

VIETNAM - RUSSIA DEFENCE COOPERATION WITHIN THE COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP FRAMEWORK: DYNAMICS AND LIMITATIONS

HỢP TÁC QUỐC PHÒNG VIỆT NAM - LIÊN BANG NGÀ TRONG KHUÔN KHỔ ĐỐI TÁC CHIẾN LƯỢC TOÀN DIỆN: ĐỘNG LỰC VÀ GIỚI HẠN

Le Thi Phuong Loan^{1*}, Bach Thai Hien²

¹The University of Danang - University of Foreign Language Studies, Vietnam

²Graduate from The University of Danang - University of Foreign Language Studies, Vietnam

*Corresponding author: ltploan@ufl.udn.vn

(Received: March 01, 2026; Revised: March 28, 2026; Accepted: April 05, 2026)

DOI: 10.31130/ud-jst.2026.24(5C).316

Abstract - This paper analyzes the dynamics and limitations of Vietnam - Russia defence cooperation within the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership framework from a Realist perspective. The findings indicate high-level dialogues, joint military training, military-technical exchanges, and multilateral coordination have been key areas of cooperation since 2012, thereby contributing to the modernization of the armed forces, enhancing defence capabilities, and improving Vietnam's ability to respond to emerging security threats in Asia Pacific. However, the reliance on Russia's military supply and logistics in addition to Vietnam's Four Nos defence policy are major challenges for this cooperation. Accordingly, the paper recommends foreign policy implications for Vietnam to further defence cooperation with Russia while upholding geopolitical balancing to better navigate geopolitics in a volatile international environment.

Key words - Vietnam - Russia defence cooperation; Vietnam - Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership; Geopolitical balancing; Emerging security threats; Military supply and logistics.

1. Introduction

In the context of an increasingly complex security environment in Asia Pacific with intensifying strategic competition among major powers [1], bilateral defence relations have become an important pillar in foreign policies, particularly for states pursuing strategic independence and diversified partnerships, such as Vietnam [2]. The Vietnam - Russian Federation relations were built on a historical foundation [3], sustained through long-term political trust and aligned with Russia's strategic presence in Asia Pacific. Within the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership framework, Vietnam-Russia defence cooperation is perceived as a strategic pillar, reflecting a high level of political trust and shared security interests [4]. However, the shifting global power dynamics are exposing both objective and subjective limitations on this cooperation. Therefore, a systematic analysis of both dynamics and limitations of Vietnam-Russia defence cooperation in the early 21st century is of practical significance. Accordingly, recommendations are proposed for Vietnam to ensure strategic balance and diversified partnerships amid a volatile international environment.

Tóm tắt - Bài báo phân tích động lực và giới hạn của hợp tác quốc phòng Việt - Nga trong khuôn khổ Quan hệ Đối tác chiến lược toàn diện dưới lăng kính của Chủ nghĩa hiện thực. Kết quả cho thấy từ năm 2012, hợp tác tập trung vào đối thoại cấp cao, huấn luyện, trao đổi kỹ thuật và phối hợp đa phương, qua đó góp phần hiện đại hóa lực lượng vũ trang, nâng cao năng lực quốc phòng và khả năng ứng phó của Việt Nam đối với các thách thức an ninh mới nổi tại châu Á - Thái Bình Dương. Tuy nhiên, sự phụ thuộc vào nguồn cung và hệ thống hậu cần - kỹ thuật quân sự từ Nga, cùng chính sách quốc phòng "Bốn Không" của Việt Nam đã đặt ra những rào cản nhất định. Bài viết đề xuất hàm ý chính sách cho Việt Nam nhằm thúc đẩy hợp tác, bảo đảm cân bằng địa - chính trị và nâng cao năng lực thích ứng trong môi trường quốc tế đầy biến động.

Từ khóa - Hợp tác quốc phòng Việt - Nga; Quan hệ Đối tác Chiến lược Toàn diện Việt - Nga; Cân bằng Địa - Chính trị; Các thách thức an ninh mới nổi; Nguồn cung và hậu cần quân sự.

2. Literature review

Vietnamese research addressing Vietnam-Russia defence cooperation includes the article entitled "Vietnam-Russia partnership in the 21st century" by Huong Ly, published in *Communist Review* on August 3, 2009, which analyzes the transition from Vietnam - Soviet relations to Vietnam - Russia strategic partnership. Another publication is "Seventy-five years of Vietnam-Russia relations: Traditional cooperation, friendship, and development" by Ha My Huong and Doan Anh Tuan, published in *Communist Review* on January 14, 2025, which systematizes the bilateral ties and clarifies key areas of cooperation strengthened in the new international context.

Regarding international publications, Vietnam-Russia relations are often analyzed within the broader context of Russian foreign policy in Asia Pacific and "pivot to the East" strategy. These works typically adopted a Russian perspective framing defence cooperation as a tool for regional influence. Prime examples include N.V. Fedorov's "Russian - Vietnamese Military-Technical cooperation: Challenges and Opportunities for Russia" published in *Vestnik RUDN International Relations* in

2017, and V. Serbin's "Vietnam's position on Russia's special military operation" published on *The Russian Journal of Vietnamese Studies* in 2023. Similarly, Nghiem Tuan Hung's "Basic aspects of security cooperation between Vietnam and Russia in the 21st century: Current situation and Prospects", published in *The Russian Journal of Vietnamese Studies* in 2025, analyzes the content of bilateral security - defence cooperation since the early 21st century.

From the above overview, defence cooperation in Vietnam-Russia relations is often analyzed as an important area of cooperation, yet not within the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership framework. These studies mainly describe the cooperation process, content, or achievements, rather than an analytical framework clarifying the dynamics of defence cooperation within the overall bilateral relation. As a result, this article aims to analyze dynamics and limitations of Vietnam - Russia defence cooperation within the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership framework.

3. Overview of Vietnam-Russia defence relations in the 20th century

In the 20th century, the Vietnam-Soviet defence relations were founded within the bilateral relations. Interestingly, even before the official diplomatic relation establishment, the influence of Russian October Revolution and Marxism-Leninism contributed to shaping Vietnam's national liberation struggle and military mindset [5]. Therefore, this relationship was developed amid profound changes in international order, consolidated through World War II and the Cold War, and closely linked to Vietnam's national liberation movement.

In 1950, in response to the Declaration of Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the Soviet Union established diplomatic relations with Vietnam on the foundation of a political-strategic alliance [3], with defence cooperation at its core. During the Vietnam's resistance wars against French colonialism and American imperialism, the Soviet Union deployed systematic military aid, focusing on military training, weapons, technology transfer, and support for key technical forces [6], thereby enhancing Vietnam's combat capabilities. After 1975, Vietnam-Soviet defence cooperation continued to be institutionalized, reflecting a high level of mutual strategic trust.

However, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 disrupted traditional defence cooperation models, prompting bilateral relations to be adjusted towards a more substantive direction serving national interests [7]. The 1994 Treaty on Basic Principles of Friendly Relations and the establishment of a Strategic Partnership in 2001 constructed a new political and legal framework for bilateral defence cooperation [8], laying a foundation for its content and limitations in the early 21st century.

4. Overview of Vietnam-Russia defence cooperation in the early 21st century

4.1. Cooperation Objectives

The key objective of defence cooperation within the

Vietnam-Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership framework is to strengthen military-technical cooperation, contributing to both national security and long-term strategic stability. According to the "Joint Statement on the 2030 Vision for Development of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership", Vietnam and Russia perceive defence - security cooperation as one of the special areas ensuring peace and stability, based on a traditional friendship, shared interests, and coordination of foreign policies [9]. This reflects two different yet complementary objectives: Vietnam aims to modernize armed forces and enhance self-reliant defence capacity, Russia aims to concretize influence in Asia Pacific and diversify markets for military equipment export. Thus, major objectives involve technical cooperation and maintaining a sustainable strategic relation in a complex international environment.

4.2. Cooperation Content

The content of Vietnam-Russia defence cooperation is shaped by substantive requirements and predictive capabilities of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership [10], including: (1) Military delegation exchange and strategic dialogue at all levels to strengthen trust and coordinate policies; (2) Coordination in specialized forces, including combat and force organization fields; (3) Exchange of experience and coordination in military medical, legal and policy fields; (4) Development and sharing of knowledge on military technology and research; (5) Consultation cooperation at multilateral mechanisms and forums on regional defence and security [4], [10], [11].

Unlike the "all-in, no control" cooperation model, the cooperation content within this partnership is selective based on long-term strategic value: cooperation in areas that help stabilize foreign policy and risk response capabilities, rather than pursuing multiple immediate activities.

4.3. Measures for implementation

Vietnam-Russia defence cooperation is implemented through a system of institutionalized and sustainable measures. Regarding military delegation exchange, high-level exchanges and deputy minister-level strategic dialogues are maintained to enhance trust and coordination [10], [11]. Regarding military branch cooperation, Vietnam and Russia implement specialized forces exchange, coordinating training and technical - military equipment cooperation, thereby improving combat readiness [4], [5], [9]. Regarding military medical, legal and political-military cooperation, the two countries coordinate research, exchange information on military medicine - legal affairs, and implement political-military cooperation mechanisms, such as the Memorandum of Understanding between General Political Department of the Vietnam Army and Main Military-Political Directorate of the Russian Armed Forces [10]. The two countries also participate in joint research projects, particularly within the Vietnam-Russia Tropical Center framework, and support, exchange technology, professional information on weapons and equipment [9], [10]. Finally, Vietnam and Russia jointly participate in multilateral mechanisms and forums on regional defence and security, such as ADMM+, and conduct joint consultations on international security issues

[4], [11], particularly resolving disputes by peaceful means on the basis of international law and UNCLOS 1982 [10].

5. Drivers for Vietnam-Russia defence cooperation in the early 21st century

5.1. Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Framework

In international relations, the Vietnam-Russia relation is not merely a higher-level strategic partnership, but a structurally distinct framework directly shaping the dynamics and methods of defence cooperation in the early 21st century.

Firstly, within the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership framework, defence cooperation plays a pivotal role in ensuring the reliability of the broader bilateral relation. It shapes the nature of ties, ensures stability and continuity even when other areas such as trade or science - technology are negatively impacted by international security uncertainties. This pivotal role makes defence cooperation a fundamental driving force, preventing the partnership from deteriorating in the emergence of external shocks.

Secondly, the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership is operated on a long-term strategy, rather than on-the-spot or situational cooperation. Within this framework, Vietnam-Russia defence cooperation prioritizes predictability, continuity, and sustainability in the long term, rather than rapid expansion in scale or scope. This reflects a shared understanding: in the context of increasing strategic rivalry among major powers, the core value of defence cooperation lies not in immediate intensity, but the ability to sustainably adapt to the changing international security environment.

Thirdly, a key feature of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership is the acknowledgment of limitations as an integral part of cooperation, particularly in the defence sector. Vietnam-Russia defence cooperation does not aim to overcome all strategic barriers, such as forming a military alliance, joint defence, or directly intervening in regional conflicts. Instead, the cooperation has been implemented within established limits, consistent with principles of independence and autonomy in Vietnam's foreign policies, as well as Russia's long-term strategic interests [3].

From this perspective, the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership both constructs a cooperation space and provides a structural dynamic for Vietnam-Russia defence cooperation in the early 21st century: maintain strategic reliability, ensure long-term stability, and control strategic risks in an increasingly complex security environment.

5.2. Motivations from the Vietnamese side

In the early 21st century, Vietnam's defence cooperation with the Russian Federation stems not from the need to seek overall security guarantees, but to enhance defence capabilities while maintaining strategic independence. Unlike the Cold War era, when defence cooperation meant alliance [7], Vietnam in the early 21st century approaches defence cooperation with Russia as a tool to adjust its defence capabilities from a Realist perspective of external balancing, rather than to expand

strategic ties. The decision to upgrade relations with Russia to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2012 proved Vietnam's efforts to multilateralize its defence relations [12]. This leverage came with no conditional security commitments or shared defence mechanisms, showing that Vietnam used this framework to maintain the depth of cooperation without narrowing its autonomy.

In addition, instead of expanding into sensitive forms of military cooperation such as troop deployment or participation in deterrence activities, Vietnam prioritizes maintaining cooperation in areas with long-term impacts on its internal capabilities, such as personnel training, technical support, and defence policy dialogue [11]. This is true even in times of international pressure and escalating Russia-Ukraine conflict, Vietnam has not severed defence cooperation with Russia, yet neither has it expanded cooperation beyond established limits. For example, since 2022, a few countries have provided military support to Russia. In April 2025, North Korea dispatched over 10,000 troops to Russia amidst Ukraine's military operations on Russian territory [13]. In December 2025, Belarus allowed Russian forces to station new nuclear-capable hypersonic ballistic missiles on its territory to strike targets in Europe, including Ukraine [14]. Meanwhile, Vietnam only affirmed the stance of not supporting sanctions resolutions against Russia at multilateral forums [15], without transforming bilateral defence cooperation into combat support or troop deployments with respect to the defence "Four No's" policy which emphasizes neutrality and autonomy. This shows that Vietnam avoids expanding cooperation into sensitive forms that could be interpreted as security commitments or military alliances. In fact, such an expansion, if any, could be acknowledged as exacerbating security dilemma from an Offensive Realist lens. Therefore, the key motivation from Vietnam is not to expand defence cooperation broadly, but to maintain essential defence capabilities while avoiding strategic dependence and adjusting foreign policy in the context of increasing major power rivalry.

5.3. Motivations from the Russian Federation

For Russian Federation, the impetus for defence cooperation with Vietnam is to maintain a stable strategic presence in Southeast Asia and expand connectivity in Eurasia in contexts of shrinking resources and strategic space [7]. After the Cold War, Russia no longer pursued a model of expanding influence through direct military presence in remote areas, but shifted to a strategy of indirect presence through highly reliable partners.

In this context, Vietnam emerges as a suitable, opportune partner for an indirect presence model in Southeast Asia [6]. The key lies in how Russia limits the form of presence and prioritizes military-technical cooperation, training, and policy dialogue, thereby maintaining a stable level of influence without generating signals of strategic engagement that could trigger a balancing response from other regional powers. As Russian Deputy Defence Minister Gerasimov noted, Asia Pacific is "a dynamically developing area with ASEAN

playing a central role and connections with dialogue partners,” therefore, Russia hopes that “Vietnam will facilitate Russia’s increased engagement with ASEAN,” particularly “through continued participation in regional security structures, including ADMM+ conference mechanism” [11]. This approach clearly reflects Russia’s motivation: maintain sufficient presence to be recognized as a regional security actor, not to increase strategic costs and risks.

This motivation is also reflected in Russia’s persistent maintenance of dialogue and defence cooperation mechanisms with Vietnam, even during periods when Russia faced significant challenges like Western sanctions or isolation. The fact that defence cooperation with Vietnam has not been interrupted by fluctuations in Russia-the-West relations shows that Russia views this partnership as a stable anchor in its presence in Asia Pacific. Leveraging Vietnam’s prominent role in regional structures allows Russia to maintain a certain level of political presence without investing significant resources [16]. Therefore, the impetus for defence cooperation with Vietnam lies in the ability to maintain a stable, predictable, and strategic presence aligned with Russia’s long-term priorities.

6. Limitations of Vietnam-Russia defence cooperation in the early 21st century

6.1. Limitations from the international environment

The primary limitation on Vietnam-Russia defence cooperation in the early 21st century stem from how cooperation is interpreted within great power strategic rivalry. In an international environment where defence is considered a sensitive strategy, cooperation is no longer explicated purely on technical objectives or scope, but perceived impacts on global balance of power. Accordingly, any move beyond the threshold of technical and logistical cooperation risks being interpreted by international politics as a shift in strategic position, regardless of actual intentions of related actors. In increasing major power rivalry, defence cooperation has become a high-risk domain. Even routine activities between Vietnam and Russia - including training, technical support, or policy consultation - may be interpreted by third parties as a move towards alliance. When security hotspots emerge or strategic competition escalates, any significant increase in military presence, operational interaction, or symbolic coordination is likely to provoke a counterbalancing response from other actors. For example, from 2001 to 2025, Vietnam’s foreign policy has generally been aligned with Russia’s interests in sustaining its presence in Asia. However, Vietnam’s maritime sovereignty concerns are intertwined with Russia’s deepening ties with China [6], showing both complementarity in terms of strategic interests and structural constraints from regional security priorities and strategic adjustments by major powers. Consequently, Vietnam-Russia defence cooperation faces the risk of ripple security effects, required to be controlled to preserve the “strategic perception balance,” even when such cooperation remains non-confrontational.

Furthermore, the current international environment operates on a dynamic balance of power logic, in which any enhancement in military capabilities or alliances is perceived in terms of its relative impacts on other actors. In this context, Vietnam-Russia defence cooperation, though preventive in nature and not aimed at any third party, may still be perceived as a variable affecting security balances in sensitive strategic areas. This forces both Vietnam and Russia to calibrate cooperation limits to avoid additional strategic pressure on Vietnam.

Finally, limitations also arise from how the international community interprets the role of Russia in the post-Cold War security structure. Given Russia’s significant political, economic, and strategic constraints, any expansion of its defence presence beyond traditional priority zones is often perceived as an attempt to reposition its influence, triggering containment responses from the US and Western allies. Therefore, bilateral defence cooperation tends to be limited to less sensitive areas, less likely to disrupt the system structure, such as personnel training, technical support, and experience exchange. This is a structural limitation that cannot be overcome simply by bilateral trust.

6.2. Inherent limitations of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, by its very nature, is not designed to leverage defence relations toward military integration, but rather to stabilize the long-term cooperation. That is, within this framework, defence plays a pivotal role in ensuring a minimum level of trust, ensuring that Vietnam-Russia relations remain resilient amid changes in the strategic environment, rather than becoming a driver of strategic expansion or security repositioning. This orientation creates an inherent limitation: defence cooperation is maintained yet constrained from becoming a driver in reshaping the overall structure of bilateral relations. This limitation is clearly reflected in the implementation of bilateral defence cooperation. Instead of pursuing groundbreaking military measures such as doctrine integration, coordinated operational mechanisms, or formal security commitments, the two countries prioritize areas capable of maintaining stability. For example, maintaining regular defence dialogues, training, technical support, and incremental modernization of existing capabilities. The framework for Vietnam-Russia cooperation, particularly in security, is shaped by both material factors and shared principles, such as non-alignment and respect for sovereignty [6]. The cooperation depth is enhanced in a controlled manner but rarely expands horizontally to new levels of cooperation that could entail unforeseen political or military obligations.

At the structural level, this limitation reflects a systemic choice: the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership framework is designed to mitigate strategic risks by limiting the extent to which defence can influence each country’s foreign relations. In that sense, the framework sustains the bilateral defence cooperation while deliberately limiting its depth. This is not a deficiency in bilateral relations, but a logical

outcome of a framework that prioritizes stability, predictability, and risk control. However, this priority also establishes a visible limit, making broader coordination or deeper military integration difficult.

6.3. Limitations from Vietnam

From Vietnam's perspective, limitations on defence cooperation with Russia stem from the need to secure strategic neutrality and flexibility. Therefore, these limitations are not a consequence of lacking bilateral trust, yet a calculated policy choice. These limitations are clearly institutionalized through Vietnam's "Four no's" defence policy [12], forming a rigid normative framework guiding all forms of defence cooperation. Within this framework, cooperation with Russia is only implemented at a level consistent with a defensive and independent orientation, avoiding expectations of bilateral security commitments or exclusionary strategic alliances.

The limitations are evident in how Vietnam chooses the content and form of cooperation. Vietnam prioritizes areas that directly strengthen self-reliance, such as human resource training, technical support, and exchanging professional expertise. Conversely, any forms of cooperation involving strong strategic commitments - such as long-term military presence or joint operations that go beyond thresholds - are approached with caution. This caution is not situational but a pervasive principle, further tightened during periods of regional tension or increased strategic competition.

The key here is that Vietnam-Russia defence cooperation follows a pragmatic approach of "usefulness without formal obligation." Vietnam seeks to ensure that all benefits directly serve national defence capabilities without incurring political-strategic obligations. This reflects an approach where limits are not barriers yet tools for managing cooperation, allowing Vietnam to strengthen defence capacities and preserve strategic autonomy without overreliance on a single major power. For example, in the defence industry, Vietnam maintains diversified partnerships rather than depending on Russia as a sole supplier, while actively enhancing self-reliance in military production and development. Consequently, the early 21st-century Vietnam-Russia defence cooperation is selective, defensive, and controlled - intentionally designed by Vietnam to protect long-term strategic interests in a volatile international security structure, rather than pursuing short-term gains at potential future costs.

6.4. Limitations from the Russian Federation

From Russia's perspective, limitations in defence cooperation with Vietnam reflect Russia's global strategic priorities and resource allocation. From a Defensive Realist lens, Southeast Asia is not central to Russia's balance-of-power or existential security concerns, but a secondary area where Russia seeks to maintain a stable level of political - technical influence with controlled costs and risks. From such a perspective, Russia position defence cooperation with Vietnam primarily as a channel for sustaining an indirect presence through reliable bilateral relations. Russia prioritizes the role of a partner providing defence

technology, equipment, and technical services [9], preserving traditional influence without incurring long-term security obligations or strategic constraints. This limitation becomes even more apparent in Russia's allocating strategic resources on areas considered more critical to its security and major-power status, making expanding defence cooperation with Vietnam costly and strategically risky. Consequently, Vietnam-Russia defence cooperation is maintained as a stable, sustainable, and highly predictable relationship [17], yet subject to limitations in strategic depth. This limitation does not reflect a decline in Vietnam's significance in Russia's foreign policy, but rather the inevitable consequence of a systemic strategic choice: prioritizing resource and risk control over expanding security engagement in secondary areas. In that sense, the limitation imposed by Russia is not a manifestation of a gap in bilateral relations, but rather a form of strategic self-restraint proactively imposed by Russia to balance presence and risk in its foreign policy.

7. Prospects for Vietnam-Russia defence cooperation and policy implications for Vietnam

7.1. Impact Assessment

At the bilateral level, defence cooperation remains the most substantive area generating deep material and technical ties between Vietnam and Russia. Most major weapons systems of Vietnam have long lifespans, requiring continuous technical support, spare parts, upgrades, and training. In fact, during 2001-2025 period, Russia is one of the leading arms suppliers to Vietnam. In terms of air defence - air force, Vietnam received a total of 36 Su-30MK2V fighters from Russia, two S-300PMU-1 long-range air defence systems, and two S-300PMU-2 systems [7]. Regarding ground combat, Vietnam ordered 64 T-90S tanks from Russia, marking an important step in the armored forces modernization, replacing equipment platforms of the Soviet Union [6]. Regarding coastal defence, Vietnam procured 6 Kilo-class diesel-electric submarines (Project 636.1); 4 Gepard 3.9 frigates (Project 11661E); 6 Svetlyak high-speed patrol boats (Project 10412); and 2 K-300P Bastion-P coastal missile systems from 2011 to enhance anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities in the East Sea [7]. This mechanism makes defence relation a stable pillar for the bilateral relations: even if trade is affected by sanctions and great power rivalry, the defence channel maintains a level of interdependence that is difficult to be replaced in the short term. However, this very structure of technical dependence also generates adjustment pressures on Vietnam.

Unlike highly market- or politically driven areas, defence cooperation operates on long-term technical-organizational logic and cycles, less influenced by short-term fluctuations. At the regional level, the impact of Vietnam-Russia defence cooperation extends beyond strengthening defensive deterrence capabilities to regulating strategic perceptions of relevant actors in a complex security environment. Vietnam's maintenance of defence capabilities based on A2/AD systems, modern air force, and navy increases the cost of coercive actions, thereby strengthening

self-defence and creating the minimum deterrence threshold for regional stability. At the same time, because this cooperation is neither institutionalized as a military alliance nor tied to collective defence, it avoids the logic of polarization or confrontation. Instead, it serves as a strategic signaling mechanism, allowing Vietnam to assert self-defence for national interests, while controlling how that message is interpreted by other actors. This is a key difference from alliance-based forms of defence cooperation, which often entails significant strategic repositioning. Accordingly, cooperation can benefit both countries: Vietnam enhances self-defence without changing its non-aligned orientation; Russia sustains strategic presence in Southeast Asia without incurring security obligations or entanglement in regional hotspots. The regional impact therefore lies less in shifting regional balance of power than in shaping behavioral thresholds and facilitating restraints among actors.

7.2. Prospects for Vietnam-Russia defence cooperation

The prospects for Vietnam-Russia defence cooperation in the early 21st century are shaped more by the relative stability of structural conditions than significant advancements in military integration. Limitations - such as major power competition, the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership framework, and self-restraint strategic choices of both countries - are likely to persist in the medium term.

At the structural level, these limitations are binding, generating a predictive framework for bilateral defence cooperation. In an international environment where defence signals are easily politicized, maintaining cooperation within established thresholds helps both countries minimize misinterpretation and escalation risks. Therefore, the prospects lie not in overcoming these limits, but in operating effectively within them: cooperation is unlikely to evolve into highly symbolic strategic forms, but rather it remains stable in less sensitive, functional areas that directly serve each side's defence capabilities, without triggering unforeseen political - security risks. Accordingly, the prospects will focus on technical depth. Technical support, maintenance, selective modernization of existing systems, specialized personnel training, and defence industry cooperation continue to be focused areas. In this sense, the prospects depend less on groundbreaking "newness," but the ability to deepen and sustain areas already recognized as strategically secure. That is, instead of expanding the scope, Vietnam and Russia optimize existing mechanisms, improving the quality of interaction and predictability.

As a result, defence cooperation with Russia tends to shift from a large-scale procurement to a model of maintaining, upgrading, and optimizing existing systems. This does not diminish the role of defence cooperation, but reshapes it towards greater stability, restraint, and alignment with Vietnam's defence autonomy. Furthermore, defence cooperation functions as a "strategic buffer", cushioning the bilateral relations from external political shocks. This allows minimal continuity even when Russia's overall foreign relations are struggling, or when the international environment becomes unfavorable.

Structurally, this dynamic helps stabilize the regional competitive environment, rather than fueling security-related tensions or an arms race.

In short, prospects for Vietnam-Russia defence cooperation lie not in the level of "enhancement" or "expansion," but in maintaining effective, controlled cooperation within structural limitations.

7.3. Policy implications for Vietnam

From the above analysis, Vietnam must balance existing advantages of the traditional partnership with maintaining strategic space amid intensifying great power competition.

Firstly, regarding cooperation direction, Vietnam must continue positioning defence cooperation with Russia as a stable, sustainable, and optimized resource. Its core value lies in the continuity of defence capacity through technical support, maintaining the lifecycle of key systems, selective upgrading, and personnel training [6]. Therefore, Vietnam should prioritize cooperation functional effectiveness to strengthen self-help capacity and minimize the risk of technical disruptions from geopolitical instability.

Secondly, regarding cooperation scope, Vietnam should proactively control the pace, scope, and form of defence cooperation to avoid misinterpretation as a strategic adjustment. Cooperation should be designed to improve capacities without incurring unforeseen political - security obligations, thereby preserving strategic autonomy.

Thirdly, from a Defensive Realist perspective, in the long term, Vietnam should use the limitations of defence cooperation with Russia as a lever to diversify and enhance defence autonomy through internal balancing. The shift from a large-scale procurement to a selective maintenance-upgrade-transfer model reflects adjustments to resources amid volatile international context. In this sense, Vietnam should prioritize strengthening internal capacity to expand strategic autonomy. This allows Vietnam to maintain traditional partnerships with Russia while reducing technological dependence and increasing policy choices. As internal capacity is strengthened, cooperation with Russia will become more selective and equitable, driven by specific needs rather than structural constraints.

Finally, in Asia Pacific, Vietnam should embed defence cooperation with Russia within the overall strategy of multilateralization and diversification, consistent with its independent and self-reliant foreign policy [2] [17]. This supports Vietnam's "Bamboo Diplomacy" by enhancing transparency and predictability. Accordingly, Vietnam-Russia defence cooperation should remain a supporting element for Vietnam's development, rather than becoming a source of new strategic constraints.

8. Conclusion

Vietnam-Russia defence cooperation in the early 21st century is stable, shaped by the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership framework and major power strategic competition. Within this structure, it serves less as a driver for expanding military ties, than as a mechanism for maintaining the depth and continuity of bilateral relations.

Research findings indicate the dynamics of Vietnam-Russia defence cooperation. Vietnam can strengthen national defence and sustain a stable strategic dialogue channel, meanwhile, Russia maintains cost-effective strategic presence in Southeast Asia via a reliable partner like Vietnam. However, these dynamics operate within defined limits, stemming from the international environment, the stabilizing nature of the partnership framework, and self-restraint strategic choices of both countries. The prospects for Vietnam-Russia defence cooperation lie in maintaining effective cooperation within established structural limits. Accordingly, Vietnam should leverage traditional advantages within controlled limits, while simultaneously promoting diversification, defence and strategic autonomy.

The findings of this paper present a new perspective by perceiving “stability within structural limits” as a central driver of cooperation, rather than framing cooperation simply as a process of expansion or contraction as in previous studies. However, due to limitations in the scope of this study, the article primarily analyzes Vietnam-Russia defence cooperation at policy and structural levels, without delving into specific interactions between the actors. Further research could focus on evidence-based analysis and adaptive dynamics of the two countries in specific periods, especially in the context of a complex international environment.

REFERENCES

- [1] L. T. P. Loan and B. T. Hien, “The US-China Strategic Competition in Southeast Asia 2017-2024 from a Realist Perspective,” *Central Vietnamese Review of Social Sciences*, vol. 3, no. 88, pp. 22-30, 2025.
- [2] N. P. Trong, *Building and developing a comprehensive, modern, and distinctive Vietnamese foreign policy and diplomacy, imbued with the spirit of “Vietnamese bamboo.”* National Political Publishing House, 2023.
- [3] H. M. Huong and D. A. Tuan, “Seventy-five years of Vietnam-Russia relations: Traditional cooperation, friendship, and development,” *Communist Review*, 2025. [Online]. Available: https://www.tapchiconsan.org.vn/media-story/-/asset_publisher/V8hhp4dK31Gf/content/bay-muoi-lam-nam-quan-he-viet-nam-nga-hop-tac-truyen-thong-huu-nghi-phat-trien [Accessed February 28, 2026].
- [4] Government of Socialist Republic of Vietnam, “Joint Statement on the Major Orientations of the Vietnam-Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in the New Cooperation Phase,” *Government E-Newspaper*, November 5, 2025a. [Online]. Available: <https://baohinhphu.vn/tuyen-bo-chung-ve-nhung-dinh-huong-lon-cua-quan-he-doi-tac-chien-luoc-toan-dien-viet-nam-nga-trong-giai-doan-hop-tac-moi-102250511175645569.htm> [Accessed February 28, 2026].
- [5] Government of Socialist Republic of Vietnam, “Cultivating the traditional friendship between Vietnam and Russia in the new era, for peace, cooperation and development,” *Government E-Newspaper*, October 5, 2025. [Online]. Available: <https://baohinhphu.vn/vun-dap-quan-he-huu-nghi-truyen-thong-viet-nga-trong-ky-nguyen-moi-vi-hoa-binh-hop-tac-va-phat-trien-102250510195444529.htm> [Accessed February 28, 2026].
- [6] N. T. Hung, “Basic aspects of security cooperation between Vietnam and Russia in the 21st century: current situation and prospects”, *The Russian Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 9, no. 3, pp. 8-20, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.54631/VS.2025.93-688074>
- [7] N. V. Fedorov, “Russian-Vietnamese military-technical cooperation: Challenges and opportunities for Russia”, *Vestnik RUND. International Relations International Relations*, vol. 17, no. 3, pp. 496-507, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-0660-2017-17-3-496-507>
- [8] H. Ly, “Vietnam-Russia Partnership in the 21st Century”, *Communist Review*, August 03, 2009 [Online]. Available: <https://www.tapchiconsan.org.vn/nghien-cu/-/2018/205/quan-he-doi-tac-viet-nam---lien-bang-nga-trong-the-ky-xxi.aspx> [Accessed February 28, 2026].
- [9] Government of Socialist Republic of Vietnam, “Joint Statement on the Vision for the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Vietnam and the Russian Federation until 2030.” *Government E-Newspaper*, November 30, 2021. [Online]. Available: <https://baohinhphu.vn/tuyen-bo-chung-ve-tam-nhin-quan-he-doi-tac-chien-luoc-toan-dien-viet-nam-lb-nga-den-nam-2030-102304770.htm#:~:text=Tr%C3%AAAn%20c%C6%A1%20s%E1%BB%9F%20k%E1%BA%BF%20qu%E1%BA%A3%20h%E1%B%99i%20%C4%91%C3%A0m,h%E1%BB%99i%20ch%E1%B%A7%20ngh%C4%A9a%20Vi%E1%BB%87t%20Nam%20v%C3%A0%20Li%C3%AAAn> [Accessed February 27, 2026].
- [10] Ministry of Defence of Vietnam, “Continuing to coordinate and promote defence cooperation between Vietnam and the Russian Federation,” *Ministry of National Defence of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam Electronic Information Portal*, August 13, 2024. [Online]. Available: <https://www.mod.gov.vn/vn/chi-tiet/sa-ttsk/sa-tt-dngp/tiep-tuc-phoi-hop-thuc-day-quan-he-hop-tac-quoc-phong-viet-nam-lien-bang-nga> [Accessed February 27, 2026].
- [11] Embassy of Socialist Republic of Vietnam in Moscow, Russian Federation, “Strengthening Vietnam-Russia defence cooperation in a long-term, practical, and reliable manner”. *vnembassy-moscow.mofa.gov.vn*, [Online]. Available: <https://vnembassy-moscow.mofa.gov.vn/vi-vn/News/EmbassyNews/Trang/T%C4%83ng-c%C6%B0%E1%BB%9Dng-h%E1%BB%A3p-t%C3%A1c-qu%E1%BB%91c-ph%C3%B2ng-Vi%E1%BB%87t-Nam---Li%C3%AAAn-bang-Nga-theo-h%C6%B0%E1%BB%9Bng-l%C3%A2u-d%C3%A0i-thi%E1%BA%BF-i-th%E1%BB%B1c-v%C3%A0-tin-c%E1%BA%ADy.aspx> [Accessed February 28, 2026].
- [12] Ministry of Defence of Vietnam, *Vietnam's National Defence 2019 (Vietnam Defence White Paper 2019)*. National Political Publishing House, 2019.
- [13] D. Thao, “North Korea claims that sending troops to Russia is a justified action.” *Voice of Vietnam*, October 5, 2025. [Online]. Available: <https://vov.vn/the-gioi/trieu-tien-tuyen-bo-viec-gui-quan-toi-nga-la-hanh-dong-chinh-dang-post1198405.vov> [Accessed February 28, 2026].
- [14] M. Sappupo “Belarus hosts nuclear-capable Russian missiles despite talk of US thaw.” *Atlantic Council*, January 11, 2026. [Online]. Available: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/belarus-hosts-nuclear-capable-russian-missiles-despite-talk-of-us-thaw/> [Accessed February 28, 2026].
- [15] V. Serbin, “Vietnam’s position on Russia’s special military operation”, *The Russian Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 7, no. 3, pp. 5-17, 2023. 10.54631/VS.2023.73-508782
- [16] S. G. Luzyanin, “Russia - Vietnam - China” Triangle: Current Challenges, Transformations and Asymmetries”, *Russian Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, vol. 6, no. 4, pp. 4-12, 2022. 10.54631/VS.2022.64-117510
- [17] Government of Socialist Republic of Vietnam, “8th Vietnam-Russia Defence Strategic Dialogue. Government E-Newspaper,” *baohinhphu.vn*, September 03, 2025b. [Online]. Available: <https://baohinhphu.vn/vun-dap-quan-he-huu-nghi-truyen-thong-viet-nga-trong-ky-nguyen-moi-vi-hoa-binh-hop-tac-va-phat-trien-102250510195444529.htm> [Accessed February 28, 2026].