

Regional Balancing Strategy and Vietnam–Japan Maritime Security Cooperation in Shaping the Emerging Security Order in The South China Sea

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ABSTRACT

Amid escalating strategic competition among great powers in the Indo-Pacific, the South China Sea has emerged not only as a focal point of sovereignty disputes but also as a testing ground for new regional security configurations. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of offensive realism and soft balancing, this article examines maritime security cooperation between Vietnam and Japan from 2007 to 2023 as a representative case of non-aligned soft balancing amid shifting power structures. It argues that: (1) bilateral cooperation has evolved from strategic dialogue into institutionalized maritime engagement, contributing to the emergence of a new, rules-based security architecture; and (2) Vietnam’s “Four No’s” defense policy—far from acting as an obstacle—has served as a strategic navigation mechanism, enabling institutionalized cooperation while preserving national autonomy. Employing case-study analysis and policy evaluation methodologies, the article elucidates how the Vietnam–Japan partnership reflects an emerging model of security collaboration for non-aligned states navigating an increasingly fluid regional order.

Keywords: Maritime security; sea security, Vietnam–Japan relations, South China Sea

INTRODUCTION

In the context of an increasingly restructured Indo-Pacific order driven by intensifying strategic competition among major powers, the South China Sea has emerged as one of the region’s most pivotal geopolitical arenas, bearing decisive implications for the evolving balance of power. Beyond serving as a vital artery in the global maritime trade network, the South China Sea also constitutes a complex zone of overlapping sovereignty claims, contested strategic interests, and competing visions for regional order, advanced by both internal and external actors. Within this context, maritime security cooperation between Vietnam and Japan since 2007 has grown into a strategically salient phenomenon that warrants deeper examination from both academic and policy-oriented perspectives.

Occupying a critical geostrategic position, Vietnam is both a claimant state in the South China Sea disputes and a prominent actor in advancing a rules-based regional security architecture. While Japan is not a direct party to the territorial disputes in the region, it has increasingly asserted itself as an influential “extra-regional partner,” pursuing a strategy centered on safeguarding freedom of navigation, counterbalancing China’s expanding influence, and projecting itself as a responsible power through the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) initiative. Transitioning from its traditional development assistance (ODA) model, Japan has progressively shifted toward maritime security

support (OSA), including the provision of patrol vessels, coastal radar systems, combat training programs, and policy dialogues with Southeast Asian countries—among which Vietnam has emerged as a central partner (Bradford, 2021).

For over a decade, scholarly research on Vietnam–Japan relations has predominantly focused on development and economic cooperation, particularly Japan’s ODA flows, infrastructure projects, and investment initiatives (Do, 2014). In contrast, studies on Japan’s regional security strategy have largely concentrated on its engagement with the Philippines or its role within multilateral frameworks such as the ADMM+ and ARF. While a number of recent studies have begun to acknowledge Japan’s emerging security role in Southeast Asia (Nishino, 2023), these works remain limited in their examination of Japan–Vietnam maritime and naval security cooperation. More importantly, no existing research has systematically approached bilateral security cooperation through the theoretical lens of soft balancing, particularly within the unique context of Vietnam’s “Four No’s” defense policy.

In light of these gaps, this article seeks to address two central research questions: (1) To what extent can maritime security cooperation between Vietnam and Japan be interpreted as a form of strategic soft balancing that contributes to reshaping the evolving maritime security order in the South China Sea? And (2) Does Vietnam’s “Four No’s” defense policy constitute a structural constraint or a strategically adaptive mechanism in the country’s evolving security partnership with Japan?

Grounded in the theoretical foundations of offensive realism and soft balancing—combined with frameworks on regional order transition and Vietnam’s distinctive foreign policy of maintaining strategic equilibrium among great powers—this article seeks to address the existing research gap on Vietnam–Japan maritime security cooperation through the lens of maritime security and power-balancing strategy. It further aims to provide practical insight into how non-allied states can pursue meaningful security cooperation to safeguard sovereignty and strategic autonomy. The Vietnam–Japan case, in this regard, may serve as a potential reference model for emerging forms of security partnerships in the contemporary Indo-Pacific landscape.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND ANALYTICAL APPROACH

To elucidate the dynamics of maritime security cooperation between Vietnam and Japan within the broader process of reshaping the regional security architecture in the South China Sea, this study does not treat the phenomenon as a purely bilateral arrangement. Rather, it situates the cooperation within the wider context of regional maritime order transformation. This section outlines the key theoretical pillars that underpin the analysis: (1) Offensive realism, which provides a framework to explain the power-driven behavior of major states; (2) Soft balancing, which illuminates non-aligned yet strategic forms of cooperation exemplified by the Vietnam–Japan partnership; and (3) The notion of a fluid or contested maritime security order, which captures the structural dimension of ongoing order-building efforts by both countries. In addition, Vietnam’s “Four No’s” defense policy is analyzed as a structural variable that conditions the form, depth, and scope of maritime security cooperation—thereby shaping both the strategic role and constraints of Vietnam within its evolving partnership with Japan.

The intensification of geopolitical tensions in the South China Sea—particularly following the 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA)—has reinforced a core proposition of offensive realism: in an anarchic international system, states act to maximize their power in pursuit of long-term security (Mearsheimer, 2001). China has increasingly asserted its position through the militarization of artificial islands, the expansion of its coast guard capabilities, and the application of coercive pressure against littoral states. Against this backdrop, Japan—a country traditionally dependent on the principle of freedom of navigation—has undergone a strategic transformation from a “civilian state” to a “moderate security power,” a shift clearly articulated through the Abe Doctrine and the implementation of its Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy (Bradford, 2021).

Among Southeast Asian states, Vietnam—facing some of the most acute maritime security challenges and sovereignty pressures without entering into any formal military alliances—has emerged as a central partner in Tokyo’s strategy to expand maritime security engagement in the region (Paul, 2009). In this context, Pape (2005) and Paul (2004) argue that states like Vietnam can constrain great-power influence through the development of indigenous defensive capabilities, the promotion of regional institutional frameworks, and technical cooperation, rather than by forging binding alliances (Pape, 2005; Paul, 2009). This model is particularly apt for understanding Japan’s approach to Southeast Asia, where Official Security Assistance (OSA) has served as a form of “unnamed latent alliance,” supporting the transfer of patrol vessels, coast guard training, maritime legal capacity-building, and policy dialogue (Le, 2021). For Vietnam, Japan’s involvement through activities such as the delivery of patrol vessels and radar systems, as well as the organization of short-term training programs for maritime law enforcement personnel, has occurred without any political conditionalities—thereby enabling both countries to pursue their strategic objectives without violating their respective core foreign policy principles (Do, 2014). It is also noteworthy that this cooperation contributes to the formation of a “non-allied but organized” maritime security order,

characterized by the sharing of information, norms, and operational capabilities, particularly through forums such as the ADMM+ and ReCAAP (Jimbo, 2012).

A distinctive feature of Vietnam's behavioral structure is its "Four No's" defense policy, officially codified in the 2019 Vietnam National Defense White Paper. This policy explicitly asserts that Vietnam will not join any military alliances, will not align with one country against another, will not allow foreign military bases on its territory, and will not use or threaten to use force (Ministry of National Defence, 2019). Although often perceived as a potential constraint, in practice, the "Four No's" policy provides Vietnam with a flexible framework for engaging a wide range of partners while maintaining strategic independence. Japan has been acutely aware of this dynamic and has accordingly adapted its cooperative approach. For instance, Japan has deliberately refrained from referencing any military commitments or force deployments, focusing instead on non-offensive defense capacity-building, such as the provision of rescue vessels, coastal surveillance systems, and technical training programs (Gronning, 2018; Pajon, 2013). This approach aligns with the logic of a "controlled partnership," whereby strategic linkages are cultivated through capability enhancement, trust-building, and shared interests rather than formalized alliances. As such, Vietnam's "Four No's" policy has not impeded bilateral maritime security cooperation with Japan; rather, it has shaped a modality of engagement that is well-suited to the sensitive geopolitical environment of the region.

In conducting this study, the article employs a foreign security policy analysis approach, combined with an interpretive framework structured around three analytical pillars: (1) offensive realism to explain structural competition among major powers; (2) soft balancing to interpret non-aligned forms of security cooperation; and (3) maritime security structure to trace processes of order formation. The research focuses on the Vietnam–Japan case through a qualitative comparative lens, utilizing secondary data sources including defense white papers, bilateral agreements, and published academic literature. Moreover, the case study method situates Vietnam–Japan relations in comparative perspective with the Philippines to highlight emerging models of non-traditional security cooperation within the current FOIP framework. This approach not only facilitates the explanation of the specific bilateral cooperation phenomenon but also offers conceptual insights into non-alliance-based power balancing models in contemporary Asian security architecture.

Over the past decades, Japan has progressively transitioned from a "postwar economic power" to a "regional order-building power" in the Asia–Pacific through the launch of its *Free and Open Indo-Pacific* (FOIP) strategy in 2016. Central to this strategic shift has been the expansion of Japan's strategic role in the South China Sea—a maritime space now at the heart of global power competition. Within the FOIP framework, the South China Sea is not only a vital maritime corridor, through which more than 90% of Japan's energy imports and a large share of its trade flows, but also a "geopolitical theater" where Tokyo seeks to assert its emerging role as a security actor in a fluid regional order (Yoshimatsu, 2025). The increasing presence of China in the South China Sea—manifested through the militarization of artificial islands and the growing assertiveness of the China Coast Guard—has heightened strategic concerns, not only for the United States but also for Japan (Pajon, 2019).

Against this backdrop, Japan has pursued a dual-layered strategy: reinforcing the U.S.–Japan alliance while simultaneously expanding security cooperation with Southeast Asian nations, with Vietnam identified as a key partner (Sato, 2013). Tokyo has consistently advanced its FOIP strategy underpinned by three core strategic imperatives:

- (i) safeguarding the security of international sea lines of communication (SLOCs);
- (ii) addressing non-traditional security threats and gray-zone challenges, particularly those posed by China;
- (iii) asserting Japan's role as a builder of a rules-based order amid an increasingly fragmented international system (Yoshimatsu, 2025).

From its initial formulation under Prime Minister Abe Shinzo in 2016 to the FOIP 3.0 version launched by Prime Minister Kishida Fumio in 2023, Japan has consistently anchored its strategy on the pillars of "the rule of law and freedom of navigation," while gradually expanding into development cooperation, institutional multilateralism, and soft security initiatives (Lim, 2023). Under Kishida's leadership, FOIP has evolved not merely as a strategic response to China but also as a core diplomatic axis for engaging with Global South countries within the framework of a liberal international order.

A noteworthy development in the evolution of Japan's FOIP strategy is the shift from a "counterbalancing-oriented strategy" (FOIP 1.0) toward a more inclusive and institutionally embedded vision (FOIP 2.0 and FOIP 3.0). Since its formal articulation in 2016 under Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, Japan's *Free and Open Indo-Pacific* (FOIP) strategy has steadily expanded both in scope and modalities of implementation to simultaneously pursue three overarching objectives: (1) reinforcing a rules-based international order; (2) balancing China's growing influence; and (3) projecting Japan's role as a responsible power within the regional architecture. Unlike traditional security strategies, FOIP does not prioritize the formation of hard military alliances. Instead, it seeks to foster a flexible, multilayered, and non-allied cooperative structure grounded in universal values such as freedom of navigation, respect for international law, and the promotion of security-related development cooperation.

At the institutional level, FOIP is operationalized through a composite policy architecture that combines high-level political and security dialogues, development-security assistance (via ODA and OSA), and capacity-building programs within both bilateral and multilateral frameworks. Notably, Japan implements FOIP through a modular and flexible approach, tailoring its emphasis on maritime security, search and rescue, rule of law, and coastal infrastructure support depending on the strategic context of each Southeast Asian partner (Koga, 2020; Pajon, 2019). The introduction of Official Security Assistance (OSA) in 2023 marks a significant step beyond Japan's traditional ODA paradigm, enabling Tokyo to provide non-offensive defense equipment, digital technologies, and surveillance capabilities to countries that share common strategic interests (Yoshimatsu, 2025). Beyond bilateral initiatives, FOIP is also institutionalized through Japan's active participation in multilateral platforms such as the ARF, ADMM+, and ReCAAP, where Japan serves as an institutional innovator, a training facilitator, and a technical information sharer. Unlike the U.S. approach, Japan emphasizes complementarity and co-creation, deliberately avoiding the impression of imposing institutional control or dominating existing maritime security structures. Importantly, FOIP is not designed as an anti-China alliance but rather as a soft framework aimed at preserving regional agency in shaping a rules-based order. This flexible architecture is particularly meaningful for non-aligned countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia. FOIP thus functions as a *strategic framework of flexibility*, enabling regional partners to proactively engage in maritime security order-building without compromising their strategic autonomy.

Within the strategic vision of FOIP, Vietnam has emerged as a particularly critical partner in Japan's regional calculus. Possessing a pivotal geostrategic position at the intersection of East and Southeast Asian maritime routes, Vietnam is also perceived as one of the most capable and willing claimants in the South China Sea to resist China's assertive actions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2023). In Tokyo's strategic assessment, a stronger Vietnam—with enhanced maritime surveillance and defense capabilities—not only contributes to balancing the strategic dynamics in the South China Sea but also alleviates the direct pressure that Japan faces in the East China Sea, where it confronts similar coercive behaviors from Beijing.

For Vietnam, cooperation with Japan constitutes a vital component of its “soft balancing” strategy aimed at maintaining strategic autonomy amid major power competition. While sustaining stable economic and political relations with China, Vietnam has simultaneously strengthened its ties with Japan, the United States, India, and ASEAN partners as part of a broader strategic hedging approach. Japan, in particular, has emerged as an ideal partner in modernizing Vietnam's maritime law enforcement capabilities without contravening its “Four No's” defense policy. Japan's assistance—including the provision of Aso-class patrol vessels, the transfer of coastal radar systems, technological support, and coast guard training—has significantly enhanced Vietnam's capacity to manage its vast maritime domain and to address non-traditional security challenges such as piracy, illegal fishing, smuggling, and climate-related disasters. From Tokyo's perspective, Vietnam is the only ASEAN partner that combines three critical attributes: strategic independence, a pressing need to enhance maritime capabilities, and a high degree of policy compatibility with FOIP. Consequently, Vietnam not only contributes to the institutionalization of FOIP maritime security norms but also stands as a quintessential example of a country that, alongside Japan, actively engages in co-constructing regional order.

VIETNAM–JAPAN MARITIME SECURITY COOPERATION: FROM STRATEGIC DIALOGUE TO THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF SOUTH CHINA SEA SECURITY ORDER

Between 2007 and 2023, maritime security relations between Vietnam and Japan have witnessed significant expansion, both in operational breadth and strategic depth. Initially grounded in diplomatic and defense dialogues, the partnership has gradually evolved into a technical–institutional–maritime security framework, reflecting growing levels of strategic trust and shared commitment to maintaining a rules-based maritime order.

(i) In terms of high-level diplomatic engagements, Vietnam and Japan have conducted over 45 high-level exchanges, including at least 10 official bilateral visits by the heads of state and government leaders of both countries (Japan International Cooperation Agency, 2020). The frequency of such interactions increased markedly after 2014, when the two nations elevated their relationship to a “Extensive Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia.” This milestone paved the way for the institutionalization of maritime security cooperation through soft mechanisms, including a series of bilateral defense dialogues, maritime security consultations, and coordinated exercises between the Vietnam Coast Guard and the Japan Coast Guard (JCG).

(ii) In terms of technical assistance, Japan was the first country to provide Vietnam with patrol vessels and non-lethal maritime security equipment. Between 2013 and 2020, Japan delivered six Aso-class patrol vessels to the Vietnam Coast Guard under a non-repayable Official Development Assistance (ODA) framework, with a total value of approximately USD 36 million (Midford, 2015). Additional support included coastal surveillance radar systems, digital communication devices, rescue equipment, and specialized maritime tools to enhance Vietnam's

patrol, monitoring, and search-and-rescue capabilities (Guricci; Fadry & Seniwati, 2024). During 2022–2023, Vietnam became the first Southeast Asian country to receive Official Security Assistance (OSA) from Japan, with a grant valued at approximately USD 2 million, aimed at supplying non-lethal equipment to strengthen the operational capacity of Vietnam's maritime law enforcement agencies.

(iii) In terms of personnel training, Vietnam and Japan have jointly organized more than 400 officer training sessions and exchange programs from 2015 to 2022. These programs have covered areas such as maritime law enforcement, technical operation of maritime equipment, underwater medicine, combating illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, and humanitarian response to maritime disasters. Specialized training courses were also organized to support Vietnam's efforts in modernizing its submarine forces and expanding maritime patrol capabilities, facilitated by the Japanese Ministry of Defense and maritime security academies such as the Japan Coast Guard College.

(iv) Regarding operational coordination, the two sides have conducted numerous port visits, search-and-rescue exercises, and strategic field interactions. A notable example is the port call by the patrol vessel *Settsu* (JCG) to Da Nang in February 2023, where bilateral training sessions and legal scenario simulations were held. This marked one of the first instances of Japan deploying a maritime asset in the region to combine technical assistance with strategic presence, signaling a transition from technical support to strategic operational engagement in a vital maritime area.

(v) Japan has also funded various marine research, environmental protection, and deep-sea surveying capacity-building programs for Vietnam. Specifically, in March 2021, Japan provided a grant of USD 6.5 million to upgrade Vietnam's maritime survey vessels and enhance data collection systems for ecological and climatic monitoring in the South China Sea. This comprehensive support has not only strengthened Vietnam's maritime surveillance and law enforcement capabilities but has also contributed to the region's non-traditional security architecture—an increasingly prioritized domain within the expanded FOIP framework.

(iv) Vietnam and Japan have established specialized security dialogue mechanisms to foster cooperation and mutual understanding. These dialogues include the Maritime Security Dialogue, the Vice-Ministerial Defense Dialogue, and the “2+2” framework between the two countries' Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Ministries of Defense (Pape, 2005). These mechanisms facilitate discussions on regional security issues, promote information sharing, and enable policy coordination. Both countries have also actively participated in multilateral forums and initiatives aimed at enhancing regional maritime security. Vietnam and Japan have coordinated within platforms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+), and initiatives like ReCAAP to combat piracy and armed robbery at sea. These activities have not only strengthened bilateral cooperation but also contributed to the maintenance of security and stability in the South China Sea region (Wijaya & Hayes, 2023).

However, it is important to note that maritime security relations between Vietnam and Japan have not developed as a horizontally stable form of cooperation, but rather as a process of deepening evolution, driven by shifting strategic contexts and the gradual growth of bilateral trust. From an initial phase characterized by symbolic and politically oriented engagements, the partnership has progressively transitioned toward substantive technical assistance, intensive capacity-building efforts, and, ultimately, the institutionalization of semi-structured cooperation mechanisms capable of shaping regional norms. Through the expansion of responsible non-aligned forms of collaboration, Vietnam and Japan have incrementally constructed a model of soft security institutionalization, whereby legal norms, operational capacities, and behavioral standards are increasingly replacing the absence of a formal alliance-based order.

One of the key contributions of Vietnam–Japan cooperation lies in promoting the “behavioral normalization” process in the enforcement of international maritime law. Officer training programs for the Vietnam Coast Guard, sponsored by Japan, have concentrated on crucial areas such as the implementation of UNCLOS 1982, the handling of illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, counter-piracy operations, humanitarian rescue missions, and responses to “gray zone” tactics. These domains are critical for sustaining a maritime order based on the rule of law rather than coercion. The convergence between Japan's and Vietnam's approaches to maritime law enforcement has contributed to the emergence of a “soft norm-based structure” in the region, where law enforcement forces not only defend sovereignty but also act as agents for the diffusion of regional norms. As Vietnam's maritime law enforcement agencies develop the capacity to operate according to international standards and coordinate with counterparts such as Japan, they collectively create a compatible behavioral environment that pushes back against norm erosion resulting from unilateral coercive actions.

Notably, Japan's increasing presence through technical assistance, training, and the deployment of patrol vessels—such as the *Settsu*'s visit to Da Nang in 2023—demonstrates that Tokyo is no longer a passive observer but rather an “active third party” in the shaping of South China Sea order. This presence is carefully designed to avoid direct confrontation while generating a soft deterrent effect by empowering coastal states like Vietnam. Unlike alliance-based models such as the U.S.–Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty, Japan's presence does not entail binding military commitments. Instead, it creates a layer of soft institutional buffering, allowing smaller states to

interact with an external major power to enhance their strategic posture without compromising autonomy. This approach—termed principled presence—has the potential to extend to countries like Indonesia and Malaysia (Koga, 2020). At the same time, Vietnam–Japan cooperation serves as a crucial link in the formation of a non-allied FOIP network in Southeast Asia. Whereas the Philippines has a formal defense treaty with the United States, and Singapore maintains deep military ties with the U.K. and the U.S., Vietnam pursues a model of strategic independence combined with soft cooperation and institutional engagement. This configuration establishes a new form of strategic balancing, whereby medium and smaller states collaborate with external partners without joining military alliances, yet still bolster their defense capacities and contribute to the shaping of regional security architecture.

VIETNAM’S “FOUR NO’S” POLICY AND THE LIMITS OF STRATEGIC COOPERATION

The “Four No’s” policy has been one of the core principles shaping Vietnam’s national defense strategy and foreign policy since the *Đổi Mới* (innovate) reforms in 1986. Officially codified for the first time in Vietnam’s 2019 National Defense White Paper, the policy states that: (1) Vietnam will not join military alliances; (2) will not align with one country against another; (3) will not allow foreign military bases on its territory; and (4) will not use force or threaten to use force in international relations. While clearly emphasizing Vietnam’s defensive posture, this principle also establishes specific limitations on the forms of strategic cooperation the country can pursue, particularly in the areas of security and defense—including its partnership with Japan.

From a structural perspective, the “Four No’s” policy represents a strategic assertion of sovereignty, emphasizing Vietnam’s independence, autonomy, and non-alignment. This policy establishes a principled framework that inherently limits Vietnam’s security cooperation, preventing the formation of binding alliance commitments similar to those between the Philippines and the United States, or Australia and ANZUS (Le, 2021). In the context of Vietnam–Japan relations, this means that security cooperation cannot cross the threshold into formal alliance structures, even though the two countries share a high degree of strategic convergence. This structural limitation also constrains the implementation of sensitive activities such as military intelligence sharing, armed joint patrols, or the establishment of collective defense mechanisms. All Vietnam–Japan security cooperation must thus operate within a “policy-safe zone,” focusing on technical assistance, training, dialogue, and non-lethal aid—an approach to which Japan has effectively adapted through the ODA, OSA, and FOIP frameworks. The “Four No’s” policy has therefore created a “soft policy boundary”: a zone that limits the scope of strategic cooperation while simultaneously providing a safe strategic buffer.

However, the “Four No’s” policy is not an absolute constraint but rather embodies a degree of strategic flexibility. The 2019 National Defense White Paper introduced an open-ended clause stating that “depending on the circumstances and the level of bilateral relations, Vietnam will consider developing appropriate defense and international partnerships in accordance with its national interests” (Ministry of National Defence, 2019). This provision creates room for deepened forms of cooperation that stop short of formal alliance commitments. In practice, Vietnam–Japan maritime security cooperation during the 2020–2023 period exemplifies the “softening of strategic limits through soft institutionalization.” In the Vietnam–Japan case, both sides possess strong incentives to deepen cooperation while carefully avoiding the optics of a confrontational alliance against third parties. This strategic balancing is clearly reflected in Japan’s implementation of FOIP and OSA programs, which provide direct security assistance to Vietnam without any political preconditions or collective defense obligations. Conversely, Vietnam has actively embraced technical assistance and enhanced field-level engagement, while consistently maintaining its non-alignment stance. This dynamic illustrates a carefully managed strategic coordination that maximizes the available cooperative space without breaching either country’s core foreign policy principles.

From a strategic perspective, the “Four No’s” policy does not constitute an absolute barrier but rather functions as a normative framework guiding cooperative behavior. Within the FOIP architecture—where Japan does not require alliance commitments from its partners—the “Four No’s” policy effectively enables Vietnam to be accepted as an active partner, neither coerced into alignment nor excluded from regional initiatives. This policy foundation underpins the emerging model of “responsible non-aligned security”, in which Vietnam simultaneously acts as a beneficiary of assistance and a co-creator of normative structures. Moreover, the evolution of Vietnam–Japan cooperation within the FOIP framework invites a rethinking of the concept of “strategic partnership” in the twenty-first century. In this context, the “Four No’s” policy serves as an internal balancing mechanism, allowing Vietnam to maintain strategic agency without becoming entangled in confrontational alignments.

CONCLUSION

The evolution of Vietnam–Japan maritime security cooperation between 2007 and 2023 reveals a significant shift from strategic dialogue to the institutionalization of a maritime security structure grounded in technical capabilities, operational capacity, and normative frameworks. Against the backdrop of intensifying U.S.–China strategic competition in the South China Sea, the Vietnam–Japan partnership reflects a prominent trend among non-aligned states: the adoption of soft balancing strategies that simultaneously enhance self-defense capacities while avoiding entanglement in confrontational alliances. Through the FOIP initiative and soft security instruments such as ODA, OSA, maritime dialogues, and law enforcement training programs, Japan has contributed to shaping a regional order via non-coercive, non-interventionist, and non-binding approaches. For its part, Vietnam’s “Four No’s” defense policy has not acted as a barrier to cooperation but rather as a strategic navigation mechanism, enabling the country to expand its security partnerships while safeguarding its foreign policy independence and sovereign autonomy. By leveraging the flexibility embedded in this policy, Vietnam has not only strengthened its maritime security capacity but has also emerged as a responsible actor in institutionalizing a rules-based regional security order.

The Vietnam–Japan case thus offers not only practical insights into security cooperation but also meaningful contributions to international theoretical debates on models of soft security institutionalization amid an evolving regional order. It opens a new avenue for research on how medium and small powers can leverage strategic space between major poles without compromising political autonomy. Furthermore, this model holds potential as a critical foundation for the establishment of flexible, multilayered, and stable maritime security networks in the South China Sea and the broader Indo-Pacific region.

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