

Some Highlights in Vietnam - Japan Relationship under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe

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Abstract: Shinzo Abe held the position of the prime minister of Japan from late 2012 to August 2020, the longest premiership in the Japanese history. During this period, the Vietnam-Japan relationship was upgraded to an extensive strategic partnership for peace and prosperity in Asia, expanding the cooperation and garnering remarkable achievements. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's administration has developed a new cooperation strategy with ASEAN, including Vietnam, focusing on political and security issues. Important decisions in tourism cooperation and human resource exchange were made and the best results ever were achieved. The article analyses the imprints of the late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's administration on the Vietnam-Japan relationship.

Keywords: Vietnam, Japan, strategic partnership, politics, security.

Subject classification: Politics

1. Introduction

The late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was twice prime minister of Japan. The first time was in 2006, when he was 52 years old and the youngest prime minister of post-war Japan. But less than a year later, he resigned due to health reasons. The second time was at the end of 2012, when this politician led the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) to an overwhelming victory in the House of Representatives elections. Immediately after returning to power for the second time, Shinzo Abe chose Vietnam as the destination on his first overseas trip as prime minister in January 2013. In 2017, Shinzo Abe twice visited Vietnam in this capacity. In August 2020, Shinzo Abe announced his resignation as prime minister due to health reasons. During his second long period as prime minister, Shinzo Abe made a great contribution to the development of the Vietnam-Japan relationship for the benefit of the two peoples, for peace, prosperity, cooperation, and development in the region and the world.

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2. Elevating relationship to an extensive strategic partnership

Vietnam and Japan officially established diplomatic relations in 1973, which is an important milestone opening a new period in the relationship between the two countries. The period of 1973-1978 was the beginning period with quite good progress such as the establishment of embassies in each country, Japan's loans and grants to Vietnam, and several other steps. But the warm relations between the two countries of only five years and then moved into a cold period lasting 12 years (1979-1991) related to the Cambodian issue. Relations between the two countries during this period fell to the lowest level after Japan announced that it decided to cut aid to Vietnam. It was not until 1992, when the Cambodia issue was resolved, that relations between the two countries were restored. This was also the time to open a new phase of the Vietnam-Japan relations.

Political and diplomatic relations between Vietnam and Japan since 1992 have been promoted in the most active and fastest way in the history of the two countries' relations. Mutual visits between the heads of state of the two countries have taken place regularly and continuously. Each visit brought important cooperation results between the two countries both politically and economically. The important milestones in raising the political-diplomatic relations between the two countries since 1992 can be mentioned as follows (Table 1).

Determining the role and importance of Vietnam, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's administration elevated the two countries' relations to a new stage of development, creating a major turning point of profound strategic significance, in line with fundamental long-term interests, at the same time meeting the earnest common aspirations of the people of the two countries and actively contributing to maintaining peace, stability, cooperation, and development in the region and the world.

Shinzo Abe's actions were instrumental in strengthening and elevating the political trust between the leaders and people of the two countries. It was during Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's rule that Emperor Akihito and the Empress made their first historic visit to Vietnam in March 2017. The Emperor is the symbol of Japan, when he and the Empress visited Vietnam; it meant that Vietnam was an important partner for Japan. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe attaches great importance to Vietnam's role and position in the region and in the world when he invited Prime Minister Nguyễn Xuân Phúc to attend the expanded G7 Summit (May 2016) and the G20 Summit (June 2019), as well as actively supported Vietnam's role as ASEAN Chair 2020 and a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for the 2020-2021 term. Japan supports Vietnam's stance on regional issues, including the East Sea (also known as the South China Sea), upholding respect for international law, the 1982 Convention on the Law of the Sea, prohibiting the threat of force or the use of force and actively supporting Vietnam's Maritime Strategy (Thái An, 2022).

Table 1: Political-diplomatic Relations between Vietnam and Japan since 1992

Year	Cooperations
2002	Senior leaders of the two countries agreed to build the Vietnam-Japan relations under the motto “Reliable, long-term stable partnership”.
2004	The two countries signed the joint declaration “Reaching to new heights of sustainable partnership”.
2006	The two countries agreed to build relations “Towards a strategic partnership for peace and prosperity in Asia”. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made his first visit to Vietnam, when he attended the APEC Summit in Hanoi.
2007	The two sides signed the joint statements “Deepening Vietnam-Japan relations” and “Cooperation programme towards strategic partnership”.
2009	The two sides issued a joint statement on building a “Strategic partnership for peace and prosperity in Asia”.
2013	Selected as “The year of the Vietnam-Japan friendship” and considered a pivotal year for elevating the strategic partnership between the two countries in the new period. In this year, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe chose Vietnam for his first trip since returning to power for the second time at the end of 2012.
2014	On the occasion of President Trương Tấn Sang’s state visit to Japan, the leaders of the two countries issued a joint statement on elevating the Vietnam-Japan relationship into an extensive strategic partnership for peace and prosperity in Asia.

Source: Author.

3. Building security cooperation strategy

The regional security environment has undergone complex changes since 2010 when China overtook Japan as the world’s second economic power. With a strong economic rise, China has taken tough actions on the East China Sea and the East Sea, putting pressure on Japan and other countries in the region. In fact, China’s approach is “Two steps forward, one step backwards” (China aims to gain benefits by claiming three things, then accepting two bargains from its neighbors/competitors, however finally it is China who gains one, and in most case, the important one). China, for its so-called core interests, determines its own principles but at the same time abandons the policy of “hiding oneself and waiting for its time”, rising more confidently and firmly to compete with the US to change the regional and world order.

The East Sea plays an important role in the security of Southeast Asia and Asia-Pacific, especially when it comes to the Spratly and Paracel Islands. These can be dual-use facilities, serving long-distance maritime activities such as controlling maritime routes in the East Sea

and military purposes such as radar stations, communication stations, and stopover and refueling stations. Western strategists believe that the country that controls the Spratly and Paracel archipelagos will control and dominate the entire East Sea (Đỗ Lê Chi, 2020, p.66).

Challenging China could disrupt the regional order and affect access to maritime trade routes. Japan is a trading island nation, dependent on energy, food, and other commodities. In the long term, Japan is concerned that China controls the East Sea and may then encroach on the Indian Ocean region, threatening the shipping lanes with African and Middle Eastern countries, the region that supplies 90% of the oil demand for this country.

Faced with fluctuations in the regional security environment, in 2013, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's cabinet formulated the National Security Strategy, identifying Japan as a maritime country, working closely with other countries, not using force, and playing a leading role in maintaining and developing an "open and stable sea" supported by rules-based law supremacy ensuring security and peaceful settlement of conflicts in accordance with international law and the freedom of aviation and navigation. A free and open maritime order based on the rule of law is the foundation of the stability and prosperity of the international community, and the government of Japan is promoting a "free and open Indo-Pacific region" which is the common international area that brings stability and prosperity to all nations (Prime Minister's Office of Japan, 2018).

An important point in the 2013 strategy of the Japanese government is to introduce "Positive Pacifism". It is active pacifism based on international cooperation, instead of the passive pacifism that has existed so far. It means that Japan will participate and actively contribute to world peace, not just declare not to do bad things. The cross-cutting goal of Japan's foreign policy is to protect national security and enhance Japan's position and role in the world. In particular, considering peace, stability, cooperation, and development in the Asia-Pacific region as factors to ensure stability in terms of political security and promote the economic recovery of Japan.

Previously, Japan's role for ASEAN countries and Vietnam was mainly limited to providing aid to support the socio-economic development of countries in the region. Into the 21st century, the Japan-ASEAN partnership increasingly emphasised political and security aspects in addition to cooperation in the socio-economic field. This trend was more evident in Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's doctrine for Southeast Asia when he returned to power for the second time. This marks the adjustment of Japan's foreign policy in the post-World War II era, which has focused solely on economic issues and avoided close security ties with Southeast Asian countries. In 2013, right after returning as prime minister for the second time, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited all 10 ASEAN countries, and the first country he visited was Vietnam. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe proposed five basic principles of the relationship between Japan and ASEAN. In which, the two leading principles clearly define that, together with ASEAN countries, Japan will build and expand universal values, such as basic human rights, democracy, and freedom to protect the free and open sea, ensure the rule of law without force, and welcome the US focus on Asia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2013).

Compared with the principles guiding relations with ASEAN of the previous prime ministers, there was a big change, emphasising security issues, especially security issues at sea. At the same time, Japan was indirectly involved by providing material support to foreign military forces. Specifically, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's cabinet approved the new Development Cooperation Charter that identified the main directions of foreign aid in 2015. Under the charter, for the first time, Japan could fund the armed forces of other countries, provided that the aid was used for non-military purposes. This was the first major revision of Japan's foreign aid policy after eleven and a half years. The new charter openly states that Japan will use development aid as a contribution to the international community in accordance with its national interest.

The new charter contains the principle that aid cannot be used for military purposes, but it is worth noting that the government may consider supporting foreign military forces under certain conditions. Some argue that this is quite ambiguous when it comes to how to determine that such aid is not used for military purposes. The charter gives priority to Asian countries due to their importance to Japan's security and economic development, especially in Southeast Asia (Nguyễn Quang Thuán & Mazyrin V.M., 2016, p.358).

4. Developing cooperation mechanisms

In the context of a significant change in the strategic environment in the Asia-Pacific region, no country can maintain peace and stability and effectively solve the emerging challenges by itself. Therefore, relevant countries increasingly attach importance to coordination and cooperation with partners, especially Japan and the ASEAN.

In 2010, ASEAN actively established the institution of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+), a defence cooperation mechanism between 18 members including all 10 ASEAN countries and eight partners, namely China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia, New Zealand, Russia, and the US. Japan placed special emphasis on the East Asia Summit (EAS) established in 2005 which was seen as a venue for dialogues on political and security issues strategically important to the region. In addition, through practical cooperation within the framework of ADMM+ or the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the parties promoted mutual trust building. Since 2012, the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) at the proposal of Japan has been held to discuss maritime cooperation among EAS participating countries, cooperation in the prevention of transnational crime and terrorism, as well as cooperation in the field of disaster relief and humanitarian assistance (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2020).

Japan took the initiative to establish an annual mechanism for the Japan-ASEAN Deputy Defence Ministerial Forum in 2009 and then the ASEAN-Japan Defence Ministers Meeting in 2014. With such annual mechanisms, ASEAN has become one of Japan's main partners in security after the US, South Korea, Australia, and India (The World & Vietnam Report, 2016).

In order to promote Japan-ASEAN defence cooperation in a more comprehensive way, at the second ASEAN-Japan Defence Ministers' Meeting held in Laos in November 2016, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's administration announced the "Vientiane Vision" initiative. Accordingly, the two sides pledged to promote defence cooperation with ASEAN through existing mechanisms such as ADMM+ and ARF, as well as in other areas such as respecting international law, enhancing maritime security, capacity building, equipment and technology transfer, and capacity building training. The Vientiane Vision can be considered the first official document orienting Japan-ASEAN defence cooperation in a comprehensive and transparent manner.

Continuing this trend of cooperation, in 2019, Japan specifically proposed the Vientiane Vision 2.0, an updated version of the Japan-ASEAN defence cooperation guideline. Vientiane Vision 2.0 sets out three priority areas: the rule of law, enhancing maritime security, and proposing cooperation to respond to disasters and non-traditional threats.

Japan joins these mechanisms, pushing confidence-building to the stage of preventive diplomacy in dealing with emerging security issues. Vietnam coordinates and supports Japan in multilateral forums, especially the ARF and the ADMM+. Vietnam supports activities within the framework of the Vientiane Vision initiative proposed by Japan to strengthen defence cooperation between ASEAN and Japan; actively participating in cooperation mechanisms, contributing to maintaining peace, stability, and development in the region and the world.

Besides multilateralism, at the bilateral level, the dialogue mechanisms between the two countries operate effectively such as the Vietnam-Japan Cooperation Committee, the Dialogue on Strategic Partnership on Diplomacy, the Security and Defence at Deputy Ministerial Level, the Vietnam-Japan defence policy dialogue at the Deputy Ministerial Level, and the Deputy Ministerial Security Dialogue. The two countries signed the MoU on Bilateral Defence Cooperation and Exchange in October 2011 and the Joint Vision Statement on Defence Cooperation Looking Forward to the Next Decade in April 2018. Following that orientation, the defence leaders of the two countries regularly meet to exchange views on the regional and international security environment. The two sides maintain trust-building activities through research and training exchanges between defence academies. Since 2002, the National Defense Academy of Japan has chaired the annual meeting of the directors of the National Defense Academy of the ARF member countries and sponsored many training courses for Vietnamese soldiers (Nishihara Masashi, 2003, pp.154-167).

5. Strengthening Vietnam's maritime law enforcement capacity

Vietnam and other countries are concerned about unilateral actions to declare sovereign areas without any legal basis or the militarisation of islands and rocks in the Spratlys (belonging to Vietnam), bringing military equipment to prevent peaceful labour activities

at sea. These acts clearly go beyond the common rules and rules of the region and the world that countries have committed to, especially in violation of international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea 1982 (Viết Tuân, 2020).

In Vietnam-Japan relations, security cooperation has always been a reconfirmed issue in high-level meetings between the two countries. The two sides agreed to strengthen cooperation in security at sea, as well as search and rescue and counter-piracy; and to strengthen and improve the effectiveness of the dialogue. In addition to continuing to promote cooperation between the services of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces and the Vietnamese People's Army, the two sides asserted that they would continue to strengthen cooperation in maritime safety to meet the needs of capacity building for Vietnam's maritime law enforcement agencies (VTV4, 2016).

Vietnam and Japan continue to strengthen cooperation in maritime safety and security such as rescue, disaster relief, and anti-piracy through information exchange between coast guard agencies through the joint statement of 2017 on deepening extensive strategic partnerships, and cooperation within the framework of the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP). Japan supports Vietnam to improve the capacity of law enforcement forces at sea, including training for human resource development (National Defence Journal, 2017). Vietnam receives and appreciates Japan's support in enhancing the capacity of its maritime law enforcement force, including the provision of used ships, new patrol boats, and capacity-building support for national defence and welcomes ships of the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force and patrol ships of its Maritime Security Bureau to visit Vietnam in accordance with Vietnamese law.

The relationship between Vietnam and Japan has been built and developed in the fields of diplomacy and economic investment and is being expanded to the field of security and defence. This is partly reflected in Japan's goodwill to help Vietnam improve its maritime law enforcement capacity. In 2015, Japan completed the transfer of six used ships to the Vietnamese navy and, on the visit of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to Vietnam in early 2017, Japan decided to provide Vietnam with six new patrol boats, helping to improve the capacity of law enforcement forces at sea. Based on the cooperation in defence and security, visits to Vietnam by the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force and joint exercises in recent years are outstanding activities between the two countries.

In April 2015, two training ships of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force with 500 crew members docked at Đà Nẵng port. In April 2016, the frigate JS Ariake-109 and the corvette JS Setogiri-156 and 500 crew members docked at Cam Ranh international port, Khánh Hòa province (Government News, 2016). On 16 June 2017, the Japan Coast Guard and the Vietnamese Coast Guard conducted the first joint exercise to deal with illegal fishing in the East Sea. The exercise was held off the coast of Đà Nẵng. Participating in the exercise were the Japanese patrol boat Echigo and a patrol boat that Japan had previously given to the Vietnamese side. The two navies cooperated to deal with all threats to ensure

open, stable, and free seas, contributing to the peace and prosperity of the region (biendong.net, 2018). In 2018, for the first time in history, a Vietnamese frigate visited Japan (Kunio Umeda, 2020). In 2019, the training fleet consisting of ships JS Setoyuki and JS Shimayuki of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force docked at Tiên Sa port, Đà Nẵng (Nguyễn Sơn, 2019). These visits are an opportunity for the two sides to exchange experiences on anti-piracy and joint training in search and rescue at sea, improve their professional skills in the field of maritime security and perform security tasks at sea.

6. Promoting tourism cooperation and exchange of human resources

6.1. Number of tourists for two-way exchanges has increased sharply

Before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Japan was attracting tourists from many countries around the world, including Vietnam. According to statistics from the Japan National Tourism Organisation (JNTO), in 2015, foreign visitors to Japan increased by 47.1% compared to 2014 to 19,737,409 people. This is a result of the loosening of visa conditions, the falling Japanese yen, and activities that attract tourists to Japan. The number of Vietnamese tourists increased by 49.2%, only after Chinese tourists whose number increased by 107.3%, and tourists from Hong Kong (up 64.6%). As of 2014, the only countries with more tourists than Japan were France, the US, Spain, China, and Italy (Reuters, 2016).

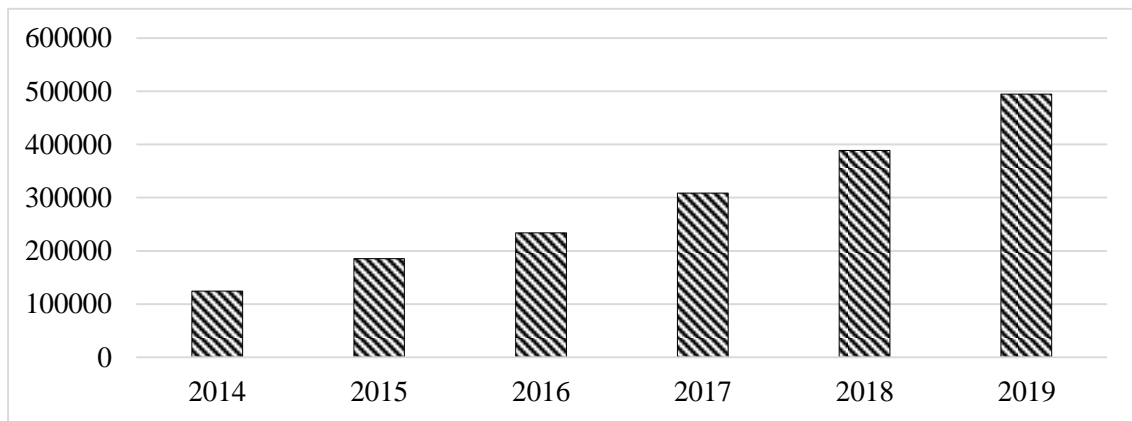
Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government set a target by 2020 when the Tokyo Olympics would take place, to increase the number of tourists to 20 million people. But as in 2015, the number of foreign visitors to Japan surpassed the previous record of 19,730,000 people, Japan decided it was necessary to set out a policy on tourism prospects towards a new target for the number of tourists to Japan (Reuters, 2016).

In 2016, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said that tourism was the pillar of the growth strategy, the engine for GDP to reach JPY 600 trillion. On that basis, towards the Tokyo Olympics in 2020 and the following years, Japan was striving to set a new goal, turning tourism into a spearhead industry. The targets were raised even higher: 40 million tourists for 2020 and 60 million visitors for 2030. At that time, before the outbreak of the pandemic, these were ambitious but completely doable numbers.

In the opposite direction, the number of Japanese tourists to Vietnam continuously increased, ranking third in the international tourist markets to Vietnam after China and South Korea. According to statistics, in 2018, Vietnam welcomed 826,674 Japanese visitors, an increase of 3.6% compared to 2017. In 2019, Japanese visitors to Vietnam increased by 12.9%. Some of Vietnam's tourist attractions that attract Japanese tourists are Hồ Chí Minh City, Hanoi, Quảng Ninh, Ninh Bình, the cluster of Huế, Đà Nẵng and Hội An, Nha Trang, and the Mekong Delta, among others. The growth rate of Japanese visitors to Vietnam is not high but stable. In some years, the number of Japanese outbound visitors

decreased sharply such as in 2013, 2014, and 2015. In other years, the number of Japanese visitors to Vietnam still grew at an average rate of about 8% per year (Thanh Giang, 2019).

Figure 1: Number of Vietnamese Tourists to Japan (2014-2019)



Source: Japan National Tourism Organisation (日本政府観光局, JNTO).

According to statistics of the Japan National Tourism Organisation and the Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, in the past 10 years, Japanese visitors to Vietnam increased continuously, with an average growth of 8-10%. The total number of two-way exchange visitors between Japan and Vietnam in 2019 reached 1,447,000 arrivals (up 18.9% compared to that of 2018), and Vietnamese visitors to Japan reached 495,000 arrivals (up 27.3%). Japanese visitors to Vietnam reached about 952,000 arrivals (up 15.2%) (Luu Huong, 2020). This is the highest increase in many years thanks to the implementation of cooperation activities, promotion of culture and tourism, and both governments' efforts in creating favourable conditions for the exchange of visitors and mutual support in tourism promotion programmes.

6.2. Receiving Vietnamese workers

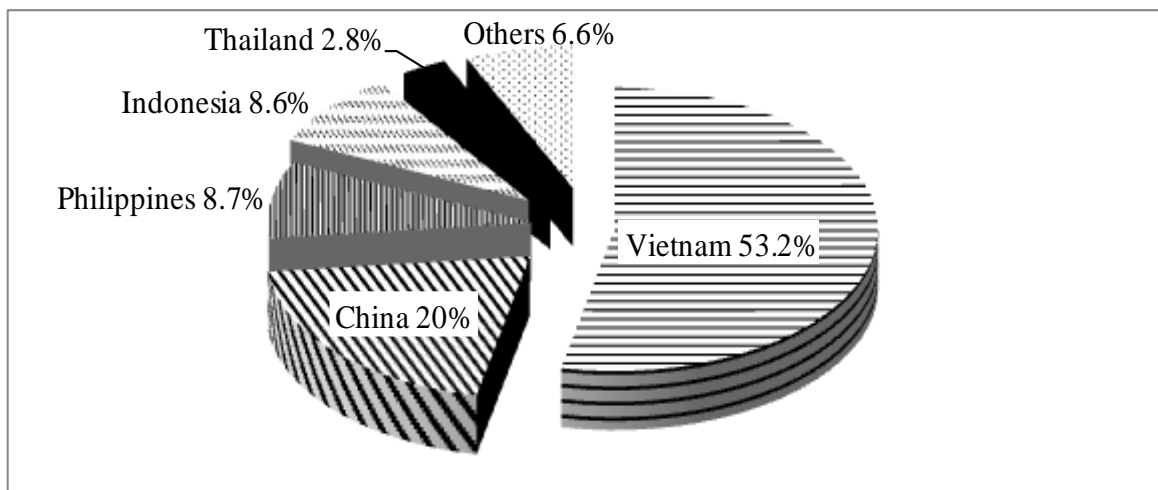
Facing the problem of population decline, especially in rural areas, on 5 June 2018, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced a plan to attract 500,000 foreign workers by 2025 to solve the permanent shortage of labour in agriculture, construction, and care for the elderly. The success of the economic policy called Abenomics can be said to be highly dependent on immigration policy. To achieve the above goal, Shinzo Abe has made two major adjustments in regulations on foreign workers. *Firstly*, it is the addition of new work visas for five fields that took effect from April 2019. *Secondly*, it is possible to extend the visa of foreign workers for two more years, after the end of the 3-year working period. Thus, a

foreign worker in Japan can extend the time up to five years. The latest labour attraction plan that Shinzo Abe announced is a significant change in the way Japan accepts foreign workers.

Data from the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare on the recruitment of foreign workers shows that, by the end of October 2019, the number of Vietnamese workers in Japan was 401,326 people, the second highest number after China, and the growth rate was 26.8% over the same period last year, the highest increase in the group of foreign workers. The number of Vietnamese workers in Japan has increased nearly 20 times between 2012 (with 26,828 people) and 2019 (Deha Magazine, 2020).

By nationality, Vietnamese workers accounted for 24.2% of the total number of foreign workers, with 401,326 people, just behind Chinese with 418,327 (25.2% of the total); followed by the Philippines: 179,685 (10.8%), Brazil: 135,455 (8.2%) and Nepal: 91,770 (5.5%). In terms of labour growth rate, Vietnam leads with an increase of 26.7%, surpassing Indonesia with an increase of 23.4% and Nepal with an increase of 12.5% (Deha Magazine, 2020). Concerning on-the-job trainees in Japan, Vietnam accounted for the highest percentage with 53.2% of the total, followed by China, the Philippines and Indonesia (Figure 2).

Figure 2: On-the-job Trainees by Nationality in 2019



Source: Ministry of Justice of Japan.

During his term, the policy of flexibility and openness by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe increased the reception of foreign workers, including Vietnamese workers. Since the policies of Shinzo Abe's administration, tens of thousands of Vietnamese people have had the opportunity to work in Japan, thousands of families have been lifted out of poverty, and many localities have had more resources for development.

7. Conclusion

During the period of the late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe from late 2012 to August 2020, Vietnam-Japan relations were upgraded to an extensive strategic partnership for peace and prosperity in Asia. Amid a volatile regional environment, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's administration launched a new policy vis-a-vis ASEAN, including Vietnam, attaching more importance to political and security cooperation. This is a fundamental adjustment of Japan's foreign policy since the post-World War II period, which once focused only on economic issues and avoided close security ties with Southeast Asian countries.

Thereby, Japan strengthens security cooperation with Vietnam through Official Development Assistance (ODA) and strengthens maritime law enforcement capacity. Furthermore, the government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has made important decisions such as promoting the attraction of foreign tourists, identifying tourism as a key economic sector, and expanding the reception of foreign workers, with Vietnam as an important market. Therefore, the two countries have achieved unprecedented results in tourism cooperation and human resource exchange. The achievements of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's leadership will be the foundation for the two countries' relations towards the 50th anniversary of Vietnam-Japan relations (1973-2023) and beyond.

Note: Translator: Lương Quang Luyện. Language editor: Etienne Mahler.

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