

Visit by Vietnamese president forges closer ties with Japan

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1 December 2023

Amid rising tensions in Asia fuelled by Washington's confrontation with Beijing, Japan and Vietnam significantly strengthened relations during a high-profile, four-day visit this week by Vietnamese President Vo Van Thuong.

Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio and Thuong held lengthy discussions on Monday, issuing a statement affirming that the two countries have upgraded their relationship to a "comprehensive strategic partnership."

The upgrade follows the Vietnamese elevation of ties with the United States in September to the same top tier when US President Biden visited Hanoi. Along with the US and Japan, Vietnam only has such declared partnerships with four other countries: China, India, Russia and South Korea.

As US imperialism has intensified its military build-up against China and strengthened alliances in the Indo-Pacific—including with Japan—Tokyo has engaged in its own remilitarisation and joined Washington's diplomatic efforts to consolidate an anti-China bloc throughout the region.

Like other countries, Vietnam is engaged in an increasingly precarious balancing act. Its relations with Russia and China are longstanding, going back to the Vietnam War. Russia is a major source of Vietnam's military hardware, while China is its largest trading partner. Any rupture in these relations would impact heavily on Vietnam.

Nevertheless, Vietnam's strengthening of military and economic ties with both the US—which waged a brutal neo-colonial war to subordinate Vietnam—and Japan signals a certain tilt toward Washington and its allies. Over the past decade, the US has exploited territorial disputes in the South China Sea to try to drive a wedge between China and its Southeast Asian

neighbours such as Vietnam and the Philippines.

Significantly, the joint statement by Thuong and Fumio, formally titled "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for Peace and Prosperity in Asia and the World," referred to the territorial disputes without naming China. The two leaders, it declared, "expressed their concerns on the situation in the South China Sea and reiterated the importance of refraining from any unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force or coercion and escalate tensions."

These phrases aimed against Beijing are part of the propaganda routinely trotted out by Washington and its allies as they escalate their military provocations in the South China and East China Seas. The US and Japan, as well as Australia, South Korea and India, are increasingly engaged in joint war games in waters and airspace adjacent to the Chinese mainland.

For all the empty words about peace, both Hanoi and Tokyo understand that the danger of a US-led war against China is rising rapidly. Closer strategic ties with Vietnam, which has a land border with China and disputes with China over the two island groups in the South China Sea—the Spratlys and the Paracels—would further tighten the US-led noose around China. In 2020, Japan provided a \$348 million loan for Vietnam to build six patrol vessels to strengthen its maritime presence in the contested waters.

Vietnam is also important economically to Japan and the US as relations with China become increasingly tense following the imposition of tariffs, trade bans and sanctions on Beijing. Global corporations are seeking to hedge their bets. They are maintaining production in China but also investing in other cheap labour platforms in a policy known as China Plus One.

Vietnam has become a favoured alternative and one of the fastest growing economies in Asia. Japan is

currently Vietnam's third-largest source of foreign investment and its fourth-largest trading partner. Last year bilateral trade between the two countries reached \$50 billion. Major Japanese corporations, including Canon, Honda, Panasonic and Bridgestone, are among Vietnam's largest corporate investors.

The new strategic partnership also focusses on "supply chains" and agreements to cooperate on semiconductors and critical minerals. In preparation for conflict with China, the US and its allies are seeking to ensure access to supplies of these components and materials, which are vital not only for many commercial products, but also for military hardware and communications. The US has imposed bans on China's access to advanced computer chips, but Chinese companies still play an important role in global semiconductor production. China dominates the global production of many critical minerals.

The joint statement affirmed that Vietnam "plays an important role in diversification and upgrading of supply chain network through digital technology and other means for Japan." Both sides agreed to create the conditions to "facilitate Vietnamese businesses to participate more deeply and substantially in the Japanese businesses-led global supply chain."

Thuong's visit to Japan was to mark 50 years since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. During the Vietnam War, Japan maintained informal relations with North Vietnam and established formal diplomatic ties with Hanoi in September 1973—two years before the defeat of the US-backed puppet regime in South Vietnam and the unification of the country.

Japan clearly attached considerable importance to Thuong's visit. The Vietnamese president and his wife were received by at the Imperial Palace in Tokyo for a meeting and lunch hosted by Emperor Naruhito and Empress Masako. Thuong also addressed a plenary session of the lower house of the Japanese Diet or parliament. Japan reiterated its support for Vietnam to host the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in 2027 and offered assistance to organise this event.

Japan's strengthening of ties with Vietnam and other Asian countries, such as the Philippines, is certainly in line with the US strategy of undermining and encircling China in preparation for war. Japanese imperialism,

however, has its own strategic and economic interests in Asia and internationally. Over the past decade, Japan has rapidly remilitarised and increasingly cast off the legal and constitutional restraints on the use of its military to prosecute those interests.



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