

# Vietnam-Japan Relations in the New Context of Regional and World Politics

PHAM Quang Minh and PHAM Le Da Huong

## 地域政治と世界政治の新しい情勢における ベトナム – 日本関係

ファム・クワン・ミン、ファム・レー・ザ・フォン

In 2013 Vietnam and Japan are celebrating the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their diplomatic relationship. The main objective of this paper is to analyze this relationship, focusing on the factors that influence it. The paper argues that, faced with a new regional security environment, the two sides have to bolster their long-standing traditional relationship to serve their mutual interests. In order to do so, the first part of the paper will show the background of the Vietnam-Japan relationship, the second will analyze the changes of context, and the third part will point out what to do for a strategic partnership.

### 1. An overview of Vietnam-Japan relations

The Vietnam-Japan relationship can be broadly divided into three periods including the first period from ancient times to the nineteenth century, the second period, which lasted from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to 1973, and the third period, which is from 1973 until today. The historical documents traced the first contact between Vietnam and Japan back to the year 716 as the first Japanese, named Abe No Nakamaro (697–770), came to Giao Chau (former Vietnam, under Chinese occupation.)<sup>1)</sup>

The most important evidence of Vietnam-Japan relations that still continues today is the ancient town Hoi An in Quang Nam-Da Nang, center of Vietnam. In the time of expanding international trade between the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, many Japanese ships came to exchange with Vietnam through a northern port in Pho Hien and a central port in Hoi An. Vietnam-Japan trade relations achieved their peak during three early decades of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In Hoi An, Japanese traders established their residence in concentrated streets, competing with Chinese ones. According to Borri, each street had its own territory, own ruled mandarin and own customs. The same source said that in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century there were 60 Japanese families with more than 200 people living in Hoi An.<sup>2)</sup> If visitors come to Hoi An today, they still observe a wooden bridge named Japanese bridge (Cau Nhat Ban) that looks like typical Japanese architecture.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the relationship between Vietnam and Japan was marked by the so-called “Go East

movement” (Dong Du) initiated by a well-known Vietnamese patriot, Phan Boi Chau (1867–1940). Impressed and inspired by the successful reform of Meiji Emperor and the victory of Japan in the Russian-Japanese War (1905–1907), Phan Boi Chau and other Asian intellectuals turned to Japan for a new model of development and for support to fight against French colonialists. On February 23, 1905 Phan Boi Chau paid a visit to Japan with his two colleagues, where they witnessed the tremendous changes in Japanese society, and met some Japanese politicians like Okuma Shigenobu and Inukai Tsuyoshi. According to Prof. Shiraishi Masaya, “The first abroad visit helped Phan Boi Chau in widening his view, not limiting in his pure armed activity. He realized a large mobilized revolution should go hand in hand with economic renovation, publication of books and newspapers, establishment of associations to enhance the spirit of patriotism, and the feeling a vindictive hatred for enemy, political—cultural level among people. At the same time, Phan also realized that Vietnamese revolution needs the assent and support from progressive public opinion and world’s revolutionary movement.”<sup>3)</sup>

During the Dong Du Movement from 1905 to 1907 Phan Boi Chau could bring about 200 young Vietnamese to Japan to study in Japanese military schools until June 1907 as Japanese government decided to dissolve the movement and expel Phan Boi Chau himself and other Vietnamese students back from Japan.

After the end of the Dong Du Movement and Phan Boi Chau’s death in 1940, the history of Vietnam-Japan relations entered a new period during the Second World War. During this period Japan tried to establish the so-called “Great East Asia co-prosperous sphere,” and the whole of Southeast Asia including Vietnam was occupied from 1940 to 1945. Differently from other Southeast Asian countries, Japan did not wipe out the French administration but kept its existence parallel with Japanese military structure. This double exploitation from both Japanese and French forces was one among other factors leading to the death of nearly 2 million Vietnamese in 1945.<sup>4)</sup> Only under the impact of Japan’s surrender in the Second World War on August 15, 1945, could Vietnam proclaim its independence and establish the Democratic Republic of Vietnam on September 2, 1945.

During the First (1946–1954) and the Second (1954–1975) Indochina Wars, Japan had a relationship only with the southern part of Vietnam. However, eight months after the Paris agreement ending the war and establishing peace in Vietnam was signed, Vietnam and Japan decided to establish their diplomatic relations on September 21, 1973. It opened a new phase of Vietnam-Japan relations in a new unified Vietnam. By doing so Japan would like to follow a more independent and constructive foreign policy toward regional countries. To confirm its new strategy, while on a tour of Southeast Asia, on August 18, 1977, the Japanese Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda delivered a speech in Manila that later became known as Fukuda Doctrine in which he emphasized 1) Japan was committed to peace and would not assume any military role in the region; 2) Japan would like to cooperate with ASEAN and to promote “heart-to-heart” relations with Southeast Asian countries across politics, economics and culture; 3) Japan also pledged to pursue a relationship with Indochinese countries including Vietnam based on mutual understanding.<sup>5)</sup> However, due to Vietnam’s involvement in Cambodia, Japanese relations with Vietnam were at low ebb from 1979 until October 1991 as the Paris agreement on settlement of the Cambodian conflict was signed.

## 2. Vietnam-Japan relations in the new regional context

Since the end of the Cold War and the Cambodia conflict, Southeast Asia entered a new period of development. Politically, after a quarter century of development ASEAN had extended its membership only to six members after Brunei was invited into the association in 1984. In fact ASEAN is still divided between five founding members and Indochinese Communist countries, plus Myanmar. This situation reflected the legacy of the Cold War period. There was still distrust among nations. So the question is whether ASEAN as a regional organization could overcome this division? Realizing the importance of unity, ASEAN accepted Vietnam and Laos as observer countries in 1992. However, membership in ASEAN was a two-way process whereby the internal development of countries played an important if not decisive role. Faced with internal crises and external changes, all countries [in Southeast Asia] from Vietnam to Laos, and also Myanmar and Cambodia have carried out a series of reforms. As an outcome, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia were included into ASEAN in 1995, 1997 and 1999 respectively. Economically, ASEAN leaders also realized that, due to the Cold War circumstance, economic integration was neglected during its first two and a half decades of existence. That's why, in November 1992, at the fifth ASEAN Summit in Singapore, the leaders of ASEAN decided for the first time to establish the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA).<sup>6</sup> From a security perspective, after the end of the Vietnam War, a durable and sustainable peace seemed to be far away. The struggle for power between different forces in Cambodia was continuing; in the South China Sea there was a clash between China and other Southeast Asian countries. It seemed to be there was the so-called "power vacuum" situation in Southeast Asia as both superpowers, the US and the Soviet Union, could not maintain their presence here. The relations in Taiwan straits and on the Korean peninsula continued to be tense. Concerned with this new security environment, in 1993 ASEAN proposed for the first time to establish the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), aiming to promote confidence-building measures, enhance preventive diplomacy, and solve future conflicts between its members.<sup>7</sup>

Being a regional power, as mentioned above, Japan tried to be a bridge between ASEAN-6 and other non-ASEAN members through the Fukuda doctrine. After ten years of interruption, Japan launched for the first time a new "regional policy," the focus of which was sub-regions. In January 1993 the Forum for the Comprehensive Development of Indochina—an initiative proposed by Prime Minister Miyazawa—was established and served as a new mechanism of cooperation with Indochina, including Vietnam. It could be considered a continuation or revitalization of the Fukuda doctrine in the new context. Taking into account the reality of ASEAN enlargement from 6 to 10 members, a new mechanism of cooperation between Japan and the group of CLMV (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam) was initiated by the Ministry of Industry and Trade (MITI), whereby a Working Group of Economic Cooperation for Indochina and Myanmar was established. In 1997 this group was replaced by AEM-MITI Economic and Industrial Cooperation Committee. In the beginning, the main task of this committee was to help CLMV to become members, and then to fill the gap in development among new and old members of ASEAN.

The other important dimension of regional policy of Japan toward Southeast Asia was a new support for the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) based on the initiative of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in October 1992.

The main objectives of GMS were to reestablish cooperation and connectivity among countries of GMS, to build up cross-border infrastructure, to develop regional energy capacity, and to deal with common issues of the region like environmental and human resources. In March 1996 “A Special Committee to Propose Initiatives for GMS Development” with participation of different experts under direct management of JICA was established. In April 1995, the Mekong River Commission was established. If the old Mekong River Committee (established in 1957) considered projects of hydro-electricity and water management important, the new one focused on the objectives of equal, sustainable development and environmental protection for the Mekong Basin.

One objective of Japan’s relationship with ASEAN including Vietnam in this period was to promote South-South cooperation. This new concept served ASEAN necessity in some aspects, for example to overcome the Asian financial crisis of 1997–1998, to implement the Initiative for ASEAN Integration, and to develop Ayeyawadi-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS). Based on Prime Minister Koizumi’s commitment in 2006, the Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund was established with a donation of 7.5 billion Yen from Japan.<sup>8)</sup>

The other new dimension of Japan-ASEAN including Vietnam cooperation was a focus on large scale and cross-border projects, which impact not only Vietnam but also neighboring countries. In October 1998, for the first time a new idea on development of Economic Corridors (EC) was raised during the ministerial meetings on development of GMS and continued in the first summit of GMS in Phnom Penh in October 2002. During the last 10 years this idea was almost implemented and successfully contributed to development of ASEAN members. The North-South Economic Corridors (NSEC) comes from Thailand through Laos, Myanmar to Yunnan (China). The East-West Economic Corridor (EWEC) goes from the center of Vietnam through Laos and north-east of Thailand and ends in Eastern Myanmar. The Southern Economic Corridor (SEC) extends from South Vietnam through Cambodia to Thailand. Among these three economic corridors, Japan paid attention to EWEC and SEC, while China focused on NSEC.

In the framework of the EWEC, Japan provided assistance for expanding Danang Port, improving the highway from there to National Road Number 1, and building up the Hai Van tunnel connecting Danang with Hue. Within the SEC, Japan provided support for building up Cai Mep-Thi Vai Port.

In short, the initiated idea of the “developing triangle” by CLMV was an important chance for Japan to reconsider its regional policy toward Indochinese countries. Located within the poorest regions of three Indochina countries, the main objective of the project was to help people in reducing hunger, improving their living condition and developing infrastructure. The projects in such areas were priority of the Japanese government. However, faced with the regional reality, from a dialogue program between Japan-CLMV started in 2004, in 2008 Japan decided to readjust its program to focus on Mekong. So Japan-CLMV dialogue was replaced by Japan-Mekong dialogue. In fact, the developing triangle was an instrument of Japan in the struggle to compete with rising China. By the way, Japan considered GMS as consisting of 5 countries in Southeast Asian mainland but not China. Being afraid of the rise of China, the US government decided in July 2010 to launch for the first time the “US-Lower Mekong Initiative”.

### 3. Forging Vietnam-Japan strategic partnership

In 2009 Japan was Vietnam's second largest trade partner after China and its second largest importer after the United States. In 2010, the two-way trade was valued at 16 billion USD. Japan is the largest contributor of development assistance for Vietnam. Recently in December 2012 in the meeting of development sponsors for Vietnam, Japan committed to provide an ODA support at 2.6 billion USD for 2013. Japan is at the same time the third largest investor in Vietnam.<sup>9)</sup>

On October 19, 2006, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung signed a *Joint Statement toward a Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia*. This document stated that in "order to promote bilateral relations in an even more coordinated and effective manner, the two sides showed their willingness to foster all types of dialogue in the fields of diplomacy, security, economy and others."

In November 2007, during his official visit to Japan as President of Vietnam, Mr. Nguyen Minh Triet, together with Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda issued a joint statement including an *Agenda toward a Strategic Partnership between Japan and Vietnam*. The Vietnam-Japan strategic partnership is focused on seven agendas:

- Exchange, Cooperation in Policy Dialogue, Security and Defense
- Comprehensive Economic Partnership
- Improvement of the Legal Systems and Administrative Reforms
- Science and Technology
- Climate Change, Environment, Natural Resources and Energy
- Mutual Understanding between the Peoples of the Two Countries
- Cooperation in the International Arena

Later, as a result of the visit of Secretary General Nong Duc Manh to Japan in April 2009, *Japan-Vietnam Joint Statement on the Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia* was issued, whereby both sides agreed to "hold an annual meeting of the Japan-Vietnam Cooperation Committee," "strengthen the Deputy Foreign Ministerial Political Consultation" and, regarding security and defense, "promote furthermore the exchange at high level and strengthen consultation at Director-General level."

According to Professor Carlyle Thayer, the term strategic partner is applied to the states that have developed comprehensive bilateral relations with Vietnam from political-diplomatic, economic, science and technology, social-cultural to security and defense cooperation.<sup>10)</sup> However, the term strategic partnership and strategic cooperative partnership and other variants are flexible. The term strategic partner is a political term rather than a reality, and identifies states that Vietnam considers particular important to secure its national interests (Russia is a comprehensive strategic partnership; strategic cooperative partnerships are China and South Korea). According to Professor Yoshiharu Tsuboi, strategic partnership is not necessarily based on similarities of values and political systems. The strategic partnership bases as much on the common perception that the promotion of bilateral relations would bring benefits for both sides in the mid- and long-term. Therefore, the strength of relationships will serve the goal to achieve practical interests rather than sharing common values.<sup>11)</sup> In other words, strategic partners describes a new

perception and approach in Vietnam's external relations after more than twenty years of Doi Moi as Vietnam does not sign any agreement of alliance like Japan-US, or Korea-US.

In terms of politico-security cooperation with Japan, the two countries agreed on the following points of common interests. Firstly, both sides agreed to promoting non-proliferation and eradication of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). Secondly, faced with various increasing threats to non-traditional security, especially the problems of infectious diseases, both countries agreed to work closely with each other to fight against natural disaster, food crisis, and poverty. Thirdly, they agreed to the necessity of addressing non-traditional security challenges, including maritime security, environmental problems, human trafficking, energy security, information security and conflict prevention and post-conflict peace building. Fourthly, they ensured that the changing strategic balance among China, India, Japan, and the United States would not be detrimental to the stability and security of East Asia.

With regard to the last point, especially noteworthy is China's rapid military buildup and hard-line behavior in the region. Many observers in the world are now questioning if China, one of the biggest beneficiaries of the present world order, is really trying to transform it into another one. To cope with the changing strategic balance in East Asia, Japan and Vietnam would be able to work together in at least three fields: the involvement of the US, enhancement of defense capability, and deepening of economic cooperation. These suggestions are based on the reality that Vietnam now follows a multidirectional foreign policy, and Japan is an ally of the US. Recent development of the US-Vietnam cooperation in various fields is also encouraging. Due to the fact that there is a big gap of powers between ASEAN and China and limited defense cooperation among them, all countries in the region welcome the US presence in Asia-Pacific. The US presence can serve as a basis for making a code of conduct of behavior of the countries in the Eastern Sea. Because China always argued that the involvement of the US makes the situation in the Eastern Sea complicated, Japan and Vietnam should closely consult and cooperate to ensure the US involvement in the region is not detrimental to the rule-making process by the territorial claimants.

Besides the US engagement, it is also desirable for ASEAN and Vietnam to promote their military capacity. Their main objective is to persuade China not to use force and not to threaten to use force in solving the conflicts and thus China will not be able to achieve her operational objectives at low cost. And such a 'refusal' capability will make it difficult for China to coerce ASEAN countries.

It is also conceivable for Japan to promote its military relations with Vietnam in the interest of both sides and the whole region. There are some possibilities that both sides can consider including promotion of joint exercises for search and rescue operations. A small arms export as Japan has done with Indonesia could also contribute to stability and security in the region.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Vietnam and Japan are two countries that share many similarities in history, tradition, customs and culture. These commonalities and interactions could serve as a solid foundation for their profitable cooperation.

Since the end of the Cold War, and especially the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the political-security situation of East Asia has been changing tremendously. This includes the increase of nontraditional security issues, the

dispute over sovereignty in the Eastern Sea, the increasing engagement of the US, and last but not least, the rise of China.

Faced with these changes, Vietnam and Japan have to readjust their strategies by cooperating more closely with each other. The agreement of strategic partnership between Vietnam and Japan was clear evidence of these trends.

In the future, Vietnam and Japan should work more closely in some concrete plans such as promoting bilateral trade and investment, building up some high-technology parks, completing human resources training and cooperating in non-traditional security projects.

#### Notes

- 1) Doan Le Giang, "Abe no Nakamaro in Japan-China-Vietnam relations, in: *Journal of Japanese Studies*, no. 3, 1999, pp. 41–44.
- 2) Christopho Borri, *Xu Dang Trong nam 1621 (The Inner Area in 1621)*, Hochiminh Publishing House 1998, pp. 89–92.
- 3) Shiraishi Masaya, *Vietnamese Nationalism and its relations with Japan and Asia-Phan Boi Chau's Idea on World's Revolution*, Vol. 1, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi 2000, p. 366.
- 4) Van Tao and Furuta Mooto (eds.), *The famine of 1945 in Vietnam- The historical facts*, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi 1995.
- 5) Edstroem B, *Japan's Quest for a Role in the World*, Institute for Oriental Languages, University of Stockholm 1988, pp. 88–91.
- 6) See <http://www.aseansec.org>
- 7) See <http://www.aseansec.org>
- 8) Shiraishi Masaya, *Japan and GMS*, in: *Building up Vietnam-Japan Strategic Partnership- Content and Roadmap*, Encyclopedia Publishing House, Hanoi 2011, p. 78.
- 9) Japan committed to support Vietnam [www.vnexpress.net](http://www.vnexpress.net) on December 20, 2012.
- 10) Carlyle Thayer, *Forging Strategic Partnership*, Paper presented on the 4<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Vietnamese Studies, Hanoi 26–28 November 2012.
- 11) Yoshiharu Tsuboi, *Vietnam-Japan Relations*, Paper presented on the 4<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Vietnamese Studies, Hanoi 26–28 November 2012.