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Basic Aspects of Security Cooperation between Vietnam and Russia in the 21st Century: Current Situation and Prospects

Abstract. This article analyzes the evolution of Vietnam—Russia security cooperation from 2001 to 2025 within the broader Indo-Pacific geopolitical context. Using a qualitative case study approach that blends realist and constructivist theories, it explores how historical ties and shared strategic interests have shaped a multifaceted partnership. Key areas of cooperation include arms transfers, military training, intelligence sharing, and emerging domains like non-traditional security. While Russian arms imports peaked in the early 2010s, a trend toward diversification emerged after 2017. Despite reduced procurement, Russia remains Vietnam’s main defense partner due to deep technical integration and logistical dependency. The study argues that the relationship has matured into a pragmatic, adaptive framework. As Vietnam pursues “multi-vector” diplomacy and Russia seeks relevance beyond the West, their cooperation reflects a resilient, non-aligned security model grounded in strategic autonomy, mutual respect, and flexibility.

Keywords: Vietnam, strategic balancing, geopolitics, Vietnam, Russia & China relations.

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Основные аспекты сотрудничества Вьетнама и России в сфере безопасности в XXI веке: текущее состояние и перспективы

Аннотация. В данной статье анализируется эволюция российско-вьетнамского сотрудничества в сфере безопасности с 2001 по 2025 год в широком геополитическом контексте Индо-Тихоокеанского региона. Используя качественный подход, сочетающий реалистические и конструктивистские теории, авторы исследуют, как исторические связи и общие стратегические интересы сформировали многогранное партнерство. Ключевые области сотрудничества включают поставки вооружений, военную подготовку, обмен разведанными и такие новые области, как нетрадиционная безопасность. Хотя импорт российских вооружений достиг пика в начале 2010-х годов, после 2017 года наметилась тенденция к диверсификации. Несмотря на сокращение закупок, Россия остается основным партнером Вьетнама в сфере обороны благодаря глубокой технической интеграции и логистической зависимости. В исследовании утверждается, что отношения переросли в прагматичную, адаптивную структуру. Поскольку Вьетнам придерживается «многовекторной» дипломатии, а Россия стремится к релевантности за пределами Запада, их сотрудничество отражает устойчивую, внеблоковую модель безопасности, основанную на стратегической автономии, взаимном уважении и гибкости.

Ключевые слова: Вьетнам, стратегическое балансирование, геополитика, отношения Вьетнама, России и Китая.

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1. Introduction

In the evolving landscape of 21st-century geopolitics, the security partnership between Vietnam and Russia stands out as a resilient bilateral. Between 2001 and 2025, though developing amid geopolitical transformations, Vietnam's foreign policy complements Russia's interest in maintaining Asian influence. However, the partnership exists in a delicate context, as Vietnam's maritime sovereignty interests intersect with Russia's close alignment with China.

Security cooperation here extends beyond arms deals and military training. It is a hybrid framework grounded in both material interests and shared principles, such as non-alignment and respect for sovereignty. Vietnam continues to depend on Russian military platforms, reflecting decades of defense compatibility and institutional trust. For Russia, Vietnam serves as a reliable and independent partner in Southeast Asia's rapidly evolving security architecture.

This paper aims to: (1) trace the evolution of Vietnam—Russia security ties, (2) examine key drivers, successes and constraints, and (3) predict the partnership's

trajectory in the future. In doing so, it contributes to a broader understanding of non-Western security cooperation. Ultimately, the Vietnam—Russia case illustrates how mid-sized and resurgent powers navigate great power politics through adaptable, multidimensional cooperation — offering a relevant model for security engagement in a complex global order.

This study employs a qualitative case study methodology to examine Vietnam—Russia security cooperation. The analytical framework integrates Realism and Constructivism. From a Realist standpoint, cooperation is driven by power balancing, strategic alignment, and national interests. Constructivism, meanwhile, highlights the enduring role of identity, trust, and historical legacy — key factors sustaining cooperation outside formal alliances. This dual-lens approach enables a comprehensive analysis of both transactional and ideational dimensions of the partnership.

2. Literature Review

First, Baylis (2003) and Poling (2007) saw the partnership through a balancing lens: Vietnam’s acquisition of Russian weapons is a cost-effective hedge against China, while a subsequent November 25, 2014 inter-governmental accord provides “a simplified procedure for entry into the port of Cam Ranh by Russian warships and vessels” [Korneev 2015]. Fedorov (2017) discusses Vietnam’s purchase of Russian weapons to protect its interests in the South China Sea and how this influences Russia’s regional policy.

Second, constructivism-inspired scholars emphasize identity and autonomy. Kaczmarek (2013) coins the phrase “memory of common struggle,” arguing that wartime solidarity still legitimizes defense links that might otherwise appear risky. Even at the height of Western sanctions in 2022, Hanoi and Moscow renewed defense-education scholarships. Yin’s 2018 ethnography of logistics officers reveals path-dependence in training and maintenance: Russian-language manuals and spare-parts pipelines create high switching costs while reinforcing institutional inertia.

Third, recent studies interrogate resilience under sanctions, digitalization, and Vietnam’s Defense Industry Strategy 2025. Mazyrin (2021) synthesizes and analyzes discussions among Russian experts on the current status and future prospects of bilateral cooperation in key areas, including military-technical aspects. Zareba (2022) predicts legacy platforms will tie Hanoi to Moscow spares into the mid-2030s.

In sum, the literature portrays a resilient but recalibrating partnership: structural power asymmetries, durable historical memory, and emerging technological imperatives interact to shape outcomes. A holistic agenda that integrates realist, constructivist, and backed by updated SIPRI data — promises a more nuanced grasp of where Vietnam—Russia security cooperation is heading to time ahead.

3. Results

Historical Context and Strategic Importance

The relationship between Vietnam and Russia stemmed from the Soviet era when the Soviet Union served as a crucial supplier of military aid to North Vietnam during its

struggles for independence [Pham 2023; Zareba 2023]. This support laid a solid foundation for Russia's continued role as Vietnam's key arms provider after the Cold War. Despite political changes in the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the between Vietnam and Russia was maintained and developed [Ministry of National Defense, Vietnam [MND], n.d.].

Vietnam's defense modernization goals are driven by strategic needs to protect its sovereignty and maritime interests, particularly in the South China Sea, as outlined in Vietnam's 2011–2020 maritime strategy [Hiebert & Nguyen, 2015]. For decades, Russia's dominance in Vietnam's weapons is attributed to several factors, including competitive pricing, flexible financial terms, equipment quality sufficient for regional security needs, and the absence of human rights conditions in transactions [Oxford Analytica 2022; Arthur 2025].

Military-Technical Cooperation Agreements

Vietnam and Russia have signed “several cooperation agreements in strategic fields, including military techniques” [MND, n.d.]. Those include cooperation in training, exchange visits, services, military medicine, peacekeeping operations, and military science; Russia also provides scholarships for Vietnamese students at its military schools [MND, n.d.]. A high-level talk (May 2025) between General Secretary To Lam and President Vladimir Putin reaffirmed the commitment to deepen military-technical cooperation and address non-traditional security challenges [Latif 2025; Huy Anh 2025]. This suggests a nuanced approach: Vietnam cannot simply abandon its vast Russian-made arsenal overnight. Therefore, it seeks to maintain a certain level of technical cooperation with Russia for existing systems.

Trends in Major Arms Transfers (2001–2025)

Vietnam's military procurement from Russia over the past two decades has played a crucial role in modernizing the Vietnam People's Army (VPA), particularly the Navy and Air Force. According to data derived from the SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, Vietnam's Trend Indicator Values (TIVs) — standardized in 1990 USD — rose sharply in the early 2010s, peaking in 2014 before declining steadily in the late 2010s and early 2020s.

Based on TIV data and contract analysis, three distinct phases in Vietnam's arms imports from Russia are identifiable:

Phase I — Initial Modernization (2001–2010): Characterized by irregular purchases of legacy platforms. Annual TIVs ranged from USD 8 million (2007) to USD 294 million (2004), indicating modest and irregular procurement and remained below \$ 300 million annually. Vietnam prioritized gradual modernization while balancing budget limitations.

Phase II — Peak Modernization (2011–2016): The turning point came in 2011, with Vietnam's arms imports jumping to over USD 1 billion, driven primarily by contracts with Russia. TIVs ranged between USD 780 million and 1.21 billion annually. Russia accounted for over 80 % of Vietnam's total arms imports in this period [Wezeman et al. 2023].

Table 1. Vietnam’s Arms Imports (SIPRI-TIV, 2001—2023)

Year	Value, Million USD	Year	Value, Million USD
2001	95	2012	780
2002	58	2013	362
2003	22	2014	1,212
2004	294	2015	855
2005	221	2016	909
2006	42	2017	783
2007	8	2018	604
2008	183	2019	160
2009	60	2020	41
2010	150	2021	<20 (est.)
2011	1,010	2022	<10 (est.)

Sources: SIPRI (2023); IndexMundi; Guarascio (2024); Wezeman et al. (2023).

Phase III — Decline and Diversification (2017—2023): Procurement from Russia declined as Vietnam completed major deliveries. From 2015 to 2018, annual imports declined gradually from USD 855 million to 604 million. In the post-2019 period, procurement values dropped significantly: only USD160 million in 2019, 41 million in 2020, and minimal amounts reported thereafter. The share of Russian weapons in Vietnam’s total imports was 60 % by 2022, “but this was a smaller share than in previous years” [Siow: 24.03.2024].

Key Equipment Acquisitions, Maintenance and Technical Support

Between 2001 and 2025, Vietnam significantly modernized its military through large-scale arms purchases from Russia, solidifying Moscow’s role as its primary defense supplier.

With over 80 % of Vietnam's military equipment originating from the Soviet Union or Russia [Oxford Analytica 2022], Russia has traditionally been the primary provider of spare parts, technical assistance, and overhaul services. The Kilo-class submarine deal entails “costly ongoing maintenance” [Pham 2023], underscoring the long-term financial and technical commitment to these complex systems.

Training Cooperation and Intelligence Sharing

Training and intelligence sharing are essential components of the Vietnam—Russia security partnership, reinforcing strategic trust. Russia has provided extensive training for Vietnamese forces in operating advanced platforms like Kilo-class submarines and Su-30MK2 fighter jets, including intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance elements [Nguyen & Kobayashi 2024]. Conducted both in Russia and in Vietnam, these programs improve maritime domain awareness — crucial for protecting Vietnam’s EEZ

Table 2. Major Russian Arms Transfers to Vietnam (2001–2025)

Equipment Type	Quantity	Estimated Value (USD)	Order/Delivery Year
Kilo-class Submarines	6	3.2 billion	Ordered 2009, expected operational 2017
Gepard-class Frigates	2 (initial), 6 (expected)	300 million (initial 2)	Received 2011, 6 expected by 2017
Svetlyak-class Fast Patrol Boats	4	Not specified	Received from 2010
Molniya-class Missile Fast Attack Ships	2 (initial), 4 (expected)	Not specified	Received 2014, 4 expected by 2016
Su-30 MK2 Fighter Jets	24 (initial), additional 12	1.6 billion (new 12)	24 in decade prior to 2015, additional 12 recently ordered
T-90S Tanks	64	Not specified	Ordered 2017, delivered 2019
K-300P Bastion Coastal Missile System	2 batteries	Not specified	Deployed 2011
S-300 PMU-2 Air Defense Missile Systems	2 batteries	Not specified	Deployed 2012
S-300PMU-1 Air Defense Missile Systems	2 batteries	Not specified	Received after 2001 (approx. 2003)
K-300P Bastion-P Coastal Defense Missile Systems	2 batteries	Not specified	Import decided 2005, received after 7 years

Sources: Hiebert & Nguyen 2015; Zareba 2023.

Note: Estimated values may vary across sources, and not all transactions have publicly available financial information.

in the South China Sea. Since 2001, Russia has also trained thousands of Vietnamese officers at institutions such as the Military Academy of the General Staff in Moscow, focusing on cybersecurity, defense strategy, and technical skills. These exchanges build institutional capacity while deepening interpersonal and strategic ties forged since the Vietnam War.

Intelligence sharing, though discreet, is central to the relationship. Cooperation spans cybersecurity, counterterrorism, and transnational crime, with official statements regularly highlighting collaboration on information security [Báo điện tử Chính phủ: 11.05.2025]. The key instrument is the 2018 Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of International Information Security [Đại sứ quán Việt Nam tại Nga 2018], which establishes channels for cyber-incident reporting and crime-data exchange; beyond this, no open-source material documents broader intelligence-fusion mechanisms.

Cooperation on Non-Traditional Security

Non-traditional security cooperation has become a vital part of Vietnam—Russia relations. Vietnam benefits from Russian expertise in disaster relief. The 2019 ASEAN—Russia HADR exercise in Vietnam exemplified joint efforts to build response capacity through training and equipment support [Nguyen & Kobayashi, 2024], aligning with ASEAN’s HADR goals [Yaacob 2023].

Additionally, cybersecurity cooperation expanded following a 2018 memorandum on e-government and cyber defense [Vietnam News Agency: 12.12.2018]. Russia has since supported Vietnam in building infrastructure and training personnel. In 2024, both sides deepened collaboration under the UN Cybercrime Convention [Cong Tuan 2024]. By 2025, Vietnam reaffirmed Russia’s role as a key digital security partner [The Kremlin: 10.05.2025].

Cooperation is shifting toward maritime crime and transnational threats. The *ReCAAP ISC Annual Report 2024* credits Vietnamese Coast-Guard reporting — leveraging Russian-supported information links — with improving regional incident transparency, while joint working groups on synthetic drugs and human trafficking continue under the Vietnam—Russia crime-prevention dialogue [ReCAAP ISC 2025].

The Vietnam—Russia Tropical Centre (VRTC) contributes to the bilateral relations via biosecurity monitoring [TASS: 17.04.2024]. High-level Defense Dialogues further institutionalize technical coordination. These mechanisms reflect a pragmatic, low-profile intelligence relationship within a broader non-aligned framework. Russia continues to underwrite the expansion of the VRTC through a mix of equipment transfers and institutional backing. At the Center’s 35th Coordinating Committee meeting in St. Petersburg (November 2024), Deputy Defence Minister Hoàng Xuân Chiến highlighted Russian funding for a second mobile testing vehicle, a jointly built biosafety level-3 laboratory, and specialist training programs for Vietnamese scientists [Viet Nam News: 16.11.2024]. Moscow then deepened that commitment on May 11, 2025, formally handing over the oceanographic research vessel Professor Gagarinsky — a platform designed to modernize VRTC field surveys and give Vietnamese researchers greater autonomy in offshore studies [People’s Army Newspaper: 12.05.2025].

Together, these concrete contributions in infrastructure, technology transfer, and human-capital development illustrate why the VRTC remains a flagship of bilateral science-and-defence cooperation.

Multilateral Security Framework Cooperation

Vietnam and Russia have increasingly engaged in multilateral security frameworks, particularly through ASEAN-led mechanisms and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Vietnam’s active participation in the ASEAN Defense Ministers’ Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) has provided a platform for Russia to deepen its regional security engagement. Russia’s involvement in ADMM-Plus exercises, has facilitated dialogue and interoperability with ASEAN member states, reinforcing Vietnam’s role as a bridge between Russia and Southeast Asia [Storey 2021]. The SCO offers another avenue for cooperation. Vietnam was suggested to soon join the SCO by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi [Báo Dân Việt: 17.07.2025]. These engagements align with

Vietnam's multilateralization strategy, allowing Vietnam to leverage Russia's influence to enhance its voice in global security forums.

4. Discussion

Drivers of Vietnam—Russia Security Cooperation

A core driver of the Vietnam—Russia security relationship is their shared commitment to strategic autonomy. Both adopt “equidistant diplomacy” to avoid entanglement in great power conflicts. Vietnam's “bamboo diplomacy,” described by Phan (2022), reflects a flexible yet sovereign approach, while Russia, particularly after its 2014 fallout with the West, has sought strategic partners in Asia to offset global isolation [Bui & Luu 2022].

Russia's non-prescriptive stance — offering long-term access to platforms without ideological conditions — makes it a reliable defense partner [TASS: 4.10.2019]. Institutionalized cooperation further reinforces this bond. Since 2013, the Intergovernmental Committee for Military-Technical Cooperation and annual Strategic Defense Dialogues have ensured continuity in arms coordination, logistics, and planning [Zareba 2023].

Vietnam's defense capability gaps, particularly in high-tech systems, are addressed by Russian training, support, and limited technology transfer, especially in shipbuilding [Nguyen 2021; Doan 2020]. This aids Vietnam's gradual defense industrialization.

Amid South China Sea tensions, Russian A2/AD systems bolster Vietnam's deterrence without provoking China. The partnership allows Hanoi to hedge strategically while enabling Moscow to project “multidirectional influence” in Southeast Asia [Prajapati 2022].

Additionally, cooperation is expanding into non-traditional areas like cybersecurity and counterterrorism. Russia supports Vietnam's cyber defense development and commitment to “information sovereignty” [Izvestia: 12.05.2025]. While not formal allies, both nations align in resisting external interference and enhancing intelligence cooperation, sustaining a pragmatic, forward-looking partnership.

Achievements of the Vietnam—Russia Security Partnership

One of the most tangible outcomes of the Vietnam—Russia security relationship has been the large-scale modernization of the VPA. Between 2001 and 2020, Vietnam shifted from a Soviet-era arsenal to a modern force equipped with fourth-generation Su-30MK2 fighters, T-90S tanks, and Kilo-class submarines — acquired entirely from Russia [Fedorov 2017]. These platforms significantly enhanced Vietnam's deterrence and readiness. In particular, the submarine fleet transformed Vietnam's capabilities in the South China Sea, enabling anti-surface operations, maritime surveillance, and anti-access/area denial strategies, thereby repositioning Vietnam as a credible maritime power in Southeast Asia.

Institutionalized cooperation is another key achievement. As Thayer (2018) affirms that Russia was Vietnam's most important defense partner. Regular meetings of the Intergovernmental Commission on Military-Technical Cooperation and strategic dialogues reflect a durable, high-trust framework. Russian firms also provide life-cycle

maintenance, spare parts, and technical support for complex systems like submarines and multirole aircraft [Fedorov 2017].

Strategically, this partnership boosts Vietnam's geopolitical leverage. Without binding alliances, Vietnam retains its non-aligned posture while engaging a major power. This flexible, multi-directional diplomacy strengthens Vietnam's global standing and helps avoid strategic entrapment [Heydarian 2023]. For Russia, Vietnam serves as a strategic outpost in Asia, enhancing its defense export profile and soft power through symbolic diplomacy.

Limitations of Vietnam—Russia Security Partnership

Vietnam's heavy reliance on Russian defense systems presents strategic vulnerabilities. Maintenance, spare parts, and crew training remain dependent on Russian support, making Vietnam susceptible to supply disruptions — especially under post-2022 Western sanctions on Russia [Le: 4.04. 2022]. These constraints reduce operational flexibility and threaten defense readiness if critical components or upgrades become delayed. As a result, Vietnam's defense leadership has increasingly advocated diversifying procurement and enhancing domestic production. Technology transfer from Russia also remains limited. Although Vietnam has co-produced Molniya-class vessels, most major systems are unavailable for local manufacturing or adaptation, hindering efforts toward defense self-reliance [Storey 2024].

Moreover, while Russia has made remarkable advances in military equipment, these innovations create challenges for the bilateral relationship, as Vietnam is unable to fully absorb and integrate such new systems. As a result, cooperation remains largely centred on legacy platforms such as submarines and aircraft, while Vietnam's emerging needs in cybersecurity, space, and counterterrorism are more dynamically addressed through ties with the United States and India [Storey 2024].

Finally, Russia's deepening strategic alignment with China since 2014 complicates trust. While officially neutral on South China Sea disputes, Russia's joint activities with China raise concerns in Hanoi [Tran et al. 2013; Grossman 2022]. This divergence curbs Vietnam's confidence in Russia as a long-term strategic counterweight to Beijing.

Future Trajectory of Vietnam—Russia Security Cooperation

The future of Vietnam—Russia security cooperation will be shaped by evolving geopolitical dynamics, Vietnam's defense diversification, and Russia's recalibrated global strategy.

Vietnam's declining imports since 2018 reflect efforts to reduce overdependence and tap into new technologies from partners [Storey 2024; Zareba 2023]. However, Russia remains critical, especially in naval and air capabilities. As of 2022, about 70 % of Vietnam's heavy weaponry still originates from Russia [Heydarian 2022], making sudden transition impractical. Maintenance contracts, spare parts, training, and systems integration will thus keep Russia central to Vietnam's defense architecture.

Looking ahead, cooperation is expected to expand into non-traditional domains where interests converge and political risks are lower. Vietnam and Russia could co-develop cyber defense capabilities and secure communication systems. Vietnam's growing interest in space-based surveillance and satellite imaging also presents

opportunities for joint initiatives. Russia's 2023 dual-use technology proposals — focused on maritime monitoring, disaster prediction, and crime prevention — align with Vietnam's defense policy of “defending the Fatherland early and from afar” [Asian Military Review 26.05.2023].

Strategically, the relationship remains valuable to both sides. For Vietnam, it supports strategic autonomy by avoiding alignment with any single power amid intensifying U.S.—China rivalry. For Russia, Vietnam offers geopolitical legitimacy and continued access to Southeast Asia's defense market. Moscow will likely offer Vietnam competitive pricing and technology incentives to retain the partnership.

Although Russia's alignment with China has grown, Moscow has refrained from supporting Beijing's maritime claims. This restraint helps maintain Vietnamese trust. Thus, the most realistic path forward is “managed diversification.” Vietnam will expand future procurement sources while retaining Russian support for existing systems. This hybrid model ensures the Vietnam—Russia security partnership remains pragmatic, resilient, and strategically relevant.

5. Conclusion

The Vietnam—Russia security partnership (2001—2025) represents a durable yet adaptive relationship shaped by Cold War legacies and evolving strategic needs. Initially rooted in ideological solidarity, the partnership has expanded to include traditional military ties, intelligence sharing, and cooperation in non-traditional domains like cybersecurity and disaster relief. Vietnam has leveraged Russian defense systems — particularly Kilo-class submarines and Su-30MK2 jets — to modernize its forces and strengthen deterrence in the South China Sea. This has supported Hanoi's goal of maintaining strategic autonomy amid major power rivalry. For Russia, Vietnam offers a vital Southeast Asian partner and a market for defense exports. Yet the relationship faces constraints: Vietnam's reliance on Russian platforms raises operational risks amid Western sanctions and Russia's growing ties with China. Limited technology transfer and stagnation in defense innovation add further challenges. Still, Vietnam's strategy of managed diversification suggests the partnership will persist — pragmatic, non-aligned, and anchored in shared strategic interests.

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