



## Chapter 2

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### Viet Nam's Foreign Policy and Japan–Viet Nam Relations Since the Start of *Doi Moi*

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## Introduction

The Communist Party of Viet Nam (CPV) adopted the Doi Moi policy at the 6th Party Congress held in December 1986. Since then, especially since the Cambodian peace agreement in October 1991, Viet Nam has developed rapidly and expanded its external relations widely.

In 1986, when it started the Doi Moi policy, Viet Nam was isolated from the international society. It was a low-income country with a gross domestic product (GDP) per capita of less than US\$100. By 2021, 35 years later, Viet Nam had signed bilateral commercial agreements with 60 countries and investment agreements with 40 countries. It has reached the level of a lower middle-income economy, with GDP per capita of US\$3,600.

Japan is one of the ardent countries that have consistently supported Viet Nam's development and its integration into the regional and international community. Moreover, in recent years, as Viet Nam has developed further and expanded its regional and international roles, its importance to Japan has been significantly increasing. The two nations have frequently cooperated and helped each other.

The first section of this chapter briefly looks back on the development of Viet Nam's external relations since the start of Doi Moi. The second section reviews the expansion of bilateral relations between Japan and Viet Nam since the early 1990s. The third section discusses the more recent developments in the countries' bilateral relations, where they have witnessed steadily growing mutual importance.

## 1. Viet Nam's Development of External Relations and its Economy since the Start of the Doi Moi Policy

Viet Nam declared independence in August 1945 and started the process of nation-building. However, shortly after that, the country began suffering from continuous conflicts for nearly half a century: the First Indochina War (1946–1954), the Second Indochina War (1960–1975), and the Sino-Viet Nam Confrontation and Cambodian Conflict (1978–1991). Only after the conclusion of the peace agreement in Cambodia in 1991 did Viet Nam enter a new era of long-lasting peace.

## 1.1. Start of the Doi Moi Policy

The first factor that enabled Viet Nam to enter the new era was the decisions and efforts of the Vietnamese people themselves. In December 1986, the 6th Party Congress adopted the Doi Moi policy of economic reform and door-opening. For its foreign policy, Viet Nam decided to expand its ties with all countries in the world, including capitalist countries, based on new thinking about the rapid development of economic interdependency amongst countries regardless of their different socio-political systems. The slogan applied by Congress was 'to combine the force of the nation with that of the time'. This implied that Viet Nam took the first steps to shift from an ideological worldview to a more pragmatic way of thinking based on the concept of national interests (Shiraishi, 2004).

After the 6th Party Congress, the Vietnamese leaders made a more decisive shift in their thinking on national security and external relations, a shift from a perception of national security focusing mainly on military strength to one of comprehensive national security that put more emphasis on economic power and diplomatic efforts (CPV Politburo Resolution No. 2 on National Defence in July 1987, and Politburo Resolution No. 13 on Foreign Policy in May 1988).

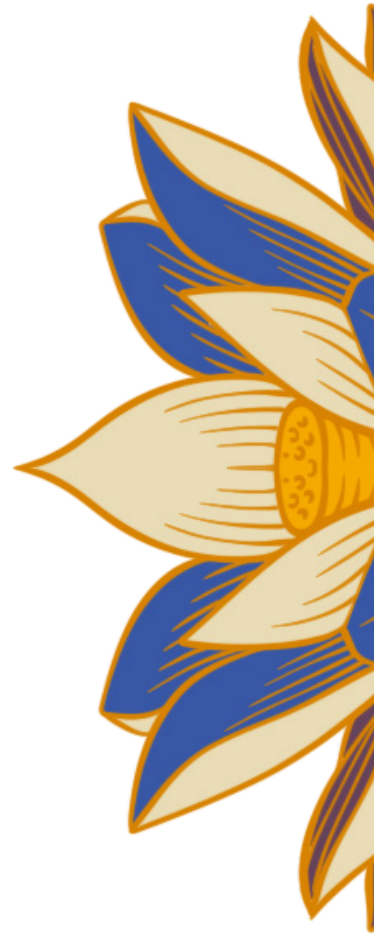
The actual measures were: the national assembly's passing of a foreign investment law and land law in December 1987, the regular army reduction in accordance with the new defence strategy in December 1989, the withdrawal of Vietnamese volunteer soldiers from Cambodia in September 1989, and the national assembly's deletion of hostile words against China and the United States (US) from the 1982 constitution preamble in December 1989, etc.

## 1.2. Cambodian Peace

The second factor was the changes in international and regional environments, which enabled Viet Nam to end its international isolation and start the process of integration into the regional and international community.

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries were the first actors responding to Viet Nam's new policy. Indonesia hosted the first unofficial meeting on Cambodia (JIM-1) in July 1988. Thailand advocated a new Indochina policy (from battlefield to market) in August 1988.

Taking over the ASEAN initiative, international society started peace talks on Cambodia in Paris in July–August 1989. Japan arranged the Tokyo meeting on Cambodia in June 1990.



In the meantime, fundamental changes took place in the international balance of power in the late 1980s. Following the start of the Soviet Union policy of perestroika, Gorbachev visited Beijing, which resulted in the Sino-Soviet rapprochement in May 1989, and the Gorbachev-Bush Malta Summit declared the end of the Cold War in November 1989.

Viet Nam began negotiations with China in January 1989, and the two countries agreed on the solution to the Cambodian issues at an unofficial summit in Chengdu in September 1990.

Thus, in October 1991, 19 countries (including Japan) signed the peace agreement on Cambodia in Paris. The United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) was established in February 1992.

In November 1991, shortly after the Cambodian peace agreement, the top Vietnamese leaders visited Beijing and the two countries officially declared the restoration of bilateral relations.

### **1.3. Omnidirectional Foreign Policy and the Diversification and Multilateralisation of External Relations**

By the end of the 1980s, Viet Nam had suffered from the international isolation and blockade imposed by regional countries and developed countries. However, the Cambodian peace agreement and Sino-Viet Nam rapprochement in late 1991 dramatically changed the East Asian regional setting surrounding Viet Nam. In the meantime, globalisation and regionalisation had accelerated all over the world.

The international and regional circumstances during the 1990s were quite favourable and friendly to Viet Nam.

Responding to the changing situation, Viet Nam articulated an omnidirectional foreign policy. In June 1991, the 7th Party Congress declared, 'Viet Nam wishes to be a friend of all members in the world community'. In April 1992, the national assembly passed the new constitution, which declared, 'Viet Nam enhances exchange and cooperation with all countries in the world, regardless of different political and social systems'.

Furthermore, in June 1992, the third plenary session of the party central committee (the seventh tenure) decided on a new foreign policy of 'diversification and multilateralisation'. Multilateralisation here implied, first of all, the country's approach to the regional organisation ASEAN (Thayer, 1999; Shiraishi, 2004).

## 1.4. Viet Nam's Joining of ASEAN

In July 1992, on the occasion of the ASEAN annual foreign ministers' meeting (AMM), Viet Nam and the Lao PDR signed the 1976 Bali Treaty (TAC in Southeast Asia), thus acquiring ASEAN observer status. In February 1993, the CPV politburo meeting agreed that 'Viet Nam is ready to join ASEAN at an appropriate time'. In July 1994, Viet Nam and Lao PDR as ASEAN observers joined the first meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF: a ministerial meeting for cooperative security in Asia-Pacific).

In July 1994, the ASEAN AMM in Bangkok agreed that ASEAN would welcome Viet Nam as the seventh official member. Receiving the news, the CPV politburo in Hanoi immediately held a meeting to decide the country's joining of ASEAN in 1995. In July 1995, at the ASEAN AMM held in Brunei Darussalam, Viet Nam became an official member of ASEAN. And in January 1996, Viet Nam started the tariff reduction process in accordance with the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (AFTA) (Yamakage, 1997; Nguyen, 2021).

The implication of ASEAN membership was multifaceted for Viet Nam. First, Viet Nam's political regime was recognised by its neighbouring countries. This contributed to the enhancement of the political stability of the country. One of the 'ASEAN Way' principles is that of non-interference. In addition, as the Cold War confrontation came to an end, ideological differences stopped being a serious issue of controversy in international relations.

Second, Viet Nam's relations with regional countries were stabilised. During the Cold War era, its relations with some ASEAN countries, especially Thailand and the Philippines, had been very confrontational. Viet Nam now became a signatory of the Bali Treaty and a member of ASEAN, a type of non-war community. Thus, Viet Nam had favourable conditions for building confidence with its neighbouring countries.

Third, Viet Nam participated in multi-layered networks of regional cooperation in Southeast Asia. It could acquire precious experience and knowledge and skills necessary for regional and international integration.

Fourth, the ASEAN membership was significant for Viet Nam to expand its scope of cooperation with extra-regional actors. When Viet Nam joined ASEAN, there already existed various frameworks, such as the ASEAN+1 Summit (sporadic), Post Ministerial Conference (PMC, annual) and ARF (annual), where extra-regional powers were invited on the basis of the ASEAN centrality principle. Later on, other forums, such as the ASEAN+3 Summit and the East Asia Summit (EAS), were also added. Viet Nam was able to enjoy many chances to exchange with the leaders of extra-regional countries.

ASEAN as a regional group also established the ASEAN+1 formula of free trade agreement (FTA)/ economic partnership agreement (EPA) with China, the Republic of Korea (henceforth, Korea), Japan, India, Australia/New Zealand, and more recently Hong Kong. The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) and Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) were inter-regional frameworks in which all the ASEAN member countries took part.

Fifth, the ASEAN membership also enhanced Viet Nam's prestige and position in the international arena and worked as a springboard to wider multilateral cooperation, such as Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in November 1998 and the World Trade Organization (WTO) in January 2007 (Shiraishi, 2008).

## 1.5. Start of the Economic Take-off: Industrialisation and Modernisation of the Country

Whilst it joined ASEAN, Viet Nam quickly restored and enhanced its relations with major countries in the region and the world.

In November 1992, one year after the Cambodian peace agreement, Japan became the first developed country to resume official development assistance (ODA) towards Viet Nam. Since then, Japan has been the top donor to the country until today.

Viet Nam also established regular relations with other important actors in East Asia. In June 1992, Viet Nam and Taiwan agreed to the mutual opening of a trade office. Meanwhile, in December 1992, Viet Nam and Korea normalised diplomatic relations.

The US, which had been deeply involved in the conflicts in Indochina for a long time, was rather slow in the beginning at approaching Viet Nam. However, in April 1991, the Bush (senior) administration put forward a road map for the normalisation of relations with Viet Nam. Following the road map, the Clinton administration also took necessary actions step-by-step to improve relations with Viet Nam. For example, in September 1993, the US government let international financial organisations resume loans to Viet Nam. This decision led to the international community's first holding of the consultative group meeting in Paris in November 1993. In February 1993, the US government decided to lift its embargo vis-à-vis Viet Nam. In July 1995, President Clinton finally announced the normalisation of diplomatic relations with Viet Nam.

In July 1995, the European Union (EU) signed a basic framework agreement of cooperation with Viet Nam (effective from June 1996), which allowed most-favoured-nation (MFN) status for the latter (Nguyễn et al., 2005; Vū, 2015).

To sum up, whilst Viet Nam faced many socioeconomic difficulties inside the country and suffered from the sudden loss of its traditional partners, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and East European countries, it was able to improve and expand relations with major regional and developed countries as well as various international organisations.





During the mid-1990s, the first wave of the 'Viet Nam boom' took place: Taiwan, Korea, Hong Kong, Japan, ASEAN, and EU countries quickly became major investors in Viet Nam.

Together with its domestic efforts of Doi Moi, the rapid expansion of foreign relations helped Viet Nam to get escape the socioeconomic crisis and stabilise its economy, thus obtaining the necessary conditions to enter a new stage of economic development.

In January 1994, the CPV held the Mid-term Conference and judged the country had preconditions for a new phase of development, i.e. industrialisation and modernisation of the country, adopting a new slogan, 'rich people, strong country, equitable and civilised society'.

In June 1996, the 8th Party Congress presented new guidelines for development: GDP per capita should be doubled from 1990 to 2000, and the country's economy should reach the level of an industrialised country by 2020.

## 1.6. Opportunities and Challenges

Viet Nam's door-opening and regional and international integration created both opportunities and challenges.

The first serious experience was the Asian regional financial crisis in 1997–1998. Although Viet Nam was not directly affected by the crisis, it could not escape from the negative impacts, such as the decrease in foreign investment, external trade, and international visitors.

Meanwhile, the 1997 peasant demonstrations in the Thai Binh province gave alarming signs concerning the widening disparity between the poor and the rich, between the urban and rural areas, and increased corruption amongst officials.

In December 1997, in the midst of the Asian financial crisis, the first ASEAN+3 summit was held in Kuala Lumpur. Since then, the three countries in Northeast Asia, i.e., Japan, China, and Korea, began dramatically expanding their close relationships with ASEAN. The ASEAN+3 mechanism swiftly developed to comprise various exchanges and cooperation at the summit, ministerial, senior officials' meeting (SOM), and expert levels.

In December 1998, Viet Nam hosted the second ASEAN+3 summit in Hanoi (which Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi attended). This was the second experience for Viet Nam in organising a multilateral gathering of government leaders, following the Francophone summit in Hanoi in November 1997.

## 1.7. The 9th Party Congress and the 8th Plenum Resolution

The term 'market economy' had been carefully avoided in Viet Nam for a long time. Instead, the earlier term adopted since the 6th Party Congress was 'multi-component commodity economy in accordance with the market mechanisms under the management of the state and with socialist orientation'. However, in April 2001, the 9th Party Congress officially recognised for the first time the concept of a 'socialist-oriented market economy'. The Congress also approved that 'economic globalisation is an objective trend in which more and more countries are involved' as a new development in the 21st century. It also recognised an 'economic sector with foreign capital' as one of the important components of the national economy. As for external relations, the Congress added the term 'a reliable partner' to the slogan that was originally adopted by the 7th Party Congress in 1991, the new slogan being, 'Viet Nam wants to be a friend and a reliable partner of all countries in the international community'.

In November 2001 (two weeks before the US-Viet Nam Bilateral Trade Agreement came into effect), the CPV Politburo Resolution No. 7 on International Integration of the Economy was issued, reconfirming the further development of external economic relations in order to promote socialist-oriented industrialisation and modernisation.

In July 2003, the eighth plenum of the party central committee (ninth tenure) adopted a resolution on strategy for national defence in the new context. The document articulated the definition of partners (who respect independence and sovereignty and promote friendly, equal, and mutual-interest relationships and cooperation with Viet Nam) and opponents (who have conspiracy and actions against Viet Nam's objectives of national building and defence). However, it added that 'some partners may be contradictory with our nation's interests', therefore 'we should overcome both tendencies, an ambiguous and careless tendency on one hand and a stereotyped tendency on another' (Mai, 2018).

## 1.8. The US–Viet Nam Bilateral Trade Agreement and Viet Nam's Accession to the WTO

During the 1990s, Viet Nam enjoyed rather stable economic development thanks to various favourable external conditions. However, it could not promote commercial and business activities with the US. As the country started the full-fledged process of industrialisation and modernisation and had a bitter experience from the Asian financial crisis, Viet Nam more clearly realised the necessity of the US market for further development.

The negotiations between the two governments for the bilateral trade agreement were prolonged. However, in July 2000 they finally reached a consensus and signed the agreement, which came into effect in December 2001. As a result, the US quickly became the main destination of Viet Nam's exports. The conclusion of the US-Viet Nam Bilateral Trade Agreement was also an important stepping stone for Viet Nam to further promote WTO negotiations.



Viet Nam applied for WTO membership in January 1995. Since then, Viet Nam conducted bilateral negotiations with 25 member countries. In May 2006, the final bilateral negotiator, the US, signed an agreement with Viet Nam. In November 2006, the WTO General Council (ministerial level) agreed on Viet Nam's accession, and in January 2007, Viet Nam became the 150th member of the WTO.

Viet Nam's accession to the WTO created a strong impetus to further promote the country's external trade and diversify its foreign direct investment (FDI) reception. It also required the readjustment of various domestic systems, including legal documents. For example, Viet Nam abolished the discrimination between domestic and foreign capital and the dual system of prices for Vietnamese people and foreigners (Fujita, 2006).

## 1.9. New Emerging Issues

In April 2006, the 10th Party Congress decided to accelerate the process of industrialisation and modernisation, integration into the world economy, and breaking away from its status as a low-income country.

Viet Nam continued socioeconomic development: GDP per capita surpassed US\$1,000 in 2008 and US\$2,000 in 2014. The country, thus, broke away from its low-income status to enter the next stage of being a middle-income country. At the same time, however, Viet Nam faced a new challenge: how to escape from the 'middle-income trap' and pursue higher economic development (Tran and Karigome, 2019).

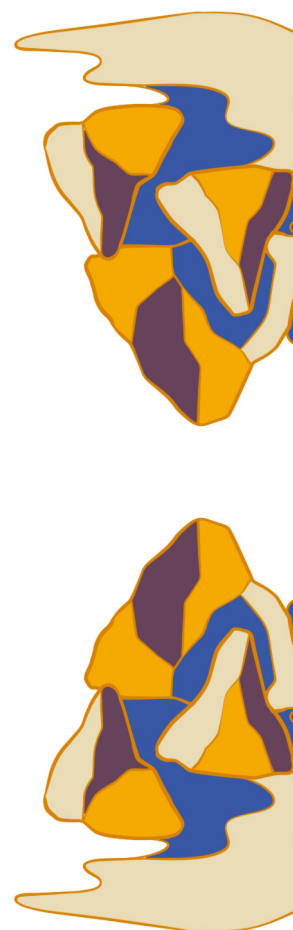
In the meantime, various new issues emerged that the international and regional communities (of which Viet Nam is a member) had to tackle:

First, due to the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks against the US and rampant cross-border crimes in continental Southeast Asia and elsewhere, international and regional cooperation concerning non-traditional security became more and more important.

Second, the UN declaration of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (September 2000) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (September 2015), epidemics, poverty, and environmental destruction in various parts of the world made human security issues more serious.

Third, the building of the ASEAN Community (for which the target year was moved forward from 2020 to 2015) and the further efforts thereafter became regional issues for all the ASEAN members.

Fourth, the conclusion of wider FTAs/EPAs imposed new challenges. Viet Nam (as well as Japan) was a member of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)-11 (8 countries started negotiations in March 2010 and 11 countries signed the final agreement in March 2018) and RCEP (16 countries started



negotiations in November 2012 and 15 countries signed the final agreement in November 2020). How could it pursue further development and industrialisation with the conditions imposed by the free trade arrangements?

Fifth, the South China Sea dispute became more and more crucial. Viet Nam was one of the countries directly involved in it.

## **1.10. The 11th and 12th Party Congresses**

In January 2011, the 11th Party Congress adopted a new development model, putting more emphasis on quality enhancement (shifting from a simple model of development by quantitative expansion). The Congress presented a detailed image of the level of an industrialised country by 2020: GDP per capita should surpass US\$3,000, and the industrial and service sectors should account for 85 % of GDP, etc. It also allowed the trial acceptance of private entrepreneurs to be party members. The Congress declared that Viet Nam would proactively build a powerful ASEAN Community (Teramoto and Fujita, 2012).

In October 2013, the eighth plenum of the party central committee (11th tenure) reviewed the results of the 10-year implementation of the eighth plenum (ninth tenure) resolution (July 2003). It adopted a new resolution on the strategy for national defence in the new context that emphasised the shift from conventional stereotyped thinking to more dialectic thinking. It argued that partners can have something contradictory, which necessitates struggle, whilst opponents might have something positive, which is worth cooperating. In general, the new guidelines were, 'make more friends, less enemies; we must cooperate whilst struggling' (Tap chi Quoc phong toan dan, 2014; Sakuma, 2012).

In January 2016, the 12th Party Congress did not refer to the year 2020 as the target to reach the level of an industrialised country. As for external policy, reflecting the serious concerns on the South China Sea situation, the Congress emphasised the solid defence of the fatherland, and the maintenance of peaceful and stable circumstances, based on the policy of 'cooperate whilst struggling' decided by the eighth plenum of the central committee.

## **1.11. More Recent Issues and the 13th Party Congress**

More recently, the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has deeply affected the international and domestic economy and society.

The February 2021 Myanmar military coup has also posed a serious challenge to ASEAN unity.

In January–February 2021, the 13th Party Congress put forward a long-term goal: Viet Nam would be a socialist-oriented industrialised country by the mid-21st century (instead of the earlier target year of 2020). More concretely, Viet Nam would be a developing country beyond lower-middle-income status by 2025 (the 50th anniversary of the liberation of the South); a developing country of higher middle-income by 2030 (the 100th anniversary of the Communist Party); and a developed country with high-income-level status by 2045 (the 100th anniversary of the August Revolution).

The congress also listed six major tasks, of which the second task included measures against COVID-19. The third included efforts 'to continue enhancing the quality and effectiveness of external activities and international integration', 'to resolutely maintain and defend the integrity of land territory, territorial waters, islands, and air space', and 'to maintain peaceful and stable circumstances for the nation's development' (Ishizuka, 2022).

## 2. Doi Moi Policy and the Development of Japan-Viet Nam Relations

Since the start of the Doi Moi policy, and especially since the conclusion of the Cambodian peace agreement, the Japan-Viet Nam relationship has steadily expanded and deepened. This section outlines the process.

### 2.1. Japan's Consistent Support for Viet Nam's Doi Moi Policy

Japan is one of the major countries that has consistently and eagerly supported Viet Nam's development and integration into the world community.


As mentioned above, as early as November 1992, one year after the conclusion of the Cambodian peace agreement, Japan became the first developed country to resume ODA to Viet Nam.

In the meantime, Japan played an important role in raising international concerns to support Viet Nam. For example, in November 1993, the Tokyo government, together with the French, took the initiative to organise the first Consultative Group meeting for Viet Nam in Paris.

In February 1995, Japan hosted a ministerial meeting of the Forum for Comprehensive Development of Indochina in Tokyo, based on Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa's appeal in January 1993. It aimed to encourage international support for the economic reconstruction and development of the three countries in Indochina, Viet Nam as well as Cambodia and the Lao PDR.

In May 1999, after the outbreak of the Asian financial crisis, Finance Minister Kiichi Miyazawa visited Hanoi and met Prime Minister Phan Van Khai, promising a ¥20 billion loan for Viet Nam's economic reform (Japan Ministry of Finance, 1999).

Japan also supported Viet Nam's integration into the world community. For example, in August 2005, Japan swiftly reached a conclusion on bilateral negotiations with Viet Nam concerning the latter's accession to the WTO. In December 2008, the Japan-Viet Nam EPA was signed. This was the first bilateral EPA for Viet Nam (and the 10th bilateral EPA for Japan).



In 2011, Japan became the first G7 country to recognise Viet Nam as a market economy (Umeda, 2019). If the country had not been able to achieve market economy status, unfavourable conditions may have been imposed in anti-dumping conflicts with other countries. Moreover, being labeled as a non-market economy would have been humiliating for Viet Nam, as it aimed for the development of its 'socialist-oriented market economy'.

## 2.2. Mutual Visits of the two Countries' Leaders

In March 1993, half a year after Japan's resumption of ODA to Viet Nam, Vo Van Kiet became the first Vietnamese prime minister to make an official visit to Japan. A year later, in August 1994, Tomiichi Murayama was the first Japanese prime minister to visit Hanoi, the capital city of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam. Since then, mutual visits of top leaders have been annualised between the two countries.

For example, in April 1995, Do Muoi visited Japan for the first time as secretary general (SG) of the VCP. Thereafter, SG Nong Duc Manh visited Japan in October 2002 and April 2009. SG Nguyen Phu Trong visited in September 2015. Three presidents have also come to Japan as state guests: Nguyen Minh Triet in November 2007, Truong Tan Sang in March 2014, and Tran Dai Quang in May–June 2018.

As for the imperial family members from Japan, Prince and Princess Akishino visited Viet Nam in June 1999, the Crown Prince (now Emperor) in February 2009, and the former Emperor and Empress in February–March 2017.

As for the foreign minister level, the annual meeting of the Japan-Viet Nam Cooperation Committee started in 2007. This is a meeting co-chaired by the foreign ministers of the two countries, where many officials of the concerned ministries attend to discuss various issues related to the economy, agriculture, and energy, etc.

At the end of 2010, the Japan-Viet Nam Strategic Partnership Dialogue (at the vice minister level) started between the officials of the foreign and defence ministries. Since then, the dialogue has been held frequently (although not strictly annually).

## 2.3. Multi-layered Concentric Circles of Multilateral Cooperation in the Region

In addition to the mutual visits between the counterpart countries, the leaders have had many other occasions for exchange.

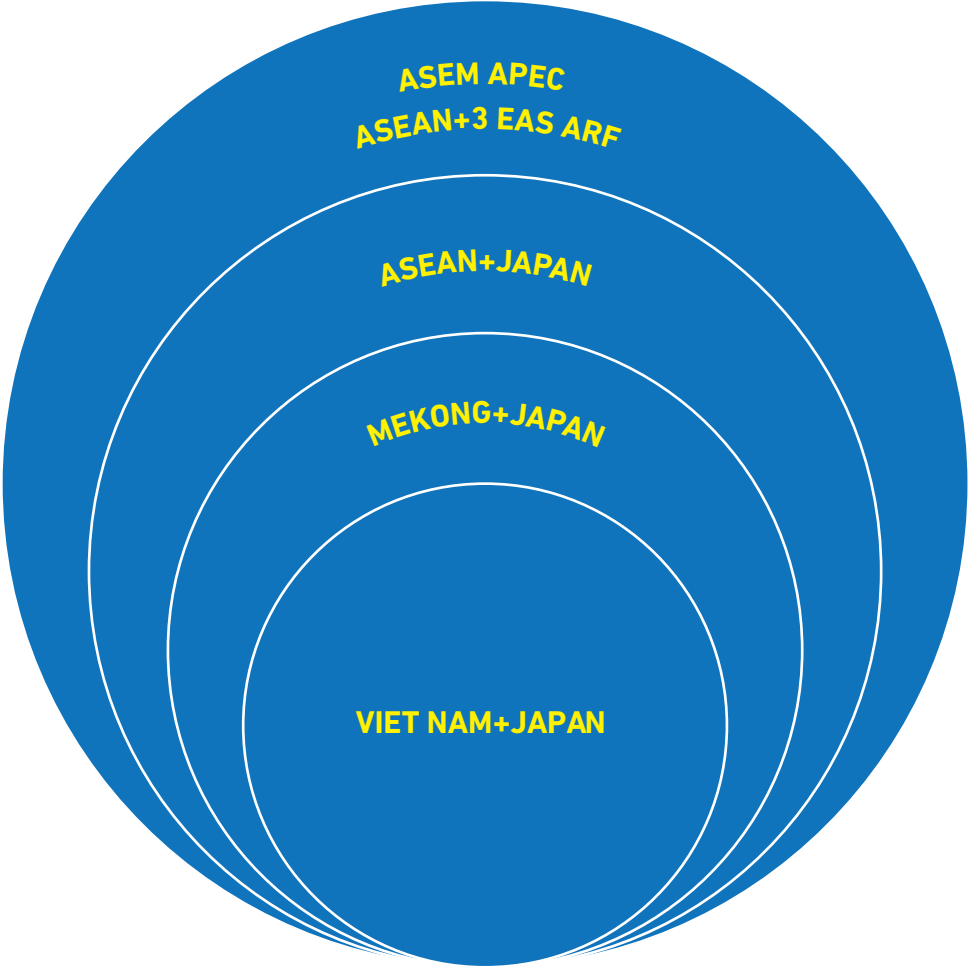
Japan and Viet Nam have joined various multilateral cooperation frameworks in East Asia and Asia-Pacific, which have reinforced bilateral relations.

For example, in 2016, in addition to Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc's visit to Japan in May to attend the G7 Ise-Shima summit (which will be mentioned later) and for a bilateral meeting with PM Shinzo Abe, they met again in Vientiane (Lao PDR) in September on the occasion of ASEAN-related summits (including Japan-ASEAN and Japan-Mekong). In November, Prime Minister Abe met bilaterally with President Tran Dai Quang in Lima (Peru) where the APEC summit was held.

Thus, when ASEAN, APEC, ASEM, and other related multilateral meetings are held, bilateral exchanges are frequently arranged, not only at the summit level but also at the ministerial, high official, and expert levels. This contributes a lot to the deepening and diversification of cooperation between the two countries.



**Figure 2.1. Multi-layered Concentric Circles Surrounding Japan and Viet Nam**



**Diagram drawn by  
Masaya Shiraishi**

**In addition, various global  
organisations (such as  
United Nations institutions)  
as bigger circles**

Source: Author.

## 2.4. Japan–Mekong Cooperation

One of the important regional cooperation frameworks that both Japan and Viet Nam have participated in is the framework between Japan and the Mekong region, which consists of five continental Southeast Asian countries. Four of them are new ASEAN members, the so-called CLMV (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Viet Nam), which joined ASEAN one by one during the 1990s, whilst Thailand is an original member of ASEAN.

As the membership enlarged, ASEAN as a regional organisation faced a new challenge, i.e., the developmental gap (ASEAN divide) between the more developed members and the newcomers. In order to maintain the organisation's unity and the region's integration, it became necessary to reduce the existing gap.

From the early period, the Japanese government paid attention to this issue and tried to support the CLMV. The abovementioned Forum for Comprehensive Development of Indochina was one of the earliest examples.

Furthermore, in 1995, a working group was started under the umbrella of AEM-Ministry of International Trade and Industry (later the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry [METI]) (economic ministers' meeting between ASEAN and Japan) to help CLMV's economic development through collaboration between the ASEAN forerunners and Japan. In 1998, a year earlier than the realisation of ASEAN-10, the working group was promoted to the AEM-METI Economic and Industrial Cooperation Committee (AMEICC). The committee has been active until today.

The Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) cooperation was started in 1992 as an Asian Development Bank (ADB) initiative, and the Japanese government became very interested in it when the idea of GMS economic corridors was announced in 1998. Japan began providing large-scale ODA (both yen loans and grants) for the construction of transport infrastructure, etc., in the East-West and Southern Corridors. These ODA projects were aimed not only at reducing the ASEAN divide but also to reconstruct the linkages between the continental Southeast Asian countries, which had been seriously damaged during the Cold War.

In 2003, the Japanese government published 'a New Concept on Mekong Regional Development' and initiated the new framework of Japan-CLV (Cambodia, the Lao PDR, and Viet Nam) cooperation. The summit and foreign ministers' meetings were held on the occasions of the ASEAN-related meetings from 2004 to 2008. One of the important agenda items within this cooperation framework was the Japanese support for the



CLV's joint 'developmental triangle' project (poverty reduction and socioeconomic development in the border provinces of the three countries).

In 2006, the Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund was established based on a promise by Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. The fund aimed to support CLMV's poverty reduction and economic development and thus contribute to ASEAN integration.

In 2007, the Tokyo government published the Japan-Mekong Subregion Partnership Program and in 2008 hosted the first Japan-Mekong Foreign Ministers' meeting in Tokyo. The next year, in 2009, in addition to the foreign ministers' meeting, economic ministers' and summit meetings were also organised. The meetings have been annualised, and the summit meeting decides a mid-term action plan for Japan-Mekong cooperation every three years (Shiraishi, 2010; Shiraishi, 2016).

## 2.5. Japan–Viet Nam Strategic Partnership

As the bilateral relationship became more and more intimate, the two countries' leaders frequently issued joint statements about their 'partnership' at the beginning and later their 'strategic partnership'.

As mentioned above, the July 2003 Plenum of the VCP Central Committee articulated the definition of 'partners'. Around that time the Hanoi government started diplomatic efforts to establish 'partnerships' with major countries. The first counterpart was the Russian Federation (in 2001). As of April 2019, Viet Nam had three 'comprehensive strategic partnership' countries (Russian Federation, China, and India), 13 'strategic partnership' countries (including Japan), and 14 'comprehensive partnership' countries (including the US) (Socialist Republic of Viet Nam, 2019).

In the meantime, Japan started partnership diplomacy around 2002–2003. As of June 2013, Japan had issued joint documents on bilateral 'strategic partnership' with 21 countries (Shiraishi, 2014a).

Between Japan and Viet Nam, the first document in which the term 'partners' was mentioned was the October 2002 joint press release by Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and Party SG Nong Duc Manh, who visited Tokyo. In the document, they referred to 'sincere and open partners acting together, advancing together'. In July 2004, when Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi visited Viet Nam and met Foreign Minister Nguyen Dy Nien, they released a joint statement, 'Toward a Higher Sphere of Enduring Partnership'.

The first document in which the term 'strategic partnership' was mentioned was the joint statement by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung when the latter visited Tokyo in October 2006. They agreed to establish a 'strategic partnership' between the two nations. And in April 2009, when Party SG Nong Duc Manh met Prime Minister Taro Aso in Tokyo, they released a joint statement in which both parties recognised that a 'strategic partnership has been established'.

In October 2010, when Prime Minister Naoto Kan visited Hanoi to attend the ASEAN-related summits and met Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung, they issued a new joint statement in which they agreed to further promote the strategic partnership 'in a stronger and more comprehensive manner'.



In March 2014, when President Truong Tan Sang visited Japan as the second state guest from Viet Nam and met Prime Minister Abe, they released a statement in which both parties agreed to build an 'extensive strategic partnership'. And in September 2015, when Party SG Nguyen Phu Trong met Prime Minister Abe in Tokyo, they released a new statement in which both parties recognised that 'the extensive strategic partnership has been established' (Shiraishi, 2014b). More recently, in November 2021, new Prime Minister Phạm Minh Chính visited Japan and met new Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. The title of their joint statement was 'Toward the Opening of a New Era in Japan-Viet Nam Extensive Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia' (Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021a).

In summary, Japan is not a 'comprehensive strategic partner' itself by the definition of the Vietnamese categorisation. However, Japan is ranked as a counterpart to promote strategic partnership in a 'comprehensive manner', and more recently a counterpart for 'extensive' strategic partnership.

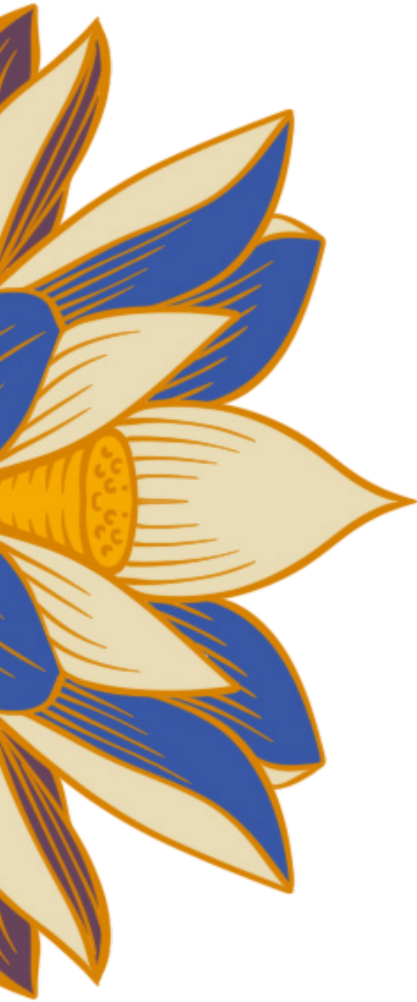
## 2.6. Japanese ODA to Viet Nam

Japanese ODA has played an important role in the process of building and promoting the strategic partnership. In November 2021, Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh visited Japan and issued a new joint statement with Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. The document described that 'Viet Nam expressed gratitude to the Government of Japan and the Japanese people for the effective support for its socio-economic development and poverty reduction efforts through Official Development Assistance (ODA) during the past 30 years' (Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021a).

As mentioned above, in November 1992, Japan became the first developed country to resume ODA, and since then it has been the top donor for Viet Nam. Thus, as of the end of 2021, the accumulated amount of Japanese ODA to Viet Nam reached ¥3 trillion (approximately US\$26 billion), of which more than ¥2.7 trillion was provided in the form of yen loans mainly to support infrastructure projects in the transport and energy sectors, etc., and the rest was provided in the form of grants and technical assistance to support various sectors, such as the medical services, environment, rural development, capacity building, education, and culture sectors (Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). The Japanese ODA in various fields has contributed significantly to Viet Nam's economic recovery, industrialisation and modernisation, and human resource development, etc., whilst enhancing Viet Nam's economic competitiveness and attractiveness as a destination for FDI.

Amongst the ODA projects, for instance, the Ishikawa project (a joint research project concerning Viet Nam's transformation into a market economy), which started in 1995 (Ishikawa, 2004), and a legal system reform project that was started in 1996 (Aikyuu, 2011), were the test cases for the Japanese government. Viet Nam was the first recipient country of such 'intellectual support projects'. With good results from the pioneer projects in Viet Nam, the Japanese government began implementing similar projects in other market transition countries.

Furthermore, in 1999/1995, after the outbreak of the Asian financial crisis, Foreign Minister Kiichi Miyazawa promised loans of ¥20 billion for Viet Nam's economic reform, as mentioned above.



At the turn of the century, the Tokyo government began making ODA programmes by country, and Viet Nam became the first target country in June 2006 (Shiraishi, 2009).

In 2003, following the agreement between Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and Prime Minister Phan Van Khai, a Japan-Viet Nam joint initiative was started to improve investment environments for enhancing Viet Nam's economic competitiveness. This was an effort to redress Viet Nam's weak and insufficient economic systems and institutions based on suggestions made by the Japanese government and businesses (Embassy of Japan in Viet Nam, 2019). Such an ambitious project could be agreed upon only with a solid relationship of mutual confidence between the two governments. The joint initiative has continued until today. The kick-off meeting of its eighth phase was held in October 2021.

In May 2002, Viet Nam initiated the Poverty Reduction Strategic Program (PRSP). It was the first attempt in Asia. However, reflecting the opinion of the World Bank and European donor countries, the original document did not pay enough attention to economic development through the building of infrastructure. With the strong initiative by Japan as the top donor and with the consent of the Hanoi government, a revised version of the document was accomplished with a new additional chapter on infrastructure building, which was accepted by the Consultative Group meeting in December 2013 (Shiraishi, 2009).

In the same period, the description of Viet Nam in the Japanese government's ODA white paper (annual report) underwent a significant change. Previously, the paper had regarded Viet Nam as a potential source of instability in Southeast Asia. However, during the first decade of the 21st century, the paper began emphasising the positive role of Viet Nam in the reduction of the ASEAN divide and the promotion of regional integrity. The paper regarded Viet Nam's stability and development as an important factor for realising well-balanced development in Southeast Asia, and noted that Viet Nam, as a more developed economy amongst the ASEAN newcomers, could be a good 'model' for the other less-developed CLM countries (Shiraishi, 2009). As mentioned above, Viet Nam showed that it could be 'a reliable partner in the international community' on the occasion of the 9th party congress in April 2001.

Viet Nam was one of the biggest destinations (number one or two) for Japanese ODA for more than a decade in the early 21st century. However, according to the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' ODA white papers, Viet Nam's ranking as a recipient country (on

the basis of the total amount of Japan's spending) was third in 2017 and 2018, sixth in 2019 and 2020, and eighth in 2021. Such a downgrading may be interpreted as a sign of Viet Nam's gradual 'graduation' from recipient status, although Viet Nam is still an important destination for Japanese ODA. In 2020, Japan's total spending to Viet Nam was US\$620.42 million, but reducing this by the US\$545.24 million paid back by Viet Nam (for returning past loans), the net spending of Japan was only US\$75.18 million (Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2021), *ODA Hakusho*).

## 2.7. China's Role in Japan–Viet Nam Relations

One of the important reasons for the recent development of Japan-Viet Nam relations may be the role of China.

In September 2010, a Chinese fishery boat clashed with a Japanese sea patrol boat near the Senkaku islands in the East China Sea, and China temporarily stopped rare earth exports to Japan. Shortly after the incident, in October 2010, Prime Minister Naoto Kan visited Hanoi. On that occasion, Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung offered a joint development of rare earth in Viet Nam, which deeply moved the Japanese people (Umeda, 2020).

A year later, in October 2011, Prime Minister Dung visited Japan and met with Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda. They issued a joint statement in which both parties confirmed that 'the peace and stability of the South China Sea is a common interest of the international community'. This was the first occasion where the two governments' joint statement referred to the South China Sea issue. Since then, all the joint statements have included a statement the paragraphs on the issue. In the meeting between Prime Ministers Noda and Dung, they also signed a document concerning the joint development of rare earth.

In July–August 2014, Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida visited Hanoi and exchanged notes with Minister of Planning and Investment Bui Quang Vinh concerning the ¥500 million grant for the capacity improvement of Vietnamese maritime law-enforcement organisations, which would provide six used vessels and related equipment. Two months earlier, in May of the same year, the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) conducted oil research under the sea inside the Vietnamese Exclusive Economic Zone.

Thereafter, in September 2015, the Japanese government signed a new document concerning an additional grant aid amounting to ¥200 million to provide other used vessels and equipment. In June 2017, it also signed another document regarding a ¥38.482 billion loan to provide six new patrol boats.



Despite these examples, however, it may be misleading to conclude that Japan and Viet Nam have established a joint front against China. As mentioned in the first section, Vietnamese diplomatic policy is basically to 'cooperate whilst struggling'. It is also true that Japan does not necessarily totally stand against China.

## 3. Importance for Each Other

Vietnamese leaders often mention that Japan is a major partner as the top donor of ODA, the second biggest investor (following Korea) in terms of the accumulated amount of registered investment, the third biggest source of foreign visitors to Viet Nam (following China and Korea), and the fourth biggest trading partner (following China, Korea and the US).

For Japan, too, Viet Nam is becoming a more and more important partner.

### 3.1. Trade

The amount of bilateral trade between Japan and Viet Nam was merely US\$5 million in 1990. However, by 2011, the amount had increased to almost US\$21.2 billion.

In recent years, thanks to Viet Nam's accession to the WTO (effective since January 2009) and the conclusion of the Japan-Viet Nam EPA (effective since October 2009), etc., bilateral trade is expanding. Vietnamese exports to Japan increased from US\$10.781 billion in 2011 to US\$20.334 billion in 2019; Vietnamese imports from Japan increased from US\$10.400 billion in 2011 to US\$19.540 billion in 2019 (*Vietnam Statistical Year Book*, each year's edition).

One of the features of recent bilateral trade is that the amounts of imports and exports are rather well balanced. Second, the bilateral trade structure was typically vertical during the 1990s: Japan mainly exported industrial goods, whilst Viet Nam mainly exported natural resources (such as oil and sea products) and light industrial products (such as apparel goods). However, in recent years, Vietnamese exports of machinery and parts, and transport machines and parts, are increasing both in terms of the amount and their share of total exports (Japan External Trade Organization, 2022). This change seems to be a reflection of Viet Nam's swift development in industrialisation, partly thanks to Japanese and other foreign capital investment to Viet Nam.

As for its importance as Viet Nam's trade partner, Japan used to be ranked number one, but in recent years (since 2013) Japan has been fourth after China, Korea, and the US (Japan Bank for International Cooperation, 2019). Meanwhile, the importance of Viet Nam as Japan's trade partner has been growing year by year. Viet Nam as a destination for Japan's exports ranked 29th in 2000, 10th in 2015, and 9th in 2019, whilst Viet Nam as the origin of Japan's imports ranked 28th in 2000, 14th in 2015, and 10th in 2019. Viet Nam's ranking in terms of the total amount of bilateral trade was 8th in 2019 (Japan Ministry of Finance, each year's edition).

## 3.2. Foreign Direct Investment

For Japanese corporations' investment in Viet Nam, the accumulated amount of registered capital from 1988 (the year in which Viet Nam introduced the foreign investment law) to the end of 2020 was US\$60.3 billion (15.7% of total FDI), ranking second after Korea (US\$70.6 billion, 18.4%) (Embassy of Japan in Viet Nam, Economy Section, 2021). However, for the annual investment amounts in 2012, 2017, and 2018, Japan was the biggest investor.

The general trend of Viet Nam's receipt of Japanese FDI has been as follows: the first wave of the 'Viet Nam boom' was from around 1995 (the year Viet Nam joined ASEAN) until the outbreak of the Asian financial crisis in 1997; the second wave was from around 2004 (when the 2003 Japan-Viet Nam investment agreement came into effect) until around 2008 (when the global financial crisis occurred); and the third wave was from the early 2010s until 2020 (when the COVID-19 pandemic began).

As for the investment sectors, in the beginning, the major investment came from Japanese manufacturers, which contributed significantly to Viet Nam's exports, especially to Japan. In recent years, however, Japanese investment in the retailing and service sectors has also become quite active thanks to the growing consumption market in Viet Nam and the relaxation of government regulations (Mitsubishi-Tokyo-UFJ Bank, 2010).

For Japanese companies, the importance of Viet Nam as an investment destination has continually increased. An example demonstrating this fact is that during the summer of 2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many factories in Viet Nam had to stop operations. Japanese enterprises' world supply chain was disrupted, and therefore domestic production in Japan and elsewhere was seriously damaged (*Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, 2021; *Yomiuri Shimbun*, 2021; *Asahi Shimbun*, 2021).

The total number of Japanese companies joining the Japan Chambers of Commerce and Industry in Hanoi (established in 1992), Ho Chi Minh City (established in 1994) and Da Nang (established in 2008) was 894 in 2010, but this increased to 1,772 in 2018, ranking number one in Southeast Asia and surpassing the number of Japanese companies belonging to a similar organisation in Thailand (Umeda, 2018). There are many factories that are not members of the abovementioned organisations, so the real number of Japanese companies doing business in Viet Nam must be much bigger. The total number of Japanese investment projects in Viet Nam from 1988 to the end of 2020 was 4,632.

Regarding the future prospects, according to the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC)'s questionnaire research targeting Japanese companies (multiple answers possible), as a promising business target in about three years, Viet Nam was ranked third (after China and India) in 2020 and fourth in 2021 (after China, India, and the US). Meanwhile, according to similar research by the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), as a good target to expand business activities abroad, Viet Nam was ranked second (after China) in 2020 and second again in 2021 (after the US). These research results suggest that many Japanese enterprises have big hopes for Viet Nam.

### 3.3. Human Interactions (1): Increasing Visitors

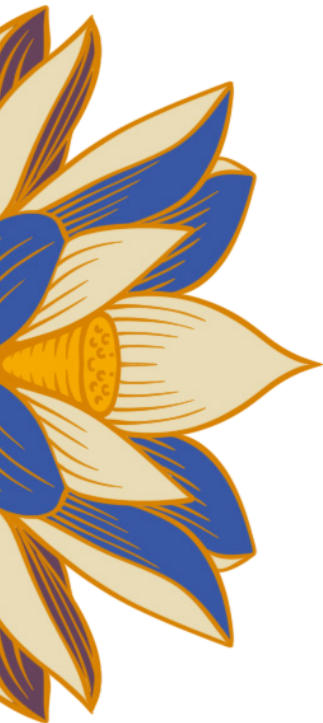
The number of Japanese visitors to Viet Nam is also steadily increasing. The opening of regular flight routes (between Kansai and Ho Chi Minh City airports in November 1994 and between Narita and Hanoi airports in July 2002, etc.) and the Vietnamese government's promotional policies (such as a visa exemption for short-term visitors from Japan for stays within 15 days) with direct impacts, as well as more general factors such as the increase in business activities between the two nations, the geographical closeness, and the development of the tourist industry in Viet Nam, have helped more Japanese to visit Viet Nam.

The number of Japanese visitors arriving in Viet Nam has also increased rapidly, from 120,000 in 1995 to 210,000 in 2003, 440,000 in 2010, 600,000 in 2013, and 950,000 in 2019. The figures in recent years show that Japan is ranked third as the origin of visitors (following China and Korea) (*Vietnam Statistical Year Book*, each year's edition). Meanwhile, from the Japanese point of view, the importance of Viet Nam as a destination when travelling abroad is growing year by year. Amongst the countries in the world, Viet Nam was ranked twelfth in 2010 and eighth in 2015. The detailed figures in 2019 were as follows: the US (including Hawaii) was the number 1 destination (3.75 million visitors), Korea was number 2 (3.27 million visitors), China was number 3 (2.68 million visitors), Taiwan was number 4 (2.12 million visitors), Thailand was number 5 (1.81 million visitors), and Viet Nam was number 6 (950,000 visitors) (Japan Travel Bureau, each year's edition).

Visitors from Viet Nam to Japan have also been rapidly increasing, especially in recent years. The number of Vietnamese visitors was 17,000 in 2003, 42,000 in 2010, 85,000 in 2013, 124,000 in 2014, 185,000 in 2015, 309,000 in 2017, 389,000 in 2018, and 495,000 in 2019 (Japan National Tourism Organization, 2022). Various factors have combined to contribute to this, such as the increasing income of many Vietnamese, their feelings of affinity and sympathy towards Japan and the Japanese people, and the popularity of cheaply priced flights between the two countries. As for the ranking of foreign visitors to Japan, Viet Nam ranked 15th in 2015, 12th in 2018, and 10th in 2019 (Japan National Tourism Organization, 2022). Thus, the importance of Viet Nam is enhancing year by year.

### 3.4. Human Interactions (2): Increasing Residents

As business activities between the two nations have increased, the number of Japanese residing in Viet Nam has also risen, though the speed has been relatively slow: 1,913 persons in 1996, 2,682 in 2000, 8,543 in 2010, 12,254 in 2013, and 23,148 in 2019 (Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, each year's edition). According to the information by Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs concerning the ranking of the top 50 countries/regions in terms of Japanese residents, Viet Nam was 31st in 1996,



26th in 2000, 20th in 2010, 18th in 2013, and 14th in 2019 (Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, each year's edition). Thus, Viet Nam's ranking has gradually improved.

Meanwhile, the number of Vietnamese residing in Japan has increased rapidly, especially in recent years. The number increased rather slowly in the past: 9,009 persons in 1995, 16,908 in 2000, 41,781 in 2010, and 72,256 in 2013. However, a rapid increase suddenly started in the mid-2010s: 99,865 in 2014, 146,956 in 2015, 199,990 in 2016, 262,405 in 2017, 330,835 in 2018, 411,968 in 2019, and 426,908 in 2020 (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, each year's edition).

Accordingly, the ranking in terms of foreign residents in Japan has also rapidly risen: Viet Nam ranked fourth in 2016 after China, Korea, and the Philippines, whilst surpassing Brazil; third in 2017 surpassing the Philippines; and second in 2020 surpassing Korea (Immigration Services Agency of Japan, each year's edition).

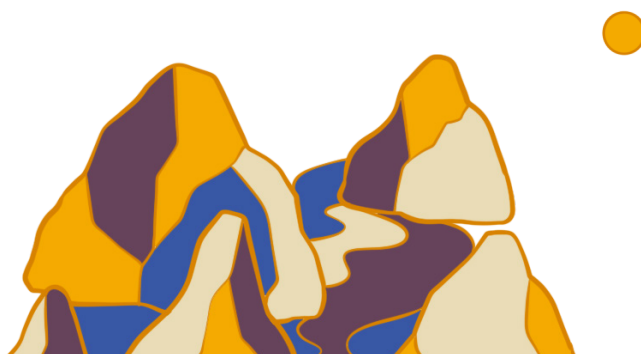
The rapid increase in Vietnamese residents has been mainly due to the increasing numbers of Vietnamese technical intern trainees and students.

As for the total number of workers in Japan, in 2019, Viet Nam ranked second, after China, but the number of technical intern trainees alone already ranked first by the end of 2016, surpassing China. As of October 2019, the number of intern trainees from Viet Nam was 194,000 (first), 87,000 from China (second), 35,000 from the Philippines (third), and 32,000 from Indonesia (fourth). Thus, the number of Vietnamese was by far the biggest. Furthermore, in 2020 Viet Nam became the number one country in terms of the total number of workers (Japan Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, each year's edition).

In terms of the destinations of Vietnamese workers going abroad, according to the Vietnamese Ministry of Labor, Japan ranked first in 2018, surpassing Taiwan. In 2019, out of 150,000 workers going abroad, 80,000 departed for Japan (first), 55,000 for Taiwan (second), and 7,000 for Korea (third) (Japan External Trade Organization, 2020).

According to the Japanese government's regulations, foreign students in Japan are allowed to work (side jobs) up to 28 hours per week (40 hours during long holidays, such as summer vacation). This is a strong incentive for more and more Vietnamese to arrive in Japan as students.

In terms of the origins of foreign students in Japan, Viet Nam ranked second in 2014, following China and surpassing Korea. According to the 2019 statistics, the total number of foreign students (including those studying in Japanese language schools) was 312,000, amongst which Vietnamese students numbered 73,000. In other words, one-fourth of foreign students in Japan were Vietnamese (Japan Student Services Organization, each year's edition).



### **3.5. Mutual Importance Demonstrated in Diplomatic Activities between Japan and Viet Nam**

Diplomatic activities between Japan and Viet Nam demonstrate well that the two countries' leaders highly appreciate each other as counterparts. The following are some examples in recent years based on information from the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

In January 2013, Prime Minister Abe chose Viet Nam for his first official trip overseas since the start of his second cabinet in late 2012.

In May 2016, the Japanese government, hosting the G7 Ise-Shima summit, invited the leaders of seven countries and five organisations as special participants to the outreach meetings. Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc from Viet Nam was one of them.

In February–March 2017, Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko (the present-day emperor emeritus and empress emerita) visited Viet Nam as the final destination of their trip abroad just before their resignation. Finally, in May–June 2018, President and Mrs Tran Dai Quang came to Japan as the last state guests to be welcomed by the emperor and empress.

In the meantime, in November 2017, Prime Minister Abe visited Da Nang to attend the APEC summit and met bilaterally with President Tran Dai Quang, the host of the summit. Furthermore, after attending the official meetings in Da Nang, Prime Minister Abe went down to the neighbouring city of Da Nang, i.e. Hoi An in the Quang Nam province. He was invited by Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc (who originated from that province) to have dinner. Prime Minister Phuc only invited Prime Minister Abe, although there were many other important leaders attending the APEC summit.

Also during the Da Nang summit, Vietnamese Minister of Commerce and Industry Tran Tuan Anh and Japanese Minister of Economic Revitalization Toshimitsu Motegi co-chaired the TPP ministerial meeting and collaborated closely with each other to obtain a final consensus amongst the 11 TPP countries.

In June 2019, the Japanese government, hosting the G20 Osaka summit, invited the leaders of eight countries and nine organisations as special participants. Amongst them was Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc again. Viet Nam had been invited three times to the G20 summit in the past. However, the reason was that Viet Nam had acted as the host country of the ASEAN-related meetings and the APEC summit that year. For the fourth occasion this time, the Japanese government invited Prime Minister Phuc because it regarded Viet Nam to be especially important.

In October 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga chose Viet Nam as the destination for his first trip abroad after his inauguration.

In early October 2021, Fumio Kishida went to Glasgow (United Kingdom) to attend the COP26 summit. This was his first trip overseas as prime minister since his inauguration. Whilst attending the formal conference, in his very busy schedule, he held bilateral meetings with only five leaders: Prime Minister Boris Johnson of the United Kingdom (as the conference host), President Joseph



Biden of the US, Prime Minister Scott Morrison of Australia, Secretary-General António Guterres of the United Nations, and Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh of Viet Nam. Kishida had served as foreign minister and Chinh as the chairman of the Viet Nam-Japan Friendship Association of Parliamentary Members for a long time and, therefore, had had chances to meet in the past. However, this was the first time for direct contact after both became prime ministers.

Three weeks later, in late November, Prime Minister Phạm Minh Chính visited Japan as the first foreign leader whom Prime Minister Kishida welcomed in Tokyo.

## Conclusion

In recent years, Vietnamese leaders have often stated that Japan is a reliable and true friend and that the Viet Nam-Japan bilateral relationship is at an all-time height: for instance, during President Truong Tan Sang's speech at the state banquet hosted by Emperor Akihito in March 2014, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc's comments to Japanese journalists in Hanoi in May 2016, and President Tran Dai Quang's speech at the state banquet hosted by himself to welcome Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko in March 2017.

For Japan, too, Viet Nam has become a very important partner, as mentioned in the previous section. In November 2020, for example, when Prime Minister Suga visited Hanoi, he emphasised to his counterpart, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc, that 'Viet Nam is an important partner for Japan which will serve as the linchpin in the efforts to realise a free and open Indo-Pacific' (Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). A year later, in November 2021, new Prime Minister Kishida made a similar statement to Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh who visited Japan (Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021b).

As Viet Nam develops further and becomes more powerful, the two nations will have more opportunities to help each other and learn from each other. There are many ways in which Japan can contribute to helping Viet Nam escape the 'middle-income trap' and continue towards higher stages of growth. For Japan, too, as the country enters the stage of an aged society with fewer children, which human society has never experienced, Viet Nam's contributions will become more and more important.

Meanwhile, there remain many challenges that both countries must jointly or individually tackle. These include the struggle against the COVID-19 pandemic, various problems related to Vietnamese technical intern trainees in Japan, and issues concerning the rise of China. More recently, there are some examples where both countries



do not necessarily share the same opinion, such as the Myanmar situation and the war in Ukraine. In the future, there will be other similar issues. Furthermore, concerning international issues, such as the US-China confrontation, that involve the global society as a whole, it is impossible for Japan and Viet Nam to take the same position. For instance, Viet Nam will not join the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue of which India is a member. In such cases, it is important that both Japan and Viet Nam are considerate of the other's position and maintain an attitude of tolerance and sympathy.

The author believes that the two countries' leaders and people will overcome the challenges and difficulties with wisdom and continue to grow their friendly and cooperative relationship.

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