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# Vietnam's Geographical Power in History and Geographic Strategic Considerations of Vietnam Today and in Coming Time

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**Abstract:** Historically, Vietnam's geographical power was more or less improved, partly due to the "Southward March" of the Vietnamese feudal government and the "Territorial Development" policy of the French colonialists. However, due to the low emphasis on private trade, limited foreign trade and more priority given to the mainland than to the sea, little investment in building technical infrastructure of the Vietnamese under the monarchy, the monopoly of foreign trade of the French colonial government as well as the country of Vietnam was always divided and warred, so the geographical potentials of Vietnam have not been properly exploited. From 1986 up to now, due to the renewal of geo-strategic awareness and actions, especially in proactive international integration, promoting investment in the development of sea and land infrastructure, the power of Vietnam's geography is improving quite rapidly. However, geopolitical competition pressure from the East Sea (South China Sea) and Mekong Sub-region is increasing, particularly China's ambition to monopolize the East Sea as well as the trend of gathering world forces on sides and axes, the decline of multilateralism and globalization due to strategic competition from major countries are creating great challenges for Vietnam's geographical power. In a new context, Vietnam can become a center for attracting foreign investment, a regional trade bridge, an "anchor" in security-defence in the Western Pacific-Indian Ocean. Conversely, Vietnam could become a geopolitical disaster because of its geographical and political sensitivities in the region. This largely depends on Vietnam's renewed efforts to expand its strategic space, both in geo-physical and cyberspace.

**Keywords:** Vietnam, Geographic Power, Sea, Land and External Power

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## 1. Introduction

Power is an indispensable need of a country which is created by many factors, including geography. This is an important part of "potential power", a factor that constitutes and determines the strength of a country that is not always recognized and used properly, especially in transforming them into more practical and stronger power. This is an important fact that many scholars and politicians are interested in. Some of the classic and all-encompassing works can be mentioned, including Robert D. Kaplan [16-17], Tin Marshall [27], in which the authors not only review the various theories of geopolitics and geostrategy of Alfred Thayer Mahan [20-21], Halford John Mackinder [18-19], Nicholas John Spykman [24-25], Robert Strausz-Hupé [26] etc., but more importantly, they

also analyze and explain the imposition of natural geography and human arrangement as well as their limits through historical events, especially through the wars of territorial expansion and geographical discoveries. These scholars argue that, although the internet has changed many rules of nature, the basic elements of geography such as space, topography, coordinate position and the way in which history of the nations is established in geospatial space continue to be very important to the common understanding of the world today as well as the future of mankind (Robert D. Kaplan [16], p. 11; [16], pp. 70-71; Tin Marshall ([27], p. 21; [27], pp. 414-415; Mazur E and Urbanek [22]; Tran Khanh [29], pp. 15-17; [30], pp. 200-201).

The above issue has not been studied much in Vietnam, yet there are quite a few works related to geo-historical, security space and development of Vietnam. Among them are the works titled "Southern Region (Nam Bo): The

process of formation and development” edited by Phan Huy Le [23] “Southward March and Geographical ‘Trap’ of the Vietnamese” by Vu Duc Liem [35], “Vietnam’s geostrategic actions under feudal times” by Tran Khanh [31]. The authors are of the view that, the Dai Viet’s process of “Southward March” has brought Vietnam a large territorial space both on the land and sea, creating more resources for economic growth and national power in international relations, building and shaping Vietnamese national identity. However, the above process also creates a geographical ‘trap’ in the governance of the country’s regions and the protection of national territorial borders. In addition, recently, in Vietnam there have also been articles related to the strategic space of Vietnam in modern times which deal with external space such as the article titled “On Vietnam’s Foreign Space during Renewal (Doi Moi) Time, since 1986” by Tran Khanh [32]. The author opines that, although Vietnam since “Doi Moi” has been more well aware of the importance of geographical factors, it has not fully exploited the country’s growing geopolitical resources to maintain, expand security and development space. This is a big issue that needs to be further studied. Within the framework of this paper, we study on the basis of the approach of geopolitics, geo-strategy, historical experience, international context, the need to consolidate and expand the strategic space of Vietnam today and over the next decade as well as the official documents of the Communist Party and the State of Vietnam to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of Vietnam in terms of geography, thereby relating to power and proposing policy recommendations.

## 2. The Transformation and Position of Vietnam’s Geographic Power in History

### 2.1. Before the Renewal (Doi Moi) Time (Before 1986)

Like many other ethnic or nation groups, since the formation of the country, the Vietnamese people have formed the concept of “clement climate”, “favorable terrain” and “concord among people” in establishing and defending sovereignty, expanding the territory and asserting its power in national geographical space and international relations. It is worth noting that, the “Southward March”, “Eastward March ” or “Seaward March”<sup>1</sup> has brought about a new source for the growth of national strength, affirming the legitimate power of the Vietnamese State (proclaiming to be the King) in international relations, especially in relations with neighboring countries. Along with that, the expansion of

the territory to the Southern land which is rich in natural resources, has many precious products such as silk, agarwood, cinnamon, pepper, gold, gems and rice, long coastlines, many rivers, seaports facing the East Sea, a bustling place of international trade flows and in the context of the booming “Asian trading system” of the 14<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and the commercial competition of the East India Companies of the West in the 16<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> centuries have attracted large numbers of merchants not only from Europe but also from China, Japan, India, Persia and other countries in Southeast Asia. This also increases the power of Vietnam’s geography and its consequences contributes to the strengthening of Vietnam’s geopolitical, geo-economic powers in international relations, expanding the national strategic space. However, the country’s advantage of having a long coastline, located on the East Sea coast of the Indochina peninsula has not been properly exploited. One of the reasons is that the feudal government of Vietnam was deeply influenced by the development model of the Chinese feudalism, which did not give emphasis on private trade, foreign trade was limited, the mainland was given more importance than the sea. Moreover, the division of the country, the struggle for power by two feudal forces, “Dang Trong” (the South-Central part) and “Dang Ngoai” (the Northern part) for nearly three centuries (from the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) and the difference in culture, the natural conditions of the southern land compared to the traditional area in the Red River basin have also created a geographical ‘trap’ in the governance of the country, including the balance of power among the Vietnam’s regions and the protection of the borders in the newly conquered territories. This not only limits the position of power and national strength in space, but also increases the sensitivity of Vietnam’s geographical and political factors in international relations, including the issues of land and sea territorial border disputes, especially with Cambodia and China (Tran Khanh ([31], pp 47-57; Vu Duc Liem [35-36]).

Since the French invasion and colonization of Vietnam (from the later half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century), Vietnam’s potential geographical strength has not been improved much, even though the French government from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century carried out the “Territorial Development Program”<sup>2</sup>. By the time France withdrew from Vietnam (in 1954), Vietnam had not yet become a geo-political and geo-economic entity with great influence in the Far East. The main reason is that France only wanted to turn Vietnam into a place to supply raw materials and consume France’s industrial products, implemented the policy of monopolistic trade and divided Vietnam into three administrative unites, i.e., Tonkin (Northern region), An Nam (Central region) and Cochinchina (Southern region) with different ruling regimes and carried out a “civilization mission” through French

1 The Southward March of the Vietnamese people which began in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, brought Vietnam a large territorial space, three times larger from 1400 to 1840, with a long coastline as far as the Gulf of Thailand. The Southward March has urged the Vietnamese people to go to the sea and gradually establish sovereignty over the islands in the middle of the East Sea (South China Sea) since the 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries (Vu Duc Liem [35], Tran Khanh ([31], pp. 47-57)).

2 This project, commonly known as the “Doumer Program”, was launched by the Governor General Doumer who ruled Indochina from 1897 to 1902, which chose Hanoi as the capital of Indochina, deployed the construction of railway lines connecting Hanoi with Yunna and Guangxi of China as well as connected Hanoi with Sai Gon and opened overland routes connecting Laos and Cambodia.

religion and culture. The name of Vietnam was also deleted from the world map.

Since 1954, Vietnam's power space position in general and geography in particular has experienced major fluctuations due to the political – ideological and military confrontation between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV)<sup>3</sup> and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN). Although pursuing different development models, both of these polities consider Vietnam to be a unified country in terms of territory and consciously exploit the strategic rivalry between the Soviet Union and the US to strengthen and expanding their strategic space, especially in foreign affairs. Therefore, during this time, the importance of Vietnam's military geo-strategic position in the regional and global policies of big countries, especially the US, the Soviet Union and China increased. However, due to the deep involvement and domination by the big countries, the fierce war between the two above entities, Vietnam was not able to fully exploit the potential resources of geography for economic development and expansion of Vietnam's international cooperation. Vietnam's position of power in space, especially in international relations, was limited at that time, especially in exploiting the advantages of its geo-strategic position in international trade.

From 1975 to the mid of the 1980s, the unified Vietnam had to mobilize its resources for the protection of territorial sovereignty of the country in the face of foreign invasions from the Southwest and Northern frontiers, thus the exploitation of the geographical advantage for economic development and international integration continued to be difficult. Perhaps, it was the domination of class and political ideology at that time that prevented Vietnam's geographical vision and strength in its development and international integration (Tran Khanh ([28], pp. 174-180)), Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs ([1], pp. 313-314)).

## 2.2. From Innovation (*Doi Moi*) Until Now (from 1986 to Present)

Since 1986, thanks to the innovative thinking of the times and the importance of geographical and geo-economic factors in the development and international integration (Tran Khanh ([32], pp. 83-96)), the power space of Vietnam in general, and the geographical strength in particular, has been constantly improving.

First of all, about *sea power*; Being aware of the importance and advantage of the East Sea<sup>4</sup> for the survival,

security and development of the country in the new context, since early 1990s, Vietnam has implemented a fairly synchronous policy on the sea. In addition to creating and strengthening the legal basis for the protection of territorial sea sovereignty and promoting maritime cooperation with relevant countries and entities<sup>5</sup>, Vietnam considers the marine economy a spearhead in its economic development strategy and ensuring national security (The Vietnam Communist Party [11-13]). Notably, in “Vietnam's maritime strategy by 2020” issued in 2007 [10], and “Vietnam's Law of the Sea” adopted in 2012, especially in “Vietnam's marine economic development strategy to 2030 and Vision 2045” launched in 2018, emphasized that, Vietnam “must become a country strong in the sea, rich from the sea...” (The Vietnam Communist Party [14]). These contents were also mentioned in the 11th, 12th and 13th Congresses of Communist Party of Vietnam (The Vietnam Communist Party [12, 13, 15]).

In order to implement the maritime strategy, first and foremost to protect the maritime sovereignty and security, Vietnam is gradually modernizing its Navy, Coast Guards<sup>6</sup>, marine militia and marine inspections. According to Global Firepower's assessment, Vietnam's naval power is currently ranked 38<sup>th</sup> globally and 5<sup>th</sup> in Southeast Asia. However, in fact, Vietnam's naval power in general has advantages and is higher than the above assessment. Although Vietnam has a smaller number of warships on the water than many countries in the region, Vietnam already has a Submarine Army, the 95<sup>th</sup> Naval Air Brigade, coastal artillery-missile systems, Marine Army Corps of Infantry, special marine service as well as an all people defense posture. Compared with other countries in the region, Vietnam has an advantage over Indonesia in terms of shore artillery – missile force and over Thailand in submarine force (VTC News [37]). It is worth noting that, in recent decades, Vietnam has focused on developing a modern fleet of surface ships that are quite versatile, equipped with anti-ship and fast-attack missiles as well as set up attack submarines to protect the sea and islands etc<sup>7</sup>.

5 Specifically, in 1994, Vietnam ratified the 1982 Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS – 1982), and together with relevant parties negotiated and signed agreements on maritime boundaries such as signing the Agreement on Joint Exploitation in the East Sea with Malaysia (1992); the Agreement on maritime demarcation with Thailand [Hiệp định phân giới biển với Thái Lan] (1997); the Agreement on the demarcation of the Gulf of Tonkin [Hiệp định phân định Vịnh Bắc Bộ] and the Agreement on Fisheries Cooperation with China [Hiệp định Hợp tác nghề cá với Trung Quốc] ((2000); the Agreement on the demarcation of the continental shelf with Indonesia [Hiệp định phân định thềm lục địa với Indonesia] (2003), the Law of the Sea of Vietnam [Luật Biển Việt Nam] (2012), the Law on the Coast Guard of Vietnam [Luật cảnh sát biển Việt Nam] (2018) etc. Along with that, Vietnam, together with ASEAN countries and China, issued the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties on the East Sea (DOC) in 2002, the Guidelines for the implementation of the DOC in 2011, the ASEAN Perspectives Document on the required components of the 2012 Code of Conduct in the East Sea (COC) etc.

6 Từ năm 1998, Việt Nam lập nên lực lượng Cảnh sát biển.

7 According to the Global Firepower in 2021, Vietnam has 65 warships of all kinds, including 4 missile defense boats, 7 anti-submarine hunting frigates, 13 fast attack missile boats, 8 missile boats, 12 gunboats, 5 torpedo boats and some other warships..

3 The Democratic Republic of Vietnam was established on 2 September 1945. In 1976, it was renamed as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

4 Vietnam has a coastline of 3260 km (ranked 27th out of 157 coastal and island countries in the world, accounting for about 100 km<sup>2</sup> of mainland/1km of coastline (the world average is 600 km<sup>2</sup> of mainland/1 km of coastline) is located on the coast of the East Sea (with an area of internal waters, contiguous internal waters and exclusive economic zones of about 1.000.000 km<sup>2</sup>, accounting for more than 28% of the East Sea area and about 3 times larger than the land area of Vietnam). Along with that, Vietnam's sea has about 4.000 large and small islands with about 2800 coastal islands. Especially, Vietnam has two archipelagos, i.e., the Spratly Islands and Paracel Islands, located on the main axes, the nodal point of international navigation which is rich in natural resources.

Along with modernizing its navy and maritime law enforcement, Vietnam is focusing on developing maritime and socio-economic infrastructure in coastal areas by issuing and expediting the implementation of master plans for the overall development of the seaport and shipping system for different periods, including the Decision on “List of Vietnam sea ports up to 2020” [6], “Project on adjusting the master plan on development of Vietnam’s seaport system to 2020 and orientation to 2030” approved and conducted since 2014 (Government of Vietnam [7]) and “Master plan on Vietnam’s seaport system for the period of 2021-2030, vision to 2045” promulgated on September 22, 2021 (Government of Vietnam [8]). Along with that, Vietnam also focuses on developing a system of coastal highways with a length of 3.041 km, passing through 28 coastal provinces and cities. Since the Decision on the Detailed Planning of Coastal Roads (Government of Vietnam [5]), the construction of this road system has been accelerated quite rapidly.

Moreover, Vietnam also established many coastal economic zones. Since 2008, Vietnam has approved the project “Planning for development of coastal economic zones of Vietnam to 2020”, which focuses on forming a system of 15 coastal economic zones stretching from the Van Don Economic Zone in Quang Ninh province to the Nam Can Economic Zone in Ca Mau province (Government of Vietnam [3]).

Since 1980s, Vietnam has cooperated and joined venture with foreign countries, especially with the former Soviet Union (and Russia today) to exploit oil and gas in the sea. It is this cooperation that not only makes Vietnam form a fairly developed oil and gas industry, but also helps Vietnam maintain and strengthen security and sovereignty at sea. The contribution of the oil and gas industry to GDP is high, especially in the first 15 years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Although the share of this industry in GDP has decreased quite rapidly in recent years<sup>8</sup>, the establishment and development of this sector has helped Vietnam to gain the position of a country with a petroleum mining and processing industry in the Southeast Asian region and the place that attracts the geo-economic and geo-politic interests of other entities in the world.

Along with that, the marine tourism industry is also strengthened. This is one of the advantages of Vietnam in bringing into full play the potential of the sea. Long natural sandy beaches along the coast such as those in Da Nang, Khanh Hoa, Binh Thuan, Ba Ria-Vung Tau, Phu Quoc etc. as well as natural scenic spots in localities in Ha Long bay, Nha Trang bay, Con Dao etc. are the strength of the sea tourism industry.

8 The contribution of the oil and gas industry to Vietnam’s GDP from 2007 to 2010 averaged 10,83%. Annually. In the period 2010-2014, it dropped to an average of 7,21%. By 2015, this contribution was just 3,79% and in 2017 it was 2,76%. From 2015 up to now, the domestic oil production has continuously decreased, from 16,9 million tons in 2015; down to 15,2 million tons in 2016; 13,4 million tons in 2017; 12 million tons in 2018; 11 million tons in 2019; 9,7 million tons in 2020 and is forecasted to continue to decrease in the following years (See: Vietnam + (2021). *Vietnam Oil and Gas Group: Solving the problem of oil and gas exploitation*”, dated November 13, 2021).

*Regarding the strength of the mainland*, although Vietnam has a modest land area (about 332.000 km<sup>2</sup>)<sup>9</sup>, has a narrow width in the middle of the Central region, especially in the section from Ha Tinh province to Quang Tri province, there are places with about 50 km width, yet it has the strength of two large plains at the two ends of the country, the Red River Delta and the Cùu Long River Delta, located in the East Sea coast, with a warm climate around the year. Along with that, the mainland territory of Vietnam has a land border of more than 4.926 km, adjacent to China in the North (nearly 1.450 km), with Laos in the West (about 2.340 km) and with Cambodia in the Southwest (about 1.137km) which is an advantage for Vietnam in creating and promoting the sea gateway for those countries. Since the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Vietnam has focused on upgrading and establishing infrastructure and legal mechanisms for traffic connections towards the East Sea, creating border gate economic zones etc.

Firstly, it is connecting traffic from land border gates with coastal areas and ports; Vietnam completed the construction of an expressway connecting Lao Cai, the border gate with China’s Yunnan province to the Hải Phòng seaport in 2014, upgrading the National Highway 1A connecting Hanoi with the Đông Đàng border gate, adjacent to the Guangxi province of China, expanding roads No. 7, 8, 9 to the border with Laos, road No. 1, and the road connecting Ho Chi Minh City with Cambodia etc. Along with that, the road system along the border is also given importance by Vietnam not only to develop production and social security but also to contribute to maintaining the border of the country. It is noteworthy that recently, on September 1, 2021, the Prime Minister of Vietnam issued Decision No. 1454/QĐ-TTg approving the master plan on road network development for the period 2021-2030, a vision to 2050, of which by 2030, about 5.000 km of expressways and 172 national highways will be completed with a total length of nearly 29.000 km (The Government of Vietnam [9]), forming a system connecting economic and political centers, key economic zones, seaports, airports, border gateways on land. As of 2021, the whole country has 1.163 km of expressways, about 916 km are expected to be completed by 2023, bringing the total number of expressways in the country to 2.079 km (Vnexpress [34]).

Along with the above, Vietnam also focuses on developing border-gate economic zones along the land border. Since the second half of the 1990s, Vietnam has piloted the development of three border areas, i.e. Mong Cai, Moc Bai and Lao Bao into border-gate economic zones. In 2005, Vietnam issued the “Regulation on land border gates” (The Government of Vietnam [2]) and in 2008, the Project “Planning for development of Vietnam’s border-gate economic zones up to 2020” (The Government of Vietnam [4]) was approved and implemented quite strongly.

It is worth noting that, Vietnam has urgently signed legal documents related to the border and completed planting

9 The land area of Vietnam is only about half the area of Myanmar (676.576 km<sup>2</sup>) and nearly 65% of the area of Thailand (513.120 km<sup>2</sup>).

border markers on land with China and Laos, as well as actively doing marker planting and solving border issues with Cambodia<sup>10</sup>. This not only contributes to the consolidation of sovereignty and border security, but also facilitates cross-border cooperation.

Along with the above geo-strategic actions, Vietnam focuses on expanding *external space*. Along with the final settlement of the Cambodia issue and the normalization of relations with China in 1991, the establishment of diplomatic relations with the EU in 1990, with the US and accession to ASEAN in 1995, the establishment of cooperative relations with international financial and monetary organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank (WB), Asian Development Bank (ADB), actively participating in ASEM, APEC, WTO etc. Vietnam pursues the policy of multilateralization and diversification, making friends with all countries in the world. As of early 2021, Vietnam has had official diplomatic relations with 186 out of 193 member states of the United Nations, had economic and trade cooperation with 230 countries and territories, and been an active member of over 70 international and regional organizations and forums, established 30 strategic and comprehensive partnerships in which there are 17 strategic and comprehensive strategic partnerships with countries around the world<sup>11</sup>. In particular, Vietnam has made spectacular progress in all aspects, from politics-diplomacy, economy-trade, education-training to security-defence in relations with the US (Tran Khanh [32]).

It is worth noting that Vietnam actively participates in the ASEAN integration process (since 1995), signed the Free Trade Agreement between Vietnam and the Eurasian – Asia Economic Union (FTA VN-EAEU) (2015), The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) (2018), The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (2020). Moreover, Vietnam is proactive and actively participates in cross-border cooperation programs within the cooperation frameworks of the Mekong region such as the Greater Mekong Sub-region Cooperation (GMS) (1992) the Mekong-Japan Cooperation (MJC) (2008), the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) (2009), the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) (2016) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (2013), but also actively coordinated with relevant parties to create new cooperation mechanisms such as the Mekong River Commission (1995), Vietnam – Laos – Cambodia Development Triangle (1999), cooperation of four countries of Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam (2004) etc. Along with that, Vietnam has been actively participating

in multilateral cooperation mechanisms on defence and security, including participating in the United Nations' peacekeeping force, participating in security and defense drills at sea. The above diplomatic actions also contribute to increasing the geo-strategic position and power of Vietnam's geography.

### 3. New Opportunities, Challenges and Geographic Strategic Considerations of Vietnam in the Coming Time

#### 3.1. New Opportunities Are Unfolding

*First of all, there are opportunities from international cooperation and competition.* The increase in international competition and cooperation in Southeast Asia is contributing to increasing the “gateway” and “anchor” position of Vietnam in geo-political and geo-economic competition among major countries, especially between the US and China. China is pushing ahead with the BRI project, considering Vietnam one of the foremost important strategic junctions in its neighboring foreign policy towards Southeast Asia. And the US considers Vietnam one of the topmost important areas of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy (POIP), expects Vietnam to become its “anchor” in competition with China in this region. In the new context, other countries and entities such as Japan, Russia, India, Korea, Australia, and EU countries also see the importance of Vietnam in their geo-political and economic strategies in the Southeast Asian region (Tran Khanh, Hắc Xuan Cảnh ([33], pp. 13-25)).

*Next is the opportunity from the increase in position and national synergy.* According to the Lowy Institution assessment, Vietnam's national synergy has continuously increased in recent years. As of 2020, Vietnam ranks 12<sup>th</sup> in its national aggregate strength, 13<sup>th</sup> in economy, 11<sup>th</sup> in military, 9<sup>th</sup> in diplomacy in Asia (Lowy Institute, Asia Power Index, Key Findings 2020: 6 and part: Countries-Viet Nam).

The point to be emphasized is that, although Vietnam is a country at a medium level of development, it has actively participated in the new generation of free trade institutions such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement and the world's largest free trade agreement such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Along with that, Vietnam also participates in building and shaping multilateral institutions, gradually promoting its role in mediating regional and global issues<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, Vietnam is urgently investing in building technical and legal infrastructure for expanding the land and sea strategic space as well as strengthening national cohesion,

10 In October 2005, Vietnam and Cambodia additionally signed the 1985 National Border Planning Treaty. In October 2019, the two sides signed the 2019 Additional Agreement and the Protocol on demarcation and planting of border markers on land. Up to now (2021), 84% of the land border has been demarcated.

11 As of 2021 Vietnam has had 17 strategic and comprehensive strategic partnerships, in which there are 3 comprehensive strategic partnerships, i.e. Russia (2001); India (2007); China (2008); 14 strategic partnership, i.e. Japan, Korea and Spain (2009); England (2010); Germany (2011); Italy, Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore and France (/2013); Malaysia and Philippines (2015); Australia (2018); New Zealand (2020).

12 Vietnam successfully organized the second US-North Korea Summit in February 2019, well taking over and fulfilling the role of ASEAN Chair in 2020 and a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council in 2020-2021.

ensuring sovereignty, border security and promote international integration. The above efforts are contributing to increasing the power position of Vietnam in general and the advantages of Vietnam's geography in particular in international relations.

### 3.2. *New Challenges to Be Faced*

*First of all, it is the challenge from China's geopolitical ambitions and the complicated and unpredictable fluctuations of the regional and global geopolitical and security environment.* The fact that China has claimed the "nine-dash line" and is taking tough actions to monopolize the East Sea (South China Sea), especially the fact that China is militarizing the artificial islands it occupies from Vietnam, implementing the "gray zone" strategy, introducing laws to prevent normal activities of the Vietnamese people at sea, exerting diplomatic pressure, attracting many countries with money, investing in building marine infrastructure in some countries around the East Sea (South China Sea)<sup>13</sup> etc. is creating a major challenge to Vietnam's security and development.

On the mainland side, China is increasing its involvement in the issues of the Mekong Sub-region, including actively participating in the GMS, introducing the BRI, establishing the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (MLC) mechanism etc. to realize its geo-economic and geopolitical objectives in this region. Through the above cooperation mechanisms, China has been investing heavily in infrastructure, especially transport and ports in the western countries of Vietnam, including Laos and Cambodia<sup>14</sup>. Moreover, China has increased its control over water resources in the upper Mekong (known in China as Lancang) with large hydroelectric dams, but currently there is no feasible mechanism to harmonize the legitimate interests of the countries located downstream of this river.

Along with that, the unpredictable fluctuations of the geopolitical environment and the world order, especially the increase in strategic competition among major countries ([15], pp. 105-107) especially the US – China, the US – Russia also create dilemmas for Vietnam. For geopolitical purposes, these countries will increase the use of tools, from money diplomacy to political and military pressure to force Vietnam to "take a side". China will continue to use the elements of geographical proximity, "comradeship" and partial economic dependence, as well as using some ASEAN countries that have good relations with China and the lack of unity in ASEAN to increase its pressure on Vietnam. As for the US, through strengthening cooperation not only in economy, but also in military security with Vietnam, to help contain China's influence. Russia is a traditional friend, having close defense and energy ties with Vietnam, is under pressure of

geopolitical competition from the US and the West in Ukraine. Meanwhile, Vietnam wants to maintain a good neighboring and "comrade" relationship with China, and at the same time wants to use the US factor and its allies to have more resources to protect its sovereignty in the East Sea. Meanwhile, Vietnam wants to maintain friendly relations with both Russia, Ukraine and Western countries, does not want to take sides in the ongoing war in Ukraine.

Next is the challenge from the domestic situation of Vietnam; Despite new efforts to consolidate and expand maritime and land power, Vietnam still has many limitations in building a synchronous infrastructure system for security and sustainable development. Vietnam has not yet built up large fleets of ships for commercial development, has not had a system of railways and highways running along the country, connecting seaports with land border gate areas, especially in the central region. Moreover, the system, logistics facilities, after-sales services for seaports, traffic and trade hubs are still weak. Along with that, Vietnam is also under pressure from cyber security.

### 3.3. *Considerations*

The major question is how to exploit the advantages and minimize the disadvantages of Vietnam's geography in the current new context? Vietnam has a good geographical location/position, but the terrain is rather complicated, its body is "ultra-thin" in an S-shape, the two ends are enlarged and the middle part is shrunk. The Central region has many good seaports, but it lacks continental space, is sparsely populated, and has low economic development. Moreover, Vietnam is located in a "sensitive position" in the escalating US – China strategic competition. Vietnam's new efforts in increasing sea and land power have not been commensurate with the requirements of reality. Therefore, Vietnam more than ever before needs to urgently carry out the following tasks:

- 1) To promote faster development of technical and social infrastructure, in which priority is given to investment in road and high-speed rail transport systems in "herring-bone" style along the North-South axis, expanding and connecting traffic axis in the East – West direction, connecting central seaports with the land border of Laos and Cambodia ([15], pp. 249-250).
- 2) Along with the selection, modernization of seaports, the development of key coastal economic zones (without rampant investment), Vietnam needs to exploit the advantage of sea transportation by quickly building a fleet of sea transport ships, especially the fleet of sea container ships with large capacity. In the new context, it is not necessary for Vietnam to build special administrative-economic zones along the coast such as in Vân Đồn, Văn Phong and Phú Quốc, because Vietnam has deeply integrated into the world economy and participated in most bilateral and multilateral free trade agreements, including new generation FTAs<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> China has recently funded the construction and modernization of Cambodia's Sihanoukville and Koh Kong ports, located in the Southern part of the East Sea, on the shores of the Gulf of Thailand. These two ports has civil, commercial and military functions in the Southwest of Vietnam.

<sup>14</sup> For example, the Boten-Vientiane high-speed railway line in Laos, funded and built by China, has been in operation in December 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific

Moreover, Vietnam has decentralized more power to provinces in attracting foreign investment. In the context of the booming Industrial Revolution 4.0 and the world economy's strong transition to a digital economy, the geographical distance has also been reduced remarkably. In addition, 3 locations selected as special zone projects are sensitive locations in terms of security and defense.

- 3) Vietnam needs to rapidly modernize its navy and air forces and rapidly increase missile warheads. In the context of limited resources, it is not necessary for Vietnam to rapidly increase the number of warships and aircraft, but more importantly, it is to increase the modernity, mobility and contract of the armed forces as well as to promote the all people posture in defense and security protection.
- 4) In the land border area, in addition to arranging defense points at key points, strengthening the development of technical infrastructure, it is necessary to have policies to further encourage local residents, ethnic minorities to settle in clusters along the border patrol lines. Along with that, it is necessary to exploit and apply indigenous knowledge for socio-economic development and ensure national security and defense.
- 5) In addition to continuing to pursue the policy of multilateralization and diversification, making friends with all countries, and promoting international integration, Vietnam needs to further decipher the pairs of the US – China, the US – Russia, and China – US relations, especially in resolving conflicts and bottlenecks in relations with China and the US. Along with that, Vietnam should pay more attention to consolidating special ties with Laos and Cambodia, strengthening relations with other big and middle powers, consolidating ASEAN and increasing national cohesion with about 6 millions overseas Vietnamese.
- 6) Vietnam needs to prioritize resources to set up, protect and expand its sovereignty in cyberspace. It should not only perfect the legal and strategic basis of this space but also urgently build the base and connect digital data, strengthen security, privacy and prioritize resources for information technology development, national digital transformation and pay more attention to international cooperation, including foreign affairs information.

## 4. Conclusion

The geographical power of Vietnam has constantly been changing due to the impact of national policies and international environment. Historically, Vietnam's geographical power was more or less improved, partly due to the "Southward March" of the Vietnamese feudal

government and the "Territorial Development" policy of the French colonialists. However, due to the low emphasis on private trade, limited foreign trade and more priority given to the mainland than to the sea, the monopoly of foreign trade of the French colonial government as well as the fact that Vietnam was always divided by different forces and constant wars, the geographical potentials of Vietnam have not been properly exploited. From 1986 up to now, due to the renewal of geo-strategic awareness and actions, especially in proactive international integration, promoting investment in the development of sea and land infrastructure, the power of Vietnam's geography is improving quite rapidly. However, geopolitical competition pressure from the East Sea and Mekong Sub-region is increasing, particularly China's ambition to monopolize the East Sea, is creating a major challenge for Vietnam's geographical power. More than ever before, Vietnam needs to exploit and synchronously combine the factors of "clement climate", "favorable terrain" and "concord among people" to maintain and expand its strategic space, both geo-physical space and cyberspace.

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