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## Shinzo Abe's Role in Strengthening Vietnam–Japan Defense Cooperation: Maritime Security and Coast Guard Diplomacy\*

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STRESZCZENIE

**Rola Shinzō Abe w umacnianiu współpracy obronnej między Wietnamem a Japonią: bezpieczeństwo morskie i dyplomacja straży przybrzeżnej**

Artykuł ukazuje rolę premiera Shinzō Abe podczas jego drugiej kadencji w zakresie wzmacniania współpracy obronnej i bezpieczeństwa między Wietnamem a Japonią w ramach dyplomacji straży przybrzeżnej. Dzięki swoim

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wybitnym osiągnięciom w dziedzinie polityki zagranicznej Shinzō Abe odegrał kluczową rolę w umacnianiu partnerstwa strategicznego między oboma krajami, tworząc solidne podstawy dla wszechstronnej i długoterminowej współpracy w dziedzinie obrony i bezpieczeństwa. Za jego rządów współpraca ta znacznie się rozszerzyła. Poza tradycyjnymi programami wymiany wojskowej i szkoleniowej, objęła nowe obszary, takie jak transfer technologii obronnych i bezpieczeństwo morskie. Ponadto Japonia wykazała istotne zaangażowanie we wspieraniu Wietnamu w rejonie Morza Południowochińskiego (Morza Wschodniego), przyczyniając się do ochrony interesów regionalnych Wietnamu. Wyniki badań ukazują, że polityka Shinzō Abe wywarła głęboki i trwały wpływ na umacniania bezpieczeństwa w regionie. Artykuł stanowi istotny wkład w zrozumienie współpracy w zakresie bezpieczeństwa morskiego między Wietnamem a Japonią w okresie urzędowania Shinzō Abe.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Shinzō Abe, Wietnam, Japonia, Morze Południowochińskie, dyplomacja straży przybrzeżnej

#### ABSTRACT

The article shows the role of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe during his second term in advancing defense and security cooperation between Vietnam and Japan as part of coast guard diplomacy. With his remarkable contributions to Japan's foreign policy, Abe played a pivotal role in consolidating the strategic partnership between the two nations, establishing a solid foundation for comprehensive and long-term collaboration as regards defense and security. Under his leadership, bilateral cooperation expanded significantly. Beyond traditional military and training exchange programs, it expanded into new areas, such as defense technology transfer and maritime security. Furthermore, Japan demonstrated a strong commitment to supporting Vietnam in the South China Sea (East Sea), thus contributing to the protection of Vietnam's regional interests. The findings indicate that Shinzō Abe's policies had a profound and lasting impact on strengthening regional security. This article makes a significant contribution to understanding maritime security cooperation between Vietnam and Japan during Shinzō Abe's tenure.

**Keywords:** Shinzo Abe, Vietnam, Japan, East Sea, Coast Guard Diplomacy

#### Introduction

Vietnam–Japan relations, despite their long historical evolution, were only officially established on September 21, 1973, marking the beginning of extensive bilateral cooperation<sup>1</sup>. In the following decades, this relationship was mainly driven

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<sup>1</sup> Japan was the first country in the G7 group to receive the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam on an official visit in 1995. In addition,

by economic and political factors, in particular Japan's provision of official development assistance (ODA) to Vietnam and support for the country's industrialization. However, major changes in the international and regional context since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century opened up new opportunities for relations between the two countries, shifting from economic cooperation to a comprehensive strategic relationship, especially in the areas of defense and security. One of the important turning points in strengthening Vietnam–Japan relations was the transformation in Japan's foreign policy, particularly through the Fukuda Doctrine adopted by Japan in the 1970s<sup>2</sup>. This doctrine emphasized Japan's role in maintaining peace and stability in Southeast Asia and affirmed Vietnam as an important partner in Japan's strategy in the region<sup>3</sup>. Relations between the two countries reached a series of milestones, from the establishment of “Reliable and long-term stable partnership” in

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Japan is also a G7 country that pioneered the establishment of a strategic partnership with Vietnam in 2009 and recognized Vietnam's market economy status in 2011. *Thúc đẩy quan hệ đối tác chiến lược sâu rộng Việt Nam – Nhật Bản phát triển toàn diện* [Promoting the comprehensive development of the Vietnam–Japan Extensive Comprehensive Strategic Partnership], <https://nhandan.vn/thuc-day-quan-he-doi-tac-chien-luoc-sau-rong-viet-nam-nhat-ban-phat-trien-toan-dien-post620952.html> (accessed 10 March 2025).

<sup>2</sup> The Fukuda Doctrine, presented in a speech by Prime Minister of Japan Takeo Fukuda in 1977 in Manila, marked an important turning point in Japan's foreign policy towards Southeast Asia. This doctrine rested on three main pillars: economic cooperation, political dialogue and regional security. In its first phase (1977–1978), Japan pledged to promote economic cooperation through aid and investment, while maintaining close political relations with countries in the region. Phase 2 (1979–1989) saw Japan fulfilling its commitments to security and development cooperation, particularly in supporting infrastructure projects. The Fukuda Doctrine not only strengthened Japan's position in Southeast Asia but also created an environment of peace and stability, promoting economic and political development in the region. It also reflected a shift in Japan's foreign policy, from a post-war nation to a key strategic partner in Asia. See T. Yano, *The “Fukuda Doctrine” and Its Implications for Southeast Asia (1978)*, [in:] *Turning Points and Transitions: Selections from Southeast Asian Affairs 1974–2018*, ed. S.D. Cook, Singapore 2018, pp. 54–59; P.E. Lam, *Japan's Relations with Southeast Asia The Fukuda Doctrine and Beyond*, London 2013; H.M. Hang, *Học thuyết Fukuda trong thập niên 1970 và sự tìm kiếm vai trò chính trị của Nhật Bản ở Đông Nam Á trong thời kỳ Chiến tranh Lạnh* [The Fukuda Doctrine in the 1970s and Japan's Search for Political Role in Southeast Asia during the Cold War], “Journal of Northeast Asian Studies” 2011, no. 2(120), pp. 27–35.

<sup>3</sup> Japan International Cooperation Agency, *Vietnam–Japan Partnership from the Past to the Future*, [https://www.jica.go.jp/Resource/vietnam/english/office/others/c8h0vm0000cydg8v-att/general\\_04\\_01\\_vn.pdf](https://www.jica.go.jp/Resource/vietnam/english/office/others/c8h0vm0000cydg8v-att/general_04_01_vn.pdf) (accessed 10 March 2025).

2002, through “Strategic partnership for peace and prosperity in Asia” in 2009<sup>4</sup>, to “Extensive strategic partnership for peace and prosperity in Asia” in 2014, when relations between the two countries reached a new height<sup>5</sup>. These milestones represent strong and comprehensive development of bilateral relations, especially in the context of an increasingly complex regional security landscape that requires close cooperation between countries in the region.

<sup>4</sup> Vietnam and Japan officially established diplomatic relations in 1973. After Japan decided to reopen aid to Vietnam in 1992, relations between two countries grew, with mutual understanding and trust strengthened. This relationship made an important contribution to the development of each country and promoted peace and prosperity in Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific region. In April 2002, the two countries established the “Reliable and Long-term Stable Partnership”, creating a solid foundation for comprehensive and sustainable cooperation. During the talks between General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam Nong Duc Manh and Prime Minister of Japan Taro Aso in 2009, the two sides agreed to develop a strategic partnership for peace and prosperity in Asia. In 2010, during the visit of Prime Minister of Japan Naoto Kan, two countries signed the Joint Statement on the Development of this Strategic Partnership. See *50 năm quan hệ Việt Nam – Nhật Bản – Một số kết quả nổi bật* [50 Years of Vietnam–Japan Relations: Some Notable Achievements], <https://www xaydungdang.org.vn/quoc-te/50-nam-quan-he-viet-nam-nhat-ban-mot-so-ket-qua-noi-bat-20226> (accessed 10 March 2025); *Tuyên bố chung Việt Nam – Nhật Bản về quan hệ đối tác chiến lược vì hòa bình và phồn vinh ở châu Á* [Japan–Vietnam Joint Statement on Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia], <https://nhandan.vn/tuyen-bo-chung-viet-nam-nhat-ban-ve-quan-he-doi-tac-chien-luoc-vi-hoa-binh-va-phon-vinh-o-chau-a-post531966.html> (accessed 10 March 2025); *Tuyên bố chung Việt Nam – Nhật Bản về quan hệ đối tác chiến lược vì hoà bình và phồn vinh ở châu Á*.

<sup>5</sup> At the invitation of Japan, President Truong Tan Sang paid an official visit to Japan from March 16 to 19, 2014. As part of the visit, on March 18, 2014, President Truong Tan Sang and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe held high-level talks, agreeing to elevate Vietnam–Japan relations to “Extensive Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia”. The Joint Statement was signed on March 18, and addressed the following areas: (1) Political security, focusing on political cooperation, defense, maritime security, public safety, justice and non-traditional security issues; (2) Economy, including supporting industrialization, promoting ODA, public-private cooperation, improving the investment environment, trade, agriculture, forestry and fisheries, reform of banks and state-owned enterprises, energy, science and technology; (3) Cultural and people-to-people exchanges; (4) Regional and international cooperation. This statement represents an important step forward in strengthening the strategic relationship between the two countries. *Tuyên bố chung Việt Nam – Nhật Bản về quan hệ đối tác chiến lược vì hòa bình và phồn vinh ở châu Á* [Japan–Vietnam Joint Statement on the Establishment of the Extensive Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia], <https://mofa.gov.vn/tin-chi-tiet/chi-tiet/tuyen-bo-chung-viet-nam-nhat-ban-ve-thiet-lap-quan-he-doi-tac-chien-luoc-sau-rong-vi-hoa-binh-va-thinh-vuong-o-chau-a-589.html> (accessed 10 March 2025).

During Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's tenure (2012–2020), Vietnam–Japan relations not only saw an expansion of economic and development cooperation but also extended to include defense and security, with a particular emphasis on maritime security and coast guard diplomacy. Abe's proactive and decisive foreign policy played a pivotal role in promoting defense cooperation between the two nations, especially amid growing tensions in the East Sea and in light of the need for a more stable security environment in the Indo-Pacific region. This strategic reorientation was manifested not only through high-level commitments but also through tangible initiatives intended to protect shared interests in freedom of navigation and regional stability.

In this context, Vietnam's growing cooperation with Japan in maritime security represents both a strategic adaptation and a practical necessity in response to the evolving regional security landscape. As China's maritime assertiveness intensified, Vietnam sought to diversify its security partnerships to avoid dependence on any single power, in line with its long-standing policy of diversification and multilateralization of foreign relations and the defense principle of maintaining strategic autonomy<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, Vietnam's proactive foreign and defense policy framework reflects a strong commitment to strategic autonomy and balanced diplomacy. A major shift in Vietnam's strategic thinking was articulated in the Eighth Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam (Resolution No. 8-NQ/TW, 2003) on the "Strategy for Safeguarding the Homeland in the New Situation"<sup>7</sup>. The Resolution institutionalized a more flexible and adaptive approach through the principle of "struggle and cooperation" (vừa hợp tác, vừa đấu tranh), recognizing that a country could simultaneously be a partner in one domain and a competitor in another, depending on national interests. Complementing this doctrine, Vietnam upholds the "Four No's" defense policy: (1) no military alliances, (2) no foreign military bases on its territory, (3) no alignment with one country against another and (4) no use or threat of force in international relations. This strategic doctrine provides

<sup>6</sup> Ministry of National Defence of Vietnam, *Vietnam National Defense White Paper 2019*, Hanoi 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Communist Party of Vietnam, *Nghị quyết Trung ương 8 (khóa XIII) về Chiến lược bảo vệ Tổ quốc trong tình hình mới* [Resolution No. 8-NQ/TW on the Strategy for Safeguarding the Homeland in the New Situation], Hanoi 2003.

the foundation for Vietnam's foreign policy of independence, self-reliance, and balance, ensuring that its growing cooperation with Japan under the Abe administration is consistent with its national defense principles and long-term security strategy<sup>8</sup>. Japan, under Abe's "Proactive Contribution to Peace" policy, emerged as a trusted and capable partner, sharing Vietnam's interests in upholding international law, freedom of navigation, and a rules-based regional order. Japan's sustained advocacy for the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and peaceful dispute settlement further reinforced this strategic alignment (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2016).

The Abe administration advanced this partnership through a series of substantive maritime security initiatives. Japan provided Vietnam with six used patrol vessels in 2015 to strengthen maritime law enforcement capacity, followed by an ODA loan of 36.6 billion yen in 2020 for building six new large patrol vessels under the Maritime Security and Safety Capacity Improvement Project<sup>9</sup>. These measures were complemented by training programs, expert exchanges, and joint search-and-rescue exercises, enabling Vietnam to enhance maritime surveillance, response capabilities, and the application of international maritime law<sup>10</sup>. Japan also supported human resource development and institutional capacity-building, assisting the Vietnam Coast Guard Academy and research institutes in integrating international maritime law standards into their training and operations.

<sup>8</sup> Viet Nam News, *Việt Nam Consistent with "Four No's" Defence Policy: Minister*, <https://vietnamnews.vn/opinion/591586/viet-nam-consistent-with-four-no-s-defence-policy-minister.html> (accessed 17 October 2025).

<sup>9</sup> Japan International Cooperation Agency, *Signing of Japanese ODA Loan Agreement with Viet Nam: Maritime Security and Safety Capacity Improvementa Project*, [https://www.jica.go.jp/english/news/press/2020/20200730\\_31\\_en.html](https://www.jica.go.jp/english/news/press/2020/20200730_31_en.html) (accessed 10 October 2025); Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia, *Vietnam-Japan Relations under the Abe Administration*, <https://kyotoreview.org/issue-34/Vietnam-Japan-relations-under-the-abe-administration> (accessed 10 October 2025); Naval News, *Japan to Build Six Patrol Ships for Vietnam's Coast Guard*, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2020/08/japan-to-build-six-patrol-ships-for-vietnams-coast-guard/> (accessed 10 October 2025).

<sup>10</sup> Vietnam News, *Vietnam Coast Guard, JICA Office Strengthen Cooperation*, <https://vietnamnews.vn/politics-laws/1719055/viet-nam-coast-guard-jica-office-strengthen-cooperation.html> (accessed 10 October 2025); People's Army Newspaper Online, *Vietnam, Japan Expand Cooperation in Maritime Law Enforcement*, <https://en.qdnd.vn/military/intl-relations-and-cooperation/Vietnam-Japan-expand-cooperation-in-maritime-law-enforcement-576123> (accessed 10 October 2025).

At the diplomatic level, Abe's Japan actively supported Vietnam and ASEAN in regional and global forums such as the Shangri-La Dialogue, the East Asia Summit (EAS), and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), emphasizing the principles of respect for international law, freedom of navigation, and the early conclusion of the Code of Conduct (COC) in the East Sea<sup>11</sup>. Through these wide-ranging initiatives, Japan not only demonstrated its strategic engagement in Southeast Asia but also bolstered Vietnam's capacity to manage maritime challenges independently, marking the rise of coast guard diplomacy as a key pillar of the Vietnam–Japan strategic partnership.

In summary, the evolution of Vietnam–Japan relations from economic cooperation to a comprehensive strategic partnership reflects both the structural transformation of the regional security environment and the growing strategic convergence between the two nations. Under Abe's leadership, Japan's foreign policy underwent a profound shift – from a traditional focus on economic diplomacy to a proactive and multidimensional engagement combining defense, security, and maritime cooperation. Through initiatives such as the provision of patrol vessels, capacity-building programs, and advocacy for a rules-based order in the East Sea, Abe not only reinforced Japan's strategic presence in Southeast Asia but also strengthened Vietnam's maritime security capabilities and diplomatic leverage.

This article argues that Shinzo Abe played a decisive role in transforming Vietnam–Japan relations into a comprehensive framework of defense and coast guard diplomacy, where maritime cooperation became a central pillar of mutual trust and regional stability. By analyzing Japan's strategic motivations, Vietnam's reciprocal responses, and the tangible outcomes of bilateral maritime collaboration, the study seeks to clarify how Abe's proactive foreign policy reconfigured the security architecture of the East Sea and contributed to strengthening Vietnam's position within the regional order.

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<sup>11</sup> T. Shoji, *Japan's Security Policy on ASEAN – On the 50<sup>th</sup> Year of Friendship and Cooperation*. Sasakawa Peace Foundation, [https://www.spf.org/iina/en/articles/shoji\\_17.html](https://www.spf.org/iina/en/articles/shoji_17.html) (accessed 10 October 2025); N. Hanh, *Maritime Capacity-Building Cooperation between Japan and Vietnam*, "ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute Perspective" 2021, no. 148, pp. 1–10.

## 1. Promoting the development of a foundation for defense and security cooperation

During his first term of office as prime minister, Abe made important contributions to furthering and promoting cooperation between Vietnam and Japan. In 2006, the two countries issued a joint statement on the establishment of a strategic partnership for peace and prosperity in the Asian region, marking an important turning point in bilateral diplomatic relations. Following Abe's re-election on December 26, 2012, Vietnam–Japan relations continued to expand and consolidate in a number of areas, particularly with respect to defense and security.

The first and arguably most significant contribution during Abe's second term was to raise Vietnam–Japan relations to a new level, creating a solid foundation for defense and security cooperation between the two countries. When choosing Vietnam as his first foreign visit at the beginning of his second term of office, Abe demonstrated that Japan prioritized the relationship with Vietnam in its foreign policy. Abe stated: "For Japan, Vietnam is an important partner with shared regional and economic interests"<sup>12</sup>. That decision stemmed not only from the mutual interests of both parties but also from Abe's personal affection and regard for Vietnam. On January 16, 2017, during his official visit to Vietnam, Abe declared: "I attach great importance to my affection and relationship with Vietnam and that is the reason why I chose Vietnam as one of the four countries I visited earlier this year. Four years ago, Vietnam was also the country I visited for the first time after I took office as prime minister"<sup>13</sup>. After his visits, he actively promoted high-level exchange activities and met with heads of state as well as leaders of ministries and government agencies, thereby reaching bilateral cooperation agreements in many areas. Following the initial affirmation of the value each country placed on the

<sup>12</sup> S. Masaya, *Quan hệ đối tác chiến lược Nhật Bản – Việt Nam: Quá trình hình thành và triển vọng* [Japan–Vietnam Strategic Partnership: Formation Process and Prospects], [in:] *History, Culture and Cultural Diplomacy: The Vitality of Vietnam–Japan Relations in the New International and Regional Context*, Hanoi 2014, p. 330.

<sup>13</sup> D. Ngoc, *Việt Nam – Nhật Bản ký 6 văn kiện hợp tác* [Vietnam–Japan signed 6 cooperation documents], <https://nld.com.vn/thoi-su-trong-nuoc/viet-nam-nhat-ban-ky-6-van-kien-hop-tac-20170116225634651.htm> (accessed 10 March 2025).

other, Abe, guided by his long-term vision, worked with President Truong Tan Sang to comprehensively transform Vietnam–Japan relations by raising them to a new level through the Joint Statement on “Extensive Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia”<sup>14</sup>. This affirmed “political trust and reflected extensive development between the two countries in all areas, in line with their fundamental and long-term interests, meeting the aspirations of their citizens, contributing to peace, stability, cooperation and development in the region and in the world”<sup>15</sup>. Subsequently, *the Joint Vision on Vietnam–Japan Relations* signed by Abe and General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam Nguyen Phu Trong in 2015, continued to promote and solidify the extensive strategic partnership between Vietnam and Japan. At the same time, this statement was an affirmation of the value the two countries placed on their bilateral relationship as well as their commitment to pursue it. Accordingly, Japan attaches great importance to developing relations with Vietnam as a key partner in the region while Vietnam considers Japan to be a leading long-term partner<sup>16</sup>. In addition to the visits, the commitments reflected in the joint statements between the two countries issued during Abe’s tenure, Emperor Akihito and the Empress paid their first historic visit to Vietnam in March 2017<sup>17</sup>. As the emperor embodies the Japanese

<sup>14</sup> Building on the bilateral cooperation strengthened since the establishment of diplomatic relations, the two sides resolved to establish the “Extensive Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia”. The two leaders agreed that it not only reflected deep political trust but also demonstrated the comprehensive development of bilateral relations in all areas. This is in line with the long-term and fundamental interests of both sides, meeting the aspirations of people of the two countries and contributing to peace, stability, cooperation and development in the region and in the world. The Joint Statement marks an important turning point in Vietnam–Japan relations, opening a new phase towards the goal of peace and prosperity in the Asian region. See *Tuyên bố chung Việt Nam – Nhật Bản về thiết lập quan hệ đối tác chiến lược sâu rộng vì hòa bình và thịnh vượng ở châu Á* [Japan–Vietnam Joint Statement on the Establishment of the Extensive Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia], <https://baochinhpvu.vn/tuyen-bo-chung-ve-viec-nang-cap-quan-he-viet-nam-nhat-ban-len-doi-tac-chien-luoc-toan-dien-vi-hoa-binh-va-thinh-vuong-tai-chau-a-va-tren-the-gioi-102231127222926484.htm> (accessed 10 March 2025).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> On March 2017, during one of his final overseas trips as Emperor of Japan, Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko made a State visit to Vietnam. This historic visit not only contributed to strengthening mutual trust and understanding

state, his visit represented recognition of Vietnam is an important partner for Japan<sup>18</sup>. These advances laid a solid institutional foundation for the development of Vietnam–Japan relations in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond.

In addition to elevating Vietnam–Japan relations, thereby providing a basis for cooperation across a range of areas, including defense and security, Abe also made a significant contribution to the entrenchment of trust between the two countries through support for Vietnam’s role and stature and by coordination with its leaders on many key issues at international conferences and multilateral forums. Accordingly, Abe invited Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc to attend the expanded G7 Summit in May 2016 and the G20 Summit in June 2019 as well as proactively supported Vietnam in assuming the role of ASEAN Chairmanship 2020 and Non-Permanent Member of the United Nations Security Council for the 2020–2021 term. In Abe’s view, such events were considered “a recognition of Vietnam’s enhanced standing in the international community”<sup>19</sup>. Abe’s efforts to promote Vietnam’s broader participation in international and regional forums as well as his support for Vietnam in assuming responsibilities in international organizations contributed to the consolidation of political trust between the leaders and the people of the two countries. This was regarded as an opportunity to advance comprehensive cooperation, particularly in the areas of politics, diplomacy, defense and security between

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between the two countries but also promoted the development of the Vietnam–Japan partnership more comprehensively. Thereby, the visit strengthened the bonds between the two countries and fulfilled their aspirations, opening up the prospect of extensive cooperation in many areas. The visit took place from February 28 to March 5, 2017. See *Nhà vua Nhật Bản và Hoàng hậu thăm Việt Nam* [Emperor and Empress of Japan Visit Vietnam], <https://baochinhphu.vn/nha-vua-nhat-ban-va-hoang-hau-tham-viet-nam-102216997.htm> (accessed 10 March 2025).

<sup>18</sup> *Những dấu ấn trong quan hệ Việt Nam–Nhật Bản dưới thời cố Thủ tướng Abe Shinzo* [Marks in Vietnam–Japan Relations under the Late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe], <https://kinhhtedothi.vn/nhung-dau-an-trong-quan-he-viet-nam-nhat-ban-duoi-thoi-co-thu-tuong-abe-shinzo.html> (accessed 10 March 2025).

<sup>19</sup> *Cựu Thủ tướng Abe Shinzo – Người góp phần nâng tầm quan hệ Việt Nam – Nhật Bản* [Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe – The Person Who Contributed to Elevating Vietnam–Japan Relations], <https://vtv.vn/the-gioi/cuu-thu-tuong-abe-shinzo-nguoi-gop-phan-nang-tam-quan-he-viet-nam-nhat-ban-20220709060640047.htm> (accessed 10 March 2025).

the two countries as well as at the regional and international level, on the basis of the joint statement already established between Vietnam and Japan.

In addition to elevating Vietnam–Japan relations and fostering mutual understanding during his tenure, Abe helped put in place a framework for cooperation in defense and security. In this regard, three significant statements proved instrumental in defining the trajectory of Vietnam–Japan relations: *Japan–Vietnam Joint Statement on the Establishment of the Extensive Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia* (2014), *Joint Vision Statement on Vietnam–Japan Relations* (2015), *Joint Statement on Deepening the Japan–Vietnam Extensive Strategic Partnership* (2017). Through these legal documents, Abe and his Vietnamese counterparts set out a shared basis for defense and security cooperation, maintaining existing practices such as high-level visits and exchanges between the leaders of the two countries as well as consultative mechanisms such as the Vietnam–Japan Cooperation Committee at the Foreign Ministerial level, Japan–Vietnam Security Dialogue at the Deputy Ministerial level and Strategic Partnership Dialogue at the Deputy Foreign Ministerial level<sup>20</sup>. In these three documents, many additional areas were identified and incorporated into the framework of bilateral relations, including maritime security, naval cooperation, non-traditional security issues and participation in international initiatives<sup>21</sup>. The continued maintenance of traditional approaches together with the introduction of new ones contributed to establishing a basis for Vietnam and Japan to pursue defense and security cooperation during Abe's tenure and in subsequent periods. Such cooperation has since been governed by the agreements reached during his tenure.

In response to changing circumstances following his return to office, Abe sought to further strengthen Vietnam–Japan relations, reinforcing political trust and refining defense and security arrangements within the existing legal framework. This marked one of the most consequential aspects of Abe's policy towards Vietnam during this period.

<sup>20</sup> *Japan–Vietnam Joint Statement on the Establishment of the Extensive Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia.*

<sup>21</sup> *Joint Statement on Deepening the Vietnam–Japan Extensive Strategic Partnership.*

## 2. New directions in defense and security cooperation

In line with the overall development of Vietnam–Japan relations during Abe’s tenure, defense and security cooperation expanded to encompass new areas, evolving into a more comprehensive framework. This, in turn, strengthened both countries’ national standing and their role in regional affairs.

First, in addition to the established practice of high-level bilateral visits, Abe initiated discussions and sought consensus from his counterparts on strengthening exchanges between Vietnam and Japan. Accordingly, with regard to defense and security, the two sides agreed to conduct exchanges between their units, including visits to Vietnam by ships and aircraft of the Japan Self-Defense Forces<sup>22</sup>. This proposal of the Abe administration was reflected in joint statements of the two countries and became a major and recurring component in defense cooperation. From 2012 to 2020, mutual visits by warships became regular and intensified over time. Japanese warships visiting Vietnam included three destroyers named JS Hamagiri (DD155), JS Sawayuki (DD125) and JS Asayuki (DD132) to Hai Phong (2012)<sup>23</sup>; the warship Kojima to Da Nang (2013)<sup>24</sup>,

<sup>22</sup> *Tuyên bố chung Việt Nam – Nhật Bản* [Japan–Vietnam Joint Statement], <https://phambinhminh.chinhphu.vn/tuyen-bo-chung-viet-nam-nhat-ban-10537203.htm> (accessed 10 March 2025).

<sup>23</sup> The destroyer squadron of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF), comprising three escort destroyers – JS Hamagiri (DD155), JS Sawayuki (DD125) and JS Asayuki (DD132) – each displacing approximately 3,000 tons, was equipped with short-range missiles, torpedoes, various artillery, helicopters, and carried a crew of 600 officers and sailors. The visit of Japanese naval vessels to Hai Phong city served as an opportunity to enhance friendly relations, cooperation, and mutual understanding, contributing to stability in the East Sea and in the region. While symbolic, the visits of Japanese warships were indicative of Japan’s intention to further tighten friendly relations, mutual understanding and trust between the people and armies of the two countries in general and the two navies in particular. See N.D. Binh, N.V. Tung, *Thành tựu hợp tác về quốc phòng giữa Việt Nam và Nhật Bản những năm đầu thế kỷ XXI* [Achievements in Defense Cooperation between Vietnam and Japan in the Early Years of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century], <https://tapchilichsudang.vn/thanh-tuu-hop-tac-ve-quoc-phong-giua-viet-nam-va-nhat-ban-nhung-nam-dau-the-ky-xxi.html#:~:text=N%C4%83m%202012%2C%203%20t%C3%A0u%20khu,qu%C3%A2n%20nh%C3%A2n%20d%C3%A2n%20Vi%E1%BB%87t%20Nam> (accessed 10 March 2025).

<sup>24</sup> On the morning of July 30, 2013, the Japan Coast Guard training vessel KOJIMA docked at Tien Sa port and visited Da Nang city. That visit took place as the two countries were organizing a number of activities to celebrate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary

the training vessel Kojima to Da Nang (2016)<sup>25</sup>, the helicopter destroyer JS Izumo to Cam Ranh (2017)<sup>26</sup>, the training vessel Kojima to Da Nang (2018)<sup>27</sup>, the training submarine Kuroshio to Cam Ranh (2018)<sup>28</sup>, the helicopter destroyer JS Izumo to Cam Ranh

of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Vietnam and Japan. It followed a previous visit of the Japan Coast Guard ships and aircraft to Vietnam and facilitate the exchange of experience between the Japan Coast Guard and the Vietnam Coast Guard. See *Tàu Cảnh sát biển Nhật Bản thăm Đà Nẵng* [Japan Coast Guard Ship Visits Da Nang], <https://baotintuc.vn/thoi-su/tau-ca-nh-sat-bien-nhat-ban-tham-da-nang-20130730101914448.htm> (accessed 10 March 2025).

<sup>25</sup> This was the second visit of Kojima training vessel of the Japan Coast Guard to Vietnam. Both the Vietnam Coast Guard and the Japan Coast Guard are active members of the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) as well as participating in the Heads of Asian Coast Guard Agencies Meeting (HACGAM). This visit created an opportunity for officers and crew members of two forces to interact, thereby promoting close cooperation in improving maritime law enforcement capacity. See *Tàu huấn luyện Kojima của Nhật Bản thăm TP Đà Nẵng* [Japan's Training Vessel Kojima Visits Da Nang City], <https://vov.vn/quan-su-quoc-phong/viet-nam/tau-huan-luyen-kojima-cua-nhat-ban-tham-tp-da-nang-533968.vov> (accessed 10 March 2025).

<sup>26</sup> The JS Izumo (DDH-183) is the lead ship of its class of helicopter carriers, named after Japan's Izumo Prefecture. As part of the Pacific Partnership 2017 (PP17) program in Khanh Hoa Province, the JS Izumo participated in exchange activities, including seminars and training sessions on humanitarian assistance, disaster relief while also improving the capacity of coastal rescue forces in Nha Trang city. The JS Izumo is capable of carrying up to 28 helicopters and has five landing spots on the deck. With strong anti-submarine capabilities, the ship is also fully equipped with resources to serve as a command center and provide support in humanitarian disaster situations. See *Hình ảnh tàu chiến lớn nhất của Nhật Bản tại cảng Cam Ranh* [Image of Japan's Largest Warship at Cam Ranh Port], <https://vietnamnet.vn/hinh-anh-tau-chien-lon-nhat-cua-nhat-ban-tai-cang-cam-ranh-373983.html> (accessed 10 March 2025).

<sup>27</sup> The visit of the training vessel Kojima to Da Nang was part of a series of naval exchange activities between Vietnam and Japan held on the occasion of the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries (1973–2018). This was not only an important milestone in bilateral defense relations but also demonstrated Japan's strong commitment to enhancing cooperation with Vietnam. That visit also implemented an agreement between the prime ministers of the two nations, in which Japan pledged to support Vietnam through a project to build new patrol vessels and other forms of cooperation. See *Tàu huấn luyện Kojima...*

<sup>28</sup> From 17 to 21 September 2018, the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force training submarine Kuroshio, with a crew led by Colonel Ueta Yasuteru, Commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Submarine Training Unit, docked at Cam Ranh port. This marked an important milestone in enhancing understanding and trust between Vietnam People's Navy and the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force. That visit not

(2019)<sup>29</sup> and the minesweepers Bungo and Takashima to Da Nang (2019)<sup>30</sup>. In turn, the Vietnam People's Navy's guided-missile frigate Gepard 015 – Tran Hung Dao (Ship 015) visited Japan (2018)<sup>31</sup>. In addition to strengthening mutual understanding and trust between the people and armed forces of the two countries, particularly their navies, the visits also facilitated expertise-sharing and the improvement of capabilities, especially those of Vietnam. At the same time, this activity reflected an increased presence of the two countries in bilateral and regional affairs.

Abe also reinforced defense and security cooperation between the two countries by proposing, together with Vietnam's leaders, more extensive bilateral engagement on humanitarian issues. In particular, Japan committed to supporting Vietnam in overcoming the consequences of the war. In the *Japan–Vietnam Joint*

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only strengthened defense cooperation between the two countries but also expanded cooperation in naval activities. See *Tàu ngầm huấn luyện Kuroshio của Lực lượng Tự vệ trên biển Nhật Bản thăm Việt Nam* [Kuroshio Training Submarine of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force Visits Vietnam], <https://www.qdnd.vn/chinh-tri/tin-tuc/tau-ngam-huan-luyen-kuroshio-cua-luc-luong-tu-ve-tren-bien-nhat-ban-tham-viet-nam-549748> (accessed 10 March 2025).

<sup>29</sup> As part of the 2019 Indo-Pacific Deployment (IPD) program, the helicopter destroyers IZUMO and MURASAME of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force visited Cam Ranh International Port. In particular, this visit marked the first time that Vietnam People's Navy and the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force jointly organized training programs. The activities included joint exercises on formation maneuvers and communication between Vietnamese naval vessels and IZUMO and MURASAME in order to enhance cooperation and experience-sharing between the two navies. See *Tàu hộ vệ trực thăng IZUMO và tàu hộ vệ MURASAME thăm hữu nghị Cảng Quốc tế Cam Ranh* [IZUMO Helicopter Destroyer and MURASAME Helicopter Destroyer Visit Cam Ranh International Port], [https://www.vn.emb-japan.go.jp/itpr\\_ja/TauhovelizumovaMurasamethamcangCamranh.html](https://www.vn.emb-japan.go.jp/itpr_ja/TauhovelizumovaMurasamethamcangCamranh.html) (accessed 10 March 2025).

<sup>30</sup> In December 2019, the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force minesweepers Bungo and Takashima visited Da Nang. In addition to being the first exchange on underwater mine clearance, that visit formed part of a training program coordinated with the navies of countries in the Indian Ocean region intended to enhance the operational capabilities of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force and strengthen coordination with other navies. See N.D. Binh, N.V. Tung, *op. cit.*

<sup>31</sup> In October 2018, the Vietnam People's Navy's guided-missile frigate Gepard 015-Tran Hung Dao visited Yokosuka and Sakai cities (Japan). This was the first time a Vietnamese navy ship had visited Japan. N.T. Trung, P.T.K. Thoa, *Quan hệ quốc phòng Việt Nam – Nhật Bản: Tăng tốc hợp tác trong giai đoạn mới* [Vietnam–Japan Defense Relations: Accelerating Cooperation in the New Era], “HUFLIT Journal of Science” 2022, no. 6(4), pp. 36–37.

*Statement* dated May 31, 2018 between Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and President Tran Dai Quang, both sides agreed to “promote cooperation in addressing the war consequences through the clearance of remnants of landmines and assistance to the victims of dioxin and landmines in Vietnam”<sup>32</sup>. Other humanitarian activities, such as search and rescue operations, were also incorporated into bilateral cooperation at the initiative of the prime minister and his counterparts. The inclusion of these areas in the strategic cooperation further broadened Vietnam–Japan relations. At the same time, the joint statements recorded the two sides’ agreement to expand cooperation to non-traditional security matters that had not been covered in earlier strategic arrangements. Accordingly, Vietnam and Japan resolved to: “strengthen cooperation to respond to non-traditional security issues including cybersecurity, prevention of cybercrime, terrorism, transnational crime, ensuring food and water security”<sup>33</sup>.

Abe’s role in promoting defense and security cooperation between Vietnam and Japan was also reflected in his support for Vietnam’s greater participation in the political, defense and security affairs of the international community<sup>34</sup>. During his tenure, Abe and his Vietnamese counterparts – including President Truong Tan Sang, General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc and President Tran Dai Quang – agreed at high-level visits and talks to provide further support for Vietnam’s involvement in United Nations activities. Accordingly, for the first time in their defense and security cooperation, the Government of Japan under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe stated that “Japan welcomes Vietnam’s decision to participate in United Nations peacekeeping activities

<sup>32</sup> *Tuyên bố chung Việt Nam – Nhật Bản...*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>34</sup> Abe’s support for Vietnam was clearly demonstrated through his efforts to promote bilateral defense and security cooperation in parallel with international integration. During high-level meetings with Vietnamese leaders such as General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong and Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, both sides agreed to expand cooperation and support Vietnam’s participation in United Nations peacekeeping operations. For the first time, Japan officially stated that it “welcomes Vietnam’s decision to participate in United Nations peacekeeping operations and affirms its support through technical assistance and training”. This marked a significant milestone, reflecting Abe’s vision of promoting Vietnam’s proactive and responsible role in global security affairs.

and affirms its support to Vietnam”. On the basis of this commitment, Japan provided Vietnam with comprehensive assistance in carrying out its peacekeeping mission in line with the agreed objectives<sup>35</sup>.

Furthermore, one of the key developments was the integration of maritime security into defense and security cooperation between Vietnam and Japan. As a result of the efforts of Abe and his administration, the two countries agreed that Japan would support Vietnam in strengthening its law enforcement capacity. During the Abe administration, Japan steadily increased its defense budget as part of its “coast guard diplomacy strategy”, pursued in close partnership with Vietnam. In addition to expanding Vietnam’s fleet of patrol vessels, the provision of search-and-rescue equipment helped improve the country’s maritime defense capabilities. Subsequently, Japan implemented ODA packages for the construction of defense vessels in Vietnam, thereby reinforcing its maritime security and consolidating bilateral defense ties. In addition, cooperation in arms trade and technology transfer was also regarded as part of former Prime Minister Abe’s broader defense policy agenda. Under his leadership, Vietnam became the twelfth country to which Japan agreed to transfer defense equipment following the United States, the United Kingdom, Malaysia and several other allies and partners<sup>36</sup>. This further underscored Vietnam’s position within Japan’s defense and security strategy and was indicative of the Abe administration’s policy direction.

As strategic ties between Vietnam and Japan evolved, Abe played a central role in advancing defense and security cooperation between the two countries, establishing a durable framework

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<sup>35</sup> As a result of this commitment during Abe’s tenure, Japan began providing technical, logistical, and training assistance to support Vietnam’s participation in United Nations peacekeeping operations. Through the Ministry of Defense and JICA, Japan organized training courses for Vietnamese officers and shared experience from the Japan Self-Defense Forces’ (JSDF) peacekeeping missions in South Sudan. These initiatives enabled Vietnam to successfully deploy its Level-2 Field Hospital and engineering units to UN missions in South Sudan (UNMISS) and the Central African Republic (MINUSCA). This cooperation marked a significant step in Vietnam’s defense integration into the international community. Vietnam News, *Việt Nam, Japan Strengthen Cooperation in UN Peacekeeping*, <https://vietnamnews.vn/politics-laws/1651000/viet-nam-japan-strengthen-cooperation-in-un-peace-keeping.html> (accessed 12 October 2025).

<sup>36</sup> N.T. Trung, P.T.K. Thoa, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

for the long-term development of bilateral relations. Such achievements not only characterized defense cooperation during Abe's tenure but also laid the groundwork for subsequent initiatives in this area, contributing to regional peace and stability and to the further expansion of Vietnam–Japan cooperation.

### **3. Strengthening maritime security cooperation and supporting Vietnam on the East Sea issue**

The second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed escalating regional and global challenges posed by China. In this context, Japan has demonstrated growing interest in maritime security in the East Sea through strategic adjustments and a distinct approach to defense and security. During his second term, Abe pursued his “Proactive Contribution to Peace” policy, promoting closer cooperation with ASEAN countries, particularly those involved in maritime disputes such as the Philippines and Vietnam. At that time, Japan implemented a series of concrete measures to consolidate its role in the East Sea, including the provision of patrol vessels and maritime surveillance equipment to Vietnam and the Philippines, expanded training programs and information-sharing on maritime security, and the signing of the Joint Vision Statement on Defense Cooperation between Japan and Vietnam (2011, 2013). At the regional level, Japan actively raised the East Sea issue in multilateral forums such as the Shangri-La Dialogue, the East Asia Summit (EAS), and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), urging adherence to international law, particularly the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and advocating the early conclusion of the Code of Conduct in the East Sea (COC). Notably, Abe's launch of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) Strategy in 2016 underscored Japan's view of the East Sea as a critical area for safeguarding freedom of navigation, trade, and regional energy security. These initiatives demonstrate Japan's proactive and strategic engagement in maintaining peace and stability in the region, as well as its emergence as a reliable security partner for ASEAN, particularly Vietnam<sup>37</sup>.

<sup>37</sup> J. Rossiter, *The “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” Strategy and Japan's Emerging Security Posture*, “Rising Powers Quarterly” 2018, vol. III, no. 2, pp. 113–131; P.C.N. Anh, *Một số điểm nổi bật trong quan hệ Việt Nam – Nhật Bản dưới thời Thủ tướng*

First, Abe played an important role in establishing maritime security as a key component of defense and security cooperation between Vietnam and Japan. Before Abe's return to power, under the Naoto Kan administration, Vietnam and Japan had not addressed cooperation regarding the East Sea issue. On October 31, 2010, during Naoto Kan's official visit to Vietnam, the two countries adopted the *Japan–Vietnam Joint Statement on Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia*<sup>38</sup>, thereby raising their bilateral relations to a new level. The Statement reaffirmed several areas of cooperation within the strategic partnership: (1) strengthening delegation exchanges and dialogue; (2) Japan's economic aid; (3) trade and investment; (4) energy, natural resource development and climate change; (5) scientific and technical cooperation; (6) mutual understanding between people of two countries; (7) regional and international cooperation<sup>39</sup>. Yet, it did not include maritime security cooperation in general and the East Sea in particular. However, as the regional security environment evolved, Abe adjusted the extent of cooperation with Vietnam. With the *Japan–Vietnam Joint Statement on the Establishment of the Extensive Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia*, maritime security cooperation was first introduced into the joint agenda of the two countries. The Statement provided that: "The two sides affirmed that the two countries will continue to strengthen cooperation on maritime safety based on the need to improve the capacity of Vietnam's maritime law enforcement agencies"<sup>40</sup>. Abe further indicated that a survey delegation would soon be dispatched to Vietnam to discuss practical support measures in this respect<sup>41</sup>. Based on that legal document, during Nguyen Xuan Phuc's visit to Japan from June 4–8, 2017, the two leaders continued to adopt the *Joint Statement on Deepening the Japan–Vietnam Extensive Strategic Partnership*, in which they again agreed to further

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Shinzo Abe [Some Highlights in Vietnam–Japan Relationship under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe], "Vietnam Social Sciences Review" 2022, no. 5(211), pp. 20–32.

<sup>38</sup> *Japan–Vietnam Joint Statement on the Comprehensive Development of the Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia*.

<sup>39</sup> *Japan–Vietnam Joint Statement on Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia*.

<sup>40</sup> *Japan–Vietnam Joint Statement on the Establishment of the Extensive Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia*.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*.

coordinate their approach to the East Sea-related issues. Accordingly, the two countries reiterated “the importance of ensuring peace, security, safety, freedom of navigation and overflight; exercising self-restraint and fully respecting the diplomatic and legal process; settling disputes by peaceful means on the basis of international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), fully and effectively implementing the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the East Sea (DOC) and soon developing an effective Code of Conduct in the East Sea (COC)”<sup>42</sup>. These agreed positions formed the basis for the two countries to reach consensus in bilateral and multilateral cooperation in that regard.

In addition, Abe's contributions to Vietnam–Japan maritime security cooperation and to the East Sea issue were also reflected in regional and international forums. At the 23<sup>rd</sup> Shangri-La Dialogue held in Singapore from May 30 to June 1, 2014, Abe reaffirmed Japan's commitment to regional maritime security. Therefore, Japan “could ease the constitutional restrictions in order to exercise the right to collective self-defense, or provide military assistance for “a friendly country under attack”<sup>43</sup>. At this forum, Abe expressed support for Vietnam concerning the East Sea issue. Abe stated: “I welcome the dialogue between the relevant countries, and the two sides agreed that this dialogue should be carried out in accordance with international law and agreed on the importance of demilitarization and restraint on the ground”<sup>44</sup>. Abe's emphasis

<sup>42</sup> The Code of Conduct in the East Sea (COC) is a proposed agreement aimed at establishing rules and norms to manage the behavior of parties and prevent conflicts in the East Sea. It is being negotiated between the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) and China, building on the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the East Sea (DOC). The objective of the COC is to promote peace, stability, and cooperation while ensuring compliance with international law, particularly the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). D.V. Huy, *Đàm phán Bộ Quy tắc ứng xử ở Biển Đông (COC) giữa ASEAN và Trung Quốc: Thực trạng và triển vọng* [Negotiations on the Code of Conduct in the East Sea (COC) between ASEAN and China: Current Situation and Prospects], “Vietnam Social Sciences Review” 2023, no. 1, pp. 8–20; *Joint Statement on Deepening the Vietnam–Japan Extensive Strategic Partnership*.

<sup>43</sup> H. Vinh, *Shinzo Abe: Nhật sẽ “hỗ trợ tối đa” ASEAN tại biển Đông* [Shinzo Abe: Japan Will “Maximally Support” ASEAN in the East Sea], <https://vneconomy.vn/techconnect/shinzo-abe-nhat-se-ho-tro-toi-da-asean-tai-bien-dong.htm> (accessed 10 March 2025).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*.

on Japan's extensive presence in the East Sea was driven by a number of strategic and geopolitical factors. The East Sea is not only of critical geopolitical significance but also rich in natural resources, thereby affecting the interests of many countries worldwide. Hence, the disputes in the East Sea are not merely a bilateral matter between China, Vietnam and coastal states, but rather an international one. As an ally of the United States, Japan seeks to curb China's expansion in the region, particularly as regards military and political power and maritime sovereignty. Japan, which itself has a territorial dispute with China over the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands, is likewise motivated to reduce China's influence in the East Sea, while supporting Vietnam in limiting China's control over the region.

Moreover, both Japan and Vietnam face maritime sovereignty disputes with China, which has brought them into closer alignment. Abe continued to express strong support for the East Sea issue at the 22<sup>nd</sup> ASEAN-Japan Summit, held in Thailand on November 4, 2019, where he endorsed ASEAN's position on the matter, emphasizing the importance of maintaining peace, stability and security in the region, and safeguarding freedom and safety of navigation and overflight. He also advocated respect for the diplomatic and legal processes, compliance with the principles of international law, especially the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and urged the parties to exercise restraint and avoid militarization, refrain from unilateral actions that could exacerbate tensions, and promote the effective and substantive development of the Code of Conduct (COC)<sup>45</sup>.

Beyond supporting Vietnam through bilateral exchanges, at international forums on maritime security in the East Sea, Abe in his role as head of the Government of Japan took many specific measures to help Vietnam in building maritime law enforcement capacity, conducting rescue activities, ensuring security and freedom of navigation. In the context of increased tensions following the Hai Yang Shi You 981 standoff<sup>46</sup>, at the Shangri-La Dialogue,

<sup>45</sup> V. Dung, *Nhật Bản ủng hộ duy trì hòa bình và ổn định ở Biển Đông* [Japan Supports the Maintenance of Peace and Stability in the East Sea], <https://vov.vn/chinh-tri/nhat-ban-ung-ho-duy-tri-hoa-binh-va-on-dinh-o-bien-dong-974846.vov> (accessed 10 March 2025).

<sup>46</sup> On May 2, 2014, China deployed the Hai Duong 981 oil rig 17 nautical miles south of Tri Ton Island in Vietnam's Paracel Islands, approximately 120 nautical

Shinzo Abe declared his support for the Philippines and Vietnam in territorial disputes with China<sup>47</sup>. Accordingly, Japan committed to enhancing Vietnam's maritime law enforcement capacity in two key areas: (1) hardware including patrol vessels, surveillance aircraft, weapons and equipment; (2) software, including coast guard training, joint exercises and capacity building. This support was provided through the Government of Japan's ODA assistance. Japan's objective was to improve Vietnam's operational capacity at sea, thereby contributing to maritime safety and freedom of navigation in accordance with international law<sup>48</sup>. To give effect to Abe's commitment, on July 31, 2014, the Government of Japan decided to provide Vietnam with six vessels, including two fishery patrol vessels of the Fisheries Agency of Japan and four repurposed commercial fishing vessels, as part of the non-refundable aid package. All of these vessels were second-hand and weighed between 600 and 800 tons. Japan also provided lifeboats and other equipment. The total value of the aid package amounted to 500 million yen<sup>49</sup>. The Abe administration expected that Vietnam

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miles east of Ly Son Island in Quang Ngai province, Vietnam. This position is entirely located in Vietnam's 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone under the United Nations Convention on the International Law of the Sea in 1982. In order to protect its sovereign rights and jurisdiction within the exclusive economic zone under international law, Vietnam dispatched 29 law enforcement vessels to area near China's Hai Duong 981 oil rig after determining that it was to be positioned there permanently. Vietnam's law enforcement forces actively engaged in advocacy efforts, calling on China to immediately cease its violations of international law and withdraw the rig from Vietnamese waters. See *Nhìn lại sự kiện Hải Dương 981 và bài học kinh nghiệm trong đấu tranh bảo vệ chủ quyền biển đảo* [Looking Back at the Hai Duong 981 Event and Lessons Learned in the Struggle to Protect the Maritime Sovereignty], <https://canhsatbien.vn/nghien-cuu-trao-doi/4184/87> (accessed 10 March 2025).

<sup>47</sup> T. An, *Thủ tướng Abe: Nhật ủng hộ VN ở Biển Đông* [Prime Minister Abe: Japan Supports Vietnam in the East Sea], <https://vietnamnet.vn/thu-tuong-abe-nhat-ung-ho-vn-o-bien-dong-178447.html> (accessed 10 March 2025).

<sup>48</sup> V.D. Cuong, *Quan điểm của Hoa Kỳ và Nhật Bản về vấn đề Biển Đông và hàm ý chính sách đối với Việt Nam* [Perspectives of the United States and Japan on the East Sea Issue and Policy Implications for Vietnam], "Journal of East Asian Studies" 2022, vol. VI, pp. 56–57.

<sup>49</sup> The decision was made by Foreign Minister of Japan Fumio Kishida during an official visit to Vietnam on July 31, 2014. N.T. Minh, *Quan điểm của Nhật Bản tại Biển Đông và hàm ý đối với chiến lược của Trung Quốc* [Japan's Perspective in the East Sea and Implications for China's Strategy], "Journal of Research and Development" 2022, no. 3(137), pp. 88–98; *Nhật cung cấp 6 tàu cho Việt Nam*

would upgrade these vessels for maritime security patrol purposes<sup>50</sup>. In addition, Japan conducted a number of exchange and training activities for Vietnamese defense personnel through the Sasakawa Peace Foundation and joint naval drills to enhance the capabilities of Vietnam's law enforcement agencies. Specifically, in February 2016, two P-3C surveillance aircraft of the Japan Coast Guard conducted drills at sea with Vietnam. In March 2016, two Japanese destroyers visited Cam Ranh Port in Vietnam, while in June 2017, the navy of the Japan Coast Guard conducted a joint drill with Vietnam in Da Nang<sup>51</sup>. These measures contributed to achieving the objective set out by Abe and facilitated government support for Vietnam's maritime capacity-building. As of July 28, 2020, Japan continued to provide concessional loans worth 26.6 billion yen to Vietnam to finance the procurement of six patrol vessels for the Vietnam Coast Guard in order to strengthen law enforcement and maritime rescue capabilities, ensuring the security, safety and freedom of navigation of Vietnam under Japan's ODA funding. The vessels were to be completed by October 2025<sup>52</sup>. The steps taken under the Abe administration demonstrate Japan's commitment and participation in bilateral cooperation and represent its tangible contribution in this area.

Thus, amid changes in the regional security environment and in the interests of Vietnam and Japan in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the two countries made important adjustments to their defense and security cooperation with maritime security and the East Sea becoming key areas of focus in official statements and practical measures between them. These developments in bilateral cooperation reflect the ideas, guidelines and policies pursued by Abe during his time in office.

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[Japan Provides 6 Vessels to Vietnam], <https://tuoitre.vn/nhat-cung-cap-6-tau-cho-viet-nam-629332.htm> (accessed 10 March 2025).

<sup>50</sup> *Nhật Bản sẽ cung cấp 6 tàu tuần tra biển cho Việt Nam* [Japan Will Provide 6 Sea Patrol Vessels to Vietnam], <https://baoxaydung.com.vn/nhat-ban-se-cung-cap-6-tau-tuan-tra-bien-cho-viet-nam-110413.html> (accessed 10 March 2025).

<sup>51</sup> N.T. Giang, *Chính sách của Nhật Bản đối với Biển Đông: Tác động và triển vọng hợp tác đối với Việt Nam* [Japan's Policy on the East Sea: Impacts and Prospects for Cooperation for Vietnam], "Journal of International Studies" 2017, no. 4(111), p. 74.

<sup>52</sup> K. Shigenoi, *Japan's Role for Southeast Asia Amidst the Great Power Competition and its Implications for the EU-Japan Partnership*, Vietnam 2022, p. 57.

## Conclusion

As prime minister, Abe played a significant role in advancing defense and security cooperation between Vietnam and Japan, a process that reflected major changes in Japan's defense and security policy and was closely aligned with Abe's policy priorities in strengthening the extensive strategic partnership between the two countries. In particular, in the context of an evolving regional security environment, he championed and promoted the coast guard diplomacy, thereby significantly contributing to maritime security and freedom of navigation in the East Sea, an issue of particular importance to Vietnam. Japan's initiatives to enhance Vietnam's coast guard capacity laid the foundation for closer security ties, particularly at sea. At the same time, this assistance enabled Vietnam to diversify maritime security cooperation in the East Sea, reducing its reliance on China as the "only option for cooperation"<sup>53</sup>. Abe's contribution to strengthening bilateral relations and to promoting peace and prosperity, as well as regional and global cooperation, was acknowledged by both the Vietnamese Government and the broader public. This relationship has been reinforced through shared security objectives and through its alignment with Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) Vision. Cooperation between Vietnam and Japan in defense, security and maritime law enforcement is likely to continue to develop in line with the potential of their strategic partnership for peace and prosperity in Asia. Building on the foundations established during Abe's tenure, relations between the two countries now have momentum for sustained development. This trajectory underscores the significance of bilateral engagement and may serve as an example of contemporary diplomatic cooperation, particularly with respect to maritime security and freedom of navigation.

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<sup>53</sup> V.D. Cuong, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

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