia-Pacific region, thereby establishing a significant stake in various dimensions of this area. These dimensions encompass economic activity, trade, prosperity, political stability, security concerns, and adherence to the global order founded upon international legal frameworks. The South China Sea holds great importance as a crucial shipping route for Japan. The South China Sea serves as a crucial conduit for Japan, facilitating the transportation of over 80% of its oil supply and approximately 70% of its trade.¹⁹ The presence of any issues within the South China Sea region would hinder the established shipping route in this area, necessitating a diversion of Japanese vessels around the Indonesian archipelago and through the Pacific Ocean. Opting for such an alternative pathway would incur higher expenses and require a greater investment of time.²⁰ Based on a study conducted by a team of Japanese experts, in the event of a conflict arising in the South China Sea leading to disruptions in shipping routes, Japan would incur an augmented expenditure of 50% in transportation costs as it seeks to navigate alternative maritime pathways.

The imperative for stability in Japan arises from the potential ramifications of any instability in the South China Sea, which could have adverse effects on Japan's stability and

2018, https://www.navy.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/CMDR_Anh_Duc_Ton_Vietnams_Maritime_Security_Challenges_0.pdf

¹⁷ Sato, Yoichiro (2016). “Japan and the South China Sea Dispute: A Stakeholder’s Perspective”. In Ian Storey and Lin Cheng-yi, eds, *The South China Sea Dispute: Navigating Diplomatic and Strategic Tensions*, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore, pp. 272-290.

¹⁸ Ishii, Yurika (2022). “Cooperation, challenges and charms: The UNCLOS for Japan”. *FULCRUM*. <https://fulcrum.sg/cooperation-challenges-and-charms-the-unclos-for-japan/>

¹⁹ Celine Pajon (2013). “Japan and the South China Sea: Forging strategic partnerships in a divided region”. *Asie*. Visions 60, p. 7.

²⁰ TS. Nguyen Thanh Minh (2022). “Lợi ích chiến lược của một số nước lớn ở biển Đông”. Tạp chí Diễn đàn Doanh nghiệp. <https://diendandoanhnghiep.vn/loi-ich-chien-luoc-cua-mot-so-nuoc-lon-o-bien-dong-233606.html>

Dr. Nguyen Thanh Minh (2022). “Strategic interests of some major countries in the South China Sea”. *Business Forum Magazine*. <https://diendandoanhnghiep.vn/loi-ich-chien-luoc-cua-mot-so-nuoc-lon-o-bien-dong-233606.html>

economic progress. It is probable that numerous nations would become entangled in any conflict arising in the South China Sea, thereby causing destabilization throughout the region. This would impede maritime traffic, while also exerting an impact on the security environment and impeding the economic development of Japan.

Moreover, the actions exhibited by China in both the South China Sea and the East China Sea demonstrate numerous parallels. Japan identifies the links between events occurring in the East and South China Seas. China's "historical claims" in both disputes, its efforts to isolate and target individual claimants in the South China Sea, its military buildup in the region, and its utilization of "gray zone" operations are all perceived as components of a comprehensive strategy employed by China that aims to undermine the territorial claims and influence of other states in the area while establishing its dominance in reality.²¹ Japan is confronted with similar gray zone tactics and China's increasing assertiveness in the East China Sea, particularly about the ongoing territorial dispute between the two nations concerning the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

Hence, to safeguard its interests, Japan is willing to contribute to the ongoing disputes in the South China Sea as a broader regional security concern for all countries in the region. Japanese leaders have consistently emphasized their commitment to establishing a peaceful order and containing the escalation of conflicts within the region.

Japan's South China Sea policy encompasses four primary tenets, as evidenced by the pronouncements of Japanese leaders and official policy documents:

- (i) Japan maintains a neutral stance in relation to the territorial and maritime disputes in the South China Sea,
- (ii) Japan promotes the peaceful resolution of disputes, emphasizing the adherence to international laws and the maintenance of a rules-based global order,
- (iii) Japan is committed to safeguarding a free and open Indo-Pacific region, which encompasses the South China Sea, and ensuring that the freedom of navigation, overflight, and sea commerce remain unimpeded, thereby fostering Japan's economic well-being, and
- (iv) Japan provides assistance in enhancing the capabilities of nations involved in territorial disputes within the South China Sea.

Concurrently, the circumstances pertaining to the South China Sea are progressively evolving into a more intricate state. China asserts sovereignty over a significant portion of the

²¹ S. Takahashi (2018). "Development of gray-zone deterrence: concept building and lessons from Japan's experience". *Pacific Review* 31 (6), pp. 787-810.

maritime territory in the South China Sea. China is currently experiencing notable growth in various domains, including the construction, enhancement, and reclamation of geographical structures that it is occupying illegally in the South China Sea. China has also deployed anti-ship missiles in this region. China's actions are directed at altering the existing state of affairs by the exertion of force. Furthermore, the South China Sea is confronted with various non-traditional maritime security challenges, including piracy, terrorism, and marine environmental pollution. These challenges have detrimental effects on the security and stability of the region and have thus prompted Vietnam and Japan to enhance their overall strategic partnership and maritime collaboration in order to safeguard their security, political, and economic interests and exert influence within the region. The enhancement of maritime cooperation between Vietnam and Japan expands the opportunities and resources available to both countries for the execution of diplomatic and security endeavors.

2. Maritime cooperation between Vietnam and Japan

2.1. Relations between Vietnam and Japan

First, it is noteworthy that the two countries demonstrate a very high level of mutual trust and maintain an extensive strategic partnership devoid of any major issues. The political systems of the two countries exhibit notable differences; however, these disparities have not posed any obstacles to their bilateral relations. Japan is among the nations that forged diplomatic ties with Vietnam in its nascent stages. Over the course of several generations, the collaboration and amicable bonds between Vietnam and Japan have experienced noteworthy growth and consolidation across diverse domains. This progress has been particularly pronounced since the establishment of the Extensive Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia in 2014. Throughout history, Japan has consistently remained a crucial strategic partner for Vietnam. Regular exchanges of delegations at all levels are a common occurrence.

Second, the two countries complement one another in their respective primary disciplines. Vietnam and Japan have engaged in close collaboration, providing one another with practical and invaluable assistance in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Japan is one of Vietnam's primary economic partners, playing a crucial role in various aspects of their bilateral relationship. In 2022, Japan stood as the foremost provider of Official Development Assistance (ODA) to Vietnam, contributing \$29.3 billion or approximately 30% of all foreign capital. This aid included \$1.8 billion in non-refundable assistance, as well as a substantial sum of 2.7 trillion

yen in loan capital, nearly 100 billion yen in non-refundable aid, and 180 billion yen in support for technical cooperation.²² Furthermore, Japan has ranked for years as Vietnam's second-largest collaborator in labor cooperation, its third-largest investor, a significant partner in its tourism sector and its fourth-largest trading partner. These collaborations have made a noteworthy impact on Vietnam's socioeconomic development, as well as its endeavors toward industrialization and modernization. Japan is an advanced maritime nation that possesses advanced technological capabilities for the exploration and preservation of marine resources. Hence, Vietnam stands to gain from Japan's assistance in enhancing its maritime awareness and capacity. Vietnam regards Japan as a nation of weighty stature and influence in the realms of economy, politics, military, and diplomacy. Hence, by engaging in cooperation with Japan regarding matters in the South China Sea, Vietnam can effectively mitigate the risk of unilateral actions undertaken by regional powers that contravene established principles of international laws.

In recent years, Vietnam has consistently held an important strategic position within Japan's policy as a Southeast Asian nation. Vietnam is a participating member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and it has emerged as a favorable choice for Japanese companies seeking to further diversify their supply chains. This preference is primarily driven by the country's advantages such as cost-effective inputs, affordable labor, and a politically stable environment. This observation is supported by a recent (2021) survey conducted by the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) of 700 Japanese foreign direct investment (FDI) enterprises operating in Vietnam. Additionally, it is worth noting that Vietnam's market is experiencing significant growth. Vietnam is among the nations that Japan prioritizes in terms of providing support for the development of maritime law enforcement capabilities, with the aim of enhancing the latter's capacity in this domain. Vietnam, alongside the Philippines, holds a key position within Japan's Indo-Pacific strategy in Southeast Asia. The primary objective of this strategy is to uphold peace and stability in the South China Sea, consequently fostering stability in the East China Sea.

2.2. Vietnam-Japan maritime cooperation relationship

²² Hải Minh (2022). “Việt Nam, Nhật Bản tăng cường trao đổi để cùng thúc đẩy tiến độ các dự án ODA”. Báo Điện tử Chính phủ. <https://baochinhphu.vn/viet-nam-nhat-ban-tang-cuong-trao-doi-de-cung-thuc-day-tien-do-cac-du-an-oda-102220823123807642.htm>

Hải Minh (2022). “Vietnam, Japan to promote exchanges to boost the progress of ODA projects”. The Vietnamese Government Digital Newspaper. <https://baochinhphu.vn/viet-nam-nhat-ban-tang-cuong-trao-doi-de-cung-thuc-day-tien-do-cac-du-an-oda-102220823123807642.htm>

Maritime collaboration between Vietnam and Japan has involved wide-ranging engagement across various domains, aligning with the bilateral strategic partnership established between the two nations. The establishment of maritime cooperation between Vietnam and Japan has been progressively solidified through mutual commitments made during the visits of leaders from both nations.

2.2.1. Cooperation commitments

Following the establishment of a strategic partnership between the two countries in 2006, the bilateral relations experienced a meaningful elevation. There exists a tradition of annual reciprocal visits by the leaders of the respective states in both countries. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe conducted an official visit to Vietnam in November 2006, during which Vietnam and Japan released a Joint Statement titled "Towards a Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia."

In November 2007, a momentous event took place in Japan involving the visit of Vietnamese President Nguyen Minh Triet. During this visit, the leaders of both countries signed a Joint Statement focused on the enhancement of relations between Japan and Vietnam, as well as the establishment of an agenda aimed at fostering a strategic partnership between the two nations. The agenda covered a comprehensive range of areas, spanning policy dialogue, security, defense, and international cooperation. Notably, it consisted of 44 items across various fields of collaboration.²³ In 2013, a bilateral agreement was reached between the two nations on marine research and capacity building, aimed at fostering mutual support. In March 2014, Vietnamese president Truong Tan Sang embarked on an official visit to Japan. During this specific occasion, the two nations released the Vietnam-Japan Joint Statement on the Establishment of the Extensive Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia. Notably, this statement included a clause wherein Japan committed to enhancing its assistance to strengthen Vietnam's maritime law enforcement capabilities.²⁴ In November 2021, Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh of Vietnam undertook a visit to Japan. The two nations officially agreed upon a Joint Statement titled "Towards opening a new phase of the Vietnam-Japan

²³ Hồ Việt Mạnh (2008). "Quan hệ Việt Nam – Nhật Bản thông qua một số cuộc gặp quan trọng". *Nghiên cứu Đông Bắc Á*. Số 11 (93). tr. 19-22.

²⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (2014). *Japan-Vietnam joint statement on the establishment of the Extensive Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia*. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000034408.pdf>

Extensive Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia." The Joint Statement represented the mutual consensus reached by the parties regarding significant avenues for further enhancing political relations, fostering defense-security collaboration, facilitating economic recuperation in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, promoting sustainable development, addressing the challenges posed by the pandemic and climate change, and transitioning towards renewable energy sources.

2.2.2. The practical implementation of commitments to maritime cooperation

(i) Maritime security

The initiation of cooperation in maritime security between Vietnam and Japan can be traced back to 2007, when the two countries reached an agreement to station military attachés at their respective embassies. This collaborative effort aimed to facilitate the exchange of information pertaining to defense relations. Regular meetings were held between the Vietnamese Ministry of Defense and the Japanese Defense Agency at various levels, with a specific focus on matters of coastal defense.

Japan has consistently expressed its stance on the South China Sea, emphasizing the importance of establishing shared regulations and standards regarding maritime security. Japan issued a distinct and unequivocal reaction in response to China's deployment of the oil rig HD 981 within Vietnam's exclusive economic zone and continental shelf in May 2014. During a visit to NATO headquarters, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe expressed his stance on the South China Sea issue, highlighting his country's firm opposition to any alterations brought about through the use of force or coercion. The issue at hand was one global in scope having significant implications for the Asian region. The Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives of Japan released a statement regarding the South China Sea on June 11, 2014. The committee urged all relevant parties to exercise restraint, refrain from employing force to alter the status quo and avoid unilaterally asserting sovereignty over the South China Sea.²⁵

Japan has been actively involved in enhancing its influence by providing support to the Vietnam Coast Guard. This support includes facilitating the participation of the Vietnam Coast Guard in international conferences organized by Japan. The objective of these conferences is to

²⁵ Nguyễn Vũ Tùng và Nguyễn Thùy Anh (2017). “Những điều chỉnh chính sách của Nhật Bản đối với khu vực Đông Nam Á trong nhiệm kỳ 2 của Thủ tướng Shinzo Abe”. *Nghiên cứu quốc tế*. Số 2 (109). tr.12-14.

establish a regional cooperation agreement focused on addressing the issues of piracy and armed robbery against ships in the Asian region. This collaboration between Japan and Vietnam in combating maritime security threats has been ongoing since 2006. Additionally, Japan extends its assistance to Vietnam in the areas of defense research and training. Japan has furthermore dispatched a considerable number of naval vessels to Vietnam's seaports as a demonstration of its commitment to fostering maritime security cooperation.

The inaugural visit of *Kojima*, a training vessel operated by the Japanese Coast Guard, to Da Nang, Vietnam took place in July 2013. In May 2015, the Japanese government dispatched a pair of O-3C maritime patrol aircraft to the city of Da Nang. In November 2015, a mutual agreement was established between the two countries, allowing for the docking of Japanese warships at Cam Ranh Port, located in Khanh Hoa, Vietnam. In April 2016, a pair of warships and a submarine from the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force arrived at Cam Ranh Port subsequent to a visit to Subic Bay in the Philippines. The Japanese destroyer *Sazanami* (DD-113), equipped with air defense, anti-submarine warfare, and surface combat capabilities, arrived at Cam Ranh Port on May 20, 2017, to take part in the Pacific Partnership program.²⁶ In June 2017, the two nations engaged in a collaborative exercise for the inaugural occasion with the objective of addressing illegal fishing endeavors within the South China Sea. In September 2018, the submarine *Kuroshio* of Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force arrived at Cam Ranh International Port for docking purposes. In March 2019, Japan dispatched two training vessels, namely *Setoyuki* and *Shimayuki*, along with a contingent of 390 officers and sailors, to Tien Sa Port located in Da Nang.²⁷ In October 2019, a memorandum on "defense cooperation and exchange" was signed between Vietnam and Japan, which outlined the establishment of regular vice-ministerial level talks and facilitated increased Japanese port visits to Vietnam. Subsequently, in February 2023, the Japanese patrol vessel *Settsu* made a visit to Vietnam. During the visits, the Japan Coast Guard and the Vietnam Coast Guard engaged in exchanges of knowledge related to crime prevention at sea, while also conducting practical exercises to enhance their search and rescue capabilities.

²⁶ Nguyễn Thanh Minh (2017). “Chuyển động mới của Nhật Bản tại Biển Đông và hàm ý đối với chiến lược của Trung Quốc”, Nghiên cứu biển Đông. <http://nghiencuubiendong.vn/y-kien-va-binh-luan/6618-chuyen-dong-moi-cua-nhat-ban-doi-voi-bien-dong-va-ham-y-doi-voi-chien-luoc-cua-trung-quoc>

²⁷ Đức Hoàng (2019). “Hình ảnh hai tàu khu trục Nhật Bản cập cảng Tiên Sa – Đà Nẵng”. *Báo điện tử Tổ quốc*. <https://toquoc.vn/hinh-anh-hai-tau-khu-truc-nhat-ban-cap-cang-tien-sa-da-nang-20190306113100921.htm>

Additionally, both parties have scheduled collaborative military exercises. Nevertheless, there remain several unresolved technical challenges that must be addressed prior to the implementation of these drills. These include language barriers, regulatory constraints pertaining to cryptography, and the management of electronic wave interference.

In relation to capacity-building assistance, Japan is presently providing support to Vietnam primarily in three domains.

Concerning the provision of supporting equipment and facilities for Vietnam's maritime forces, it is noteworthy that on July 31, 2014, the Japanese government decided to extend assistance to Vietnam by offering six vessels. This assistance package included two surveillance fisheries ships from the Japanese Fisheries Agency, as well as four commercial fishing boats, which were provided as a grant. In addition, Japan furnished Vietnam with lifeboats and various equipment valued at 500 million yen. Furthermore, Japan engaged in negotiations aimed at facilitating the transfer of newly constructed vessels to the Vietnamese Navy. In August 2015, Japan facilitated the transfer of six pre-owned patrol vessels valued at a total of US\$5 million to Vietnam. In September 2015, a bilateral agreement was established between the two nations that served as a basis for Tokyo to expand its naval vessel exports to Vietnam. In January 2017, Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe made a public declaration of his intention to provide further assistance to Vietnam by supplying an additional six patrol boats, with a monetary value of approximately US\$338 million.²⁸ In July 2020, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) extended a loan of 36.626 billion yen (equivalent to approximately US\$350 million) to Vietnam for the purpose of constructing six additional patrol vessels.²⁹

Furthermore, Japan possesses the capability to manufacture military products of exceptional quality. Japan boasts a substantial number of military product manufacturers, with a total of more than 1,500 companies employing approximately 70,000 individuals.³⁰ The defense science and technology research budget of Japan experienced a significant increase, with an average annual growth rate ranging from 3.58% to 4%. In April 2014, the Japanese Diet granted official approval for the removal of the prohibition on arms exports by Japanese industrial corporations. Consequently, Japan gained the ability to engage in the exportation of weaponry, as well as the transfer of military technology to its allies or partners. This includes

²⁸ Le Hong Hiep (2017). "The strategic significance of Vietnam-Japan ties". *ISEAS Perspective*. https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2017_23.pdf

²⁹ Linh Pham (2020), "Japan helps Vietnam improve maritime capacity with US\$347 million loan". *Hanoi Times*. <https://hanoitimes.vn/japan-helps-vietnam-improve-maritime-capacity-in-us347m-loan-313517.html>

³⁰ The numbers are collected from many different resources.

countries situated near sea lanes that are closely linked to and vital for the Japanese economy. This particular factor has the capacity to enhance the likelihood of collaboration within the defense industry between the two nations. During the visit of Yoshida Masakazu, Director-General, Ministry of Defense of Japan, a commitment was made to provide support to Vietnam in various areas, including joint production of dual-use products, training of research staff, production and manufacturing assistance, and technology transfer. Emphasis was placed on the shipbuilding industry, particularly for law enforcement forces operating at sea.³¹ In March 2020, an agreement was reached between Japan and Vietnam regarding the transfer of military shipbuilding technology as well as the continuation of high-level defense contacts.

During the visit of Vietnamese prime minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc to Japan on June 6, 2017, both nations reached a consensus to enhance their security cooperation. This collaboration entails the implementation of various initiatives financed by Japan, such as the development of coast patrol capabilities, the procurement of defense equipment, and the transfer of technology. The two nations entered into more than ten agreements, encompassing a total aid package of 38 billion yen (\$350 million) allocated towards enhancing Vietnam's coast guard vessels and bolstering its patrol capabilities. The upgrading of maritime security is a component of a 100-billion-yen credit line that has been established for projects related to science, technology, and water management.

Furthermore, it is imperative to provide assistance in training programs aimed at boosting awareness among the Vietnamese population and bolstering the capabilities of law enforcement personnel. Japan has implemented numerous exchange and training initiatives targeting Vietnamese defense officers. The Japanese short-term training course for Vietnam holds particular significance for the practical objectives of the Vietnamese military. This is exemplified by the arrangement of a four-month seminar on underwater medicine for Vietnamese submarine officers at a Japanese facility in 2013. The provision of support promptly addressed Vietnam's requirements for human resources in the fields of underwater medicine and submarines, specifically in relation to the country's acquisition of Kilo-class submarines in 2014.³² Japan has actively engaged in numerous collaborative maritime exercises aimed at improving the operational capabilities of Vietnam's law enforcement personnel. In February 2016, a squadron from the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force equipped with two P-

³¹ Nhân dân điện tử (2018). “Tuyên bố chung về việc làm sâu sắc hơn quan hệ Đối tác chiến lược sâu rộng giữa Việt Nam và Nhật Bản”. <http://www.nhandan.com.vn/chinhtri/item/33088302-tuyen-bo-chung-ve-viec-lam-sau-sac-hon-quan-he-doi-tac-chien-luoc-sau-rong-viet-nam-nhat-ban.html>

³² Le Hong Hiep (2017). “The strategic significance of Vietnam-Japan ties”. *ISEAS Perspective*. https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2017_23.pdf

3C patrol aircraft participated in maritime exercises alongside Vietnam. One of the operational exercises involved collaboration between Japanese P-3C aircraft and Vietnamese naval vessels in providing assistance to civilian ships encountering distress situations in maritime environments. In March 2016, a pair of Japanese destroyers made their inaugural visit to Cam Ranh Port in Vietnam. In June 2017, a collaborative exercise was carried out between the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force and Vietnam in the city of Da Nang. The exercise involved the participation of the patrol vessel *Echigo*, which has a carrying capacity of 3,100 tons and is equipped to transport Japanese helicopters. Vietnam, on the other hand, utilized patrol boats that were supplied by Japan to engage in activities aimed at addressing the issue of illicit fishing vessels in maritime environments.

The two nations have expressed their commitment to enhancing collaboration in the domain of maritime security and safety. This includes areas such as search and rescue operations and efforts to combat piracy. The proposed measures involve the sharing of information between coast guard agencies and active participation within the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP). The cooperation between Vietnam and Japan encompasses various dimensions, with both countries engaging in collaborative efforts through mechanisms and forums under the leadership of ASEAN.

The assistance and endeavors provided by Japan in enhancing Vietnam's maritime law enforcement capabilities hold great importance for the recently established Vietnam Coast Guard and Vietnam Fisheries Surveillance. This enables Vietnamese law enforcement authorities to promptly and effectively manage high-pressure situations encountered at sea.

(ii) Maritime scientific research and marine environmental conservation

Japan provides assistance to Vietnam in enhancing its capacity in the marine environment, specifically by aiding Vietnam in improving its ability to forecast and respond promptly to natural disasters, climate change, and rising sea levels. This assistance includes resources, equipment, technology, and training for the fundamental investigation of marine resources and environment and marine scientific research. In 2021, Japan made a contribution to ocean science research by providing Vietnam with a research vessel and funding the necessary renovations. This support was carried out within the cooperative non-repayable aid program known as the “Socio-economic Development Program”. The total value of this generous

donation amounted to 900 million Japanese yen.³³ Simultaneously, Japan has allocated survey equipment to examine the issue of plastic pollution in the ocean as part of the Socio-Economic Development Program. The total value of this donation came to 500 million Japanese yen.³⁴

(iii) Resource exploitation and development

The exploration and extraction of oil and gas resources hold considerable importance for Vietnam in both the economic and security dimensions. Consequently, Vietnam has proactively solicited proposals from multinational oil and gas corporations to engage in the extraction of oil and gas resources within its territory. Vietnam has effectively solicited bids from PJSC Rosneft of Russia, OVL of India, BP of the UK, and Exxon Mobil and Murphy Oil of the US, as well as engaged in joint development initiatives with several Southeast Asian nations.³⁵ Vietnam has conducted research and facilitated collaboration with Japanese counterparts in the domain of gas seal investigation, exploration, and refinement. Notable partners in this endeavor include JX Nippon, Idemitsu Kosan, MOECO, Mitsui Chemical, and JGC. The objective is to advance ongoing collaborative initiatives and enhance cooperation in the foreseeable future. JVPC, a subsidiary of JX Nippon Oil & Gas Exploration Corporation (JX NOEX), has been successfully conducting oil and gas operations since 1992. Furthermore, the company has demonstrated a commendable commitment to ensuring the utmost safety in its operations, particularly in the management of the Rang Dong-Phuong Dong field. From its inception through March 2021, the project demonstrated noteworthy productivity, yielding a substantial output of 285.85 million barrels of oil, 92.03 million cubic feet of gas, and 1349 million barrels of condensate.³⁶ This notable achievement has made a substantial and meaningful contribution to Vietnam, PetroVietnam, and the contractors involved. In July 2015, PetroVietnam, along with Japanese contractors Idemitsu Kosan and Sumitomo Corporation,

³³ Xuân Long (2021). “Nhật Bản viện trợ tàu nghiên cứu khoa học biển cho Việt Nam”. Tuổi trẻ. <https://tuoitre.vn/nhat-ban-vien-tro-tau-nghien-cuu-khoa-hoc-bien-cho-viet-nam-20210423161256832.htm>

³⁴ Xuân Long (2021). “Nhật Bản viện trợ tàu nghiên cứu khoa học biển cho Việt Nam”. Tuổi trẻ. <https://tuoitre.vn/nhat-ban-vien-tro-tau-nghien-cuu-khoa-hoc-bien-cho-viet-nam-20210423161256832.htm>

³⁵ Đất Việt (2013). “Đàn đối tác dầu khí hùng mạnh của Việt Nam trên biển Đông”. <http://baodatviet.vn/chinh-tri-xa-hoi/tin-tuc-thoi-su/dan-doi-tac-dau-khi-hung-manh-cua-vn-tren-bien-dong-2360869/>

³⁶ Việt Thắng (2021). “Petrovietnam và PVEP tăng cường hợp tác với các đối tác Nhật Bản”. *Tập đoàn dầu khí Việt Nam*. <https://www.pvn.vn/Pages/detail.aspx?NewsID=bbe5e802-3a28-4239-9f80-e40854939183>

entered into an agreement outlining the intention to sign and implement a contract for the oil and gas production division of Block 39 & 40/02 located on the continental shelf of Vietnam. In August 2019, JX NOEX put forth a proposition for collaboration with PetroVietnam in the domains of oil and gas prospecting, exploration, and production.³⁷

Regarding fishery cooperation, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in November 2015 facilitated the transfer of Japanese technology and fishing equipment for tuna fishing to fishermen in Vietnam's Binh Dinh Province. This initiative was carried out as part of a JICA-funded project titled "Survey to validate the diffusion of fishing techniques and equipment to enhance the modernization of tuna fishing in Vietnam."³⁸

Over the course of time, the maritime collaboration between Vietnam and Japan has exhibited favorable progress and yielded significant outcomes, thereby fortifying the bilateral ties between the two nations and upholding tranquility, stability, and prosperity in the South China Sea. Vietnam ranks among the countries that receive a substantial amount of support from Japan. The level of maritime security cooperation between the two nations remains steadfast and is currently undergoing progressive advancement. Nevertheless, the primary emphasis of maritime collaboration between the two nations has predominantly centered on maritime security cooperation. There remains substantial untapped potential and ample opportunity for further development in the realm of maritime cooperation across various domains.

3. Suggestions for moving forward

As previously mentioned, there exist numerous shared maritime interests between Vietnam and Japan. Hence, it is imperative to enhance maritime collaboration between the two nations, as it effectively advances the interests of both states within the region and plays a substantial role in upholding peace, stability, and the free navigation of maritime pathways in the South China Sea. In light of the escalating maritime rivalry in the Asia-Pacific region, Japan and Vietnam have bolstered and expanded their maritime collaboration in recent years, most notably since 2007. However, there remains a need for improvements in the level, scope, and

³⁷ Minh Anh (2019). "Công ty dầu khí Nhật Bản muốn mở rộng đầu tư tại Việt Nam". Báo điện tử *Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam*. <https://dangcongsan.vn/thoi-su/cong-ty-dau-khi-nhat-ban-muon-mo-rong-dau-tu-tai-viet-nam-532515.html>

³⁸ Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam (2015). "Nhật Bản giúp Việt Nam hiện đại hóa việc đánh bắt cá ngừ đại dương". <https://dangcongsan.vn/kinh-te/nhat-ban-giup-viet-nam-hien-dai-hoa-viec-danh-bat-ca-ngu-dai-duong-329113.html>

efficiency of maritime cooperation between the two nations in order to fully realize its potential within a rapidly evolving and intricate global landscape.

The following recommendations are offered:

At the nation-state level, both Vietnam and Japan should demonstrate political determination in order to establish favorable conditions for their cooperation. This can be achieved through a synchronized approach involving the active participation of various levels, sectors, and localities. It is crucial to swiftly and effectively address any disagreements that may arise during this process.

At the bilateral level, it is imperative for the two nations to maintain communication and exchange across all levels, including ministries and sectors. It is crucial to sustain and strengthen existing dialogue mechanisms. Additionally, efforts should be made to foster positive personal relationships between the leaders and peoples of both countries. Collaborative strategies and approaches should also be devised to promote maritime cooperation. This will entail developing joint plans for cooperation and advancing initiatives in various maritime domains, including but not limited to maritime security, scientific research, and surveys. Furthermore, the establishment of bilateral maritime cooperation between Japan and Vietnam can potentially serve as a foundation and impetus for collaborative efforts within multilateral platforms.

At the multilateral level, it is necessary for the two countries to effectively utilize multilateral cooperation mechanisms that encompass maritime cooperation. Both countries should actively engage in these mechanisms as members and collaborate with each other, particularly within the regional forums, under the leadership of ASEAN, and adeptly disseminate information to optimize the effectiveness and caliber of collaboration while ensuring that it does not give rise to a pretext for an exaggerated response from other nations.

In conclusion, both countries need to prioritize the enhancement of collaboration based on the following principles: (i) implementing a systematic approach to collaboration, (ii) gradually progressing from simpler to more complex projects to foster motivation and confidence in the substantial cooperation between Vietnam and Japan, and (iii) adopting a rational and timely strategy that involves close and reciprocal consultations customized to address the mutual needs and interests of both nations.

The year 2023 marks the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Vietnam and Japan. Concurrently, this milestone also represents a pivotal moment in the evolution of their bilateral relationship. Based on the historical cooperation between the two countries, it is crucial to further enhance trust, foster stronger bonds of friendship, and improve

mutual understanding between them. Vietnam and Japan are committed to maximizing the potential of cooperation, particularly maritime collaboration, which is deemed significant within the context of their comprehensive strategic partnership. This endeavor aims to fulfill the shared interests and aspirations of both nations' populations, and seeks to promote peace, stability, and prosperity in the region and globally.

Biography of author

Do Mai Lan has worked at the Institute for Strategic Studies, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, since 2009. Currently, she is a PhD student majoring in International Relations at the Diplomatic Academy. She is interested in research and teaching on the US-China competition, East Asian studies and Vietnam's relations with major countries.

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