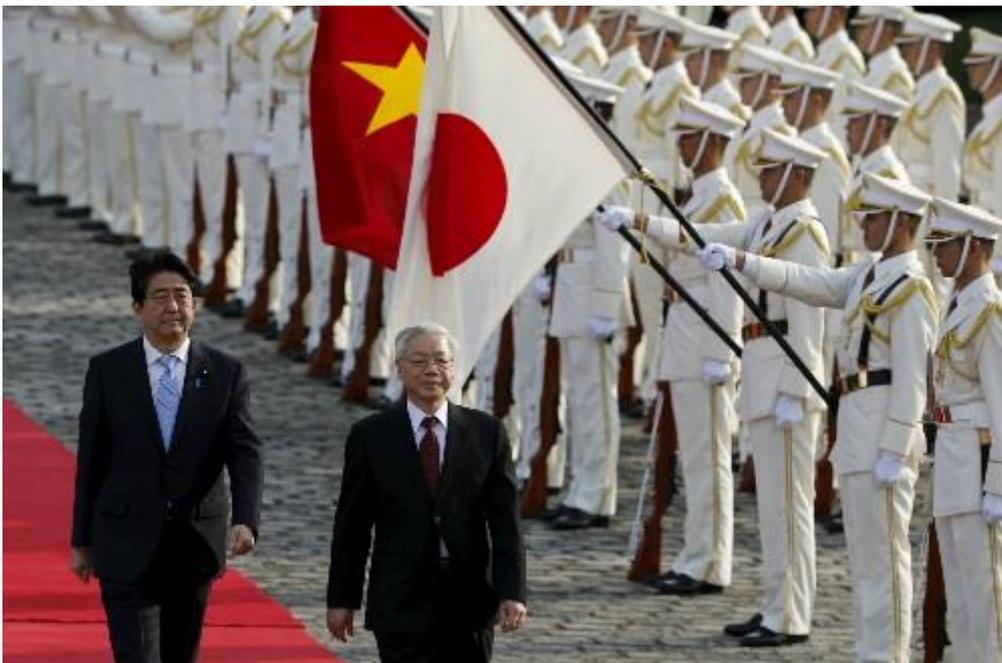


COMMENTARY

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Source: Reuters

The security cooperation between Japan and Vietnam in the face of imminent conflicts in the East Sea



An overview of the diplomacy and security ties between Japan and Vietnam

Japan is a maritime nation in East Asia whose well-being is heavily dependent on external trade, with its [42%](#) commodities and [81%](#) crude oil imports being transported through the South China Sea, one of the significant sea lines of communication worldwide. Besides that, from the security perspective, the water partly contributes to the security buffer and current regional balance of power to Japan. As mentioned above, because Japanese benefits in such aspects undoubtedly adhere to this geopolitical location, Japan acknowledges that disadvantageous effects would occur in not only the Western Pacific but also all over the world if the rules-based maritime order in the South China Sea is offended by coercion.

Nonetheless, the rapid and incessant Chinese military build-up, along with its hardline behavior in the water, to demonstrate its powerful emergence has severely damaged the freedom of navigation, the mutual interests of regional claimants and finally incurred security anxieties for Japan. Therefore, overcoming national security challenges and achieving national security objectives is considered as a priority to Japan which is unequivocally

expressed in Japan's first National Security Strategy ([NSS](#)) in December 2013 as well as in Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's [speech](#) on his Asian policies on 18/2/2013.

Japan is now conducting bilateral and multilateral dialogues, cooperation and exchange frameworks in a complementary and multilayered manner, and Vietnam is perhaps one of the most essential strategic partners for the immediate future. Like Japan, Vietnam asserts that the South China Sea is of great importance to its economy, trade, prosperity, political stability, security, and global order respect in accordance with international law. Plus, that Japan has been assisting Vietnam to pursue justice in the region helps increase its influence and counterbalance capability when encountering corresponding incidents in the East China Sea.

The diplomatic ties between the two countries actually date back to 1973, then was ultimately elevated from the "[Strategic Partnership](#)" in 2009 to a higher level of cooperative relationship in 2014, the "[Extensive Strategic Partnership](#)" for peace and prosperity of Asia. This milestone embodies both political implications and collaborative mechanisms for mutual gains, especially in the tumultuous context of the South China Sea. The convergence

of interests between the two countries does not wholly stem from shared concerns about an increasingly assertive China. Rather, Vietnam's foreign policy has remarkably been aligning with Japanese initiatives in recent years. The Japan-Vietnam's knot has also grown tighter since Japan's initiation of the ["Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy"](#) (FOIP) in 2017.

This strategy is to encounter China's "Belt and Road" initiative (BRI) and to improve the connectivity between Asia and Africa through free and open Indo-Pacific with ASEAN as the hinge of two oceans. Japan aims to develop free and open maritime order, bring and secure peace, stability, and prosperity for the region as a whole. To be specific, one of its three pillars which is Japan's commitment for peace and stability through capacity-building assistance to coastal countries and humanitarian assistance/ disaster relief, anti-piracy cooperation could be clearly observed in the cooperative military activities between the two governments.

The manifestations of Japan-Vietnam security cooperation

Recent years have witnessed good progress in the substantive security partnership between the two sides, including the increasing frequency of high-level political interactions and

naval consultations, diplomatic backing in territorial disputes with China, maritime capacity-building assistance and military collaboration.

First, there has been an array of exchange visits by both high-profile officials, such as Vietnamese Defense Ministers Phung Xuan Thanh (2011), Ngo Xuan Lich (2018) and Japanese counterparts Itsunori Onodera (2013), Iwaya Takeshi (2019) or Chief of Staff GSDF (Ground Self-Defense Force) (2013), MSDF (Maritime Self-Defense Force) personnel and officials from the Japanese Internal Bureau (2012, 2013 and 2014), in which the country representatives had frank and in-depth discussions for better mutual understanding about their perspectives on the South China Sea controversy and future security cooperation plans. The latest consultation (October 2019) on sea defense between Japanese and Vietnamese navies at Hai Phong, Vietnam also boosted their security ties as part of their so-called "Extensive Strategic Partnership".

Second, Japan's political support for Vietnam has been framed in terms of its opposition to maritime conflicts, an oblique albeit hard to miss the censure of Chinese policies, and consent for Vietnam's international law-based approach to on-going disputes in the South China Sea. Especially, during his

[rhetoric at Shangri-La in 2014](#), Prime Minister Shinzo Abe outlined and advocated his three principles for the rule of law at sea, which obviously positioned Japan on the side of Vietnam. Recently, Japan has also [utterly condemned](#) the Chinese Marine Geology 8's infringement into Vietnam's exclusive economic zone (Vanguard Bank) and continental shelf, starting from June 2019.

Third, aid-based maritime capacity building is one of the sustained efforts of Japan for the enhancement of Vietnam's maritime law-enforcement capabilities via its [ODA arrangements](#) and new defense assistance program within the framework of the National Defense Program Guidelines ([NDPG](#)) that has been implemented since 2010. For instance, Japan claimed to [offer](#) a non-refundable ODA of six sea patrol boats for Vietnam after the former foreign minister Fumio Kishida's visit to Vietnam. On practical joint exercises, in February 2016, a squadron of Japan's MSDF comprised of two [P-3C](#) patrol aircraft joined Vietnam in conducting maritime exercises, and one of the rehearsals is that Japan's P-3C aircrafts assisted Vietnamese ships to rescue civilian ships in distress at sea. Another example is the [Sasakawa Peace Foundation](#) which has had a program of exchanging defense officials with

Southeast Asian countries since 2014, including many Vietnamese defense cadres traveling to Japan annually.

Lastly, the 2014 declaration of the "Extensive Strategic Partnership" contained a commitment to implement the military cooperation outlined in the [2011 Memorandum of Understanding](#) (MOU). This has provided the two sides with wide-ranging defense cooperation activities like naval port calls, cooperation in military aviation and air defense, maritime salvage, peacekeeping and so forth. The notable examples of Japan–Vietnam military interactions to date could be listed as follows: the first naval port call by the MSDF destroyers to Cam Ranh Bay in [early 2016](#), the returning of the MSDF P-3C maritime patrol aircrafts from anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia to start [refueling at a Vietnamese airbase](#) or [Japan's sending](#) of an underwater minesweeper to Da Nang, Vietnam and its organization of [a seminar](#) on underwater unexploded ordnance (UXO) to train and strengthen Vietnamese military personnel's capability at the end of 2019.

Final words

To sum up, it is evident that Japan and Vietnam are now together pursuing defense cooperation to not only fortify

the political position of Japan in the South China Sea but improve Vietnam's "denial" capability as well. These aim to persuade China not to use force to blatantly bully and deprive the legitimate assets of inferior countries in the region. Neither Japan nor Vietnam, for sure, wish to live in

the era of "Pax Sinica". In addition, bilateral collaboration in defense and security acts as a leverage for their cooperation in other fields, developing the breadth and depth of the diplomatic relationship between Japan and Vietnam.



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