

# Strategic Position of Cô Tô Island in Northeast Sea of Vietnam

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**Abstract:** Historically, Vietnam's Northeast sea and islands are considered one of the country's important locations and gateways for diplomacy and economic exchange with a crucial role in the country's development and protection. The sea and island space also offer rich natural resources and great potential for economic development and the preservation of many unique cultural heritage sites. The country's development based on industrialisation and modernisation has been heading towards exploiting and promoting the rich potential of the vast marine space. Based on analysing the geocultural, economic, and political position of Cô Tô Island in the Northeast sea and islands, the article focuses on clarifying the special role and position of Cô Tô Island in the implementation of the Vietnam Maritime Strategy, the strategy of protecting territorial sovereignty and strengthening national defence, and the socio-economic development strategy within international cooperation. Along with this, the article also portrays the role of Hạ Long, Vân Đồn Island, and other locations.

**Keywords:** Northeast sea, islands, Quảng Ninh Province, Cô Tô Island, strategic location.

**Subject classification:** History

## 1. Sacred region with extraordinary people

In Asian geobiological zoning, the northern sea of Vietnam (Gulf of Tonkin), with its subtropical ecosystem, has many features compatible with the China - Japan subregion, while the southern sea with its tropical ecosystem has many similarities to the Indo - Malay subregion of the West Pacific (Lê Đức Tố, 2009, p.290). Many thousand years ago, the Gulf of Tonkin had an economic, cultural, and political position that was especially important in the country's development and protection. The Northeast sea and its islands played an important role in the environment, ecology, economic development, and preservation of cultural heritage, among others.

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The country is currently developing towards industrialisation and modernisation, which must mind the vast maritime space to exploit and promote the rich potential of the ocean (Nguyễn Chu Hồi, 2021; Đặng Ngọc Thanh & Nguyễn Huy Yết, 2009, pp.181-186 & 186-188). With a favourable geographical location enjoying rich natural resources, Quảng Ninh Province is one of the key areas in the socio-economic development strategy of the Northern Key Economic Region. It is an economic region with many strengths in foreign and maritime economic development. Hạ Long City, Vân Đồn and Cô Tô District Island, and other locations play an important role in contributing to helping Quảng Ninh Province become a comprehensive and dynamic development centre, an economic maritime centre and the gateway of the Northern Key Economic Region and the country (Nguyễn Xuân Ký, 2021, p.80).

After a long history under the domination of northern countries, opening the door to the independence era, many dynasties attached great importance to the maintenance of security and protection of sovereignty in the Northeast sea and islands, including Ngô (939-967), Đinh (968-980), Early Lê (980-1009), Lý (1010-1225), Trần (1226-1400), Hồ (1400-1407), Later Lê - Early Period (1428-1527), Mạc (1527-1593), Revival Lê (1583-1788), and Nguyễn (1802-1945) Dynasties<sup>1</sup> (Hà Văn Tấn, 1992, p.37). Over the centuries, Thăng Long's administration established a political frontier and multi-layered steel shields for ensuring defence and security, in parallel with building a solid cultural border. These political,

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<sup>1</sup> King Lê Thánh Tông used to have a poetry carved on Truyền Đăng Mountain when he examined the army here and visited An Bang in the ninth year of Quang Thuận Era (1468). The poetry was introduced as follows: In February of the ninth year of Quang Thuận Era, I examined the martial practice of my military forces on the Bạch Đằng River. I could feel nice wind, beautiful scenery and quiet sea and decided to travel on a boat to visit An Bang. I then ordered my army to garrison in the base of Truyền Đăng Mountain and wrote a poetry on the stone: “*Nước lớn mệnh sông trăm sông châu vào/ Núi non la liệt như quân cờ, màu biếc tiếp liền trời/ Có tráng chí nhưng lúc mới cảm thông vẫn phải theo người, như quẻ Hàm hào cửu tam (đã định rõ)/ Nay một tay mặc sức tung hoành từ xa, quyền uy như thần gió/ Nơi cơ quan trọng yếu bậc đế chủ, xúm xít đội quân hùng mạnh như hùm beo/ Cuộc chiến tranh vùng Hải Đông đã tắt ngọn khói báo hiệu/ Muôn thuở trời Nam núi sông còn mãi/ Chính là lúc sửa sang việc văn, tạm ngừng việc võ.*” (Hundreds of rivers run to this vast body of water/Many high green mountains are as wild as chess pieces, touch to the sky/Be brave, though initially he must follow the guidance of leader, as Hsien line 4 (I Ching Hexagram 31)/Now, like a piece of cake, he can rule the roost as powerful as the god of wind/The essential imperial bureau was crowded with powerful armies like tigers and leopards/The war in the Hải Đông region has extinguished the signal smoke/Long live Southern Skies, long live Đại Việt's territory/It's time to develop the culture and stop military affairs.) (Nguyễn Huệ Chi, 1992, pp.49-50). Southern Skies Cave Master (天南洞主 - King Lê Thánh Tông's regnal name) still has other poems such as: *An Bang Natural Features, Bạch Đằng River, Vân Đồn Port* and some other works about the Northeast - Quảng Ninh. It can be said that along with showing the magnanimity and the vision of His Majesty about the sea and islands, the poem on Truyền Đăng Mountain is also intended to "diversion" to prepare for the event in 1471.

military, and cultural boundaries not only asserted the country's borders and cultural identity but also strengthened the legal basis, sense of integrity, and sacredness of Vietnam's sovereignty.

Historically, the inhabitants of the Northeast sea and islands have often faced changes and challenges in the regional and international political environment. Due to sharing the land and sea borders with the Northern Empire, all sea attacks to the south of this empire passed through the northeastern land borders, sea, and islands, including Quảng Ninh, Hải Phòng, and Hải Dương Provinces. As the region is close to northeast Asia, bordering Qinzhou Prefecture, Lianzhou County, the Leizhou Peninsula and Hainan Island, the Northeast sea and islands are considered both a gateway for regional and international connections and an important forward defence system of the country. This vital defence line has the function of information collection and analysis. It is, at the same time, the first place to detect and prevent intrusions and attacks by the sea of regional forces. From Southern China, convoys often entered the Vạn Ninh Region (Móng Cái District) through Vĩnh Thực and Cái Chiên Islands into the Mang River to the Cửa Lục Region and then to the estuary of Bạch Đằng River, from which they can progress towards the capital of Thăng Long.

Along with that sea route, there was also a second one leading from the ocean to Cô Tô Island and Cửa Đồi Island, along the Mang River (also known as Đông Kênh River) to Cái Làng and Quan Lạn Islands and then heading southwest to Cống Đông, Cống Tây, Cửa Lục Islands, and Bạch Đằng River estuary. Merchant and transport ships from Northeast Asia or Hainan Island to Đại Việt often travelled on this route. After the coastal trade route was opened, many Southeast Asian and Southwest Asian countries sent ships through Cô Tô, Cửa Đồi, and Ngọc Vũng Islands to enter Vân Đồn<sup>2</sup>. This is also the sea route that the Northern Empire sent its army to invade Đại Việt. If we had followed the sea route from Qinzhou Prefecture into Đại Việt in the southwestern direction, it would have only taken us one day to arrive in Vĩnh An. From there, travellers just needed to spend about four to five days to go to Đại Bàn Fort (Kế Bào Island) in Ngọc Sơn, to Vĩnh Thái, Vạn Xuân (Vạn Kiếp, Lục Đầu Giang) to the Thăng Long. With the traffic conditions at that time, from the South of China to the Thăng Long Citadel by waterway was quite fast and convenient<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Follow *Zhengkaiyang Miscellaneous Works* (鄭開陽雜著-Zhengkaiyang zazhu) of Zheng Rouzeng (Chinese): "If you follow the Guangdong route, take a boat from Wulei Mountain, Guangzhou, and take advantage of the Northwind, in one or two days you can reach Hải Đông Phủ in Giao Châu" (Dương Văn Huy, 2008, pp.376-377).

<sup>3</sup> In 1647, Francisco (a Portuguese traveller), went from China through Vạn Ninh to enter the estuary of the Thái Bình River. He described the sea route as "innumerable small islands and reefs". In his travel book on Tonkin in 1688, the English explorer W. Dampier also wrote about the route from the Thái Bình estuary to *Tenam* "mainly along the mainland, through small creeks and narrow streams, between the islands to the east of the fjord and so close to the shore that, at a short distance from the sea, they appear to be an integral part of the mainland." (William Dampier, 2006, p.105).

In the Lý Dynasty, especially since the Trần Dynasty, taking advantage of the natural terrain, which is very hard to attack, central and local forces, including infantry and marines, built a solid defence posture in the Northeast sea and islands to intercept the enemies and cause them casualties while creating momentum for strategic counterattacks and decisive battles. Among the outstanding battles were the victories on Bạch Đằng River in 938 (against the Southern Han army, led by Ngô Quyền), in 981 (against the Song army, led by Lê Hoàn), and the battle to destroy the Mogol-Yuan army's food-carrying ships of General Trần Khánh Dư in 1288, entailing the advantaged tactical situation that led to another resounding victory in Bạch Đằng River in the same year, which highlighted the strategic talent of the Army Commander-in-chief Trần Hưng Đạo (Phan Huy Lê et al., 1976, pp.83-152; Vietnam Military History Institute, 2003, pp.193-226).

The glorious victories, natural conditions, and social activities impacting the regional political environment and other factors have cultivated cultural and political characteristics for the region and contributed to the formulation of specific personal and cultural identities of the people in Quảng Ninh. The province's inhabitants are resilient, outspoken, brave, dynamic, and practical. Over generations, the people in the region of the Northeast sea and islands have always been deeply knowledgeable about their living environment. They also have rich knowledge about the natural features of each piece of land, mountain, river, and creek and mastered skills in forest exploitation, farming, crafts development, salt making, and seafood processing, as well as other economic marine activities.

The formation and establishment of the political and cultural identity of the people in the Northeast sea and islands were closely associated with the prosperity of the Lý Dynasty and the prominent role of King Lý Anh Tông (1138-1175), who helped to open Vân Đồn's international trading port in 1149 - a historic decision, expressing the sea-oriented thinking and political bravery of a dynasty. The Lý Dynasty opened Vân Đồn seaport, the international trading port and foreign economic centre of Đại Việt in the face of the mighty Song Empire (Nguyễn Văn Kim, 2016, pp.103-105). To protect and assert sovereignty in the Northeast sea and islands, King Lý Anh Tông twice visited in 1171 and 1172 the region and drew a map of boundaries, while "looking at the shape of mountains and rivers, and wanting to know how hard the people's life is and how far they must travel to reach the capital city of Thăng Long" (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1993, Vol. 1, p.324). In the history of Vietnam, King Lý Anh Tông is a person with a very strong will on the sovereignty of the sea and islands. The King was the first to make important decisions and guidelines on the sea and islands. He is also the person who realised the exploration and establishment of sovereignty and protected the interests and marine boundaries of the country.

The Trần Dynasty (1226-1400), as a clan that developed from the sea and built their career from the coastal region, more than any other dynasties understood the role of the sea in the cause of building and protecting the country. With a vision towards the northeast, in

1349, King Trần Dụ Tông (1341-1369) raised the administrative level of Vân Đồn from the village to the town, and set up a system of bureaucracies such as: *Quan trấn* (town official), *Quan lộ* (provincial official), *Sát hải sứ* (sea procurator) và *Bình hải quân* (sea pacification navy) to look after and protect the borders, sea, and islands (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1993, Vol. 2, p.13). In three resistance wars against the violent Mongol-Yuan Empire, the Trần Dynasty had relied on Buddhism and people's patriotism to bring together the strength of the whole nation, and successfully defend the country for three times. During peace era, the dynasty continued to amplify and expand the influence of Buddhism. The heroes of the three resistance wars set up a large Buddhist centre in the high area of Yên Tử Mountain to express the nation's united social classes, ease human suffering, and open channels of communication and dialogue with regional cultures (Phan Huy Lê, 2006, pp.82-83). The blessed Yên Tử Mountain has many close connections with the sacred land of Đông Triều, which is the homeland of the Trần Dynasty's kings as well as the location of their tombs (Quảng Ninh Key Relics Management Board, 2010, pp.7-24, 28-78; Nguyễn Văn Anh, 2013). Trúc Lâm Yên Tử Zen sect is attached to the Trần Dynasty, with the Buddhism culture of Đại Việt and the reputation of Buddha King Trần Nhân Tông and many intellectual Zen masters, such as Pháp Loa and Huyền Quang. With the vision of the capital city of Thăng Long and the region of Yên Tử Mountain, the Trần Dynasty has opened a channel of cultural dialogue, building a cultural and sacred space in the northeast based on the wisdom, national spirit, and Buddhist philosophy of tolerance and compassion (Nguyễn Văn Kim, 2021, pp.79-90; Quảng Ninh Key Relics Management Board, 2011, pp.15-33).

The presence of Buddhist monuments in Quảng Ninh Province and on islands such as Cống Đông - Cống Tây (Thắng Lợi Commune) with Lắm Pagoda, Hộ Pagoda, Cát Pagoda, Trong Pagoda, Cây Quéo Pagoda and other monuments is a vivid proof for that statement. The presence of Buddhist pagodas (and the system of temples, communal houses, and shrines) in the Northeast sea and islands not only shows the spiritual needs of the island's inhabitants but also asserts the sovereignty and cultural footprint of the Thăng Long administration in the East Sea (also known the South China sea). Through economic, cultural, and spiritual communication channels, the Thăng Long administration achieved many successes in its strategy on establishing and expanding economic relations and cultural exchanges with the economies and cultures of Northeast and Southeast Asia and also Southwest Asian area. That explains why Vân Đồn as a centre for external economics and foreign affairs could exist for six centuries in Vietnam's history and played a leading role in the East Asian trading system.

The northeastern borders, sea, and islands used to cover and protect the Thăng Long citadel and the whole country throughout many historical periods. At the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, after the victorious resistance against the Ming's domination, with experience about the position of Đại Việt in regional power relationships and interactions, in the work "*Dư địa chí*" (*Book of Geography*), Nguyễn Trãi, a military and diplomatic strategist, once

asserted that Hải Đông Prefecture was “the second most important frontier region of the country in the East”<sup>4</sup> (*Nguyễn Trãi's Competed Works*, 2001, pp.458-465). The Northeast is a resource-rich region<sup>5</sup>. To adapt to the condition of limited arable land and promote the available resources, residents of the prefecture were good at business and trade in the mainland as well as maritime trade routes. The “*Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*” (*Complete Annals of Đại Việt*) once stated, “People there consider trade as their daily livelihood. Their food and clothes are therefore provided by northern merchants” (National History Bureau of Lê Dynasty, 1993, Vol. 2, pp.60-61).

Writing about the government of Hải Đông Prefecture in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the scholar Phan Huy Chú, the author of the “*Lịch triều hiến chương loại chí*” (*Categorised Records of the Institutions of Successive Dynasties*) also said, “People in this land are crowded and rich with very busy trading activities. Hence, this is also a prosperous town outside the capital, having many stunning landscapes of the country” (Phan Huy Chú, 2007, p.161). The research results of archaeology, history, anthropology, and other scientific disciplines indicate the extensive relationship, professional nature, business culture, and dynamic thinking of generations of residents in Quảng Ninh, which is somewhat outstanding in comparison to people of other regions. Given the geostrategic position of Quảng Yên Province (the former name of Quảng Ninh Province), the historians of the Nguyễn Dynasty asserted, “The land is developed based on the position of mountains, which creates a high base for defence purposes. With mountains to lean on and waters around, the location is far-flung yet crucial. It helps to keep the country’s borders safe, while easily controlling Thanh Hóa. Quảng Yên has some high mountains such as Lôi Âm, large rivers such as Bạch Đằng, 22 sea gates, more than 10 forts, winding islands and hidden rivers. Therefore, it is also considered a key place on the coast.” (National History Bureau of Nguyễn Dynasty, 1997, p.13).

From a historical perspective on the culture of Quảng Ninh Province and the Northeast, the province can be associated with three images depicting the development stages of this region: 1) Even though it was a remote and rugged border region in ancient and medieval

<sup>4</sup> According to Nguyễn Trãi, Hải Dương (with its position adjacent to the sea, where Lục Đầu River and Yên Tử Mountain are located), is the first of the four towns, leading to the eastern fort of Đại Việt. Sơn Tây is the second town, leading the western fort. Sơn Nam is the third town, leading the southern fort, and Kinh Bắc is the fourth town, leading the northern fort.

<sup>5</sup> According to the author of *Annam Primary Chronicle* (*安南志原 - Annam zhi yuan*), Đại Việt's sea has many flavors such as clams, oysters, mussels, lobsters, crabs, manatees ... "all are delicious dishes". In addition, there are tortoiseshells, cinnabar, sea snails (meat can be eaten, and shell can be taken for flavoring), whales (elephant head, fishtail, shaped like a buffalo, more than one *zhang* (Chinese ancient unit of length, one *zhang* is equivalent to 3,3m), meat has a sweet taste like pork), large yellow croaker (spawn in the sea, looks like silver carp but smaller and thinner, meat is sweet and delicious and salted is better), olive ridley sea turtle (shaped like a turtle but have no fingers and claws, thin shell with black dots, speckled with flowers like tortoiseshell, can be used as jewelry), etc. According to the author: “There are so many aquatic tribes in the sea that are indescribable.” (Gao Xiongzhen, 2017, p.169).

times, the Northeast sea and islands are rich in resources. Lê Thánh Tông, the most enlightened king in the early period of the Later Lê Dynasty, (as well as many other monarchies of Đại Việt) once praised, “*Ngư diêm như thổ*” (*salt and fish in this land are as much as land*)<sup>6</sup>; 2) The northeastern province of Quảng Ninh has a long coastline and large sea space as advantages in the development of a marine economy, trade, and services, as well as high-end ecotourism and other sectors; and 3) The northeastern sea and islands and Quảng Ninh Province have many advantages in the implementation of the Vietnam Maritime Strategy with the view: The sea is a living environment, survival space, and gateway for economic and cultural communication of Vietnamese people. Quảng Ninh and other northeastern provinces possess strength in marine resources, making a great fortune from the sea and developing sustainably based on the natural potential and position of the sea (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2008, pp.80-81).

## 2. Geo-economic position of Cô Tô Islands and Northeast sea and islands

Cô Tô is the largest island in the Cô Tô-Long Châu Island cluster consisting of Thanh Lân, Great Cô Tô, and Chần (Trần) Islands in Quảng Ninh Province with a natural area of nearly 46.2km<sup>2</sup>. The *Đại Nam nhất thống chí* (*Đại Nam Comprehensive Encyclopaedia*) of the Nguyễn Dynasty stated, “Chàng Sơn Island, Chàng Mountain (former name of Cô Tô Island) is located in the sea to east of the district. It takes travellers eight hours from Vân Đồn Island to Chàng Sơn Island in case the wind is favourable. There are also other islands here named Đông Chàng, Tây Chàng, Bò Cát, and Chàng Thông, or commonly known as Hùng Chàng. The time to visit all of them by boat is two days. The island is surrounded by large lagoons anchored with sea boats. Tây Chàng Island has two islets with Tây Chàng Mountain on the right and Thanh Lam Islet on the left. Between the two islets, there is a river called Thông Đòng with low and plain fields of more than a thousand acres on both sides”<sup>7</sup> (National History Bureau of Nguyễn Dynasty, 1997, p.33).

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<sup>6</sup> Regarding the natural conditions of the northeast region, in the poem named "An Bang Natural Features", Lê Thánh Tông wrote: "*Ngư diêm như thổ dân xu lợi, Hoà đạo vô điền thuế bạc chinh*". It means that the fish and salt in An Bang are countless as much as land, so people rush to make a profit. Due to less land, rice cultivation is not developed, so the tax must be light. Is it partly due to difficult agricultural economic development conditions that residents of Hải Đông region had to soon reach out to the sea, develop marine exploitation techniques and expand trade activities with other countries in the same area. In the work, the author also has a very remarkable comment: “Land in one province (ie. Hải Đông), mountains and sea are large but upland fields are few, people all trade for profit, farming mulberry is very little, job taxing unlike towns” (Phan Huy Chú, 1997, pp.114&160).

<sup>7</sup> Cô Tô Island is located in the sea area stretching from latitude 20°00'21"-21°15'N and longitude 107°44'36"-108°20'E. The area at the lowest tide is 22km<sup>2</sup>, and at the highest tide is 14km<sup>2</sup>. The highest point on the island above sea level is 180m and the average altitude is 40m.

Geographically, Great Cô Tô Island is adjacent to Thanh Lân Island to the northeast and borders Vĩnh Thực Sea in Móng Cái City and Cái Chiên Sea in Quảng Hà District (Quảng Ninh Province) to the north, Vân Hải Sea (Minh Châu - Quan Lạn Island), Vân Đồn District (Quảng Ninh Province) to the west, Bạch Long Vĩ Sea (Hải Phòng Province) to the southeast, international waters to the east with a length of nearly 200km from the coast of Trần Island to Bạch Long Vĩ District and Hainan Island to the far east. The island is about 150km away from Hạ Long City and 35km away from Vân Đồn Airport, 50km away from Cẩm Phả City and about 80km from the mainland. Cô Tô District has a specially important position in economic development, defence, and security.

Along with Vân Đồn, Cô Tô is an island district of Quảng Ninh Province has a crucial position in the region of the Northeast sea and islands. This sea consists of 2,320 islands with an area of over 842km<sup>2</sup>. Along with Bạch Long Vĩ Island in the middle of the Gulf of Tonkin, the coastal islands form three main mounds stretching in the northeast-southwest direction like a painted palace on the sea, forming layers of the frontier to shield the mainland. Viewing from the sea, these are the following island clusters: Cô Tô - Long Châu, Bái Tử Long - Hạ Long, and Vĩnh Thực - Cái Bầu. The Cô Tô - Long Châu island cluster holds the frontier position, created by sedimentary rocks and limestone, and low and hierarchical mountainous terrain. This is an island cluster with rich maritime ecological reserves.

The nature of Vietnam's coastal strips and waters is characterised with many precious resources, which is the basis for the development of many traditional economic sectors as well as new economic areas in the future. The Northeast is synonymous with its various resources, including mineral, ecological, tourism, geo-economic and geopolitical, and cultural resources. In the bay space, the Graptolithina fossil sites date back to the Ordovician-Silurian on Cô Tô Island is of special significance in geological and geomorphological research. The temporal marks and natural changes on the islands in Hạ Long Bay and Bái Tử Long Bay are considered "a complete and rare description of the history of the terrain development in the western Gulf of Tonkin, at least from the Miocene epoch (23 million years to date) so those consecutive periods of sea progression and regression can be restored in the Quaternary of this important sea" (Lê Đức An, 2008, pp.30-36). Hạ Long-style karst is formed from those characteristics. The bay area is famous all over the world for its magnificent scenery with thousands of islands, caves, and biosphere reserves. The unique structure of the tropical karst terrain in Hạ Long Bay has asserted the "Global Exceptional Value" of the natural world here. It is thanks to that outstanding value that Hạ Long has been twice recognised by UNESCO as a World Natural Heritage in 1994 and 2000.

Scientifically, seawater on limestone in the island system of Hạ Long Bay, Bái Tử Long Bay, Cát Bà Bay, together with sea krill shells, stone tools, ceramics, and other artefacts at the islands and caves are geological heritage, historical evidence, and cultural vestiges of the area. The caves around the two bays are homes to a variety of vestiges of Hạ Long sea culture. Archaeological findings show that, in the Neolithic period, following up the

developments of the Soi Nhụ site<sup>8</sup>, Cái Bèo, a site considered to mark the beginning of Vietnam's prehistoric economic partition, "has made important cultural advances"<sup>9</sup> (Nguyễn Khắc Sửu, 2009, p.298; Hà Hữu Nga & Nguyễn Văn Hảo, 2002). During the post-Neolithic period, the Northeast of Vietnam, an important space of the East Sea, has formed a flourishing Hạ Long sea culture. In its process of development, the "Hạ Long culture is an indigenous culture. However, the culture was made up by many elements, including its outstanding characteristics, which can be also the result of exchanges with other cultures, especially at its late stages. This is what creates a unique feature for Hạ Long culture, a culture at the gateway of the ancient Vietnamese civilisation in terms of space and time" (Hà Văn Tấn, 1998, p.267; Trình Năng Chung, 2009).

In the post-Neolithic period, as the owners of a large culture, the people in Hạ Long City not only exploited marine resources with fish, shrimp, and other kinds of seafood, but they also soon adapted and established many trade routes by sea. As a result, Hạ Long's culture has gained strong motivations for development. "Through the Hạ Long culture, a gateway for exchange, the ancient Vietnamese civilisation has received the most favourable opportunities for its development process. And it can be said that the Hạ Long people themselves contributed greatly to the process of creating the ancient Vietnamese civilisation."<sup>10</sup> (Hà Hữu Nga & Nguyễn Văn Hảo, 2002, p.236).

Regarding the landscape of the Northeast sea and islands, in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Nguyễn Trãi had wonderful verses praising the magical scenery of Vân Đồn Island, such as the following:

"Đường đến Vân Đồn lấm núi cao/  
Kỳ quan đất dựng giữ trời cao/  
Một vùng biển xấp  
gương lồng bóng/  
Muôn học xanh om tóc mượt màu/  
Non biển gạn trong tay vũ trụ/  
Tim

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<sup>8</sup> Commenting on the Soi Nhụ site, the archaeologist Trình Năng Chung said: "Soi Nhụ is one of the most important archaeological sites in the sea and island area of the Northeast of Vietnam. In terms of space, it is located on the shores of the largest Cái Bèo Island in Bái Tử Long Bay and facing the sea, is one of the focal points of cultural exchange of the whole Northern region with South China and Southeast Asia. In terms of time, it is equivalent to Hòa Bình - Bắc Sơn Culture. However, Soi Nhụ has fundamental differences compared to Hòa Bình - Bắc Sơn relics in survival space" (Trình Năng Chung, 2008, p.10).

<sup>9</sup> Regarding the Cái Bèo site, the archaeologist Nguyễn Khắc Sửu said: "Cái Bèo is a marine shelf archeology site that has a large scale, thick stratigraphy, and a rich complex of relics. The cultural vestiges here reflect the successive development of residential communities from the Middle Neolithic period, which is characterised by the Cái Bèo culture to the late Neolithic period, which is typical for the Hạ Long culture. These are important documents for determining the development stages of Cat Ba prehistoric culture in the prehistoric context of Vietnam and Southeast Asia" (Nguyễn Khắc Sửu, 2009, p.292).

<sup>10</sup> In this work, on the basis of archaeological findings, the two authors also shared the same comment: "In a space of less than 2,000km<sup>2</sup>... Of the present Hạ Long and Bái Tử Long Bay areas, at the Hoabinhian and Basonian there was a large prehistoric community. They resided in limestone caves in an area completely independent of the residents of Hòa Bình, Bắc Sơn and created a culture that exists in parallel with the both cultures. That is Soi Nhụ culture". *Ib*, p.83.

gan chẳng núng sức ba đào/ Trông bờ cây cỏ rờn rờn lục/ Nghe thấy người phiên vụng đỗ tàu” (The road to Vân Đồn has many high mountains/ The land of wonders magnificently faces the high sky/ The water surface is so clear that it reflects the blue sky/ Green trees are so long as hair in box canyons/ The big hand of the universe makes the sea water crystal clear/ I never fear the big waves/ The trees covering the banks look very green/ I can hear the people here anchoring their boats” (*Nguyễn Trãi's Completed Works*, Vol. 1, p.73).

Visiting the region of the northeastern sea and islands in 1688, in *An Nam du ký* (*Record of the Travel to An Nam*), Pan Dinggui (Chinese) also vividly describes the land as follows: “Hoa Phong is an island area, fully surrounded by rolling rocks of hundreds of thousands of shapes as they jump up from the seabed. There is no land, sand, or tree here. Only peculiar juniper and conifer trees interspersed with rocks and raised up with their trunks exposed out. The mountains are either a few hundred *tchi* (Chinese ancient unit of length, one *tchi* is equivalent to 33cm high) or a hundred and fifty *tchi* high, meandering and winding, making it impossible to make a guess or learn. The area looks like hundreds of animals or a bodybuilder sitting with armour, or a furious flame cloud on a summer day shooting to the sky. [...] Similarly, looking straight at it is completely different from having a glance on your side. The wind and clouds unpredictably change and transform in a blink of an eye. I sat in the boat and was adrift here for four days before getting out. Every time I go to where the mountain with the sea exhausted, it seems that the road is not clear, now there is a different realm. Just like that, there are a hundred times a day. At night, I tied the boat to the rock. Testing deep shallow water, I found a space of less than ten *xún* (Chinese ancient unit of depth, one *xún* is equivalent to six yards). The water is calm on all sides, often without the wind, and the passing boat seems to forget that it is at sea”<sup>11</sup>.

The island districts of Cô Tô and Vân Đồn and the islands of Quảng Ninh Province are endowed with many assets by nature. Hạ Long Bay is considered a natural wonder of the world and one of the most attractive tourist destinations in Vietnam. Bái Tử Long Bay connecting with Hạ Long Bay is also known as a major tourist centre. With systematic links, the islands of Vân Đồn and Cô Tô connect with the mainland, famous scenic spots, and the historical and cultural sites of Quảng Ninh, such as Yên Tử, Bạch Đằng, the tombs of the Trần Dynasty, Quỳnh Lâm Pagoda, and many more. Those conditions are an important factor for Quảng Ninh to develop into a national and international tourism centre. Every year, a number of traditional folk festivals about the sea, the protection of the sovereignty of the sea and islands are held in a dignified and lively manner by the authorities and people of Cô Tô. Along with that, plenty of knowledge about the sea and folk songs associated with the cultural space of the Northeast sea and islands has been created and handed down by locals for many generations.

Due to its diverse topographical and geological structure, Cô Tô can develop a high-class tourism economy with many beaches and resorts. Thanks to its unique human and

<sup>11</sup> According to the *Paragon Novels from Past to Present* (Geography Type, Wild Gate), papers of 21a and b led by Hà Văn Tấn, 1992, p.39.

natural resources, in recent years, Cô Tô Island District has been able to develop many types of tourism which are highly competitive compared to other tourist centres in North Vietnam. In recent years, the number of tourists to Quảng Ninh (Vân Đồn, Cô Tô) has increased rapidly<sup>12</sup>. In the future, Cô Tô Island District has great potential to develop marine cultural tourism, creating conditions for tourists to participate in and experience economic and cultural activities with customs, habits, beliefs, and sea festivals. Tourism is one of the driving forces for the development of the economy and marine culture, asserting cultural identity and contributing to the protection of sovereignty. Furthermore, exploitation, sea farming, processing, and sea trade also make the marine cultural imprints of Cô Tô residents more prominent and unique. The plan to develop a fish market on the sea also contributes to making the cultural space of Cô Tô fishing village more lively and attractive to tourists. The Cô Tô - Thanh Lam region can develop a model for fishing village tourism and sea trade. The sea between the two islands is covered by mountains, so generally, there are only small waves. The seabed is rather deep, and ships can operate easily. The area lies in a zone of diverse marine ecosystems with many types of valuable seafood. Fishing village tourism combined with sea trade should be the priority to create unique cultural nuances and economic potential on Cô Tô (Phạm Hoàng Hải, 2011, pp.262-263).

The Cô Tô Archipelago is endowed with a rich biological world, specific geological and geomorphological tectonics, diverse landscapes, and many clean beaches - all conditions for developing a special marine economy and tourism with the following types: sightseeing, entertainment, resorts, and discovery and adventure tours. In its development, Cô Tô has always been associated with Bái Tử Long and Hạ Long and Cô Tô must be considered an integral part of Hạ Long's marine culture. Cô Tô's maritime exchange activities are regional in nature. Along with the scientific values, the cultural and natural landscapes, the cultural values, the Northeast sea and islands provide resources with large reserves that can be exploited and promoted in the long term.

In terms of marine economic potential, Quảng Ninh's waters are one of the four key fishing grounds of the country, capable of developing fish and aquaculture to provide seafood of high economic value, such as shrimps, crabs, squids, pearl oysters, abalones, and

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<sup>12</sup> In 2019, Quảng Ninh tourism reached 14 million visitors, of which international visitors reached 5.749 million, up 14% and 15% respectively compared to 2018. Revenue from tourism in 2019 reached VND 29,487 billion, up 25% compared to 2018, contributing to the province's domestic budget an amount of VND 3,568 billion, an increase of 30% compared to 2018. In 2019, Cô Tô welcomed 288,000 tourists, including 4,200 international visitors, with a revenue of VND 700 billion. The island district currently has 266 accommodation establishments with a rich system of restaurants and hotels. Tourism and service activities create jobs for about 5,000 people (both directly and indirectly). The province has developed a tourism development project in four key spaces: Hạ Long, Uông Bí - Đông Triều - Quảng Yên, Vân Đồn - Cô Tô, and Móng Cái, and at the same time focuses on 4 main product lines such as Island tourism; Cultural and spiritual tourism; Community and ecological tourism; and Border tourism. Statistics of Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism; General Administration of Tourism, 30 December 2019.

many more, for export purposes. The region has abundant aquatic resources with more than 1,000 species, of which, there are over 60 species of high economic value. The island district has diverse economic potential and fishing grounds of over 300km<sup>2</sup>. This is also an area rich in seafood structure with many rare and valuable species. Cô Tô's aquatic resources are very rich with reserves of about 4,500 tons of all kinds, of which aquatic products reach 1,900 tons. The peanut worms, sea cucumbers, and abalones are favoured by many domestic and regional markets. It should also be added that, on the Cô Tô archipelago, there are 472 species of higher plants, of which 339 species are natural plants (Lê Đức An, 2008, p.91).

Food production, specifically fish sauce manufacturing, salt manufacturing, and seafood processing, have long been established and developed on the island. From that tradition, Cô Tô can develop a fishery and aquaculture economy. The sea area of the island has a top-ranking biodiversity reserve of Vietnam with the presence of many typical ecosystems of tropical and subtropical seas. Endowed with favourable climate conditions, a large tidal area, clean water, large inshore and offshore fishing grounds, Cô Tô can focus on raising seafood with high economic value. Thus, Cô Tô has the potential to become a large-scale marine aquaculture area, along with Cát Bà and Bạch Long Vĩ (Hải Phòng). Thanks to the diverse ecosystems, Trần and Cô Tô Islands have been selected among the 16 marine protected areas of Vietnam<sup>13</sup>.

Regarding sea trade, Quảng Ninh has a border with China on land and sea of about 250km. As a relatively closed bay, the Gulf of Tonkin can be conveniently connected to maritime international trade routes. The relatively dense system of natural channels in the bay can be good for building many deep-water ports such as Cái Lân, Hòn Gai, Cửa Ông, Mũi Chùa, and Vạn Gia. Cái Lân Port serves as a bridge between China and ASEAN through two economic corridors: Kunming - Lào Cai - Hanoi - Hải Phòng - Quảng Ninh and Nanning - Lạng Sơn - Hanoi - Hải Phòng - Quảng Ninh. Quảng Ninh also has a plan to develop the Móng Cái - Vĩnh Thực - Vĩnh Trung - Trần Island - Cô Tô route, starting from Móng Cái, an important international border gate. From Cô Tô Island, it is possible to directly access the Southeast economic region of China, which provides many advantages in cooperation with Hainan, Taiwan, and further access to the Japanese and South Korean markets. Natural resources and the position are favourable conditions for external economic development, promoting relations between Vietnam and Northeast Asian countries.

<sup>13</sup> According to Decision No. 742/QĐ-TTg dated 26 May 2010 of the Prime Minister approving the master plan on the system of marine protected areas of Vietnam up to 2020, the whole country has established and put into operation 10 out of 16 marine protected areas: 1) Cát Bà; 2) Bạch Long Vĩ (Hải Phòng); 3) Côn Cỏ (Quảng Trị); 4) Cù Lao Chàm (Quảng Nam); 5) Lý Sơn (Quảng Ngãi); 6) Nha Trang Bay (Hòn Mun, Khánh Hòa); 7) Hòn Cau (Bình Thuận); 8) Núi Chùa (Ninh Thuận); 9) Côn Đảo (Bà Rịa - Vũng Tàu); and 10) Phú Quốc (Kiên Giang). Marine protected areas that have completed detailed planning and are completing documents for approval of establishment planning include: 1) Trần Island; 2) Cô Tô (Quảng Ninh); 3) Hòn Mê (Thanh Hóa); 4) Hải Vân - Sơn Trà (Đà Nẵng - Thừa Thiên Huế); 5) Phú Quý (Bình Thuận); and 6) Nam Yết (Spratly Islands, Khánh Hòa).

From Cô Tô through the mouths of the bay, it is possible to access international maritime routes. Sea traffic is still the main mode connecting the island district. The main traffic route now starts from Cái Rồng through Vân Đồn to Cô Tô. The seaports in the island district include Cô Tô Port, Bắc Vân Military Port, Bắc Vân Wharf, and Cô Tô passenger pier. In addition to the main sea routes, road traffic is also concentrated in most of the island communes. From the analysis of the potential and resources of Cô Tô in the context of the Northeastern island waters, it can be understood that the importance of an island district is not only based on natural resources and fishing grounds but also on the position of the island. The political and socio-economic role of an island is determined by its position. Regarding the position of the island district, the human factor (human values, guidelines, and policies) is the decisive factor. Even though an island is small, it always has great value in its position if it is far from the mainland and endowed with many conditions to access international maritime routes, fishing grounds, oil and gas basins, and economic corridors on the ocean. In the Northeastern sea and islands, the Cô Tô and Bạch Long Vĩ Archipelagoes play a particularly important role for the country.

Over the years, Cô Tô has been developing rapidly. The island district still has many resources that have not been mobilised, exploited, and promoted effectively. In addition, promoting economic development while still ensuring the requirements for national defence and security and preserving traditional cultural values and living environment as well as ecosystems need to be considered by all development plans, policies, and strategies.

### **3. Geo-political position of the island district**

Along with its geo-economic position, Cô Tô Island District also has a particularly important geopolitical position. Located on the main point of the East Asian coastal trade route, the Gulf of Tonkin (or the waters of Giao Châu and Giao Chỉ before) has always kept its position as a gateway and focal point of important trade exchanges between Northeast and Southeast Asia (Chen Kou-tung, 1993, p.7). At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, due to the desire to seek (and win over) economic resources (mainly salt, forest and land, seafood, and rice), the Northeast sea and island area became the focus of many immigration flows, many illegal trade activities, and looting on the islands. Cô Tô Island (Chàng Sơn) was a place frequented by many boats and inhabitants of the area.

Due to political upheavals in China, and the waters adjacent to the Northeastern island waters of the Đại Nam, in the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, fishermen and Qing Dynasty pirates repeatedly infiltrated and pillaged the Đồ Sơn (Hải Phòng) and Quảng Yên (Quảng Ninh) regions. In 1802, *Tề ngòi hải phi* (齊桅海匪 - *Qiwei Pirates*) invaded Đại Nam's waters but were defeated. However, after that, in July 1803, more than 100 ships of the *Tề ngòi hải phi* came to invade the waters of Tiên Yên and Vân Đồn, and threatened *bảo Cỗ Dũng* (i.e. *Cỗ Dũng Garrison*). The security situation in the sea and islands, especially

in the Northeast sovereign region, became a concern of the Nguyễn Dynasty. In 1833, the pirate force led by Ngô Tam Á, in association with the bandits in Quảng Yên led by Nguyễn Bảo, invaded Vân Đồn Island and Hoa Phong Estuary in the Quảng Yên region (Vũ Đường Luân, 2008, pp.160-177). Pirate crews were often armed with strong weapons and operated very recklessly<sup>14</sup>. Faced with that situation, in 1836, King Minh Mạng instructed the Ministry of Public Works (*Công Bộ*, 工部) to consider the submission of the Governor of Hải Yên (Hải Dương, Yên Quảng) Nguyễn Công Trứ concerning: “Building a citadel is related to the defence in the border areas. The terrain of Quảng Yên Province, the inside can control the whole county, the outside can suppress the sea border, it is really a beautiful place... So I offer His Majesty orders to the province to consolidate and fortify the four sides of the castle according to the terrain. All the sides of the castle must be built to 45 *trượng* (Vietnamese ancient unit of length, one *trượng* is equivalent to 4,7m, so 45 *trượng* equivalent to 211.5m) in length, and then dig many ponds and wells inside the castle to collect water. The fortresses that are to be built in the four corners of the castle must be strictly guarded” (National History Bureau of Nguyễn Dynasty, 2002, p.1032). The head of the Nguyễn Dynasty approved the submission and ordered to strengthening the security of the Northeast sea and islands.

In the first decades of the Nguyễn Dynasty, every year (especially from about August to March of the following year), usually 500-600 boats of Chinese fishermen gathered to “fish” in the Northeast sea, especially the waters of Chàng Sơn Island. Thus, foreign ships (for transportation, fishing, pirates, etc.) often violated the waters and exclusive economic zone of the Đại Nam country. More dangerously, some groups of pirates also gathered on the islands, where they could anchor their boats and where arable land, freshwater, and densely populated areas were available to set up dens to loot the coastal areas (Nguyễn Văn Kim, 2019, pp.3-19). From Chàng Sơn, pirates often infiltrated the sea estuary from Vạn Ninh to Đồ Sơn. Understanding the danger “if the enemy is stationed in the sea, trade on the sea will be prevented” (National History Bureau of Nguyễn Dynasty, 2002, pp.428-419), in 1838, the Nguyễn Dynasty ordered Nguyễn Công Trứ to mobilise the navy to go to Chàng Sơn, attack the sea invaders, and seize the ships, as well as burn down the base of the pirate force. He also drew a map of the island and submitted an account to the court. The following year, he personally led the army to Chàng Sơn to arrest the sea invaders and set up posts in Vạng Village, Vân Đồn, and Vĩnh Thực Communes. The four-sided post at Chàng Sơn was built with the length of each side being 19 *trượng* 3 *thước* (approx. 92m) (Vietnamese ancient unit of length, one *thước* equivalent to 0.4-0.47m). With 180 inhabitants living on the island, Nguyễn Công Trứ recruited people and established Hường Hóa Village. Depending on the residence area, it was divided into four *giáp* (i.e. a grassroots administrative unit): the eastern, the western, the southern, and the northern;

<sup>14</sup> Pirate crews usually had one large sailboat, carrying 300-400 people and many light boats for maneuvering. This boat was equipped with 20-30 cannons, personal guns and many weapons such as spears, swords, knives, bows... (Dian H.Murray, 1987, pp.33-56).

appointed the *lý trưởng* (village mayor), and the *giáp trưởng* (chief sub-village manager) to govern and, at the same time, assigned *Châu Vân Đồn* (i.e. Vân Đồn District) to manage and collect taxes in Hướn Hóa. Those were the decisions of the Nguyễn Dynasty to protect and assert sovereignty over the seas and islands of the country.

In order to eradicate the piracy taking place in the Đò Sơn waters, the Governor of Hải Yên proposed to the Hue Court to deploy 10 seafaring boats, with people carrying weapons to pretend to be merchant ships to lure them into sea battles and destroyed them. In September 1838, he asked the Nguyễn Dynasty to strengthen the defence system in the waters of Chàng Sơn Island: “I think that at Chàng Sơn, Đầm Úc Anchorage is located in the east and Thảng Úc Anchorage is located in the southwest. Each built a large garrison, and each garrison should have a guard or an officer, 500 soldiers, and 20 boats. A fortress should be built on the left side of Thảng Úc and watchtowers and fire alarms should be built in high places on the right side of Đầm Úc. A boatyard should be set up at the beach in the front. Only outside at sea the news is difficult to communicate, and with the support from the left and right sides, we will be able to keep them with no worries. As for Cai Úc Anchorage at the mouth of the large sea, Vạng Village in Vân Đồn, each built a fort. A fortress should be built on the left of Cai Úc fort, and a fireplace on the right, with a strength of 200 marines and six boats. The Vạng Village fort should build one place for fire alarms. In case of an emergency, those two forts will light the fire alarms. On the one hand, they will bring troops and ships from the fortress, and on the other hand, they will send reports in an emergency dispatch to the districts of Vạn Ninh, Hoa Phong, Vân Đồn, and all the provinces and cities for rescue. So the news will be smoothly spread and will be taken into quick consideration, and the coast can be at peace” (National History Bureau of Nguyễn Dynasty, 2002, p.382).

Faced with a situation where the royal ships sent to the North or returning from the North through the waters of Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh were often looted and massacred by pirates, in June 1839 King Minh Mạng ordered Marshal Nguyễn Hữu Thắng and Chief Commander Nguyễn Công Trứ (two experienced military generals with feats of arms against pirates), to command ten warships to patrol the waters from Thừa Thiên to the North and up to Chàng Sơn Island to fight off pirates (National History Bureau of Nguyễn Dynasty, 2002, p.520). During the years in Hải Yên, Nguyễn Công Trứ used to do the following. If the Northern boats arbitrarily entered the sea and islands, whether they had fishing gear or looting equipment in their boats, they were immediately arrested and destroyed, they were not allowed to take refuge or resort to bribery. He also asked King Minh Mạng to order the Quảng Yên government not to allow local residents to illegally trade with Chinese merchants, especially selling rice to the Qing Dynasty, and that violations would be treated as serious offences<sup>15</sup> (National History Bureau of Nguyễn Dynasty, 2002, p.509).

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<sup>15</sup> In March 1836, Nguyễn Công Trứ presented to King Minh Mạng: "The people of Quảng Yên County mostly built boats to go around the neighboring provinces to buy rice and sell it to Qing merchants. So please order the provincial official to consider the amount to buy and give it to the civil mandarin to conduct the investigation".

In order to safeguard the country's sovereignty, along with strengthening the navy, the Nguyễn Dynasty also set up a system of garrisons and checkpoints in the coastal areas to maintain security, collect taxes, protect trading boats, and prevent pirates (Phạm Văn Thủy, 2011, pp.506-523). The establishment of the defence system and garrisons indicates the level of concern and vigilance of the Hue court about the insecurity in the northeastern waters. King Minh Mạng ordered the establishment of nine “*bảo*” to safeguard the coastal area and the islands<sup>16</sup>. Thereby, the Huế Court was well aware of the importance of this sea. The Nguyễn Dynasty deployed relatively strong forces at the forts of Tĩnh Hải, Ninh Hải, and Thiếp Hải to guard and use the boats seized from the Qing pirates to strengthen the navy. Up to now, many vestiges of these garrisons are still found in the northeastern waters (Nguyễn Văn Kim, 2016).

During the French colonial period, the island area was a canton consisting of five communes (i.e. East *giáp*, South *giáp*, West *giáp*, North *giáp*, and Middle *giáp*) belonging to Hà Cối Sub-district, Hải Đông District, Hải Ninh Province. Due to its strategic location, the French turned Cô Tô into a military base. From Cô Tô and Vạn Hoa Port on Cái Bàu Island, French warships attacked the waters of Hòn Gai and Hải Phòng Port. In parallel with military activities, from the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the colonial government also conducted investigations and surveys on the topography, climate, and hydrology along the coast of the Gulf of Tonkin. The main objectives were to exploit the colony; prepare a database to build the ports of Hải Phòng, Hòn Gai, and Tiên Yên; and to open a railway as an economic corridor between Hải Phòng, Lào Cai, and Yunnan.

After the island was liberated, Cô Tô was a commune in Móng Cái District. During the resistance war against the US, the positions of Bạch Long Vĩ and Cô Tô emerged as solid shields to prevent the US air and naval forces from entering North Vietnam. On 9 May 1961, President Hồ Chí Minh visited the island. He advised his compatriots and soldiers to enthusiastically engage in production and labour, cultural and educational development, ensuring peace and order, and developing the Party and Youth Union organisations to strengthen the government and solidarity. At the same time, he said, “It is necessary to

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<sup>16</sup> The nine “*bảo*” (*garrisons*) include: 1) Yên Khoái four “*dặm*” (Vietnamese ancient unit of length, one “*dặm*” is equivalent to 444.44m) from Nghiêu Phong District, with a strength of 60 soldiers, and one squadron; 2) Ninh Hải in Xuân Áng Commune, with 50 soldiers, one squadron and two large boats to support Tĩnh Hải; 3) Tĩnh Hải (1839) in Vụng Village, Nghiêu Phong District - a place frequented by the Qing boats, with 150 soldiers, one guard and three large boats; 4) Thiếp Hải (1840), Chàng Sơn (1843) with 30 marines and infantry, one squadron, one large boat; 5) Trảng Sơn in Vân Hải with two marine patrol squads, two squadrons; 6) Đông Nhân in Tiên Yên, with 26 soldiers, one military patron; 7) Cẩm Phá in Tiên Yên Province, with 30 soldiers, one squadron; and Bắc Nham 55 *dặm* away from Vạn Ninh Province, with 24 soldiers and one military patron; 8) Đình Nhân; and 9) Định Lập (National History Bureau of Nguyễn Dynasty, 1997, pp.43-44).

promote fishery, salt-making, aquaculture, and the protection of sea cucumbers and pearl oysters. Although the capital of Hanoi is far from the islands, the Party and Government always care about the people of the islands and hope they unite, strive, and make progress”<sup>17</sup>. Following the earnest wishes of the leaders and people of Quảng Ninh, President Hồ Chí Minh agreed to have his statue erected on Cô Tô Island. This is the only monument allowed to build by President Hồ Chí Minh during his lifetime. President Hồ Chí Minh’s visit to the island and his statue on the island of Cô Tô demonstrate the far-sighted vision and strategic thinking of the Party and State of Vietnam, and of President Hồ Chí Minh, on the role and position of the sea and islands in the cause of national construction and defence. His statue embodies the sacred soul of the country, a historical landmark, asserting Vietnam’s sacred and inviolable sovereignty over the East Sea.

Having undergone the wars against the French, the US, and the war to safeguard the northern border, the appearance of the Cô Tô Archipelago has changed a lot. In tune with the general changes of the country, Cô Tô has achieved many important developments. The strategic location of the archipelago is increasingly being posed as an important element in strategies of development and safeguarding of national defence and security. In 1994, Cẩm Phả District was renamed to Vân Đồn District, and Cô Tô Archipelago (consisting of two communes of Thanh Lân and Cô Tô) was also upgraded to Cô Tô District on 23 March 1994. Thus, from a commune-level administrative unit, Cô Tô became an island district, playing an important strategic role for the country. Since 1994, the Party and State have made many large investments in infrastructure development and promulgated many mechanisms and policies to create driving forces and motivation for the comprehensive development of cadres, soldiers, and ethnic groups in the island district<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Dossier of application for ranking President Hồ Chí Minh's relic site on Cô Tô Island as a special national relic. According to records, from 1946 to 1965, President Hồ Chí Minh visited Quảng Ninh 9 times (the first time on 3-5 October 1957; the second time on 29 February - 3 March 1959; the third time on 19-20 February 1960; the fourth time on 16 March 1961; the fifth time on 8-9 May 1961; the sixth time on 21-22 January 1962; the seventh time on 13 November 1962; the eighth on 23 November 1963; and the ninth time on the occasion of the Lunar New Year in 1965. It indicates that President Hồ Chí Minh was very interested in the strategic geo-economic position of the northeast sea and islands, the people of Quảng Ninh and the activities of the mining industry in the cause of national construction and defence. In 1963, it was he who gave the name of Quảng Ninh (on the basis of merging two provinces of Quảng Yên - Hải Ninh and Hồng Gai special zone, officially from 1 January 1964).

<sup>18</sup> Infrastructure system, roads, port and yard infrastructure, national grid electricity, information technology, communication, institutions of education, culture, health care,... have met national standards as a result of large investments. Cô Tô is the first island district of the country to be recognised by the Government as a new rural district, which is planned to become a national high-class marine eco-tourism zone. Per capita income increased from VND 57 million in 2015 to VND 88 million in 2019, reaching VND 92 million in 2020.

In terms of its geopolitical position, Cô Tô has always played the role of an outpost archipelago of the country, providing an anchorage for ships from many countries participating in maritime routes when passing through Vietnam's waters. As an archipelago in the Northeast sea close to international waters, the natural, political, and economic conditions of the island always had a direct impact on international trade relations and activities. According to researchers, although modern equipment and technology now provide much support for seafarers, the specific conformation and topography of the islands (as well as the chain of islands in the Gulf of Tonkin) always had a multifaceted meaning. For navigators, this includes: 1) Important landmarks for ships to be located at sea; 2) Determining the direction for sea traffic routes; 3) Bringing ships from the open sea to the wharf or port in accordance with the deep-water channels and creeks; 4) Determining the exact position of ships on the sea surface; and 5) Determining the correct point of change of direction for ships on the voyage. Along with maritime and economic benefits, the location of the islands also has a particularly important meaning in terms of national defence and security, protection of the environment, and preservation of the pristine, diverse marine ecosystems (Lê Đức An, 2008, p.27).

With an international geopolitical approach, it can be seen that, because of the island system along the coast and the ocean, Vietnam has been viewed and evaluated from a different perspective. From a peninsular country, Vietnam has become a maritime country (half archipelago, half peninsula) in Southeast Asia. With that position, together with partners in the region, Vietnam has rights and obligations in exploiting natural resources, protecting the environment, and ensuring security and peace in the East Sea, including the two large gulfs, the Gulf of Tonkin and the Phú Quốc Gulf in the Southwest Sea.

In the Northeast of the country, Cô Tô always held a very important geo-economic and geopolitical position in the construction and protection of the integrity of Vietnam's territorial sovereignty and territorial sea. The islands and archipelagos in the Northeast are the basis for determining the national border at sea and the overlapping area with neighbouring countries. In the case of the delimitation of the Gulf of Tonkin between Vietnam and China, the islands of the Cô Tô Archipelago have a particularly important position. "In terms of resources and security, it is important for both countries, but in general, the gulf is extremely important for our country. It is the only sea route connecting the North to the South and the East Sea to the outside world. It is the wall that shields the North of our country to the East, ensuring the safeguarding of Hanoi" (Luu Văn Lợi, 2012, p.96).

The results of the agreement on the delimitation of the Gulf of Tonkin show that the maritime border between Vietnam and China is 15 nautical miles from the nearest Bạch Long Vĩ Island to the east, with Bạch Long Vĩ Island taking effect for 25% and Côn Cỏ Island 50% in the delimitation of the exclusive economic zone and the continental shelf. The islands of Chàng Đông and Chàng Tây (Trần Island) also take certain effects on the delimitation of the territorial sea. The area of Trần Island and Cô Tô Archipelago have

contributed to the delimitation (from point No.1 to point No.9, especially the easternmost point of Bờ Cát Island) as belonging to Vietnam's territorial sea<sup>19</sup>. With 21 identified locations, Vietnam enjoys 53.23% of the gulf area, about 8,205 km<sup>2</sup> larger than that of China. Thus, the presence of the islands of Chàng Đông and Chàng Tây (in the Cô Tô Archipelago) and Bạch Long Vĩ and Côn Cỏ Islands at their present positions has contributed to affirming the sovereignty, and protecting the national interests, of Vietnam (Border Department - Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2005, p.121; Lê Quý Quỳnh & Nguyễn Trường Giang, 2014, pp.48-49).

Along with the demarcation of borders and territorial waters, in the master plan towards the overall development goal, Quảng Ninh is focusing on building three key development routes: 1) Móng Cái - Vĩnh Thực - Trần Island - Cô Tô, 2) Hạ Long - Cái Rồng - Cô Tô, and 3) Hạ Long - Quan Lạn - Ngọc Vũng - Cô Tô. These routes have been and are forming a closed system, key points, and territories associated with key routes and sectors, namely Hạ Long City, Móng Cái City, and Vân Đồn Commercial Port which are associated with Cô Tô Island District and Trần Island (Lê Đức An, 2008, pp.104-105). In the region, tourism, fisheries, border gate economic development, and marine services are the driving forces for economic development. Quảng Ninh is gathering a lot of resources to develop itself into a key economic zone based on its potential for a marine economy, border economic activities, and inter-route and inter-regional links.

The geo-strategic position of Quảng Ninh is both a strength and a challenge for the province in developing and implementing its development plans and strategies. Quảng Ninh shares land and sea borders with China and has many islands in the Gulf of Tonkin. The Northeast sea and islands are identified as an area with a special role in ensuring national defence and security. Cô Tô Archipelago has always been of top national defence and security significance by undertaking defence functions and exercising sovereignty. For thousands of years, Vietnamese ethnic groups have resided in a long-term and continuous manner and exercised sovereignty over the sea and islands, providing an important factor for the historical and legal basis to assert Vietnam's sovereignty in the East Sea. The continuous protection of the sea and islands has always been considered a top task of the institutions. In terms of geo-military position, the waters of Hạ Long and Bái Tử Long have a prominent role and position in all aspects, being inclusive powerful outposts, with close combat

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<sup>19</sup> The delimitation line from point No.1 to point No.9 specified in Article 3 of the "Agreement between the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the People's Republic of China on the delimitation of the territorial sea, exclusive economic zone and continental shelf of the two countries in the Gulf of Tonkin" signed on 25 December 2000 clearly defines: "The vertical plane follows the boundary line of the territorial sea of the two countries specified in Clause 1 of this Article delimiting the airspace, seabed and the subsoil of the two countries' territorial waters." (Border Department - Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2005, p.121; Lê Quý Quỳnh & Nguyễn Trường Giang, 2014, p.83).

capability, a high level of links and coordination, and the importance of military bases (Phạm Hoàng Hải, p.128).

#### 4. Comments and conclusions

From a historical perspective, we can see that the sea and islands of Vân Đồn and Cô Tô - the two island districts with a particularly important position in terms of national defence and security - have been playing an important role in the defence and safeguarding of the country's sovereignty. For generations, the authorities and people in the Northeastern seas and islands have always considered the goal of socio-economic development to be realised simultaneously with the mission of protecting political security, consolidating national defence, and protecting national sovereignty over territorial borders and seas. This is a dual goal, the most important task of leaders, troops, and people in Quảng Ninh. The natural, economic, cultural, and human resources of the Northeast land and people have been gathered, creating a common and synergistic strength for Quảng Ninh, a strong driving force promoting the development of Quảng Ninh and the entire northeastern region.

The island districts of Vân Đồn, Cô Tô, and Quảng Ninh Province have become fully aware of their potential and strengths and existing and previously hidden resources of the Northeast sea and islands. The economic and strategic location and topography of the two island districts, as well as the rich and diverse natural resources and major orientations in the Vietnam Maritime Strategy, are the basic advantages in proposing and executing development plans and strategies. In 2020-2030, Quảng Ninh aims to become a dynamic and comprehensive development centre, an international tourism centre, a marine economic centre, and a gateway to the economic region of the North and the whole country, with sustainable development according to the green growth model. Quảng Ninh is also consistent with the orientation of organising the development space of "One centre, two multi-dimensional routes, and two breakthroughs"<sup>20</sup>.

Experiencing many changes, the government and people of Cô Tô Island district have been making efforts to create new motivations for links for mutual development and breakthroughs. The development tradition of a trading port - the centre of foreign economic relations and the heroic feats of the army and people in the northeastern sea and islands

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<sup>20</sup> By "One centre" we mean Hạ Long City, the political, administrative, economic and cultural center of Quảng Ninh Province. "Two routes" include the development route to the west of Hạ Long - Đông Triều, towards the Capital region; and the Northern route of Hạ Long - Móng Cái, towards Northeast Asia. "Two breakthroughs" are Vân Đồn Economic Zone and Móng Cái Border Gate Economic Zone. Móng Cái is striving to become a centrally administered city soon. (Political Report of 15<sup>th</sup> Congress of Quảng Ninh Provincial Party Committee, 2020-2025's term).

through historical periods - have always been the pride and driving force for the cause of protecting the sovereignty of the sea and islands, while developing the economy and preserving and promoting the cultural values and heritage. Along with nature and people, culture is identified as one of the three basic pillars in the sustainable and comprehensive development strategy of Quảng Ninh. For generations, the inhabitants of the northeastern sea and islands have lived with the sea and island ecosystem, overcoming the challenges of nature to organise society and life for economic and cultural development, the protection of the environment, and survival. Cultural and historical traditions and human values have been and are a knowledge resource and valuable belongings. They help create a vision, forging skills and the spirit of today's sea and island inhabitants in the cause of building Cô Tô, an outpost island district in the Northeastern region of the country, to become more prosperous and powerful.

**Note:** Translator: Lương Quang Luyện. Language editor: Etienne Mahler.

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