

ИСТОРИЯ И КУЛЬТУРА

DOI: 10.24411/2618-9453-2020-10033

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VIETNAM'S GEOSTRATEGIC ACTIONS UNDER FEUDAL TIMES¹

Abstract: Vietnam's feudal dynasties always combined firm military measures with civilian, flexible diplomacy notably the "diplomatic tribute" and "diplomatic marriage"; where the border protection was the excuse for the Southward territory expansion; using the strategy "people enlarge land ownership first, the state governs later" to confirm the sovereignty. The task of "Southward march" and "Eastward march" not only provided new resources for Vietnam's growth but also set up a geographical "trap" in Vietnam's state administration career, especially in solving and balancing the power among the regions as well as in protecting the national sovereignty and border security on both land and sea. However, the lack of strategic vision in developing national synergy limited Vietnam's strategic space, pushing the country backward and becoming a French colony.

Keywords: Vietnam, geostrategic actions, development space, the monarchic time, Southward and Eastward territory expansion.

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О ГЕОСТРАТЕГИЧЕСКИХ ДЕЙСТВИЯХ ВЬЕТНАМА В ФЕОДАЛЬНЫЕ ВРЕМЕНА

Аннотация. Феодалные династии Вьетнама всегда сочетали жёсткие военные меры с гражданской гибкой дипломатией, особенно с «дипломатической данью» и «дипломатическим браком»; охрана границ была оправданием для расширения территории на юг; для подтверждения суверенитета использовалась стратегия «сначала завоевать земли, потом установить государственное правление». Осуществление «марша на юг» и «марша на восток» не только предоставило новые ресурсы для роста Вьетнама, но и создало географическую «ловушку» в его государственном администрировании, особенно в решении задачи поддержания баланса сил между регионами, а также защите национального суверенитета и безопасности границ как на суше, так и на море. Однако именно отсутствие стратегического видения в развитии национальной синергии ограничило пространство развития Вьетнама, отбросив страну назад и превратив её во французскую колонию.

¹This research is funded by Vietnam National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (NAFOSTED), the grant number 01/1018/NCUD

Ключевые слова: Вьетнам, геостратегические действия и пространство развития в монархическое время.

Introduction

There have been many studies on the fight against the invasion to defend and expand the national territory as well as the diplomatic ties of Vietnam during the feudal time. The typical studies are “Vietnam’s Glorious History against Invasion of Chinese Feudalism” [Hong Lam and Hong Linh 1984], “Vietnam’s Sovereignty over Seas and Islands: Historical Evidence and Legality” [Do Bang 2020], “The Southern Region (Nam Bo): Foundation Process and Development” [Phan Huy Le 2017], “Vietnam’s Diplomacy from the Country Foundation Time to August 1945” [Ngoại giao Việt Nam 2001], “Vietnam’s Foreign Trade during the 17th, 18th and Early-19th Centuries” [Thanh The Vy 1961] and so on.

However, these titles mainly approached each specific issue and field such as fighting against aggression, political diplomacy and international trade. In fact, there is a lack of comprehensive and in-depth studies that discuss the reshaping of Vietnam’s strategic space due to the impact of geographical factors, internal politics and international context. Moreover, the negative side of geostrategic actions, especially of the Southward expansion, is also missed. Among them, the critic viewpoint is found in some studies such as “Southward March and Geographical ‘Trap’ of the Vietnamese”, “Vietnam: History of the Vulnerable Nation” [Vu Duc Liem 2018], reasoning that the fast “Southward march” during the 16th-18th centuries were an addition to the power fight and division between the Dang Ngoai in the North and the Dang Trong in the South, having taken about 300 years (until 1802) before the national unification was attained.

That development also increased Vietnamese’s sensitivity and adaptability in national administration, especially in selecting the capital, solving and balancing the power between the regions as well as protecting the sovereignty, border security from the invasion. This issue should be studied further for full comprehension.

In this paper, the author applies geopolitical and geostrategic approaches when analyzing the politic processes, particularly the strategic actions such as protecting sovereignty, expanding territory, exploring natural resources, occupying strategic places as well as analyzing the international relationship under the mutual interaction and impact in terms of political, environmental and geographical viewpoints. At the same time, the author uses ancient chronicles to select the typical actions in Vietnam’s fight for protection and expansion of survival space during the monarchic time. That have helped to make viewpoint on advantages and disadvantages of the above-mentioned process, contribute to the systematization of measures, strategies and action plans that Dai Viet government has applied in foreign affairs, provide a more overall view on Vietnam’s traditional strategic culture in general and foreign affairs in particular throughout the history.

Fighting against invasion, protecting national sovereignty

Ngo Quyen’s Bach Dang victory against Chinese invaders in 938 marked an end after almost thousand years of Chinese domination (179 BC–938), opening the door to Vietnam’s national independence. After that, the Ngo Dynasty (939–965) and the Dinh Dynasty proclaimed their emperors, put down the revolt of and win 12 warlords, the Pre-Le Dynasty (968–1009) also suppressed the localities under rebellion, both specifying and confirming the Vietnam’s national independence, sovereignty and border [Dao Duy Anh 2005: 108–118]. By time of the Ly Dynasty (1009–1225), with the aim to reinforce and enlarge the sovereignty and position, Ly Thai To had

chosen Dai La as the capital instead of Hoa Lu, named as Thang Long (the flying dragon), and by 1054, Dai Co Viet (Great and Big Viet) had been renamed as Dai Viet (Great Viet).

Confirming Dai Viet's sovereignty as an independent country is detailed via the poem "Nam Quoc Son Ha" (Rivers and Mountains of the Southern Country) composed during time of Ly Thuong Kiet² and the later poem "Binh Ngo Dai Cao" (Proclamation of Victory) by Nguyen Trai³. In tandem with confirming the border, the will of independence, self-control and nationalism in terms of politics and culture also added to composing the geostrategy and creating the national synergy.

Fight against the aggressor, defence of the border and territory sovereignty are reflected by specific actions, especially since the Ly Dynasty (1009–1225), the Tran Dynasty (1225–1400). Backbone and famous generals, aristocrats of the court were assigned to control the feuds along with the border as well as the high-ranking mandarins were dispatched to patrol the border, particularly the North. Sometimes, the King in person surveyed these places. At the same time, the King applied the policy "Flexible for Afar" setting up good marriage-based relationship with the local officers in order to protect the national border [Nguyen Thi Phuong Chi 2013: 3–12]. Moreover, Dai Viet during Ly-Tran also actively struck into the enemy's den on their land when he detected any risk of invasion. Thanks to those strategic thought and action, Dai Viet won the invasive wars of Song during the 11th century, Yuan during the 13th century, Ming during the 15th century, Qing during the 18th century from the North and the fights against Champa from the South [Hong Lam and Hong Linh 1984: 224–454].

Under the Le So (Later Le) dynasty (1428–1527), especially during Le Thanh Tong King rule (1442–1497), the awareness of the border and territory was heightened. One typical example had been Inducement by Le Thanh Tong towards messenger Le Canh Huy before he was sent to China as King's envoy in 1471, reading that "It is no reason for any part of our country to be stolen. We should spare no effort to debate and negotiate and should not be overwhelmed by them. If not successful, we will dispatch our messenger to their court to win the rightness. If anyone devotes any part of Thai To's mountain and land to the enemy, he will be put to serious punishment" [Kham dinh Viet su thong giam cuong muc 1998: 112].

Conquering and enlarging the territory

One of the typical examples of Dai Viet's territorial expansion was the "Nam tien" (Southward march) action. It was confirmed by Dai Viet administration that the only way to reinforce and enhance national power, especially, fight against strong Northern China's pressure and threat was to enlarge the territory towards the South, where Champa was relatively weak and not crowded. Meanwhile, the West had high and overlapping mountains and the East had immense sea, so it was

² Poem "Nam Quoc Son Ha"

*The Southern emperor rules the Southern land
Our destiny is writ in Heaven's Book
How dare ye bandits trespass on our soil
Ye shall meet your undoing at our hands*

³ Poem "Binh Ngo Dai Cao"

*Dai Viet has proclaimed the typical culture and institution for long.
The lands have been divided, Northern and Southern customs are also different
The independence has been built and developed since Trieu, Dinh, Ly, Tran
We share the equal position with Han, Duong, Tong, Nguyen
From time to time, it may be powerful and not powerful, but the talented is present all time...*

difficult to have enough people and energy to go in those directions, conquer a new space. For this reason, since the Ly dynasty, Vietnam's authorities usually considered the national border protection as the excuse to beat Champa and force them to reserve the Northern part for Dai Viet. For example, in 1069, Champa associated with Tong troops to harass Dai Viet in the South; however, the failure made Champa's King devote land of Dia Ly, Ma Linh and Bo Chanh to Dai Viet. In 1074, Ly Thuong Kiet took an inspection tour to the South to draw map of mountains and rivers, renamed two districts of Dia Ly and Ma Linh as Lam Binh and Minh Linh, called people for living there [Dai Viet Su ky Toan thu: 1998. I. 233–237].

Until the Tran dynasty, the territory was kept enlarging to the South. Since this time, Dai Viet administration also applied political marriage and diplomatic ties for the targeted goals. Typical example was King Tran Anh Tong in 1306, who accepted to marry Princess Huyen Tran to King of Champa, Jaya Sinharmen III, to exchange for joining Chau O and Chau Ri (from North of Quang Tri to North of Quang Nam) to Dai Viet [Dai Viet Su ky Toan thu 1998: II. 102) as per Fig. 1.

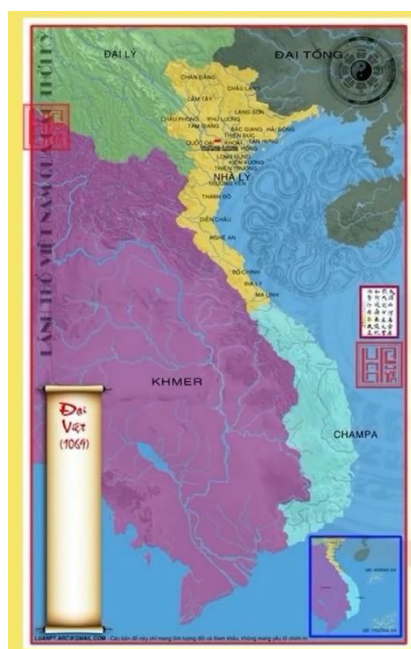
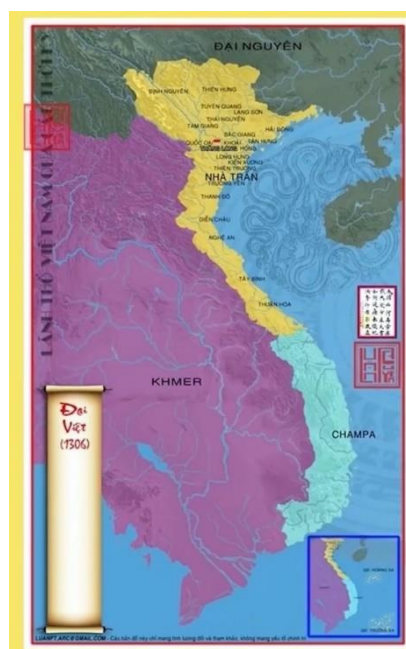


Fig.1. Vietnam's territory in the Ly Dynasty time, 1069



Vietnam's territory in the Tran Dynasty time, 1306

Under the Ho dynasty (1400–1407), in spite of being busy by moving capital from Thang Long to Thanh Hoa and lacking support from officials, Vietnam's authority still paid much attention to enlarging to the South. In 1402 and 1403, the Ho dynasty made two attacks into the land of Champa. The King of Champa was frightened into devoting Chiem Dong (South of Quang Nam) and Co Luy (North of Quang Ngai) to Vietnam. King Ho Quy Ly divided this new land into four districts of Thang, Hoa, Tu and Nghia, assigned the officials to rule as well as called the people without land from Thanh Hoa to Thuan Hoa to live there. However, the Ho dynasty was defeated by the Chinese Ming dynasty in 1407. Taking this chance, Champa troops attacked the North and regained the lands which they had been forced to devote to the Ho dynasty previously [Dai Viet Su ky Toan thu 1998, II: 203–204].

In the time of Le So (1428–1527), especially under the Le Thanh Tong dynasty (1460–1497), the career of Southward expansion was continuously promoted. Since that time, Dai Viet usually

organized big punitive conquests to Do Ban capital of Champa, typically the great conquest launched by King Le Thanh Tong in Spring 1471. This campaign not only provided Dai Viet the new land ranging from North of Hai Van Pass (now included in Da Nang) to Cu Mong Pass, Phu Yen province, but also placed a decisive hit to destroy the Kingdom of Champa [Dai Viet Su ky Toan thu 1998, III: 239]. After this event, the Le dynasty called for migrating, building plantation and developing the Central and Central Southern regions, starting the control over the East Sea (South China Sea) [Dao Duy Anh 2005: 237].

While fighting against Lord Trinh (1545–1787) in the North (Dang Ngoai), Lord Nguyen (1558–1777) in the South (Dang Trong) kept promoting the Southward marches in many versatile ways. In addition to taking the opportunity to protect the border, forcing troops to enlarge the territory as well as using diplomatic marriage, Lord Nguyen also applied civil methods such as calling the people to reclaim abandoned lands, building villages of the Vietnamese with the aim to confirm the sovereignty by setting up the governance machinery over the new lands, especially in the Nam Bo region⁴ [Dai Nam Thuc luc Tien bien 1962, 1: 122–125; 153–157], [Trinh Hoai Duc 1998: 51–75, 114].

It should be noted that Lord Nguyen used Chinese immigrants as the force to enlarge and reclaim the new territories, confirming the sovereignty over the Nam Bo. Typically, in 1679, Lord Nguyen permitted more than 3,000 Chinese political refugees, who opposed the Thanh dynasty, to live and reclaim the abandoned lands of Dong Nai and My Tho. In addition, in 1709, Lord Nguyen accepted the wish of Mac Cuu (a Chinese migrant who lived in Cambodia) to devote Ha Tien to the Dang Trong authority in exchange for ruling that land [Dai Nam Thuc luc Tien Bien 1962, 1: 125, 198–199]. This event marked a new progress in enlarging the territory and confirming the sovereignty not only over the lands but also over the seas in the Southwest region of Nam Bo, including islands of Phu Quoc and Tho Chu of Vietnam in the early 18th century [Phan Huy Le 2017, I: 519–520]; [Tran Nam Tien 2018: 52] as per Fig. 2.



Fig. 2. Vietnam's territory



Vietnam's territory

⁴ Among those immigrants, there were also the Catholic who escaped from the religious prohibition in the North.

under the late Le Dynasty time, 1471 under the Lord Nguyen, from the late 17th century to the early 18th century)

In 1698, in order to confirm the sovereignty over the Southern region, Lord Nguyen declared the State-based official sovereignty over Dong Nai and Saigon–Gia Dinh. The sub-administrations from districts, towns, communes to hamlets were established and officially mentioned in the administrative map of Southern Kingdom. In 1838, Minh Menh introduced the official map of Dai Nam called “Unified Map of Dai Nam” (Fig. 3), specifying border of the South in particular and of Vietnam in general [Tran Nam Tien 2018: 52]. This move under the slogan “People to enlarge territory first, the State rules later” was one of the challenges and plans on enlarging and confirming the sovereignty promoted generally by Vietnam’s authority, especially in the Southern region since Lord Nguyen time.

Another geo-strategic action was enlarging the sea space, also called “*Dong tien*” (Eastward) or “*Bien tien*” (Seaward) to confirm and carry out the sovereignty over the East Sea. Possibly, conquering the sea and gradually confirming the sovereignty over the remote islands such as Hoang Sa (Paracel Islands) had been started since the second half of the 15th century, when Quang Nam was included in Vietnam’s territory. The name “Gold Sand Bank” (Bai Cat Vang–Hoang Sa) was officially placed in “Hong Duc Map” published in time of Le Thanh Tong King (1460–1497) [Do Bang 2020: 7, 27–28]. It was not by chance that Nguyen Binh Khiem, the most famous philosopher of Vietnam in the 16th century, pointed out that “If big East Sea is protected, Vietnamese nation will be sustainable” [Nguyen Binh Khiem 2017].



Fig. 3. Vietnam’s territory under the Lord Nguyen, 1757

Vietnam’s territory under the Nguyen Dynasty, 1832

Noticeably, Lord Nguyen was credited to establish the sovereignty over Hoang Sa (Paracel Islands) and Truong Sa (Spratly Islands) on the East Sea. Lord Nguyen Phuc Nguyen (1614–1635) set up Hoang Sa paramilitary army team in Quang Ngai and next other Lords established Bac Hai team in Binh Thuan assigned to the offshore islands to exploit sea products, collect commodities and

confirm the sovereignty [Le Quy Don 1977: 116–121]. From the semi-military armies, step by step, Hoang Sa team and Bac Hai team were combined with the official naval forces of the State, especially since Tay Son (1778–1802) time. During 1815–1816, based on the increasing power of the naval forces, King Gia Long dispatched troops to Hoang Sa to set up the flags, surveyed and measured the sea roads, and during 1833–1836, King Minh Menh kept dispatching naval forces and supervisors to the islands to draw maps, build temples and sovereignty steles there [Do Bang 2020: 8, 82–86].

It was predicted that the sovereignty over Truong Sa, Con Dao, Tho Chu and Phu Quoc had been confirmed since the second half of the 17th century, the early 18th century, when Lord Nguyen made the official division of the border and established their administration in the Central South and the South region [Do Bang 2020: 31, 36].

We should also mention that the naval forces during Tay Son time, especially early time of the Nguyen dynasty were developed quite quickly. The Nguyen dynasty started learning the shipbuilding technique and sea experience from the Western foreigners, including building big shipyards to produce steam-based vessels [Do Bang 2020: 47–63].

Foreign affairs

Firstly, regarding *the political and cultural relations*, especially with China, Vietnam's feudal dynasties both opposed the invasion by determined military polices and expressed the flexibility and amicable negotiation in many ways, including “diplomatic tribute” and “diplomatic marriage”. For example, in 1078, the Ly dynasty sent their envoy Dao Trung Nguyen to devote three elephants and ask for returning Quang Nguyen and Bao Lac. In 1084, Dr. Le Van Thinh won the diplomatic negotiation, forcing the Tong dynasty to return the western part of Quang Nguyen province to Dai Viet. It is remarked by Phan Huy Chu on this issue that “in the Ly dynasty, big area of land was returned by Tong thanks to the previous victories..., which were powerful enough to make Tong admire. Next, the envoy was very clever and intelligent in negotiating, winning the respect from China. That proved the prosperity during that time” [Phan Huy Chu 1961: 196]. One more example was in 1306 when King Tran Anh Tong married Princess Huyen Tran to Champa's King Jaya Sinharmann III to exchange for Chau O and Chau Ri [Dai Viet Su ky Toan thu 1998, II: 102]. With the similar action, Lord Nguyen Phuc Nguyen in 1620 married his daughter Princess Ngoc Van to Cambodia's King, Chey Chettha II, with the aim to confirm his position in competing with Siam as well as to create more favourable condition for the Vietnamese to immigrate to the South [Trinh Hoai Duc 1998: 51].

It was worthy to mention that Vietnam's feudal authorities chose and prosecuted the policy of “Sach phong” (Title conferral) and “Trieu cong” (Tribute) in the relationship with neighbouring countries, especially with the China [Nguyen Thi My Hanh, 01.09.2014]. This was the typical diplomatic tie not only to protect safety of the Fatherland but also express the respect towards Confucianism and confirm his official power in reigning the country. This viewpoint was generalized that “in ruling the country, friendship with the neighbour should be important... Vietnam has a southern land that is filial with China, although the people built their country on a separate scale, but inwardly they claim to be emperor, while foreign affairs are proclaimed king, still subject to taste, judging the real world” [Phan Huy Chu 1961: 135].

Since the 16th century when the Western aspects appeared in Vietnam, both Lord Trinh, Lord Nguyen and then the Nguyen Dynasty still considered Confucianism as the fundamental morality in international relations and Catholicism was prohibited, despite they in fact desired to set up further

relationship with Westerner to enjoy the tax incentives on trading activities and weapon purchase [Truong Ba Can 2008, 2: 9–19].

Regarding international trading, it may be said that since the 12th–13th century, Dai Viet had made new efforts in developing foreign trade, typically turning Van Don into the international trade port [Nguyen Van Kim 2014: 224–250]. Since the 16th–17th centuries, regardless of the Trinh–Nguyen civil war, Dai Viet’s foreign trade, especially in the Dang Trong flourished. This resulted from many factors, which were firstly the big competition among the East India companies of Western countries and increasing appearance of Chinese and Japanese merchants in the Southeast Asia [Li Tana 1998: 111–121]. Concurrently, Dai Viet was located on the international marine route of the East Sea, owning numerous of precious products loved by foreigners such as silk, aloe wood, cinnamon, pepper, gold, gemstone and rice [Le Quy Don 1977: 305–306]. More importantly, Lord Nguyen was further open for trading activities, including actively welcoming foreign businessmen [Thanh The Vy 1961: 217–219]. Vietnam’s driving force to welcome foreign traders, especially in the South, was both earning profits and reinforcing the power in the context of the competition between Lord Trinh and Lord Nguyen [Li Tana 1999: 95–96].

Since the mid-18th century, in the North and especially since the 1820s after Gia Long had died, Minh Menh was the King, Vietnam’s government developed the Confucian model, imitating the Qing dynasty to apply the closed-door policy with a lot of limits in trading activities as well as showing the determination in opposing the missionary work of Western people and refusing the official diplomatic ties with them [Truong Ba Can 2008, 1: 476; 2: 9–19]. It resulted in the fact that Vietnam’s integration into the foreign trading in particular and Vietnam’s international relations with the Western countries in general were put to a down. Whereas, the Nguyen dynasty still respected the relation with China and kept taking advantages of Chinese immigrants as the big economic and political force to reinforce its position [Tran Khanh 1993: 18–20].

General remarks

Based on the above studies, some following remarks are provided:

First, Vietnam’s feudal administration, since having gained the national independence after almost thousand years of Chinese domination not only spared no effort to fight against the invasion but also kept enlarging the territory by conquering new lands. These policies consisted of building and protecting the border with military strategies and national unification, caring the near-border ethnic minorities, combining determined military measures with flexible relations, especially “diplomatic tribute” and “diplomatic marriage”, considering border protection as the excuse to enlarge the territory, using the strategy “people enlarge land ownership first, the state governs later” to confirm the sovereignty, protect and enlarge the survival space.

Second, solution of *Southward march*, enlarging the territory to the South, where there was a big area of wild land and it was near the disadvantageous countries, was carried out for about 850 years, from the Ly dynasty to the Nguyen dynasty with the aim to reinforce, to enlarge the strategic space for internal growth, giving hands to fight against the regular invasion from the Northern countries, confirming the position in the South East of Asia.

The career of Southward march made Dai Viet’s geographical space three times bigger from 1400 to 1840, paving the way for a modern and new Vietnam [Vu Duc Liem: 29.10.2018]. However, due to big migration of the Vietnamese from the North to the South, especially since the early 15th

century⁵ and the geographical and cultural differences of the new land in comparison with the traditional land (Red River), Vietnam was separated by two powers, namely the Southern Vietnam and the Northern Vietnam, taking about 300 years (from the time when Nguyen Hoang went to the South in 1558 to look for “Shelter” in the period of Minh Menh emperor rule (1820–1841) to develop a relatively-stable power status throughout Vietnam like now. Some scholars consider this to be the geographical “trap” in ruling the country, especially in selecting the capital, solving and balancing the power between the regions as well as protecting the sovereignty and border security from the invasion [Vu Duc Liem: 31.08.2018; 28.10.2018].

Third, encroaching the sea and exploiting sea resources as well as confirming the sovereignty over the sea, also called “*Eastward*” or “*Seaward*” was another strategy applicable along with the history. Nevertheless, encroaching the sea and gradually confirming the sovereignty over the islands on the East Sea such as Hoang Sa was just started since the second half of the 15th century, the early 16th century in tandem with the task of Southward by King Le, Lord Nguyen. Lord Nguyen, then the Tay Son dynasty and the Nguyen dynasty started paying much attention to building up the sea military forces. However, Vietnam’s feudal administration did not have any specific seaward policy on the development of sea military power and sea foreign trading [Wheeler 2006: 123–154]; [Thanh The Vy 1961: 23–28].

Fourth, foreign affairs in general and *foreign trade* in particular applied by Vietnam’s feudal authority were placed under the strong influence of Chinese feudal model, underestimating the individual trading, limiting foreign trading, overestimating land more than sea and traditional culture protection [Nguyen Khac Vien 1974: 17–20]. Sometimes, particularly during the time of Lord Nguyen in the South, sea foreign trading activities were relatively crowded. That relative crowdedness was mostly attributable to urgent demand for money from tax collection and weapon purchase to reinforce and fight for power.

Conclusion

To protect the independence and enlarge the living space, Vietnam’s feudal dynasties always used firm military measures with civilian, flexible diplomacy, notably the “diplomatic tribute” and “diplomatic marriage”; where the border protection was the excuse for the territory expansion; taking advantages of immigrants to declare the sovereignty over the new land. The task of “Southward march” and “Eastward march” not only provided new resources for Vietnam’s growth but also set up a geographical “trap” in Vietnam’s state administration career, especially in solving and balancing the power among the regions as well as in protecting the national sovereignty and border security on both land and sea.

However, due to being deeply influenced by Chinese feudal model and the lack of strategic vision towards modernization, especially the development of sea power and relations with Western countries, Vietnam’s feudal dynasties limited its strategic space, pushing the country backward and becoming the French colony.

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⁵ According to the French and Japanese scholars, about 3.12 million Vietnamese people migrated from the North to other places, especially the South during the early 15th century [Yumio Sakurai 1997: 133–153].

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For citation: *Tran Khanh* (2020). Vietnam's geostrategic actions under feudal times. Russian Journal of Vietnamese Studies, Series 2, No. 4. P. 47–57.

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Article history:

Received: February 24, 2020

Received in revised form: June 19, 2020

Accepted: October 27, 2020

Для цитирования: *Чан Кхань*. О геостратегических действиях Вьетнама в феодальные времена (англ. яз) // Вьетнамские исследования, сер. 2, 2020, № 4. С. 47–57.

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Продвижение статьи:

Дата поступления: 24.02.2020

Дата поступления в переработанном виде: 19.06.2020

Принята к печати: 27.10.2020