

# Vietnam-Japan Relations Confronting Regional Structure Movements<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *All international relations in modern times are affected by the structure of the international system. So is Vietnam-Japan relations. The article provides a theoretical basis for the structure of international relations, analyzing to bring a clear view of the current status of the Asia-Pacific regional structure. Thereby, it points out the effects, both positive and negative, of that structure to Vietnam-Japan relations, contributing to providing an additional perspective from a structural perspective to relations between the two countries.*

**Keywords:** International Relations, Structure, Japan, Vietnam

## Introduction

Vietnam-Japan relations have experienced a long-term friendly cooperation process based on a firm foundation. This has been proved throughout decades both in quantity and quality in varied areas: political and security cooperation with various shared viewpoints; extensive and effective economic cooperation with Japan's role as a leading investor and ODA provider for Vietnam; extensively increased cooperation in cultural and social fields; mutual trust in state-to-state relations and mutual understanding

between the two peoples (See: Hoang Khac Nam, 2014: 345-358). Such an ongoing trend is likely to further develop in a long-term vision. It is this process and foundation that has helped Japan-Vietnam relations overcome many crucial and complex challenges.

However, all international relations are contingent upon internal and external factors. Changes in either of these factors may impact on the direction, scope and development of the relations. Historical evidence shows that no relations grow continually due to constant changes in these factors. In the case of Vietnam-Japan relations, internal factors are seen to be relatively stable which is determined by mutual benefits and perceptions that have

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been strengthened over a long time as well as considerable sustainability of domestic economic, political and social background. Meanwhile, external factors are rather unstable, especially at regional level. East Asia, compared with others in the world, is now a complicated and unpredictable region. The regional instability and possibilities in volatility will substantially affect the progress of Vietnam-Japan relations in the coming time.

Among external factors, structure is most likely to impact on international relations, particularly as the modern international system has been well-developed. The regional environment dominates relations among countries most directly and significantly in the context of regionalization. Japan and Vietnam, both located in the Asia-Pacific region, have become increasingly connected to the regional system, which results in an irrevocable impact of the regional structure on the relations. For that reason, current movements of the Asia-Pacific regional structure will be one of the most influential sources that affect the relationship between the two countries.

### **1. Overview of structure in international relations**

There are various interpretations and definitions of structure in the study of structure research in general, and international relations in particular. At the same time, there are also a large number of different viewpoints about the role of structure, i.e., the relations between structures and units. In the paper, structure is interpreted as where the units in the system are related, a synthesis of rules on the existence of system against

its units, from which it acts as a way to organize them in the system (See: Hoang Khac Nam, 2009: 3-13). In other words, structure is referred to as an “arrangement” of parts in a system.

Accordingly, the structure of the international system is presented in three main aspects. *First*, relatively stable and common patterns of relations connect units to form a system. At the same time, they also have an impact on the units in the system. Behaviors and interactions of units will become more acceptable if consistent with common patterns and vice versa. This is where units in the system are related. *Second*, this structure is also reflected in the presence of rules including valid international laws, universal norms and values or common ideas, etc. The set of rules on the existence of system units facilitates players in the international system to adjust behaviors and interactions. *Third*, power distribution among countries in the international system, in which center of powers, great powers or alliances of higher levels have certain advantages and capabilities to operate the whole system as well as govern its relations. This enables the structure to serve as a way to organize the system. All three aspects of the structure play a role in the arrangement of parts or units of the system as common relationship patterns create a connection, rules regulate the structures - units and units - units relations, while the distribution of capabilities facilitates the organization and operation of the system. Among these three aspects, power distribution plays the most important role in the structure and has the greatest

influence on international relations. This role is determined by at least two points. The first point is the power of dominance over the other two aspects, i.e., common relationship patterns and rules. Common patterns of relations established in several ways can hardly exist in a system unless they're in line with the interests of major power centers and supported by them. Violating these patterns may cause unfavorable reactions from great powers. Similarly, laws are often in the hands of the strong as countries with greater power can set the rules and force the weaker to comply, let alone their roles in connecting other countries into the structural system. Historical evidence has proved that big countries use their power to attract or force smaller countries to participate in the international system and common relations patterns rather than the reverse. For international law, big countries often play a role in ensuring its enforcement as the international system is a realm of anarchy without sanctions in the international law. The second point is that power distribution can affect and change the whole structural system, which is argued by Kenneth Waltz and Neo-Realism. Accordingly, the main variable that affects international relations is the distribution of capabilities across states in the system<sup>1</sup>. Kenneth Waltz emphasizes:

"The ordering principles endure but the structures vary through changes in the distribution of capabilities across states" (Waltz, 1979: 129). Changes in such distribution are those of the system whether it is an anarchic or hierarchic one (Waltz, 1979: 101). The distribution of capabilities, therefore, plays a major role and is regarded as a manifestation and main structural content in the international system.

Kenneth Waltz mentioned the "distribution of capabilities" across states, but in our opinion, it should rather be considered "the distribution of power" for two reasons. Capabilities are the source of power and will transform into a state's power in international relations; capabilities that are not enforced in international relations in the form of national power will have little effect on the structure. So, the term "power distribution" will herein be used to replace the "distribution of capabilities". Despite this controversial idea, it's considerably relevant to the current Asia-Pacific situation as power reveals as both an aim and a notable means of international relations. Realist thinking remains dominant in the foreign policy of most countries in the region. Such objective and subjective contexts have brought about a sense of relevance for the

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<sup>1</sup> According to Kenneth Waltz, the arrangement of parts in the system to create the structure is made on three points: the ordering principles, the specification of functions of differentiated units; and the distribution of capacities across units. Those types of changes can lead to changes of system. However, under the view of Neo-Realism, the world has always been anarchy, so the principle

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of anarchy will not change. Similarly, countries (as international relations subjects and units of international structures) have relatively similar basic interests and are equally focused on security and power. Therefore, the function of a country and that of a system in a broader meaning, fundamentally remain unchanged. Only the distribution of power changes, leading to changes in the structure of the international system (Waltz, 1979).

structural approach of Neo-Realism to regional international relations.

With the above-mentioned meaning and role, the structure of Asia - Pacific region definitely has much impact on regional international relations in general and Vietnam-Japan relations in particular. The movement in regional power distribution will act as the most important structural factor affecting the relations between Vietnam and Japan.

## **2. Movements in the regional power distribution today**

Changes in the distribution of power among great powers have been seen as the greatest movement in the structure of the Asia-Pacific region over the past few years, which has led to an uncertain and changeable status of the regional structure. This ambiguous status is obviously revealed in the power competition among all major regional and related countries. After the “unipolar moment” by absolute dominance of the United States, entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century, powerful countries have become more public and ambitious in increasing power through running arms, involving alliance, expanding economic influence and promoting soft power in the Asia - Pacific region. Meanwhile, weaker countries always hesitant struggling with their in-between status, also engage in arms races or try to assure their positions through regional institutions. So far, this competition has maintained an upward trend which contributes to the unstable power distribution and undefined power order in the region.

In the Asia-Pacific region nowadays, big states are, explicitly or implicitly, pursuing their own plans for regional order in

their favor, however not in line with the interests of others. Regional institutions including ASEAN also pursue their own desires. It is this competition for power among big states and regional institutions that has driven international relations to different ways, and partially made it more complicated and difficult to identify the distribution of power.

Another cause of this increasingly intense competition and disputes lies in the inappreciable disparity of power among “competitors”. Currently, the United States has a comprehensive power superior to others, however, due to the allocation of strength on a global scale, can hardly concentrate all its strength in the region. US resources used in the region, therefore, do not outrival others who all have incomplete power, that is, both strengths and weaknesses. China has a great economic power, surpassing Japan in terms of quantity but inferior in quality. Russia is strong in military but is economically limited, therefore far from having an influence in the region. India is emerging and trying to involve in the region by its eastern policy, however, is also limited in power. ASEAN countries, lacking economic and political power, are mainly dependent on social one. Having both strengths and weaknesses, all states attempt to seize every opportunity for higher positions in the regional power distribution, which also contributes to the more complicated acceleration of the competition for power in the region.

From Neo-Liberalist viewpoints, the development of regional institutions demonstrates the trend of increasing cooperation. But its diversity and overlap

also reveal a complicated competition for power in the region. Great powers involve in regional institutions with different attempts but share the same intention for a place to gather force. This has conducted institutions not only for cooperation but also for competition. There has been no single institution in Asia and the Pacific capable enough to coordinate international relations in the region like the African Union (AU) in Africa or the European Union (EU) in Europe. Though multilateral relations have increased, bilateral relations remain dominant. Most multilateral institutions are less effective and many failing in having full participant cooperation, or if any they would rather operate at a merely formal and limited level. Take the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) as an example. Established in 1994, bringing together all relevant countries, ARF has, so far, not generated any meaningful results to the region. Activities aim at security issues of Southeast Asian rather than the entire Asia-Pacific region. In multilateral activities of regional institutions, nothing resembles the former "European balance of power" (Concert of Europe).

An alliance is a high-level gathering of forces. A power order is easier to be established and maintained on the basis of a relatively stable alliance among great powers, such as NATO in Europe. However, things are different in Asia-Pacific. Among military-political alliances, only the US-Japan, the US-Korea alliances prove secure to a certain extent while others are not the case. Currently, a "diamond quadrilateral" is likely to emerge among America - Japan

- Australia - India, however, uncertain and not necessarily a military-political alliance. States in the region try to connect through strategic partnerships, many of which remain unsecured, less mutually trusted, situation-based and formalistic. The uncertain and unstable alliance among big powers also adds to instability of the system. While alliance is a rapid way to change the distribution of power, such an alliance only leads the distribution to volatility due to the fluctuation of the alliances. On the other hand, it is also not easy for great powers, through political alliances or economic links, to draw small and medium countries whose have chosen an equivocal or balancing policy international relations to avoid making a decision which side to stand on. When forced to make a choice, they remain hesitant, waiting and watching, and only become members without full participation and firm binding which allows any arbitrary withdrawal. Such a "fragile" alliance has added to instability and changeability of the distribution of power.

The accelerating complexity in the distribution of regional power also derives from economic competition. Economic sector, a fundamental source of political, military, science and technology powers, has become increasingly important in international relations as all countries prioritize economic development and seek to expand international economic cooperation. Economy has played an increasing role as a more appropriate tool for power execution while military-political power is no longer as applicative as it used to be. In Asia-Pacific, the competition for economic power seems

tenser than elsewhere as a result of the region's emergence as the most dynamic economic center since the Cold War. The three leading economies, the US, China and Japan are all located in this region, let alone many emerging economies such as India, Korea, Russia, and "East Asian dragons". Major economic powers all aim at gaining structural power in the economic sector for a higher position in the political and security structure. At the same time, having gained economic power in the Asia-Pacific region, it would be easier to seize structural power in the global economic system. This explains all those efforts to build different and overlapping economic institutions, various options for setting up a free trade agreement (FTA) none of which is inclusive of all big states in the region. For example, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) excludes the US. Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) (now known as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) does not include China. To some extent, this implies a process of gathering force through economic cooperation, creating a scope of economic influence to gain political one. Therefore, the competition for economic power occurs in both trade/investment and money/finance. In their scope of influence, big states, typically the US and China, try to set their own rules and patterns of relations. In addition, the competition in economic structure and the interweaving movement of this structure with the security-political structure have contributed to the complicated situation of the common structure in the region.

So far, it has been difficult to determine the regional power structure as a unipolar, bipolar or multipolar according to theoretical models. On the Asia-Pacific scale, no power is superior to dominate (a unipolar). America is stronger than any others, but to some extent, is not genuinely an Asian country. The United States and China have a greater advantage than any other countries but cannot control every regional and international relations issue as bipolar. The two countries' separate alliance systems are unclear as many countries try to maintain a balanced or hedging strategy. A multipolar system seems rather clearer when considering subjects that are many other great powers including Russia, India and Australia. On the other hand, medium-ranked powers such as South Korea, Indonesia and even the ASEAN play their own roles in the region and are not easily dominated. An intermediary system of "a superpower and several great powers" is no longer true. A "nonpolar" system is even incorrect due to a common fact that there exists considerable asymmetry between big and small countries in the region. Viewpoints on which great powers belong to the Asia-Pacific region even vary because degrees of participation and involvement in the regional structure differ among great powers. Furthermore, new strategic movements of the great powers towards an Indo-Pacific Region has made it even more difficult to define the structure.

The main reason for this situation lies in the complexity and uncertainty of power competition in the region. Looking back at history, since the Cold War era when international relations here began to

develop and shape the regional system, regional power competition has always been complex. The distribution of power has not ever been stable. A so-called “order” has likewise not clearly defined.

### **3. The impact of the regional structure status on Vietnam - Japan relations**

The above complex movement of the Asia-Pacific region structure has a significant impact on Vietnam-Japan relations, both direct and indirect, as analyzed below.

*First*, in the unclear context of regional power order, great powers are more likely to be provoked to compete for power as all countries would take advantage of every opportunity to gain structural power or at least more power to stay safer against changes in regional power distribution. In general, competition for power is unavoidable in any structure, but it will become tenser and more complex in the context of undefined power distribution. In a relatively stable structure, power competition might be “more gentle” as restrained by the structure in general, as well as the stabilized power order in particular.

As power competition tends to increase, Japan is likely to become a party of the regional power competition, and Vietnam easily dragged into such a race among big countries. Moreover, countries will have to share development resources for the arms race. On the other hand, economic cooperation will function as a manipulative way to gather force. Against that background, Vietnam is likely at considerable risk of being involved in the competition, which might also be the most influential structural cause for Vietnam-Japan relations. However, as

this competition does not imply a public and aggressive confrontation like in the Cold War era, the drag seems less harsh and forceful mainly via a more “gentle” path called economic cooperation.

Vietnam is currently implementing a balanced and multilateralist foreign policy with Japan as a leading partner. Vietnam’s steadfast policy and Japan’s knowledge will facilitate the development of the relationship.

*Second*, an undefined structure and uncertain distribution of power in the Asia-Pacific region will make other aspects of the structure including relations patterns and rules less common and effective. When common relations patterns and rules are limited, anarchism in the international environment becomes more profound and selfish nationalism is less restrained. Against this background, conflict is more likely to freely expose, which is an unfavourable environment for the development of Vietnam-Japan relations. In general, more stability and less conflict is the environment that nurtures friendly and cooperative relations. This is more noticeable in the Asia-Pacific region compared to other regions such as Western Europe, North America or Latin America where more common patterns of cooperation and rules facilitate cooperation.

Nonetheless, compared to the Cold War era, common relations patterns and rules in the Asia-Pacific region have grown considerably both in quantity and quality. The current regional structure, to an extent, includes common relations patterns and rules, such as open cooperation and regionalism, with more emphasis on

international law. These things, especially this trend of cooperation, which began after the regional financial crisis in 1997-1998 and proceeded notably in the economic sector, have contributed to conflict management.

In spite of less popularity and limited validity, common relationship patterns and rules maintain a certain position in the regional international relations. It is worth noting that Vietnam and Japan both desire to promote the common relationship patterns and rules in the region. The two countries also share various viewpoints on related issues including cooperation, integration, rule of law, freedom of navigation, accordance with international law. In fact, though certain differences remain between the two countries, on a basis of mutual understanding and sympathy, they are kept from becoming obstacles that may affect the relationship. *Third*, an unstable structure and constant power competition also cause complication and instability to the international relations, concealing a greater risk of conflict. This may also significantly affect Vietnam - Japan relations in many ways. First of all, power competition may greatly impact on the regional cooperation trend that has profoundly emerged since the Cold War. The relationship between Vietnam and Japan which has, after all, been heavily based on this trend, will certainly be affected more or less. Currently, both countries, rather than a former East Asian cooperation, are both focusing efforts on cooperation with countries outside the region. East Asian regionalism as a driving force for cooperation between the

two countries is no longer a strong stance. Furthermore, both Vietnam and Japan have ongoing territorial disputes with China - an emerging power in this competition. The conflicts between China and Vietnam and Japan are more likely to become exacerbated and difficult to solve. competition for regional power and direct great power conflict is never an appropriate condition for the development of Vietnam-Japan cooperation in long term. However, since the two countries are interested in maintaining peace, stability and security in the region, they both find it easier to share views on regional issues. At the same time, facing the same risk of territorial conflicts is also a premise for the two countries to better consult and cooperate in order to cope with both national and regional risk of instability and insecurity. Vietnam - Japan political and security cooperation are, thereby, more likely to develop.

### **Conclusion**

A bilateral relationship cannot be solved only by a structural approach. However, this approach will contribute to addressing external factors from the regional structure and their impact on Vietnam-Japan relations. The most notable feature in the current Asia-Pacific structural movement is the unclear distribution of power. The cause of this situation lies in the competition among regional powers. As a result, power distribution is amid ongoing change without predictable consequences. This situation generates instability and unpredictability, concealing risks of conflict in international relations.

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