

Overview of Vietnam–Japan Dialogue Relations: Insights into Past and Present Challenges

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Abstract

Vietnam and Japan have had diplomatic relations for centuries, officially establishing diplomatic ties in 1973. Over the past 50 years, Vietnam - Japan relations have been influenced by the international relations of powerful countries and the historical context of both countries. While the relationship has achieved significant milestones, it has also experienced periods of ups and downs. Through a historical political economic approach and document analysis, this article provides an overview of the achievements and evaluates the challenges of the Vietnam - Japan relations. The results show that the Vietnam-Japan relations are a relationship between a developed country, acting as an investor, and foreign aid donor, and a developing country. Japan has expanded its investment roadmap, supporting Vietnam in developing transportation, energy, and healthcare infrastructure, improving administrative systems, enhancing human resource quality, expanding investment markets, and strengthening its Southeast Asian position. Despite the expansion of economic, political, and cultural exchanges between Vietnam and Japan, the relationship still faces challenges, most notably the internal challenges of both countries, such as differences in economic and political institutions, state models, and a significant gap in development levels. Understanding the past and current challenges is essential for formulating optimal policies for each country in maintaining and developing their relationship in the present and future.

Keywords: changes, cultural exchanges, economic, political, relations

1. Introduction

In 2023, Vietnam and Japan marked 50 years of diplomatic relations. Over the past half-century, the two states have maintained high-level meetings. On the Japanese side, the Emperor of Japan visited Vietnam once, the President of the Japanese Senate visited once; the Japanese Prime Minister visited Vietnam seven times, and the Japanese Foreign Minister visited Vietnam 12 times. On the Vietnamese side, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) visited Japan three times,

the President of Vietnam visited Japan five times, the Chairman of the National Assembly of Vietnam visited Japan twice, the Vietnamese Prime Minister visited Japan eight times, and the Vietnamese Foreign Minister visited Japan seven times (MOFA., 2019). The Vietnam-Japan relations have experienced ups and downs; there have been phases of economic cooperation, periods of aid suspension, and expanding relations from the economy to political security and culture, society, etc.

Vietnam - Japan relations are a modern relationship between two countries based on Vietnam's developing economy and Japan's role as an investor and foreign aid provider. In this spirit, Japan has endeavored to create a partnership with Vietnam through ODA (Official Development Assistance) programs; investing in transportation infrastructure, power, law, healthcare, environmental protection projects, etc. (MOFA., 2019). However, this relationship is not merely bilateral between the two states but is also profoundly influenced by the global context in each historical period. The world's major changes such as the Cold War, US-China relations, Cambodia's issues, the normalization of Vietnam-China relations, etc., have all impacted Vietnam-Japan relations (Diep, 2022).

The Vietnam - Japan relations have achieved many accomplishments, especially Vietnam's economic development. Assessing the achievements in Vietnam - Japan relations over the past 50 years is invaluable for understanding the journey of cooperation between the two nations from the past to the future and is profoundly significant in nurturing and developing the relationship between the two states to become more comprehensive and sustainable. Vietnam has signed comprehensive strategic partnerships with five countries (China - 2008, Russia - 2012, India - 2016, South Korea - 2022, USA - 2023). Developing the Vietnam-Japan partnership into a comprehensive strategic cooperation relationship alongside major countries is a significant expectation of observers. Evaluating past achievements and current challenges also allows for an objective view and accurate prediction of the development process from a partnership to comprehensive cooperation between Vietnam and Japan in the future. This article summarizes the history of Vietnam-Japan relations, the efforts in developing the Vietnam-Japan partnership, Japan's contributions to Vietnam's economic and social development, and the challenges and prospects of Vietnam-Japan relations.

2. Method and Methodology

This article is presented based on the interdisciplinary Historical Political Economy (HPE) method. This approach allows studying how political and economic subjects and institutions interact over time. According to Jenkins and Rubin (ed., 2022a), HPE differs from economic history in that it focuses on the causes and consequences of politics; it also differs from conventional political economy in that its context is entirely historical, even when it has implications for contemporary political economy. "HPE as social scientific inquiry which highlights political causes or consequences of historical issues." (Jenkins & Rubin, 2022b).

One of the prominent features of the HPE method is that when describing history, it includes profound insights into politics and economics while delving into the political history of the issues being studied (Volha, Eugene & Scott, 2023). Additionally, studies using the HPE method are concerned with the historical context, explaining causes, developments, outcomes, and historical significance based on the historical context. In a study on the concept of HPE, Jenkins and Rubin ((ed., 2022) considered this method as a social science investigation to highlight the political causes or consequences of historical issues. Jenkins and Rubin affirmed that, methodologically, HPE allows for an in-depth exploration of historical sources to improve the measurement of the impact of the historical context, using multiple sources to validate historical claims, analyze causal relationships, explain historical events, and use the historical context to gain a better understanding of the past.

HPE is not a new research method. The works of Alexis de Tocqueville and Karl Marx from the 19th century tended to use this method, as did Max Weber, Werner Sombart, and Tawney in some of their publications in the early 20th century (Jenkins & Rubin, 2022). However, HPE has recently garnered increasing academic interest, with many articles published in leading influential journals worldwide; and recently (2021), a new journal dedicated to this field was launched, receiving positive responses from the international academic community (Journal of Historical Political Economy - University of Southern California). HPE is likened to a research wave in political science that examines the past. Charnysh, Finkel, and Gehlbach (2023) surveyed the development of this field and identified three common uses of HPE: understanding the past for its own sake, using history as a way to understand the present, and using history as a context to explore predictive patterns. It can be affirmed that the HPE approach is an important component of historical research as it provides a framework to understand the past and make accurate claims, speculating on the developmental patterns of a historical phenomenon.

3. A Concise History of Vietnam - Japan Dialogue Relations

Vietnam and Japan have had long-standing relations. From the 16th century, Japanese merchants came to Dai Viet to trade. In the 17th century, the Nguyen lords in Dang Trong (southern Vietnam) promoted trade, allowing Japanese merchants to trade and reside in several important Vietnamese ports. Tokugawa Ieyasu's shogunate even exchanged trade dispatches with the Nguyen lords. Lord Nguyen Phuc Nguyen also married his daughter, Princess Ngoc Hoa, to the famous merchant Araki Shutaro. Before the establishment of diplomatic relations between Vietnam and Japan, Japan had several economic and technical cooperation projects and grants in aid for Vietnam, such as the Da Nhim Hydroelectric Plant project in Lam Dong Province (1959-1964), an irrigation project in Phan Rang Province, the Cho Ray Hospital project (Saigon), and the development project of the Faculty of Agriculture at Can Tho University.

On January 27, 1973, the Paris Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam was signed. On September 21, 1973, Vietnam and Japan established diplomatic relations. In 1975, Japan opened its embassy in Hanoi. During this period, Japan implemented its foreign policy based on the Fukuda Doctrine, aiming to act as a bridge, actively contributing to maintaining peace and stability in Southeast Asia,

and believing that Vietnam would play an important role in this mission (JICA, 2013). However, in the 1970s and 1980s, Vietnam-Japan relations were strongly influenced by global contexts such as the normalization of US - China relations, the democratization movements in Eastern European countries, Cambodia's issues, and the end of the Cold War, etc. As a result, Japan temporarily suspended ODA aid to Vietnam. During the 1970s and 1980s, Japan only provided emergency relief (natural disasters) to Vietnam on a few occasions (Diep, 2022).

In the 1990s, Vietnam launched comprehensive reforms, transitioning from a centrally planned economy to a market economy. In the early 1990s, Cambodia's issues were resolved. In 1992, Vietnam adopted a new constitution. In 1995, Vietnam normalized relations with the United States and joined ASEAN. In 1996, Vietnam joined APEC (Mai Thi Phu Huong, 1996). In 1993, international organizations and Western countries resumed aid to Vietnam. In this context, Japan was the first country to resume ODA aid to Vietnam. In 1992, Japan announced the resumption of aid. In 1994, Japanese Prime Minister Murayama became the first Japanese Prime Minister to make an official visit to Vietnam. In talks with Vietnamese Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet, both sides agreed to strengthen their relationship not only in economics but also in politics, culture, and people-to-people exchanges, ushering in a new era in Japan-Vietnam relations. They also outlined specific Japanese assistance plans for Vietnam (Ngo Hong Diep, 2022). In this context, Japan increased its ODA support and implemented numerous economic and social development projects in Vietnam. In 1993 alone, Japan implemented seven economic and social development projects in Vietnam (three projects for building the Phu My, Pha Lai, and Ham Thuan - Da Mi thermal power plants, and three transportation projects for upgrading National Highway No. 1, National Highway No. 2, and improving the North-South railway bridge, and the Hai Phong port improvement). In 1994, the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers program was launched. From 1995, Japan's projects in Vietnam began to expand from the economic field to political and social fields, such as the project to research economic development policies during the transition to a market economy, and the project to support the formation of basic government policies and legal systems (supporting legal reform in Vietnam) (JICA., 2013).

Entering the 21st century, the global international relations landscape has shifted towards multipolarity and multi-centeredness; the nature, content, and methods of international relations have also undergone many changes. Notably, the scientific and technological revolution and the trend of globalization have become dominant in international relations. The international political and security environment was evolving complexly (Nguyen Van Tuan, 2022). In Southeast Asia, countries were both cooperating and competing, with intertwined interests and hidden new challenges. Powerful countries such as the United States, Russia, India, and China were adjusting their strategies, impacting Vietnam-Japan relations. In this context, Vietnam and Japan strived towards a strategic partnership. In the first decade of the 21st century, more than ten high-level visits between Vietnam and Japan took place (JACA., 2013). The two countries signed several important documents creating a legal framework to promote bilateral relations. In 2002, Vietnam and Japan established a "Trustworthy, stable and long-term Partnership." In 2003, the Vietnam-Japan Investment Agreement

was signed, and the Joint Japan-Vietnam Initiative was launched. In 2006, Vietnam-Japan relations made new progress after both sides signed a Joint Statement "Towards a Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia." With a determination to promote and deepen comprehensive cooperation, in 2008, the Vietnam-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement was signed. In 2009, the two countries officially upgraded their relationship to a "Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia." In 2010, high-level leaders of the two countries signed joint statements "Comprehensively Developing the Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia," and, "Implementing Actions within the Framework of the Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia." Based on the strategic partnership, amid the new international context, Vietnam-Japan relations have developed strongly, comprehensively, and substantively. This foundation led to the decision in March 2014 to elevate the relationship to an "Extensive Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia." Notably, in September 2015, during the visit to Japan by the General Secretary of the CPV, Nguyen Phu Trong, the two countries issued a statement on "Common Vision for Vietnam-Japan Relations." This is considered an important milestone, marking a new, unprecedentedly comprehensive, and positive development phase in bilateral Vietnam-Japan relations across all fields (Xuan, 2023).

Based on establishing legal frameworks, in the first 15 years of the 21st century, Japan has supported Vietnam in promoting economic and social development planning, infrastructure development, and human resource training to serve economic growth. From 2000 to 2014, Japan supported Vietnam in implementing 22 economic and social development projects. Infrastructure development projects accounted for a high proportion, especially transportation infrastructure, such as the Can Tho Bridge construction project, National Highway 1 bypass, Ring Road 3 (Hanoi), urban railways (Ho Chi Minh City), and the North-South expressway. Next were economic and social development planning projects, such as the master plan and feasibility study on urban transportation in Ho Chi Minh City, a strategic development study linking Da Nang City and surrounding areas, and a comprehensive urban development program for Hanoi Capital.

Notably, during this period, Japan's support projects for Vietnam shifted towards developing a fair and civilized society. Some projects related to people and the environment were implemented. In 2004, Japan first funded a project to train tax officials to meet the modernization of the tax management system. Following that were projects on legal and judicial system reforms (2007), environmental protection in Ha Long City (2009), and technical human resource development at the University of Industry (2009). In 2010 alone, Japan supported Vietnam in implementing three projects on social and human development: strengthening the capacity of the State Bank of Vietnam, training to enhance the capacity of the National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, and improving the capacity to ensure student safety and testing for dangerous infectious agents in the laboratory network. In 2012-2013, Japan's projects continued to support Vietnam in promoting industrialization, enhancing international competitiveness, addressing weaknesses, and building a just society. Two notable projects in this category included: enhancing the capacity of the

Vietnamese Government Office and improving the capacity of the Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics in training leaders and civil servants (JACA., 2013). Since the mid-2010s, many pressing global issues have demanded coordination between countries and international organizations to address: the widening gap between rich and poor nations, population growth along with migration flows, energy shortages, resource depletion, environmental degradation, worsening climate conditions accompanied by devastating natural disasters, major epidemics, and the increasing trend of transnational crimes. In the Asia-Pacific region in general and Southeast Asia in particular, the trend of peace, cooperation, and development continued to rise, but there were always underlying factors causing instability, such as disputes over influence and power, borders, territories, islands, and resources between countries, as well as economic, political, and social instability in some countries, etc. (CPV, 2016).

Amid these new developments in the world and regional situation, Vietnam and Japan, along with their respective governments, continued to implement various foreign policies to maintain peace and stability in Southeast Asia. High-level visits between the two states have become more frequent. From Japan, these visits included Speaker of the House Yamazaki Masaaki (2015), Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida (2016), Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the Emperor and Empress, Speaker of the House Tadamori Oshima (2017), Foreign Minister Taro Kono (2018), Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide, and Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu (2020), and Prime Minister Kishida Fumio (2022). From Vietnam, these visits included General Secretary of the Communist Party Nguyen Phu Trong, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh (2015), Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc (2017), President Tran Dai Quang (2018), Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc (2019), President Nguyen Phu Trong (2021), and President Vo Van Thuong (2023). Through these frequent visits, high-level leaders of the two countries have continued to maintain and develop Vietnam-Japan relations under the guiding principle of a trustworthy, stable, and long-term partnership, reaching new heights of a sustainable partnership. In 2018, the two sides issued a joint vision statement on defense cooperation for the coming decade. The dialogue mechanism at various levels has always been maintained. In addition to regular political dialogue at the Deputy Foreign Minister level, both sides have established mechanisms for economic, security, and defense dialogues. Japan continues to support Vietnam's reform policies and assists in Vietnam's integration into regional and global frameworks (ASEAN, APEC, WTO, ASEM, ARF, lobbying the OECD to provide technical assistance to Vietnam, etc.); Japan always values its relationship with Vietnam, prioritizing long-term benefits and goals (Diep, 2022).

4. Japan's Contribution to Vietnam's Socio-Economic Development

Vietnam was heavily affected by the Cold War (1947-1991). It was once a hotspot of the historic confrontation between the socialist and capitalist blocs (Institute of Military History of Vietnam, 2015). After emerging from the war, Vietnam was listed among the poorest countries in the world. Economic infrastructure, such as roads, railways, power plants and transmission systems, water supply, and drainage systems, was either destroyed during the war or outdated, and people's living

standards were low. Since 1986, Vietnam has implemented comprehensive economic and social reforms (CPV, 1986). As a result, Vietnam's economy grew strongly, and by the early 2010s, Vietnam had entered the group of middle-income countries (World Bank, 2010). Vietnam's strong economic development was driven by the determination and efforts of its government and people, as well as by investments from foreign countries and international aid. The efforts of Japan, one of the main donors and friendly Asian partners made a significant contribution to Vietnam's economic development (MOFA., 2019).

Vietnam-Japan relations have expanded the investment trajectory from Japan into Vietnam. Except for the periods affected by the Cold War, Cambodia's issues, the Asian financial crisis (1998), and the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers (2008), Japanese investment capital has consistently contributed to promoting industrialization in Vietnam (Nguyen Van Tuan, 2022). From 1993 to 2021, Japan was the second-largest FDI investor in Vietnam, with 4,690 projects and a total registered capital of \$62.9 billion, accounting for about 16% of total foreign investment in Vietnam. In the first eight months of 2021, among the 92 countries and territories investing in Vietnam, Japan invested over \$3.2 billion, accounting for 16.8% of total investment, an increase of 94.9% compared to the same period in 2020, second only to Singapore with a total investment of over \$6.2 billion. However, it is noteworthy that during this period, only Japan increased its investment, while Singapore and other major partners like South Korea showed a trend of decreasing investment (Huong, 2021).

Japan's investment programs and projects in Vietnam have focused on infrastructure, particularly in transportation and energy. From 1993 to 2021, investment in transportation consistently accounted for 30% of total investment from Japan. A series of transportation infrastructure development projects to improve the flow of goods nationwide were implemented continuously over the years, especially in Northern Vietnam. Most of the transportation projects funded by Japan were strategic, aiming to develop a network of major national highways connecting the capital Hanoi with the port city of Hai Phong and Cai Lan Port to attract investment in industrial zone construction. Thanks to the development of transportation infrastructure, industrial zones have been established, creating an environment that attracts investment. Many domestic and foreign enterprises, including Japanese enterprises, have invested in the Vietnamese market, further expanding investment opportunities. Improved road networks have made freight transportation easier and reduced transportation costs. Alongside infrastructure development projects, projects to develop human resources in traffic safety and strengthen the capacity of the traffic police have been implemented, significantly improving Vietnam's transportation system. (Figure 1).

In the energy sector, Japan has focused on funding Vietnam's power infrastructure development and efficient energy use. Over the past 30 years, Japan has implemented numerous projects to develop power sources, create comprehensive power development plans, promote energy conservation, train electrical engineers, and disseminate electrical technical standards. Eight power plants currently operating effectively in Vietnam have been built with Japan's ODA. (Table 1).

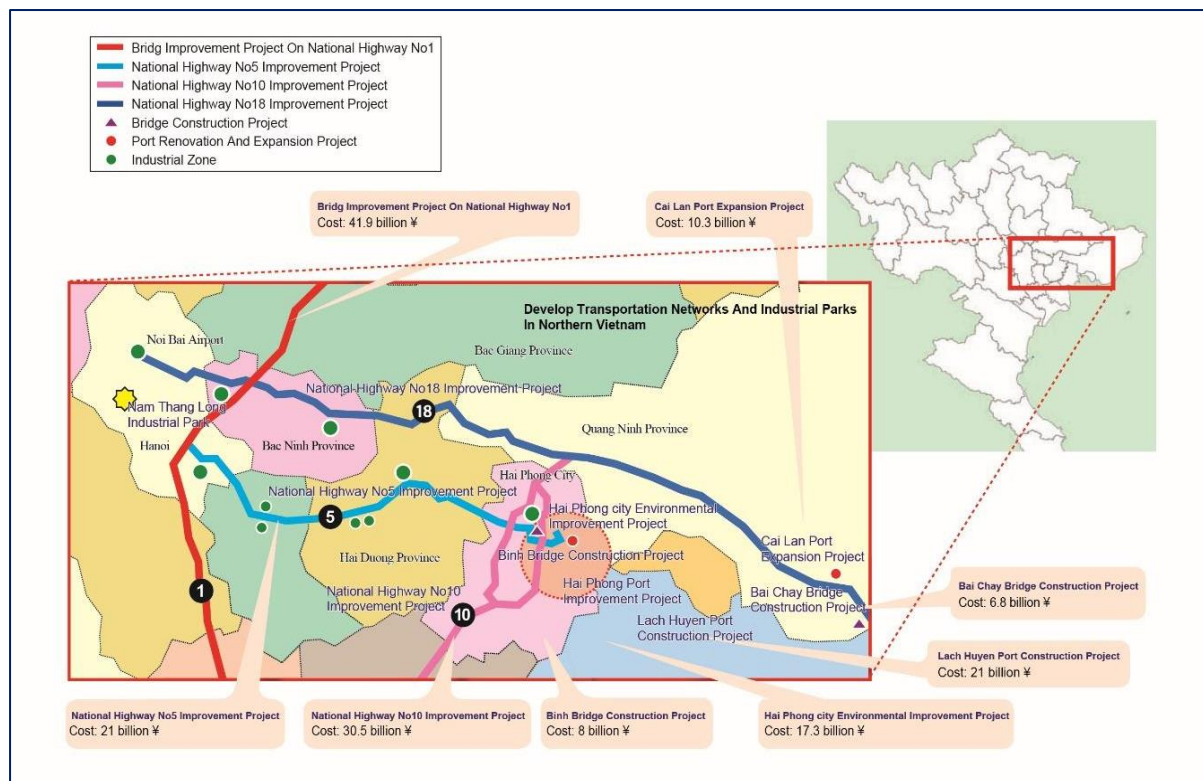


Figure 1. Information on the development of the transportation network in Northern Vietnam funded by Japan (JICA., 2013).

Table 1. Power Plants Funded by Japan's ODA currently operating effectively in Vietnam (MOFA., 2019).

No.	Project Name	Start Year	End Year	Total Capacity	Location
1	Da Nhim Hydropower Plant	1961	1964	160MW	Southeast Region
2	Phu My Thermal Power Plant	1994	2002	1,092MW	Southeast Region
3	Pha Lai Thermal Power Plant	1995	2003	600MW	Red River Delta
4	Ham Thuan-Da Mi Hydropower Plant	1995	2001	475MW	Southeast Region
5	Dai Ninh Hydropower Plant	1999	2008	300MW	Southeast Region
6	O Mon Thermal Power Plant	2001	2009	300MW	Mekong Delta
7	Nghi Son Thermal Power Plant	2006	2016	600MW	Central Coast
8	Thai Binh Thermal Power Plant	2009	2017	600MW	Red River Delta

In addition to funding transportation and energy infrastructure projects, Japan has assisted Vietnam in improving its legal system and enhancing the capabilities of administrative and financial agencies. Since 1996, Japan has implemented technical cooperation projects to support the formation of key government policies and Vietnam's legal system. Japan has introduced its legal system and human resources training regime and has provided advice on matters such as amending the Civil Code,

etc. Japan's approach is not to impose improvements but to support Vietnam in its self-reform process, helping Vietnam choose, develop, and apply new laws and policies proactively through information sharing and dialogue. Japanese legal institutions like the Ministry of Justice, the Supreme Court, and the Bar Association have systematically assisted Vietnam. These supports have fostered mutual trust, laying the groundwork for technical cooperation with Vietnam's central legislative, judicial, and administrative agencies, such as the Government Office, the National Assembly, and the Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics, in training and improving the quality of human resources (MOFA., 2019).

The Vietnam-Japan relations have also contributed to Vietnam's socio-economic development by creating jobs, reducing poverty, and improving people's living standards and health. A notable example was in the healthcare field. Japan has supported Vietnam in improving the infrastructure of key hospitals, training human resources, and enhancing management, enabling people to access higher-quality healthcare services. Examples of Japan's cooperation in healthcare included three projects to upgrade and renovate three major hospitals in Vietnam: the Cho Ray Hospital project (Ho Chi Minh City, 1995-1998), the Bach Mai Hospital project (Hanoi, 1999-2004), and the project to improve healthcare services in Central Vietnam (2005-2010). These projects, along with those on reproductive health care, maternal and child health monitoring books, measles vaccine production plants, and responses to avian influenza SARS outbreaks, etc. have significantly improved Vietnam's healthcare service quality. These achievements have considerably contributed to both countries viewing each other as reliable partners, closely connected in various fields such as politics, economy, culture, health, and human resource cooperation. This foundation also sets the stage for both countries to strengthen cooperation in new fields such as innovation, science and technology, digital transformation, green transformation, energy, climate change response, etc. Local cooperation, cultural exchanges, and people-to-people exchanges have also made positive progress (Diep, 2022).

5. Challenges in Vietnam-Japan Relations

The nature of Vietnam-Japan relations is fundamentally one of a foreign investor and aid donor (Japan) with a developing economy (Vietnam). This intrinsic nature poses significant challenges across various aspects:

- *Firstly*, there are differences in economic and political institutions and state models; Japan is a highly developed capitalist country, while Vietnam is a developing socialist country.
- *Secondly*, there is a substantial disparity in the scale of the economies. Japan is one of the world's three largest economies, with a GDP of around \$4,100 billion in 2022 (peaking at nearly \$6,300 billion in 2012), and a per capita income of about \$40,000 per year, among the highest globally. In contrast, Vietnam's GDP is approximately \$400 billion, with a per capita income of about \$4,110 per year, placing it in the middle-income group globally.
- *Thirdly*, the disparity in development levels, advantages, and capabilities in the capital, finance, market, science and technology, defense, and international status also pose challenges in Vietnam-Japan relations, particularly for Vietnam.

These differences and disparities create certain challenges in the approach, methods, and effectiveness of economic cooperation, especially in connecting the two economies bilaterally. For example, in economic relations, regarding trade, although there is a balance in the trade balance, most of the goods Vietnam exports to Japan are raw materials, semi-processed or low-tech processed products. Meanwhile, Vietnam imports high-value, high-tech products from Japan. In terms of investment, there is also a significant disparity; the primary source of FDI is from Japan into Vietnam, while FDI from Vietnam into Japan is minimal. According to statistics, from 2009 to 2013, there were no FDI figures from Vietnam to Japan. Only in 2014 and 2015 was there approximately \$1 million each year, and in 2016 it was around \$2 million; by 2022, it reached \$19.2 million (Xuan, 2023). As a foreign investor, Japan's ODA for Vietnam is quite substantial. However, over 90% of the capital is conditional loans or aid, with grants in aid accounting for only about 1-2% and technical assistance for about 3-6%. Since 2017, Vietnam has had to accept ODA loans on market mechanism, with low interest rate incentives, and stricter lending conditions. This reflects the fundamental differences and non-aligned interests between the two countries, not clearly demonstrating the goal of strategic economic development, production capacity, and human resource connectivity based on mutual benefit and support.

In recent years, Japan's ODA for Vietnam has been provided based on the "Latest Policy for National Assistance to Vietnam" along with the "Annual Plan" approved by the Japanese government in December 2017. This policy includes three pillars of priority fields: (i) promoting economic growth and enhancing international competitiveness; (ii) supporting vulnerable groups; and (iii) strengthening state governance. New forms of cooperation will be implemented, such as the Private Sector Investment Finance (PSIF) program and forms of cooperation involving the public, local governments, and social organizations to continue improving the use and investment of ODA funds. At the 10th Vietnam-Japan Cooperation Committee meeting (September 2018), Japan committed to supporting high-quality infrastructure development in Vietnam. Vietnam has always prioritized using Japan's ODA and preferential loans as a "lever" to promote and attract private investment, not using foreign loans for projects that the private sector is interested in and can implement with more effective technology and lower costs; using these funds as a catalyst for domestic capital, especially private sector investment; gradually reducing the proportion of foreign loans in the total project investment, etc. These events show an effort to overcome the one-sided nature of investment cooperation and ODA aid from Japan to Vietnam (Xuan, 2023).

Apart from the challenges arising from differences between the two countries, Vietnam-Japan relations are also influenced by international relations. Despite being recently elevated to the level of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia and the World, Vietnam-Japan relations have been facing an environment where strategic competition and influence among powerful countries are becoming increasingly fierce. There is a growing trend of revisiting traditional regional and international institutions, economic growth challenges after the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Fourth Industrial Revolution linked to innovation, which has driven continuous technological advancements; new challenges in fields such as

supply chains and the decarbonization process, etc. requiring both sides to adjust their relationship to respond to current changes.

From another perspective, according to Japan's National Security Strategy (published in 2022), Southeast Asia is not a strategic priority. Japan's geographical focus is shifting back to Northeast Asia with pressing security issues from neighboring countries like China and North Korea. Japan is also not emphasizing maintaining and strengthening the existing international order through regional institutions. Instead, it seems to be shifting towards building an order based on power rather than a rules-based order. As a Southeast Asian country, Vietnam will undoubtedly face challenges as Japan focuses more on bilateral relationships and newly established institutions rather than ASEAN. While ASEAN plays a crucial role in facilitating a regional order in Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific, Japan's National Security Strategy does not clarify ASEAN's strategic role but rather expects its contribution. Vietnam's position within ASEAN may not significantly support the promotion of Vietnam-Japan bilateral development.

Currently, Vietnam also faces strategic challenges from major countries. The emergence of multilateral frameworks, such as the "Quad" group (comprising India, Japan, the US, and Australia), the Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) security partnership, and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), implicitly challenges ASEAN's central role in the Indo-Pacific. Regional issues, such as the South China Sea, hinder ASEAN unity due to differing member-state views. Recently, Japan invited Vietnam to the G7 Summit to counter China. This raises concerns about whether China's rise is the reason for closer Vietnam-Japan relations. What are the pros and cons of Vietnam and Japan cooperating to oppose China's maritime claims? (Thayer, 2023).

Recent developments in Vietnam-Japan relations, such as signing a separate agreement on Japan's ODA support for Vietnam with a new-generation ODA support program for post-pandemic recovery and development; the public infrastructure project in Binh Duong province; the agricultural infrastructure development project in Lam Dong province; the Vietnamese government's request to discuss issues affecting the Nghi Son Refinery and Petrochemical project; considering visa exemptions for Vietnamese citizens to promote tourism; new Japanese investments in high-tech industries and energy transition to support Vietnamese businesses in enhancing their participation in Japan's supply chain, etc. indicate a new step in the Vietnam-Japan strategic partnership. These can be seen as favorable, positive developments but still reflect an "asymmetric" relationship, containing both opportunities and challenges, with the biggest challenge being competition on the basis of mutual interests between the two countries (Minh, 2019)).

6. Conclusions

Vietnam-Japan relations have spanned 50 years (1973-2023), characterized by both advantages and challenges. There have been periods of halted aid (1979-1990) and very limited political relations. However, in 1992, Japan decided to resume aid to Vietnam. Since then, economic, political, and cultural exchanges have expanded, fostering mutual understanding and trust between the two countries. Japan has set

several milestones as a G-7 nation in its relationship with Vietnam: being the first to welcome a Vietnamese General Secretary (1995), the first to establish a Strategic Partnership (2009), the first to recognize Vietnam's market economic status (2011), and the first to invite Vietnam to the G7 Summit (2016). In the first two decades of the 21st century, Vietnam-Japan relations have flourished, with frequent high-level visits and cooperation to elevate bilateral ties. This has led to continuous progress, from a "tightening relationship between the two countries not only in the economic field but also political, cultural and people-to-people exchanges, towards a new era" (1994) to becoming a "trustworthy, stable, and long-term partnership" (2002), moving towards a "strategic partnership" (2010), and evolving into an "extensive strategic partnership" (2018). On this foundation, Vietnam and Japan have also made significant contributions to addressing regional and international issues.

The Vietnam-Japan relations are bilateral but are influenced by multilateral relations among many countries, aimed at addressing common issues like war, peace, cooperation, and the struggle for coexistence and development. This relationship impacts not only the two nations but also the East Asian region, especially Southeast Asia. For Japan, achievements in relations with Vietnam helped realize its goal of becoming a "comprehensive powerful country" and the effectiveness of its "Asia-oriented" policy, especially towards Southeast Asia. Through cooperation and investment in Vietnam, Japan maintains a regular presence and deep integration in Southeast Asia, enhancing its role and influence within ASEAN. This helps Japan address domestic challenges, diversify markets, and expand investment opportunities for Japanese businesses. For Vietnam, cooperation with Japan provides additional investment capital, allowing Vietnam to pursue a policy of diversification and multilateralization in foreign affairs, leveraging Japan's industrial strengths to support its industrialization and modernization goals, and enhancing its prestige and position within ASEAN and internationally. For ASEAN, the Vietnam-Japan relations contribute to the trends of peace, cooperation, connectivity, and development, expanding multilateral economic cooperation mechanisms in the region, narrowing gaps, and promoting unity among ASEAN countries.

Economic interests are the main driving force in the development of Vietnam-Japan relations. Despite efforts to expand cooperation in political, cultural, security, and defense fields, the primary focus remains the economic connection based on each country's potential and advantages. This connection, while beneficial in terms of mutual interests, also presents challenges. Internal challenges such as differences in economic and political institutions, state models, development levels, cultural differences, and management mechanisms can be addressed through mutual respect and cooperation. However, geopolitical challenges at the international and regional levels, especially those related to economics, trade, globalization, and international integration, will significantly impact Vietnam-Japan relations. In the future, the shared interests of both countries will provide a solid foundation and strong motivation for the continued development of their relationship, aiming towards a "comprehensive strategic partnership" between Vietnam and Japan.

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