

# Russia's viewpoint on the East Sea and some recommendations for Vietnam

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**Abstract:** *The East Sea, located on the arterial sea route connecting the Indo-Pacific Ocean, has a special geo-strategic position. Currently, territorial disputes in the East Sea are becoming a serious security challenge in Southeast Asia, dividing ASEAN countries and attracting many other countries including Russia to participate. Apart from the two main players, the US and China, the emergence of Russia has become significant on the political chessboard related to the East Sea as it has cooperative relations with both China and Vietnam - the two countries involved in the East Sea conflicts. The article clarifies Russia's views on disputes in the East Sea, and provides some suggestions for Vietnam.*

**Keyword:** The East Sea, Russia's point of view, Russian Federation, China, Vietnam

## Introduction

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, territorial and maritime conflicts in the East Sea have become prominent and directly impacted international relations. China, since its territorial sea declaration in 1958, has continuously strived to gain maximum control over the waters of the East Sea, as well as all the islands, reefs, and shoals in the area. In the 1990s, when gradually became aware of the potential oil resources of the East Sea, the issue of historic rights in the sea began to appear in China's political discourses. In many respects, this goes against international

law of the sea, especially the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which China signed in 1996. China's interests in this area include four main factors: firstly, the perception of the historical legal basis for the East Sea combined with maintaining national credibility; secondly, to protect China's coastal cities, in line with President Xi Jinping's new national defense strategy - "moving from coastal defense to blue-water offshore defense"; thirdly, to perform the strategic "Belt and Road Initiative"; finally, China desires access to marine resources, especially fish stocks and hydrocarbon

deposits (because China's coastal resources are almost exhausted, China needs to go offshore). Gaining control of the East Sea will help China achieve its goals (Дикарев, Лукин, 2021).

Currently, the disputes taking place around the East Sea between ASEAN countries and China become more and more complicated because of the participation of external powers, while the relevant parties could not come to a consensus. Therefore, the return of the Russian Federation to the East Sea will have a certain impact on the general situation in the region. Russia's attitude towards the East Sea issues can also change the balance of political power, especially after Russia was sanctioned by the US and the NATO member countries and became a strategic partner of China.

### **1. Russia's foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific region and the East Sea**

The Asia-Pacific region is considered the convergence of economic, geopolitical, military-strategic, demographic, and geocivilized interests of the world's leading countries. As a Eurasian country, Russia has long-standing economic, political, and military interests in this region. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov once emphasized that Russia's national interests in the Asia-Pacific region are natural and legal. Expanding cooperation with partners in the region will help Russia strengthen its interests (Сергей Лавров, 2015). The main objective of Russia's strategy is to develop multilateral trade and economic relations, therefore, Russia establishes effective political relations with all major countries in the Asia-Pacific region. The announcement of Russia's strategic pivot to this zone aims to: 1- Exploiting the potential of fast-growing economies in Asia

to attract investment for the development of Russia's Siberia and the Far East; 2- Approaching the large energy resource market in Asia as the world's largest energy exporter; 3- Expanding large market for modern weapons and equipment in Asia due to huge demand from countries in this region (The ISN Security Watch, 2017).

Although Russia has always worked to strengthen its role as the main mediator in disputes, as stated in the Foreign Policy approved by the President of the Russian Federation on 12 February 2013, it notes in particular that in the context of global instability and the growing interdependence of states, Russia will always remain a neutral country, resisting external shocks based on compliance with legal principles, regardless of its relationship with Europe-Atlantic, Asia-Europe, or with Asia-Pacific. Russia, therefore, has always "avoided" all conflicts, especially the dispute between China and Japan over the Senkaku (Diaoyu) archipelago and the one over islands in the East Sea. To affirm its position as an influential power, Russia also launched joint initiatives in the field of ensuring regional security. As Russian expert, G.M. Lokshin affirmed: "Russia is not interested in other issues, only ensuring stability, peace, and security, freedom of navigation on sea routes" (Локшин, 2015: 208).

Russia's active integration into the Asia-Pacific region has not only practical geopolitical implications but also geopolitical benefits. With a dynamically developing economic and political system, the Asia-Pacific region will help Russia realize strategic tasks as Russia is gradually implementing its "Look East" policy. Russia's return to this region is rapid and has obtained many successes, not only in

the military field, but Russia is gradually infiltrating the economy and resources in the region and the East Sea (Мосяков, 2018). However, the realization of the goals set by Russia is in danger of being hindered by conflicts in the Asia-Pacific region, especially sovereignty disputes in the East Sea area (Дмитрий Стрельцов, 2017). Regarding the East Sea issue, Russia always has its stance, guided by Russia's national interests, emphasizing that it will not participate in and will not become a mediator. Despite this, Russia opposes the intervention of any third party and believes that all disputes should be resolved directly between the parties to the conflict. However, N.V. Fedorov supposes that Russia adheres to a neutral stance in conflicts in the East Sea, at the same time Russia is indirectly involved when it develops its partnership with the claimants, including China and Vietnam (Федоров, 2016).

This can also be explained by the reason that a significant part of Russia's trade passes through the East Sea, so Russia is always interested in ensuring stability, peace - security, freedom of navigation, and communications in these waters. Russia and China agree in opposing outside interference when settling disputes in the East Sea. Russian scholars A. Dikarev and A. Lukin explain that Russia's support of China's position is entirely politically understandable (Russia and China generally agree on most important international issues) and is economically consolidated (Russia's trade with China is five times higher than Russia's trade with ASEAN countries) (Дикарев, Лукин, 2021: 12-13). Keeping a neutral attitude on the conflicts in the East Sea is something that Russia has repeatedly stated officially. On August 25,

2021, the spokesman of the Russian Foreign Ministry M.V. Zakharova affirmed, on issues related to the East Sea, that Russia's position is consistent and unchanged. Russia is not involved in the disputes, nor does it take sides. Consultations and negotiations should be conducted by the parties concerned, and without interference by forces outside the region (МИД России, 2021). On October 13, 2021, in his speech at Russian Energy Week, Russian President Vladimir Putin once again emphasized: "On the issue of the East Sea, Russia's position is to create opportunities for all countries. countries in the region settle all disputes that arise without the intervention of external powers. The negotiation process must be based on the basic rules of international law" (Cited: Tacc, 2021).

For Russia, the key to resolving conflicts in the Asia-Pacific region is to build a new security architecture in the region based on common principles and norms of international law. Russia believes regional dialogue frameworks such as APEC, the ARF Regional Forum, and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting will create effective leverage to weaken or even resolve territorial disputes. At the same time, the rules and regulations set forth by multilateral regional security structures are possible to restrain the expansionist ambitions of external forces, first of all, the United States (Дмитрий Стрельцов, 2017). According to Igor Mishin, the disputes in the East Sea will not be resolved shortly, due to the stalemate in negotiations between China and ASEAN on a Code of Conduct in the East Sea. Furthermore, there are more and more foreign powers participate in the "militarization" of the region. This puts the disputes at risk of

developing into a full-blown conflict and will affect Russia's national interests (Игорь Мишин, 2020).

## **2. Russia - Vietnam, and Russia - China relation in the context of the East Sea disputes**

### ***2.1. The East Sea issue in Russia - Vietnam relation***

Vietnam is Russia's only strategic partner in Southeast Asia and one of Russia's closest allies in the East. Through promoting cooperation with Vietnam in fields such as military, technology, energy, and a joint venture in oil production, etc., Russia has created a balance in the East Sea in terms of forces as well as interests. Over the years, the Russian Federation and Vietnam have built an extensive system of political contacts and dialogues, at all different levels, creating a solid basis for political cooperation.

Facing "hot" issues in the East Sea, Moscow and Hanoi share the same view that relevant parties need to settle disputes peacefully. However, Russia does not support Vietnam's argument when it comes to the interests of a third party and considers it a part of the disputes in the East Sea (Карлейль А. Тайер, 2016). Another factor that governs the Russia-Vietnam relationship and is directly related to the conflict in the East Sea is energy. Abundant hydrocarbon reserves on the continental shelf of the East Sea are one of the main reasons for the tensions in the area. Russia has carried out many joint projects for energy with Vietnam in disputed areas in the East Sea, despite China's stance (Федоров, 2016).

China opposes the Russia-Vietnam cooperation relationship, saying it "goes beyond economic interests and is mainly

related to politics and security". China determines this Russia's main goal when the country develops a strategic partnership with Vietnam. China argues that the importance of the East Sea is not only its mineral resources but also its strategic location, helping Russia orient its vision when it "pivots to the East" and Vietnam will certainly be the springboard. The fact that Russia is behind Vietnam is no different from the US, which desires to occupy the East Sea... (Мосяков, 2018: 28).

Discussing the Russia-Vietnam cooperation relationship in the current context of conflicts in the East Sea, D.V. Mosyakov affirmed that the crisis in Russia-Vietnam relations has passed the lowest point. This is large because Russia has realized its important political mission in the East, trying to befriend both China and Vietnam, siding with justice and peace in the conflicts in the East Sea. This is called a "win-win" policy. However, despite the optimistic signs about the actual situation and prospects of Russia-Vietnam relations, the search for positive solutions to the conflicts in the East Sea has not significantly changed. Russia's attitude to the conflict is becoming a more complex and difficult task than before. Because it is not because the Vietnam-China conflict is too big, but the fierce competition between the US and China to gain domination of the Asia-Pacific region, and gradually turn this confrontation into a global conflict (Мосяков, 2018: 33-34).

E. Vishnik notes that Vietnam's importance to Russia is determined by the fact that Russia longings to strengthen the "Asian" element and has more interaction with countries in the region when deploying its foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific region. Cooperation with Vietnam is not

to confront China, but to expand Russia-Vietnam bilateral relations. In 2010, with the support of Vietnam, Russia joined the East Asia Summit - an important economic organization in the region and gained more access to ASEAN member countries. At the same time, the Russia-Vietnam partnership also creates opportunities for Vietnam to strengthen in terms of its military and economy, as well as to seek diplomatic settlement of disputes in the East Sea (Мосяков, 2018: 24-25).

## ***2.2. The East Sea issue in Russia-China relation***

Both Russia and China share the same view that they do not want “forces outside the region” to interfere in the East Sea issues. For A.P. Tsvetov, China opposes internationalization because it wants to be the strongest party in the dispute, and Russia opposes such interference because it is in line with the common spirit of Russia's current foreign policy. But this goes against the stance of Southeast Asian countries, including Vietnam, which considers the US as a counterweight to China. Mr. A.P. Tsvetov said that Russia continues to follow neutrality but bears its interests in Southeast Asia. Russia's presence can positively influence China in regional security affairs. Positioning Russia as a “third force” can also positively affect relations with Vietnam, strengthen Vietnam's position and even bring stability to the East Sea region. V.M. Kashin also affirmed that Russia has a “completely reasonable viewpoint on the disputes in the East Sea” (See: Федоров Н. В, 2016: 27-36).

Conflicts in the East Sea are one of the main reasons leading to the formation of the Indo-Pacific strategy of the US to control the influence of Russia and China in the

region. This partly explains the closeness between Russia and China. Moreover, according to A. Dikarev and A. Lukin, the confrontational policy of the US and its allies in relations with Russia has pushed Moscow closer to Beijing, and Russia's stance on the East Sea is also in line with China's point of view (Дикарев, Лукин, 2021: 7). However, this does not hinder Russia's neutral stance on the East Sea issue and its active cooperative relationship with Southeast Asian countries that have territorial disputes with China.

Carlyle A. Thayer argued that Russia - China relation is built on the common goal of opposing the US. The sanctions imposed by the US and EU countries on Russia have caused great damage to the Russian economy, so Russia needs the “output” for energy sources, especially gas. China is a large and potential market for Russia. However, Russia and China do not always have the same interests. Russia is still rather hesitant about the “Belt and Road” project, on the other hand, Russia wants to develop relations with China, but without affecting the traditional relationship with Vietnam. This tension is clearly shown in Russia's position on the East Sea issue (Карлейль А. Тайер, 2016). Military cooperation between Russia and China has also progressed to the point where President Vladimir Putin once called China a “natural partner and ally” of Russia (The ISN Security Watch, 2017). At the most recent event, on October 13, 2021, at Russian Energy Week, President Vladimir Putin once again affirmed the relationship with China, considering China as a powerful economic power that can achieve its goals without the use of force. According to Mr. Putin,

“China’s economy is the leading economy in the world to surpass the US” (Cited: Tacc, 2021).

For Russia’s role in East Sea issues, Russian expert - Titarenko commented that China, as a rising power, should not have baseless claims of sovereignty over the territory on the East Sea. Russia’s attitude towards disputes in the East Sea is also considered, based on domestic and regional situations, to diversify relations and prevent conflicts from destabilizing the region (Локшин Г.М., 2017). To resolve conflicts in the East Sea, relevant parties need great political and diplomatic efforts, any outside intervention will make the problem serious and difficult to come up with a reasonable solution. It is necessary to create an atmosphere of goodwill to get out of the crisis period, in which Russia plays a constructive role. Negotiations and discussions on the East Sea issue should go through several international organizations in the region such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), various dialogue platforms within ASEAN, and other international associations (RIA, 2017).

### **3. Some recommendations for Vietnam**

In diplomatic relations with China and Vietnam, Russia has established a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership, however, the two relationships are different. The relationship between Russia and Vietnam has a long tradition, inherited from the previous Soviet-Vietnamese relationship, stemming from the Soviet Union’s help in Vietnam during the war, building socialism into a comprehensive strategic cooperative relationship in all fields of the economy - commerce, military, science and

technology, education and culture. The Russia - China relationship is the one between two major countries in the world aimed at aligning interests with each other and sharing the same goal of dealing with the US (and its Western allies), especially after Russia was sanctioned by the US and other NATO countries after the coup in Ukraine in 2014.

At present, Vietnam is successfully integrating into the regional economy and becoming a prestigious and reliable partner of many countries around the world. With such basic characteristics, Vietnam needs to emphasize friendly partnership, deepening the existing fields of cooperation (economic - trade, military, science and technology, education, and culture) and expand potential cooperation fields (such as transferring technology to produce Covid-19 vaccines), focusing on those that raise common interests in the East Sea. Notably, cooperation in terms of military - technology, and energy between Russia and Vietnam in the East Sea is considered a crucial “hedging policy” in response to the expansion strategy and expanding influence of China in this area.

In recent years, meetings between leaders of the two countries have created new impetus for Russia - Vietnam relations. During the most recent official visit to the Russian Federation at the end of 2021 (November 29 - December 2) Vietnamese President Nguyen Xuan Phuc, in addition to cooperation agreements in several fields, such as defense - security, economy - trade, fuel - energy..., the official document signed is the Joint Statement on the Vision of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Vietnam and the Russian Federation up to the year 2030. In the ongoing

complicated international context, this will create a strong impetus for the mutually beneficial cooperation of the two countries in controlling the Covid-19 pandemic and post-pandemic economic recovery (Григорий Михайлович Локшин, 2021). To resolve conflicts in the East Sea, Vietnam should not rely on any major powers, neither Russia nor the US, because that will disrupt the balance in the effective diplomatic relations between Vietnam and these great powers at present. Moreover, Vietnam needs to promote cooperation with ASEAN countries, use multilateral diplomatic methods as well as be ready to prepare legal tools in dealing with disputes with China in the East Sea. Vietnam, when persisting with the implementation of “internationalizing” the East Sea strategy, will take advantage of the support of major powers, the international community, and East Coast countries (currently having maritime territorial disputes with China) to ensure its legitimate interests, and at the same time limit bad situations that will occur in the East Sea.

### Conclusion

It can be noticed that Russia's viewpoint on the East Sea disputes is more complex than the statements expressed “outside”. Russia has its policy, which is closely related to its national interests. Despite its neutral attitude, Russia still maintains the development of arms and energy trade cooperation with the claimants in the Asia-Pacific region, including China and Vietnam. Russia is creating a more balanced region in terms of interests and power in the East Sea while increasing its credibility with Asian partners. Therefore, on the one hand, Russia does not oppose China's policies, on the other hand, the country always

sympathizes with Vietnam's concerns in the East Sea. Against the rising tensions in the Eurasian space, the imposition of tough sanctions by the US and EU has prompted Russia's efforts to strengthen ties with its traditional partner in East Asia. However, both Vietnam and ASEAN always expect Russia to play a larger role in current East Sea issues □

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