

Navigating Asymmetric Threats: Japan's Role in Enhancing Vietnam's Maritime Capacity in the South China Sea during the Early Decades of the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

In the context of growing tensions in the South China Sea—fueled by overlapping territorial claims and intensifying strategic rivalry among major powers—maritime security cooperation between Japan and Vietnam has become a critical element of their respective foreign and defense policies. This study investigates the principal strategic drivers underpinning the Japan–Vietnam maritime security collaboration in the South China Sea during the early 21st century and evaluates its implications for the evolving regional security architecture. The analysis centers on the four primary mechanisms of cooperation: (1) high-level defense dialogues; (2) technical assistance and transfer of maritime equipment; (3) joint training programs and military exercises; and (4) collaboration in non-traditional security domains, including search and rescue, anti-piracy efforts, and disaster response operations. Of particular note is Japan's intermediary role in enhancing Vietnam's maritime security capabilities, undertaken with due consideration to Vietnam's defense policy framework, especially the "Four No's" principle. The findings indicate that the Japan–Vietnam maritime security cooperation is underpinned by a strategic alignment aimed at safeguarding freedom of navigation, countering unilateral actions, and reinforcing a rules-based regional order. Despite facing constraints such as institutional limitations, geopolitical pressure from China, and divergent strategic priorities, the partnership demonstrates resilience, sustained by a stable political foundation and mutual adherence to international law. These elements foster a conducive environment for deepening future cooperation and contribute constructively to the development of a flexible, inclusive, and rules-based regional security architecture consistent with the vision of a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific".

Key words: maritime security cooperation, Japan, Vietnam, South China Sea, early decades of the 21st century

INTRODUCTION

In the early decades of the 21st century, the South China Sea has become one of the most complex and strategically significant disputed maritime areas in the world. Overlapping territorial claims, increasing militarization, and intensifying competition among major powers have posed serious challenges to regional peace and stability [1, p.51], [2, p.13], [3, p.69-70]. Within this context, Japan and Vietnam - two littoral states with increasingly interconnected economies and shared strategic interests-have enhanced their cooperation to safeguard national interests and promote maritime security [4, p.1], 5.

Although Japan is not a claimant in the South China Sea disputes, it relies heavily on maritime routes through the region for trade and energy imports. Furthermore, Tokyo's commitment to a rules-based international order, as articulated in its vision for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), has prompted a more

proactive role in regional affairs [6, p.11], [7, p.6]. Conversely, Vietnam - a claimant state - faces mounting pressure from China, particularly in relation to the "nine-dash line" claim, the construction of artificial islands, military deployments, and the presence of maritime militias [8, p.226], [9, p.22]. In response, Vietnam has called for dispute resolution through multilateral dialogue and international legal mechanisms, while advancing a balancing strategy by deepening partnerships with like-minded countries, with Japan emerging as a prominent partner [8, p.236].

Japan and Vietnam's shared concerns in the South China Sea are shaped by their mutual adherence to international law, especially the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and their apprehensions over China's increasingly assertive actions. For Vietnam, the South China Sea represents a cornerstone of national security, economic development, and territorial integrity [8,

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p.229]. For Japan, freedom of navigation and over-flight in the region is vital to its national interests, as more than 80% of its energy imports pass through these waters. The FOIP also reflects Japan's role as a normative power-promoting capacity building, maritime domain awareness, and adherence to international law [10, p.170]. Against this backdrop, the maritime cooperation between Japan and Vietnam has expanded steadily, encompassing official development assistance (ODA), capacity building for coast guard forces, joint exercises, and defense equipment transfers.

This study investigates how Japan and Vietnam define and protect their national interests in the South China Sea, and how bilateral cooperation reflects a convergence of strategic priorities within the evolving Indo-Pacific security architecture. It focuses on the two central research questions: (1) What strategic drivers underpin the Japan-Vietnam maritime security cooperation in the early 21st century? and (2) How does this cooperation influence regional security and the international rules-based order? The first question examines the alignment of national interests, specifically shared concerns over China's assertive maritime behavior, including militarization, unilateral claims, and coercive tactics. Both countries emphasize the importance of safeguarding freedom of navigation, enhancing maritime law enforcement capabilities, and upholding international legal norms - especially the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). These factors have created a strong foundation for sustained strategic collaboration. The second question explores the broader regional implications of this partnership. Japan's support for Vietnam - particularly in capacity-building and maritime surveillance - has bolstered Vietnam's position within ASEAN and contributed to the development of an inclusive, resilient, and rules-based regional order. This cooperation also serves as a strategic response to growing great power competition in the Indo-Pacific.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic literature reflects growing scholarly attention to this partnership, largely in response to China's assertive behavior, specifically its militarization of disputed features and expansive claims^{1,3}. While Japan remains a non-claimant, its reliance on SCS trade routes renders maritime stability a vital national interest. Accordingly, Japan's FOIP strategy complements Vietnam's focus on sovereignty and multilateral dispute settlement^{6,10}. Vietnam, facing direct coercion, has prioritized modernizing its coast

guard and naval capabilities. Japan has become a key partner, providing ODA, technological expertise, and security assistance framed in non-confrontational terms^{8,9}. Japanese provisions of patrol vessels and surveillance equipment have substantially strengthened Vietnam's maritime domain awareness and law enforcement capacities.

Scholars identify the four main cooperation mechanisms: high-level strategic dialogue, technical/material support (especially patrol vessel transfers), joint exercises, and collaboration on non-traditional security issues such as disaster relief and anti-piracy operations^{7,11}. These efforts align with UNCLOS and Vietnam's "Four No's" defense policy, which aims to maintain strategic autonomy while enabling international partnerships^{12,13}. Despite these achievements, challenges persist. China's diplomatic pressure, Japan's limited defense budget, and divergent regional agendas constrain deeper cooperation¹⁴. Nonetheless, the partnership has proven resilient, underpinned by strategic trust, aligned foreign policies, and shared participation in ASEAN-centered mechanisms. These factors help embed the bilateral partnership within a broader framework of inclusive regional governance.

In summary, current scholarship presents the Japan-Vietnam maritime cooperation as a strategic response to regional instability and normative contestation. Their collaboration, situated within multilateral norms and institutions, contributes meaningfully to a resilient, rules-based Indo-Pacific order^{15,16}.

While the existing literature provides a comprehensive analysis of the Japan-Vietnam maritime security cooperation, several gaps remain. *First*, there is the limited exploration of the long-term impact of Japan's capacity-building initiatives on Vietnam's maritime strategy, especially in the context of its non-aligned foreign policy. *Second*, the interplay between Japan's FOIP and Vietnam's ASEAN-centric approach requires further examination to understand how these frameworks can be harmonized to strengthen regional stability. This study contributes to the literature by adopting a multi-theoretical framework - combining structural realism, neoliberal institutionalism, and constructivism - to provide a nuanced understanding of Japan-Vietnam maritime security cooperation. By focusing on the strategic drivers, mechanisms, and challenges of this partnership, the study elucidates its role in shaping a rules-based regional order in the Indo-Pacific. The qualitative case study approach, grounded in official documents and scholarly analyses, offers a comprehensive examination of the bilateral relationship, highlighting its significance in the context of intensifying great power competition.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To analyze the motivations and mechanisms of this partnership, the study adopts a multi-theoretical framework incorporating structural realism, neoliberal institutionalism, and constructivism. From a structural realist perspective, cooperation is driven by a shared perception of China as a strategic threat. Japan's support for Vietnam's maritime capabilities functions as a form of "soft balancing"¹⁷. Japan's maritime policy in the South China Sea, from a strategic perspective, encompasses several key dimensions: enhancing defense support for countries, including Vietnam and the Philippines; conducting joint naval exercises within frameworks such as Malabar and the Indo-Pacific Partnership Exercise; promoting the transfer of maritime security technologies and patrol equipment; and utilizing the Quad as a platform for coordinated action—while deliberately avoiding the appearance of a strategy aimed at "containing China" in order to safeguard its economic interests with Beijing. Through these measures, Japan articulates a "soft balancing" strategy—eschewing direct confrontation while proactively engaging in strategic coordination to maintain a balance of power in the region. Neoliberal institutionalism highlights the role of legal regimes and multilateral forums such as ASEAN, ADMM-Plus, and FOIP in facilitating and legitimizing bilateral cooperation¹⁸. Constructivism offers a complementary view by emphasizing shared identity, values, and political trust. Vietnam perceives Japan as a reliable, non-confrontational partner, free from historical baggage and aligned in its normative commitments¹⁹.

By synthesizing these perspectives (Table 1), the study conceptualizes the Japan–Vietnam maritime cooperation as a multi-dimensional partnership—strategically driven, institutionally reinforced, and normatively grounded—shaping regional security in an increasingly contested maritime domain.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology, specifically a case study approach, to analyze the bilateral maritime security relationship between Vietnam and Japan. The analysis draws upon official sources such as joint statements, defense white papers, national security strategies, as well as academic research produced by leading strategic institutions. By combining a multi-theoretical framework with qualitative methods, the study offers a comprehensive depiction of the driving forces, modes of implementation, and challenges inherent in the maritime security cooperation between the two nations.

It further evaluates the strategic depth of this partnership within the complex geopolitical context of the Indo-Pacific region. This approach is particularly well-suited for analyzing complex political and strategic phenomena, where factors, including geopolitical motivations, shared values, and political trust are not easily quantifiable. The case study method enables the researcher to examine a specific bilateral relationship in depth, thereby providing a nuanced understanding of strategic convergence, cooperative mechanisms, and the challenges both countries face. The study is guided by two central research questions: (1) What strategic drivers underpin Japan–Vietnam maritime security cooperation in the early 21st century? and (2) How does this cooperation influence regional security and the international rules-based order? This methodological approach helps illuminate the key dimensions of the partnership, including both countries' commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Japan's role in enhancing Vietnam's maritime capacity, and the broader implications of this cooperation for regional security. Official documents from both governments serve as foundational sources for scholarly analysis. On the Vietnamese side, the 2009 and 2019 Defense White Papers reiterate the "Four No's" policy while affirming Japan's role in technical assistance and training^{20,21}. The Vietnam Maritime Strategy to 2030 mandates closer cooperation in joint patrols and surveillance with strategic partners, notably Japan²². On the Japanese side, policy instruments such as the Defense White Paper, the 2013 National Security Strategy (NSS), and FOIP-related materials express a strong commitment to supporting Vietnam's maritime capacity through ODA, including patrol vessels, radar systems, and surveillance technologies²³. The NSS is the first strategic document to integrate ODA into national security policy, demonstrating Japan's adaptation of its developmental role to new security challenges²⁴. It emphasizes: (1) national interests as the core focus; (2) the rule of law alongside universal values such as freedom, democracy, and human rights; (3) mobilization of comprehensive state resources beyond ODA alone; and (4) flexible application of non-military support principles to enhance the defense capabilities of like-minded states²⁵. Subsequently, the 2015 Development Cooperation Charter reflected these policy adjustments, while the 2016 FOIP initiative was designed as a strategic counterbalance to China's Belt and Road Initiative²⁶. These developments clearly illustrate Japan's long-term vision and strategic calculations in promoting a free, open, and stable Indo-Pacific region.

Table 1: The Theoretical Interpretations of Japan–Vietnam Security Cooperation in the South China Sea [Source: Author's compilation]

Key Dimensions		Realism	Neoliberal Institutionalism	Constructivism
Perception of China		China seen as strategic threat; cooperation as soft balancing.	Enhancing Vietnam's capacity to counter China's A2/AD; maintaining power balance.	Shared threat perception legitimized through multilateralism (ASEAN, ADMM+).
Security Assistance		Strategic move to strengthen Vietnam without direct confrontation.	Institutional mechanisms (e.g., FOIP, ODA) uphold rule-based order.	Reinforces shared identity rooted in peace and maritime norms.
Joint Exercises		Indirect deterrence and signaling to China.	Promotes multilateral security norms via ADMM+, RIMPAC.	Builds regional security community through shared values.
International Law		Legal cooperation as counter-measure to unilateralism.	Legal tools (UNCLOS, PCA) serve strategic interests.	Legal norms strengthen mutual trust and collective identity.
ASEAN Role		Vietnam's rise bolsters regional balance.	Supports ASEAN centrality and rule-based order (AOIP, COC).	Vietnam viewed as norm entrepreneur within ASEAN.
Challenges		Geopolitical constraints and China's pressure limit cooperation.	Multilateralism faces limits due to ASEAN divisions.	Trust and shared values can mitigate divergences, but history and geopolitics remain barriers.

RESULTS

The Drivers of Japan–Vietnam Maritime Security Cooperation in the South China Sea in the Early Decades of the 21st Century

The Shared Concerns over China's Growing Assertiveness

China's emergence as a regional and global power, especially through its maritime expansionism, has posed significant strategic challenges for Japan [11, p.534], [27, p.64]. Since the 1990s, the South China Sea has become central to Beijing's efforts to assert influence, exemplified by expansive territorial claims that overlap with those of Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan. Among these claimants, China asserts the broadest claim, intensifying regional tensions. The modernization of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), the deployment of maritime militias, the construction of artificial islands, and the militarization of disputed features have reinforced China's attempts to consolidate control over the South China Sea. Vietnam, whose maritime claims directly intersect with China's, remains one of the most affected parties [28, p.20]. Since 2007, Beijing has intensified maritime patrols and enforcement activities under the pretext of protecting fishing rights, leading to confrontations such as the 2011 cutting of Vietnamese

seismic survey cables and the frequent detention of Vietnamese fishermen. Simultaneously, the ongoing deadlock in ASEAN–China negotiations over the Code of Conduct (COC) has further destabilized the region [14, p.114], [12, p.128].

Japan has expressed strong concern over China's militarization of contested areas, viewing it as a threat to regional security and the rules-based international order. Under President Xi Jinping, China's strategy has become increasingly assertive, including the establishment of submarine bases on Hainan Island and efforts to create "facts on the ground." Scholars have drawn parallels between China's approach in the South China Sea and its strategy in the Sea of Okhotsk, suggesting ambitions to transform the South China Sea into a controlled military zone [1, p.105]. Since 2009, Beijing has labeled the SCS a "core interest," using the "nine-dash line" to legitimize unilateral actions, which have been widely criticized as violations of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) [12, p.240], [4, p.230]. These moves form part of a broader anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategy intended to limit external military presence—including that of Japan and the United States—within the First Island Chain [29, p.117], [30, p.23].

China's actions also impact Japan's security in the East China Sea, particularly regarding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute [31, p.219-220]. Concerned that similar coercive tactics could be employed there, Japan has intensified security cooperation with Vietnam—a country similarly committed to international law and peaceful dispute resolution—thus laying the foundation for a strategic partnership grounded in shared regional security interests [32, p.142], [12, p.128].

Japan and Vietnam's Strategic Interests in the South China Sea

Although not a claimant in the South China Sea disputes, Japan maintains vital strategic interests in the region due to its dependence on maritime trade and energy imports. Approximately 95% of Japan's energy imports and 40% of its maritime trade pass through the South China Sea, making the security of these sea lines of communication a core national interest [6, p.11]. Tokyo views any unilateral actions—such as the construction of artificial islands, militarization of contested features, and coercive enforcement of sovereignty claims—as serious threats to the freedom of navigation and regional stability [33, p.131-132]. These developments, primarily driven by China, are widely regarded as violations of international law, specifically the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and as undermining the rules-based order [34, p.138-145]. Former Prime Minister Abe Shinzō notably warned that the South China Sea risked becoming “a Chinese lake”, underscoring the level of Japan's strategic apprehension [5, p.2].

In response, Japan has strengthened security ties with Southeast Asian nations, especially Vietnam and the Philippines—both frontline states in territorial disputes with China. Through initiatives focused on maritime capacity building, joint exercises, port visits, and training programs, Japan has helped its partners improve maritime domain awareness and law enforcement capabilities [9, p.26]; [35, p.159-160]. These efforts also reflect Tokyo's evolving defense policy and an expanded role for the Self-Defense Forces (SDF), which increasingly operate beyond Japan's immediate vicinity [33, p.20], [36, p.13]. In addition, Japan perceives developments in the South China Sea as closely linked to its own security concerns in the East China Sea, particularly regarding its dispute with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Chinese consolidation in the South China Sea could set a precedent for similar coercive behavior in the East China Sea, posing a direct challenge to Japan's

sovereignty and national security [6, .11]. As a result, Japan supports a U.S.-led rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific to ensure regional stability and freedom of navigation [33, p.127].

For Vietnam, the South China Sea is of paramount strategic importance, tied to its sovereignty, resource security, and national development. Adhering to an independent, multilateral foreign policy, Vietnam aims to reduce dependency on any single power - especially China—through diversification and expanded cooperation. Japan plays a central role in this strategy, offering diplomatic support and security assistance without the political sensitivities associated with Western powers [31, p.193-194]. The cooperation with Japan enhances Vietnam's maritime enforcement capabilities through patrol vessel transfers, personnel training, and technical support [6, p.13]. Following incidents such as China's deployment of the Haiyang Shiyu 981 oil rig in 2014 and large-scale island reclamation, maritime capacity building has become a priority for Hanoi [31, p.205-206].

Since elevating their relationship to a Strategic Partnership in 2009, Japan and Vietnam have made the maritime security cooperation a central pillar of bilateral ties. Vietnam values Japan's consistent advocacy for dispute resolution based on UNCLOS and its support within ASEAN-led efforts to counter China's assertive actions [10, p.335]. This partnership not only enhances Vietnam's maritime resilience but also strengthens its role within the regional security architecture.

A Shared Commitment to International Law

A fundamental factor driving the maritime security cooperation between Japan and Vietnam is their strategic alignment in supporting a rules-based regional order grounded in international law, particularly the 1982 UNCLOS. As a comprehensive legal framework governing global maritime activities, UNCLOS clearly outlines the rights and obligations of coastal states—including both Vietnam and China—in the context of South China Sea disputes. Both Japan and Vietnam endorse the development of a legally binding Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea and consistently reaffirm their commitment to the rule of law, oppose unilateral actions that alter the status quo, and advocate for maritime safety and security [37, p.61]. In official statements, former Prime Minister Abe Shinzō praised Vietnam's consistent position of resolving disputes through peaceful means, in accordance with international law [31, p.177], [38, p.128-129].

Both countries emphasize the role of international legal mechanisms and support the 2016 ruling by the

Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) as a precedent for resolving disputes under international law [39, p.101]. The convergence of legal and strategic perspectives—driven by shared concerns over China's assertive behavior—has laid the foundation for the increasingly substantive maritime security cooperation between Japan and Vietnam. This partnership contributes to the preservation of peace and the promotion of freedom of navigation in the South China Sea [6, p.12].

A Solid Bilateral Foundation

Japan–Vietnam relations have developed progressively across political, economic, and security dimensions since the establishment of diplomatic ties on September 21, 1973. Following the end of the Vietnam War, both countries prioritized economic cooperation and regional stability. Japan became one of the first major donors of Official Development Assistance (ODA) to Vietnam, supporting the post-war reconstruction and infrastructure development in the late 1970s and 1980s. The bilateral relations deepened significantly after Vietnam's withdrawal from Cambodia in 1989 and the end of the Cold War. In 1992, Japan resumed large-scale ODA, facilitating major development projects and encouraging Japanese investment in Vietnam's emerging market. The partnership was elevated to a "Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia" in 2006 and upgraded to a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" in 2014 [15, p.22]. The maritime security cooperation began in the early 2000s, reflecting shared concerns over regional stability. A key milestone was the 2007 agreement to enhance maritime security, followed by the 2011 Defense Memorandum of Understanding, which enabled cooperation in personnel training, humanitarian assistance, and counter-terrorism [13, p.9].

From 2012 to 2022, the bilateral cooperation expanded significantly, including joint training, equipment transfers, and strategic dialogues reaffirming a shared commitment to a rules-based maritime order [6, p.13]. Political trust, high-level exchanges, and shared responses to non-traditional security threats—such as piracy and illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing—have reinforced defense ties. The convergence of strategic, economic, and security interests, along with a history of stable bilateral relations, has laid a strong foundation for deepening cooperation. Japan, among the first countries to normalize relations with Vietnam post-war, has become a key economic and maritime infrastructure partner, underpinning the expansion of strategic ties amid growing tensions in the South China Sea [40, p.108], [41, p.103-104].

The Influence of the United States and ASEAN

The United States occupies a central position in Japan's foreign policy, with Washington's involvement in Indo-Pacific development initiatives—specifically under the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) vision—being vital to promoting multilateralism and sustaining a rules-based regional order²⁵. The U.S.–Japan alliance, underpinned by strong economic, political, and security ties, provides a framework through which both countries shape regional stability. In this context, Japan–Vietnam cooperation has emerged as a key pillar of an open and inclusive security architecture aligned with U.S. strategic interests⁴².

In response to China's expanding maritime claims, the United States has emphasized freedom of navigation and the protection of sea lines of communication (SLOCs) in the South China Sea. U.S. freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) and diplomatic engagement have supported Vietnam's efforts to counter Beijing's assertive behavior. Concurrently, Japan has expanded its security cooperation with Vietnam through defense equipment transfers, maritime capacity-building, and policy coordination—reinforcing its role as a "force multiplier" in regional security [43, p.48-49]. U.S. policy continues to encourage allies, including Japan and ASEAN members, to assume more active roles in maintaining regional order [44, p.312]. ASEAN remains a critical actor in the Indo-Pacific's security landscape, though internal divisions persist. Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar maintain close ties with China due to economic reliance, leading to cautious stances on South China Sea issues. Thailand, by contrast, seeks a pragmatic balance between economic and strategic interests. Despite these differences, ASEAN plays a stabilizing role by fostering regional dialogue and consensus [45, p.3]. Nevertheless, the lack of ASEAN unity has prompted states like Vietnam and the Philippines to pursue bilateral or minilateral arrangements—often supported by the United States. Japan, recognizing ASEAN's strategic relevance, promotes cooperation through initiatives such as the Vientiane Vision. The evolving trilateral dynamic between Japan, Vietnam, and ASEAN reflects a convergence of interests shaped by China's rise and the enduring influence of the United States. Japan supports regional capacity-building, while Vietnam balances strategic autonomy with deeper alignment [12, p.8], [9, p.3].

The maritime security cooperation between Japan and Vietnam in the early decades of the 21st century has

been driven by structural strategic factors, most notably a shared concern over China's increasingly assertive behavior in the South China Sea. Both countries view China's unilateral actions - ranging from the militarization of disputed features to the implementation of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategies - as serious challenges to the rules-based regional order, particularly the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). From Japan's perspective, freedom of navigation in the South China Sea is vital to its national economic security, especially in terms of energy and trade. Meanwhile, Vietnam sees cooperation with Japan as a crucial means to enhance its maritime law enforcement capacity and to maintain an independent and autonomous foreign policy. The two nations share a strong commitment to international law and the peaceful settlement of disputes, which provides a legal and political foundation for institutionalizing bilateral cooperation across various domains, including training, strategic dialogue, equipment transfer, and maritime capacity-building support.

The Forms of Japan-Vietnam Maritime Security Cooperation in the South China Sea

The Political Dialogue and Mechanisms of Cooperation

Amid rising tensions in the South China Sea - specifically due to China's increasingly assertive behavior - Japan and Vietnam have intensified the maritime security cooperation through institutionalized strategic dialogue and political coordination. Since 2012, the two countries have held regular Vice-Ministerial-Level Defense Policy Dialogues, establishing a structured mechanism for discussing security issues, with maritime security as a key focus. The "2+2" dialogue framework between their respective Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense, together with high-level meetings, has fostered mutual political trust and facilitated substantive cooperation between the two countries.

In the defense domain, Japan has supported Vietnam's maritime capacity-building through training programs, joint exercises, and technology transfer. Since 2019, Vietnamese naval vessels have made regular port calls to Japan, while the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) has conducted reciprocal visits to Cam Ranh Bay. Their first joint exercise in 2019, focusing on search and rescue and anti-piracy operations, underscored the growing operational depth of the bilateral cooperation [14, p.116], [46, p.105].

A pivotal moment came in 2021 with the signing of the Japan-Vietnam agreement on defense equipment and technology transfer. This agreement signaled a major advancement in bilateral strategic ties, reinforcing shared concerns over regional security and affirming a mutual commitment to a rules-based Indo-Pacific order. While it strengthens Vietnam's maritime capabilities and enhances Japan's role as a trusted defense partner, its long-term effectiveness depends on careful implementation amid evolving geopolitical complexities, particularly those involving China [16, p.44], [47, p.117].

Beyond the bilateral framework, both countries coordinate closely in regional platforms such as ASEAN, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+). They advocate for the rule of law, peaceful dispute resolution, and the non-militarization of the South China Sea. Japan and Vietnam also align on the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) initiative-Japan as a principal proponent and Vietnam via its endorsement of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP). Tokyo's strategic role facilitates Vietnam's access to advanced defense technologies and regional security mechanisms, while allowing Hanoi to maintain strategic autonomy within a complex geopolitical environment [48, p.5, 61].

Ultimately, the Japan-Vietnam maritime security partnership exemplifies the strategic value of sustained political dialogue and institutionalized cooperation mechanisms in navigating an increasingly complex regional environment. By aligning mutual interests through both bilateral engagement and multi-lateral platforms, this cooperation not only strengthens Vietnam's maritime defense posture but also reinforces a rules-based regional order-laying a vital groundwork for deeper strategic alignment and long-term regional stability.

The Capacity-Building and Technical Assistance

One of the most significant forms of strategic cooperation between Japan and Vietnam in the maritime security domain is capacity-building through technical assistance and defense equipment transfer. Japan has recalibrated its Official Development Assistance (ODA) policy to align with regional security objectives, identifying Vietnam as a priority partner for enhancing maritime law enforcement and sovereignty protection capabilities [12, p.202]. Since 2014, Japan has provided ODA in the form of patrol vessels to support the Vietnam Coast Guard.

During President Trương Tấn Sang's official visit to Japan in March 2014, the two governments agreed on Japan's donation of six patrol vessels, valued at

approximately 500 million yen (USD 5 million) [6, p.13]. In January 2017, Prime Minister Abe Shinzō announced an additional provision of six vessels through a 120-billion-yen ODA loan package, aimed at maritime safety [10, p.109, 338]. This initiative materialized in May 2017 during Abe's visit to Vietnam, where Tokyo pledged USD 38.5 million for the construction and transfer of modern patrol boats. Since 2018, these vessels have been delivered incrementally, enhancing Vietnam's capacity to monitor and defend its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), especially in response to increasing incursions and maritime sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea [35, p.34-35].

Beyond vessel transfers, both countries have intensified collaboration in defense technology. In 2020, a Memorandum of Cooperation on Maritime Security was signed, under which Japan agreed to supply coastal radar systems and encrypted communications equipment. Vietnam aims to complete its Japan-funded radar network by 2025, covering coastal areas from Đà Nẵng to Phú Quốc. This system is expected to significantly improve early warning and maritime threat response capabilities while facilitating intelligence sharing with regional partners such as Japan, the United States, and Australia.

Further formalization occurred in September 2021 when the two defense ministers signed an agreement enabling the transfer of defense equipment and technology, opening consultations on specific items like naval vessels and advanced radar systems. Cooperation has also expanded into areas such as cybersecurity, military medicine, and defense industrial collaboration. Notably, in May 2019, a memorandum on defense industry cooperation established a framework for long-term technology transfer, contributing to Vietnam's domestic production capabilities [28, p.263].

By 2022, Japan had delivered a total of 12 patrol vessels to Vietnam, including Kunigami-class and Hateruma-class ships equipped with modern radar and communication systems. In parallel, Japan has supported Vietnam's maritime monitoring capabilities through satellite technology, significantly assisting in the development of the PicoDragon remote sensing satellite [32, p.203].

Military medical cooperation, specifically in underwater medicine, represents another key pillar. Between 2012 and 2019, Japan, in collaboration with the United States and Australia, conducted seven training workshops for the Vietnam People's Navy [33, p.137], [49, p.394]. The signing of a Memorandum of Understanding on military medical cooperation, with a

focus on underwater medicine, marks a pivotal advancement in bilateral defense ties. This trilateral initiative addressed critical capability gaps in the operation of Vietnam's Kilo-class submarine fleet, thereby improving operational safety and effectiveness. The MoU also contributed to strategic trust-building and aligns with broader Indo-Pacific security frameworks. However, the long-term success of such cooperation hinges on sustained implementation, resource allocation, and the careful navigation of regional geopolitical challenges.

On the training front, Japan has implemented a diverse array of programs for the Vietnam Coast Guard and Navy, focusing on search and rescue, anti-piracy operations, ship handling, and maritime governance. Vietnamese military personnel have also received training in peacekeeping operations (PKO), humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR), aviation safety, and defense logistics. Japan has provided scholarships and short-term training courses at institutions such as the Japan National Maritime Academy, thereby supporting Vietnam's human resource development for maritime modernization [14, p.115], [12, p.192].

The transfer of coastal radar and Automatic Identification Systems (AIS) has further improved Vietnam's maritime domain awareness. Agreements on defense technology exports, including maritime patrol aircraft, underscore the growing strategic trust and mutual commitment between the two nations. Collectively, these cooperative initiatives reflect a shared commitment to strengthening regional security, enhancing Vietnam's maritime capabilities, and reinforcing a rules-based Indo-Pacific order.

The Joint Training and Exercises

Joint military exercises form a crucial pillar of the Japan-Vietnam defense cooperation, enhancing operational coordination, interoperability, and mutual readiness while affirming both countries' shared commitment to regional maritime security. Since 2016, Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) destroyers and aircraft have regularly visited Vietnamese ports and airbases. Notably, the inaugural port calls of JS Ariake and JS Setogiri to Cam Ranh Bay marked a symbolic turning point in bilateral military engagement [11, p.540]. Between 2016 and 2021, the two sides conducted multiple bilateral exercises—both at sea and in tabletop formats—featuring JMSDF maritime patrol aircraft and Vietnamese Navy and Air Force units, particularly in Đà Nẵng. A milestone was the JMSDF submarine *Kuroshio*'s visit to Cam Ranh in 2018 [6, p.13], part of Japan's broader Indo-Pacific

Deployment (IPD) initiative launched in 2017. Programs such as “Ship Rider” and cooperation in search and rescue (SAR) and maritime incident response further institutionalize practical coordination. Both countries also participate in multilateral frameworks like ADMM+ and RIMPAC, with Japan assisting Vietnam in maritime intelligence sharing—especially regarding Chinese activities in contested zones [48, p.57], [10, p.331].

In sum, these engagements not only strengthen Vietnam’s maritime operational capacity but also elevate Japan’s regional security profile, reinforcing a shared vision for a stable, rules-based Indo-Pacific.

The Cooperation in Non-Traditional Security Areas

Joint military exercises are a central pillar of the Japan–Vietnam defense cooperation, enhancing interoperability, operational coordination, and mutual readiness while reinforcing their shared commitment to maritime security. Since 2016, the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) has conducted regular port visits and airbase engagements in Vietnam, beginning with the arrival of JS *Ariake* and JS *Setogiri* at Cam Ranh Bay - marking a new phase in bilateral defense relations [11, p.540]. Between 2016 and 2021, the two sides conducted multiple joint naval exercises, both at sea and in tabletop formats, involving JMSDF maritime patrol aircraft and Vietnamese naval and air force units, especially in Đà Nẵng. The 2018 visit of the JMSDF submarine *Kuroshio* under the Indo-Pacific Deployment (IPD) initiative further expanded operational cooperation [6, p.13].

Bilateral mechanisms such as the “Ship Rider” program, joint search and rescue (SAR) training, and coordinated maritime incident responses have institutionalized defense collaboration. Participation in multilateral platforms like the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM+) and the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC) has reinforced regional coordination. Japan also supports Vietnam in maritime intelligence sharing, particularly related to Chinese activities in contested waters [48, p.57], [10, p.331].

Cooperation has also expanded into non-traditional security areas. In cybersecurity, Japan provides training, technical assistance, and encrypted communication systems to improve the resilience of Vietnam’s maritime law enforcement infrastructure. Regular cybersecurity dialogues and working groups have facilitated information exchange and threat response, while legal and policy support has helped align Vietnam’s cyber governance with international standards. Both countries are active in ASEAN-led initiatives addressing cybercrime and terrorism.

Japan has transferred 12 patrol vessels (Kunigami- and Hateruma-class) and conducted anti-piracy training through regional frameworks like ReCAAP, enhancing Vietnam’s law enforcement capacity at sea. Peacekeeping cooperation includes scholarships and training for Vietnamese officers in logistics, medical support, and UN coordination. Humanitarian initiatives cover unexploded ordnance (UXO) clearance via ODA programs, and partnerships with NGOs and JICA. SAR and humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR) efforts are guided by the 2011 Memorandum of Defense Cooperation, with Japan’s disaster response experience contributing to Vietnam’s maritime preparedness.

Table 2 provides a detailed summary of the defense and maritime security cooperation between Japan and Vietnam from 2011 to 2022, highlighting the progression from legal frameworks to practical activities, including equipment transfers, joint exercises, and naval exchanges. Each event has contributed to strengthening Vietnam’s capacity to safeguard its sovereignty and uphold regional security, while simultaneously reinforcing its strategic partnership with Japan. This cooperation not only yields significant bilateral benefits but also contributes to the stability of the broader Indo-Pacific region.

Overall, the Japan–Vietnam defense cooperation reflects a dynamic, multidimensional partnership. It enhances Vietnam’s maritime and institutional capabilities, deepens bilateral ties, and contributes to a rules-based, stable Indo-Pacific regional order. The Japan–Vietnam maritime security cooperation is multifaceted, encompassing institutionalized political dialogue, defense equipment transfer, joint training, and non-traditional security collaboration. These efforts have enhanced Vietnam’s maritime capabilities, fostered strategic trust, and reinforced both countries’ commitment to a rules-based Indo-Pacific. Through bilateral and multilateral mechanisms, including ASEAN-led forums, the partnership strengthens operational interoperability and advances shared interests in regional peace and stability.

The Effects of Japan–Vietnam Security Collaboration

Overall, the Vietnam–Japan defense cooperation has influenced regional dynamics and relevant stakeholders in several key ways. It raises critical questions: Has it affected China’s strategic calculations? Has it enhanced Vietnam’s maritime capabilities? And what are the similarities and differences between Japan’s cooperation with Vietnam and the Philippines?

Table 2: The Key Milestones in Japan–Vietnam Security Cooperation [Source: Author’s compilation]

Year	Key Activity	Description
2011	MoU on Defense Cooperation	Established framework for bilateral defense exchanges and emergency coordination
2014	First Patrol Vessel ODA Agreement	Japan agreed to provide six patrol vessels to Vietnam
2016	First Port Visits by JMSDF Destroyers	JS Ariake and JS Setogiri visited Cam Ranh Bay
2017	Launch of IPD Initiative	Japan began regular Indo-Pacific deployments; Vietnam included as partner
2018	Kuroshio Submarine Visit	Marked deepening naval trust and access to key Vietnamese ports
2019	First Bilateral Naval Exercise	Focused on counter-piracy and rescue operations
2020	MoC on Maritime Security	Included radar system and encrypted communication assistance
2021	Defense Equipment Transfer Agreement	Enabled detailed consultations on transferring ships and technologies
2022	Total of 12 Patrol Vessels Delivered	Included Kunigami- and Hateruma-class ships for EEZ patrols

Amid escalating strategic competition between the United States and China, Japan has become an increasingly important strategic partner and hedging option for Vietnam [48, p.61]. Cooperation with Japan enables Hanoi to indirectly strengthen its relationship with Washington while minimizing potential backlash from Beijing. Tokyo has assumed a significant intermediary role through capacity-building initiatives and joint maritime exercises, enhancing Vietnam’s ability to respond to coercive behavior in the South China Sea. Japan’s growing involvement in regional security - particularly its support for Vietnam and the Philippines - has elicited concern from China, which perceives Tokyo as interfering in the South China Sea disputes. Chinese officials frequently condemn Japan’s activities in the region, framing them as intrusions into China’s “internal affairs” [49, p.93]. In Chinese diplomatic discourse, Japan is often depicted as a disruptive actor, comparable to the United States [45, p.1].

Although the Japan–Vietnam security cooperation has expanded in both scope and depth, it remains insufficient to significantly alter China’s strategic priorities, which continue to focus primarily on countering U.S. influence. For Beijing, the cooperation between Japan and Vietnam is seen as a secondary factor within its broader geopolitical framework. From Hanoi’s perspective, this partnership serves as a supplementary component of its hedging strategy rather than a transformative shift in alignment. Vietnam maintains a policy of strategic autonomy and avoids formal defense alliances to prevent

antagonizing China. As a result, Japan–Vietnam cooperation primarily serves to adjust regional dynamics and improve Vietnam’s strategic leverage without provoking a major strategic recalibration from Beijing [48, p.58], [14, p.136-137].

Japan has also played a role in enhancing Vietnam’s maritime security capabilities by providing patrol vessels and conducting training programs [14, p.115]. However, the extent of this assistance remains constrained by Japan’s own strategic and operational limitations in the East China Sea. Furthermore, the imbalance in maritime power between Vietnam and China - especially in terms of naval assets - remains considerable [31, p.153]. While Japanese support has contributed to incremental improvements, it is not sufficient to reverse the existing asymmetry. Acknowledging this limitation, Vietnam continues to diversify its partnerships to bolster its maritime defense capabilities [31, p.154].

Japan’s strategic engagement with Vietnam and the Philippines shares several key features, including the promotion of strategic dialogue, defense assistance, and support for sovereignty claims vis-à-vis China [41, p.39]. Both countries are central to Japan’s South-east Asia security strategy [11, p.534-535]. Nevertheless, variations in their respective ties with the United States and differing sensitivities in managing relations with China have led to divergent levels of defense cooperation. Despite these differences, both countries perceive Japanese engagement as vital to strengthening their national security and reinforcing a rules-based regional order [35, p.125].

Japan's sustained efforts in capacity-building and diplomacy have helped Vietnam and the Philippines—comparatively weaker claimants—to better respond to China's assertiveness. This resilience may pressure ASEAN to adopt a more cohesive approach and expedite negotiations on an effective Code of Conduct (COC) [6, p.12]. Vietnam's collaboration with Japan enhances its ability to push for ASEAN consensus despite internal divisions, specifically from pro-China members such as Cambodia and Laos [36, p.20].

The Challenges of Japan–Vietnam Security Collaboration

One of the principal challenges to deepening Vietnam–Japan security cooperation stems from increasing pressure from China. While Vietnam actively promotes bilateral engagement with Japan, it must simultaneously maintain a delicate strategic balance to avoid destabilizing its relationship with Beijing. Vietnam's longstanding “Three No's” policy—no military alliances, no alignment with one country against another, and no foreign military bases on Vietnamese territory—has led Hanoi to approach defense ties with Tokyo with considerable caution [14, p.116]. Although the relationship has witnessed meaningful progress, it remains limited in military depth due to the absence of binding agreements, such as those on intelligence sharing or logistical support [11, p.534]. Several initiatives, including patrol vessel transfers and joint exercises, have been delayed over concerns about provoking Beijing. Coercive measures from China—ranging from economic pressure to heightened military activities in the South China Sea—have reinforced Vietnam's cautious stance, affecting both the pace and scope of bilateral defense cooperation [9, p.21].

A second major constraint concerns Japan's limited capacity for sustained military support. Despite being one of Vietnam's largest ODA donors, Tokyo faces significant budgetary pressures and domestic priorities that restrict its ability to provide long-term defense assistance [33, p.132]. Strategically, Japan's attention remains focused on the East China Sea, where tensions with China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands have intensified, limiting its resource allocation to the South China Sea. On the Vietnamese side, technical barriers also hinder cooperation. The limited availability of skilled personnel and underdeveloped infrastructure have constrained the effectiveness of Japan–Vietnam technology transfer programs [48, p.58]. Additionally, concerns persist among segments of Vietnam's political and defense leadership regarding Japan's constitutional limitations and its strategic

dependence on the United States. These perceptions, especially prevalent within the Communist Party of Vietnam, the Ministry of National Defense, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, contribute to skepticism about Tokyo's long-term commitment to proactive security cooperation. While Vietnamese leaders emphasize strategic autonomy and caution against overreliance on external partners, analysts remain uncertain about Japan's ability to fulfill sustained defense obligations. Such concerns are rooted in both historical experiences and Vietnam's broader imperative to maintain balanced relations with major powers.

Third, strategic divergence further complicates the development of robust defense ties. Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy aims to counter China's influence through maritime security and the rule of law. In contrast, Vietnam's core priority is the protection of national sovereignty in the South China Sea, particularly in disputed areas such as the Paracel and Spratly Islands [35, p.188]. This misalignment has produced differing expectations and limited the formulation of shared security objectives. Remarkably, the 2018 Joint Vision Statement avoided institutionalizing defense cooperation, reflecting Vietnam's political caution [14, p.116]. While Japan emphasizes engagement in the East China Sea, Vietnam continues to diversify its security relations with the United States, India, and European partners. Given its proximity to China and economic interdependence, Vietnam has adopted a non-confrontational security posture. Japan, constrained by its constitutional framework, has opted to support Vietnam through non-binding capacity-building efforts—such as personnel training, equipment transfers, and maritime surveillance—rather than formal security guarantees [28, p.297–298]. However, any advancement in cooperation is likely to be closely observed by China, which may respond with diplomatic or economic pressure [48, p.58].

Finally, the Vietnam–Japan cooperation within multilateral frameworks such as ASEAN and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+) faces institutional limitations. Divisions within ASEAN—particularly the influence of China-aligned members like Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar—undermine regional consensus on South China Sea issues, weakening the impact of Vietnam–Japan coordination in multilateral settings [33, p.140]. Although both states support a rules-based order, Vietnam's reluctance to engage in arrangements perceived as targeting third parties continues to constrain defense collaboration [48, p.58]. Japan, too, must manage its

involvement carefully to avoid further straining relations with China, specifically given its maritime challenges in the East China Sea [31, p.164, 240]. Since the Cold War, Japan has expanded engagement with ASEAN through regular consultations, including the Japan–ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting launched in 2014. The FOIP strategy introduced in 2016 reinforced Japan’s focus on maritime security and legal norms. Nevertheless, ASEAN’s internal fragmentation and Japan’s cautious approach raise questions about the effectiveness of regional security frameworks and the sincerity of external actors’ support for ASEAN centrality.

The Future Trends in Japan–Vietnam Maritime Security Cooperation in the South China Sea

Despite the substantial progress in maritime security cooperation between Japan and Vietnam in recent years, bilateral relations continue to face certain limitations stemming from geopolitical pressures, institutional constraints, and divergent strategic orientations. Nonetheless, both countries share core interests in promoting maritime security and maintaining a rules-based regional order— an area of consensus that is likely to remain a cornerstone of future cooperation. This cooperative framework reflects a systematic progression, beginning with specific maritime security initiatives and extending toward broader strategic objectives, including regional stability and the preservation of international legal order. In an increasingly complex geopolitical environment, the Japan–Vietnam partnership is deepening, reflecting long-term strategic recalibration. The diagram below (Figure 1) illustrates two optimal and feasible pathways for advancing maritime security cooperation toward a stable regional order. The left branch outlines a progression from enhanced cooperation to strong alignment on security issues, culminating in joint defense initiatives. The right branch shows how strategic stability can be achieved through institutionalized cooperation and adherence to international norms.

However, the implementation of initiatives such as joint defense mechanisms or institutionalized cooperation may encounter challenges due to asymmetries in military capabilities and differences in foreign policy priorities. In both scenarios analyzed, the maritime security cooperation plays a central role in shaping a stable regional order. These scenarios are developed based on a theoretical framework that integrates structural realism, liberal institutionalism, and constructivism, to examine how the two countries

can shape the maritime security cooperation in an increasingly complex geopolitical environment.

Both scenarios aim to promote engagement and compliance with international institutional mechanisms, therefore laying the foundation for a peaceful, cooperative, and sustainable regional order. The accompanying model illustrates two prospective pathways for the Japan–Vietnam maritime security cooperation: (1) the Enhanced Cooperation Scenario and (2) the Strategic Stabilization Scenario. Both seek to uphold a rules-based maritime regional order, yet differ in terms of institutional integration and the degree of strategic alignment.

The Enhanced Cooperation Scenario

The Enhanced Cooperation Scenario envisions a significant strengthening of bilateral defense relations between Japan and Vietnam, driven by a high level of convergence in threat perception, particularly regarding coercive behaviors in maritime domains by third parties—chiefly China. Aligned with the assumptions of structural realism, this scenario posits that states respond to external threats by enhancing their defense capabilities and promoting strategic cooperation¹⁷. The core of this scenario lies in the implementation of joint military activities, the enhancement of operational interoperability, and the establishment of strategic coordination mechanisms to improve collective deterrence and response capacity to maritime security challenges. Defense cooperation in this context is framed as a form of *soft balancing*, aiming to constrain assertive behavior by China without provoking direct confrontation.

The key characteristics include:

- **Operational Interoperability:** This scenario emphasizes the integration of Japan’s advanced maritime technological capabilities (such as radar systems, patrol vessels, and encrypted communication technologies) with Vietnam’s developing naval capacities. Joint activities - including coordinated patrols, bilateral exercises, and intelligence sharing - are expected to strengthen Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) and deterrence capabilities. Practical examples include the visit of the *Kuroshio* submarine to Cam Ranh Port in 2018 and the 2019 Japan–Vietnam bilateral anti-piracy exercise involving the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) and the Vietnam People’s Navy.

- **High-Level Political Commitment:** Bilateral agreements, especially the 2021 Japan–Vietnam Defense Cooperation Agreement, provide the legal and political foundation for long-term initiatives such as the

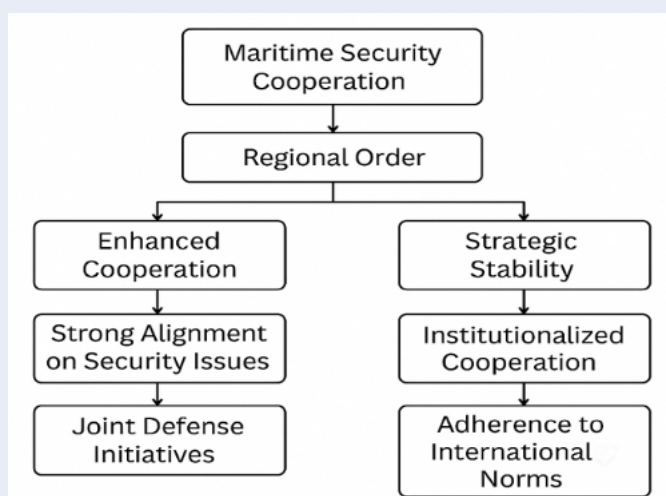


Figure 1: Optimal and Feasible Scenarios [Source: Author's compilation]

transfer of Kunigami-class and Hateruma-class patrol vessels, as well as coastal radar systems. Institutional mechanisms, such as the Vice-Ministerial Defense Policy Dialogue and the “2+2” framework between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense, play a pivotal role in strategic coordination and maintaining political trust.

- **Regional Implications:** The bilateral Japan–Vietnam cooperation contributes to shaping a regional security architecture consistent with Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2023). Strengthened collective response and deterrence capabilities not only elevate Vietnam’s strategic position within ASEAN but also support shared objectives with partners, including the United States and Australia. Furthermore, this scenario creates opportunities for weaker claimant states such as the Philippines to improve their responses to China’s assertive actions.

The main challenges include:

- **Asymmetry in Military Capabilities:** The significant disparity between Japan’s and Vietnam’s defense capacities may limit the effectiveness of operational coordination. While Japan possesses modern destroyers and advanced technologies, Vietnam is still undergoing naval and coast guard modernization under constrained resources.

- **Geopolitical Backlash:** The intensification of bilateral cooperation may provoke reactions from China, which views Japan’s engagement in the South China Sea as interference in its “internal affairs.” China may respond with diplomatic or economic coercion, while

Vietnam must carefully maintain its “Three No’s” defense policy (no military alliances, no siding with one country against another, no foreign military bases) to preserve strategic balance.

- **Limited Japanese Resources:** Japan must balance its defense resource allocations between competing priorities, particularly the East China Sea dispute with China. Budgetary constraints and domestic policy pressures may impact Japan’s ability to sustain long-term support for Vietnam.

Overall, the Enhanced Cooperation Scenario presents a promising avenue for strengthening the defense capabilities and strategic posture of both nations amid a complex regional security landscape. However, its successful implementation requires tight coordination in military capacity-building, political commitment, and strategic diplomacy to minimize the risk of escalation.

The Strategic Stabilization Scenario

The Strategic Stabilization Scenario emphasizes institutionalized cooperation through adherence to international norms, specifically the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). By embracing international legal principles and participating in multilateral frameworks, this scenario aims to reduce the likelihood of conflict and promote long-term regional stability. Contrary to militarized approaches, this scenario adopts a norm-based strategy in which institutions and legal instruments play a central role in fostering cooperation (Keohane, 1984).

This scenario also incorporates elements of constructivism, highlighting the importance of political trust,

shared values, and collective identity - such as Japan and Vietnam's mutual commitment to maintaining a rules-based regional order.

The three pillars of this scenario include:

- **Institutionalized Cooperation:** Both countries actively engage in regional forums, including the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) to promote dialogue, information-sharing, and maritime policy coordination. Japan and Vietnam's endorsement of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) reinforces the bloc's centrality in addressing regional security challenges.

- **Norm Compliance:** A shared commitment to UNCLOS serves as the legal foundation for bilateral cooperation, enabling both nations to reject unilateral actions that violate international law—such as China's nine-dash line claim. Both countries also support the 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) and view it as a legal basis for peaceful dispute resolution.

- **Risk Mitigation:** Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) - such as transparency in maritime operations, intelligence sharing, and joint capacity-building programs - are prioritized to reduce the risk of miscalculation or unintended escalation. This includes training on cybersecurity and anti-piracy under initiatives like ReCAAP.

This scenario contributes to sustaining long-term peace by bolstering a rules-based maritime order, reducing the risk of conflict, and enhancing regional stability. It also enables Vietnam to maintain strategic autonomy without over-reliance on any major power, while strengthening ASEAN's centrality and supporting initiatives, including the South China Sea Code of Conduct (COC). Nonetheless, the scenario's limitation lies in its relatively limited flexibility in responding to urgent security challenges due to its non-confrontational nature.

The *Enhanced Cooperation* and *Strategic Stabilization* scenarios represent two complementary yet distinct pathways for fostering the maritime security cooperation between Japan and Vietnam. The *Enhanced Cooperation* Scenario focuses on deepening bilateral defense ties and responding effectively to immediate security threats, making it suitable in a context of intensifying strategic competition but with the potential to escalate tensions with China. In contrast, the *Strategic Stabilization* Scenario seeks to build a regional order grounded in institutional and normative frameworks, promoting long-term peace and regional stability, though requiring more persistent and complex coordination efforts.

Although differing in approach, both scenarios share the overarching objective of establishing a rules-based regional order. The *Enhanced Cooperation* Scenario emphasizes immediate security benefits through bilateral defense ties, making it more responsive to urgent threats but potentially more contentious due to geopolitical sensitivities. Conversely, the *Strategic Stability* Scenario prioritizes long-term regional peace through normative and institutional integration, offering a less confrontational pathway that demands patience and coordination. The accompanying diagram (Author's compilation) illustrates the transition from tactical coordination to strategic and normative alignment. From a theoretical standpoint, the *Enhanced Cooperation* Scenario reflects the realist emphasis on power balancing, whereas the *Strategic Stability* Scenario aligns with liberal institutionalist principles of norm-based cooperation. The interplay of these frameworks highlights the complexity of Japan-Vietnam maritime security cooperation, which must strike a balance between short-term security imperatives and long-term goals for regional stability.

The Japan-Vietnam strategic partnership is expected to continue deepening, underpinned by a stable political foundation and the convergence of strategic interests in upholding a maritime order based on international law. Vietnam consistently identifies Japan as a key long-term strategic partner [48, p.5]. Their cooperation has expanded beyond the bilateral level to multilateral frameworks such as ASEAN, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM+), and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) [50, p.164-165]. These platforms cultivate mutual trust and foster coordination in addressing non-traditional security challenges, including piracy, illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, as well as humanitarian assistance [48, p.53].

Japan's commitment to supporting Vietnam's maritime capabilities reflects broader strategic alignment under the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) framework. A combination of formal agreements, consistent cooperation, expanded training initiatives, and high-level political signaling suggests that Tokyo will continue enhancing its defense support to Vietnam. This includes defense equipment transfers and capacity-building programs, forming part of Japan's long-term strategy to reinforce regional security and deepen bilateral ties. One notable initiative is the coastal radar network project, scheduled for completion by 2025, which aims to significantly enhance Vietnam's maritime domain awareness and response capabilities [16, p.44].

In the coming years, Japan is expected to continue playing a pivotal role in strengthening Vietnam's maritime infrastructure. Key areas of support include the transfer of patrol vessels, radar systems, encrypted communications equipment, and associated training programs. The growing trend of transferring advanced defense technologies—such as aircraft and modern patrol platforms—signals increasing strategic trust and institutionalized security cooperation between the two sides [10, p.335]. Joint maritime exercises, including search and rescue (SAR), anti-piracy operations, and maritime incident response, are anticipated to expand further. These efforts aim to enhance interoperability between the Vietnam Coast Guard and the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF). Concurrently, intelligence-sharing—specifically concerning Chinese military activities in sensitive zones such as the Paracel and Spratly Islands—will be reinforced through existing cooperative mechanisms [4, p.233].

This partnership also contributes to a rules-based regional order, as evidenced by both nations' support for the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) [50, p.165]. Despite challenges such as Chinese pressure, limited resources, and differences in strategic priorities, the Japan–Vietnam security relationship continues to show positive momentum, driven by mutual trust and shared regional commitments [48, p.58].

Japan's support bolsters Vietnam's position as a proactive ASEAN member, particularly in addressing South China Sea issues. This strategic cooperation enhances Hanoi's capacity to build consensus on a legally binding and effective Code of Conduct (COC), thereby contributing to regional stability and the preservation of a rules-based maritime environment. Coupled with Vietnam's expanding diplomatic engagements with the United States, India, and Australia, the Japan partnership enables Hanoi to maintain strategic autonomy without overdependence on any single power. This strategy also supports ASEAN's broader objective of managing great power rivalry and preserving regional equilibrium [9, p.28-37].

The development of national capabilities through such partnerships allows Vietnam to articulate a more assertive and independent stance in ASEAN forums. Japan's role in augmenting Vietnam's "geopolitical buoyancy" diversifies Hanoi's strategic alignments and mitigates the risk of diplomatic marginalization by China on contentious issues. As a result, Vietnam maintains a balanced and proactive posture within

ASEAN, without being constrained by the strategic preferences of external actors [16, p.26].

Looking forward, Vietnam is expected to sustain its non-aligned foreign policy while deepening security ties with key regional and global actors such as the United States, India, and European nations [51, p.34–35]. Simultaneously, Japan will likely advance its FOIP strategy by strengthening multilateral cooperation and avoiding direct confrontation with China [52, p.313]. The continued bilateral cooperation between Japan and Vietnam will not only support Hanoi's maritime capacity but also reinforce ASEAN's cohesion, especially regarding consensus-building on South China Sea initiatives such as the COC [35, p.130].

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that the maritime security cooperation between Japan and Vietnam in the South China Sea has emerged as a strategic pillar in their bilateral relations during the early decades of the 21st century. Grounded in the convergence of national interests, this partnership reflects a shared commitment to maintaining peace, stability, and a rules-based maritime order amid intensifying geostrategic competition. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to scholarly understanding by effectively employing a multi-theoretical framework that integrates structural realism, neoliberal institutionalism, and constructivism to explain the Japan–Vietnam security cooperation in the South China Sea. This integrative approach clarifies how the two states define and pursue their strategic interests within a competitive power environment, while simultaneously leveraging institutional mechanisms and shared normative values to build trust and promote a rules-based order. Notably, the study conceptualizes "soft balancing" and strategic "hedging" as effective tools for middle powers navigating intensifying great power competition.

The three key conclusions can be drawn from this analysis. *First*, bilateral cooperation is primarily shaped by a strategic consensus in responding to China's assertive maritime actions. Both countries view unilateral actions that threaten freedom of navigation and regional stability as serious challenges, thereby promoting defense dialogues, capacity-building initiatives, and joint exercises. *Second*, Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy provides an institutional and value-based framework to support Vietnam in enhancing its maritime capabilities. Through official development assistance (ODA), patrol vessel transfers, technical cooperation,

and joint training programs, Japan has served as a critical enabler in strengthening Vietnam's ability to safeguard its maritime interests, while respecting Vietnam's "Four No's" defense policy principles. *Third*, this bilateral cooperation contributes significantly to shaping a broader regional security architecture. The partnership not only reinforces Vietnam's role within ASEAN but also promotes adherence to international law - particularly the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) - and supports multilateral mechanisms such as the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+).

Despite notable achievements, the relationship continues to face certain constraints, including geopolitical pressure from China, institutional limitations within ASEAN, differences in strategic priorities, and Japan's domestic resource constraints. However, the durability of this cooperation - underpinned by political trust, strategic complementarity, and shared values - indicates strong potential for long-term development. In the context of intensifying strategic rivalry in the Indo-Pacific, Japan - Vietnam maritime cooperation is likely to expand further, especially in areas such as non-traditional security, intelligence sharing, and regional capacity-building. These developments will remain instrumental in shaping a resilient, inclusive, and rules-based maritime order in the South China Sea and the broader Indo-Pacific region.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ASEAN: Association of South East Asian Nations
COC: Code of Conduct
ADMM+: ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus
AOIP: ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific
ODA: Official Development Assistance
IPD: Indo-Pacific Deployment
JMSDF: Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force
RCEP: Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
EEZ: Exclusive Economic Zone
ReCAAP: Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia
PCA: Permanent Court of Arbitration
SDF: Self-Defense Forces (Japan)
FOIP: Free and Open Indo-Pacific

JCG: Japan Coast Guard

UNCLOS: United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea

QUAD: Quadrilateral Security Dialogue

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

This manuscript has no conflicts of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

The author participated in the study design, coordination, and manuscript drafting.

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Điều hướng các mối đe dọa bất đối xứng: Vai trò của Nhật Bản trong việc tăng cường năng lực hàng hải của Việt Nam tại Biển Đông những thập niên đầu thế kỷ 21

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TÓM TẮT

Trong bối cảnh an ninh hàng hải tại Biển Đông ngày càng phức tạp do các tranh chấp chủ quyền chồng lấn và cạnh tranh chiến lược giữa các cường quốc, quan hệ hợp tác an ninh hàng hải giữa Nhật Bản và Việt Nam đã trở thành một trụ cột quan trọng trong chiến lược đối ngoại và quốc phòng của cả hai quốc gia. Nghiên cứu này tập trung phân tích các động lực chiến lược chính định hình quan hệ hợp tác an ninh hàng hải giữa Nhật Bản và Việt Nam tại Biển Đông trong những thập niên đầu thế kỷ XXI, đồng thời đánh giá tác động của mối quan hệ này đối với cấu trúc an ninh khu vực. Việc phân tích tập trung vào bốn cơ chế hợp tác chính: (1) đối thoại quốc phòng cấp cao; (2) hỗ trợ kỹ thuật và chuyển giao thiết bị; (3) huấn luyện và diễn tập chung; (4) hợp tác trong các lĩnh vực an ninh phi truyền thống như cứu nạn, chống cướp biển và ứng phó thảm họa. Đặc biệt, nghiên cứu xem xét vai trò trung gian của Nhật Bản trong việc hỗ trợ Việt Nam nâng cao năng lực hàng hải, trong khi vẫn tôn trọng nguyên tắc "bốn không" của chính sách quốc phòng Việt Nam. Kết quả cho thấy, hợp tác Nhật - Việt trong lĩnh vực an ninh hàng hải phản ánh sự hội tụ chiến lược nhằm duy trì tự do hàng hải, ứng phó với các hành vi đơn phương và củng cố trật tự khu vực dựa trên luật lệ. Mặc dù chịu ảnh hưởng từ rào cản thể chế, áp lực địa chính trị từ Trung Quốc và khác biệt trong ưu tiên chiến lược, mối quan hệ này vẫn được duy trì nhờ nền tảng chính trị ổn định và cam kết chung với luật pháp quốc tế. Các yếu tố này tạo điều kiện thuận lợi cho việc mở rộng hợp tác trong tương lai và đóng góp tích cực vào việc hình thành cấu trúc an ninh khu vực linh hoạt, bao trùm và dựa trên luật lệ, phù hợp với định hướng "Ấn Độ Dương - Thái Bình Dương Tự do và Mở rộng".

Từ khóa: hợp tác an ninh hàng hải, Nhật Bản, Việt Nam, Biển Đông, những thập niên đầu thế kỷ 21

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