



## **Maritime Economic Cooperation in the East Sea in the Context of Strategic Competition: Opportunities, Barriers, and Policy Implications for Vietnam**

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### **Abstract**

The East Sea is a maritime space of particular significance for economic development, energy security, maritime trade, coastal livelihoods, and the geo-economic structure of the Asia-Pacific region. Against the backdrop of increasing strategic competition among major powers, maritime economic cooperation in the East Sea offers both opportunities to promote a green economy, circular economy, maritime connectivity, offshore renewable energy, sustainable fisheries, and marine environmental protection, while also facing numerous obstacles stemming from sovereignty disputes, legal disagreements, lack of strategic trust, resource depletion, climate change, and competition for influence among major powers. This article analyzes the legal and institutional basis of maritime economic cooperation in the East Sea, identifies key opportunities and obstacles, and proposes several policy implications for Vietnam. The central argument is that Vietnam needs to pursue a "principled cooperation" approach: promoting maritime economic cooperation based on the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, ensuring national interests, maintaining a peaceful environment, and proactively creating substantive cooperation mechanisms in less sensitive areas such as marine environmental protection, marine scientific research, sustainable fisheries, green transformation of seaports, and offshore renewable energy.

**Keywords:** *East Sea; Maritime Economic Cooperation; Strategic Competition; Blue Economy; Vietnam; UNCLOS 1982*

### **1. Introduction**

The East Sea is one of the world's most important maritime spaces in terms of geostrategic, geoeconomic, and geo-environmental significance. This region connects the Pacific and Indian Oceans, linking to the Strait of Malacca, a crucial maritime chokepoint for global trade and energy. According to UNCTAD, the Strait of Malacca connects the Indian Ocean with the East Sea and accounts for approximately 23.7% of global maritime trade volume in 2023, highlighting the exceptional importance of Southeast Asia's maritime space to international supply chains (UNCTAD, 2024).

For Vietnam, the East Sea is not only a space for survival and development, but also a pillar of the strategy for sustainable marine economic development. Resolution No. 36-NQ/TW of 2018 sets the goal of making Vietnam a strong, sustainably developed, prosperous, secure, and safe maritime nation, in which purely marine economic sectors are oriented to contribute increasingly to national growth (Central Committee, 2018). The Government subsequently issued Resolution No. 26/NQ-CP of 2020 to concretize the overall and five-year plans for implementing the Strategy for Sustainable Marine Economic Development of Vietnam to 2030, with a vision to 2045 (Government, 2020).

However, maritime economic cooperation in the East Sea is not currently taking place in a neutral environment. Strategic competition between major powers, especially the US-China rivalry, the increasing activities of asserting maritime claims, the militarization of some entities, and the delay in developing a Code of Conduct in the East Sea have narrowed the space for maritime economic cooperation. Legal and sovereignty disputes not only create security risks but also increase transaction costs, restrict investment, hinder marine scientific research, offshore energy exploitation, and shared resource governance.

The question arises: in a space with both great potential for economic cooperation and significant strategic competition and sovereignty disputes, how should Vietnam approach maritime economic cooperation in the East Sea to simultaneously promote development, protect national interests, and contribute to regional peace and stability? This article addresses that question through three aspects: the legal and institutional basis of maritime economic cooperation; opportunities and obstacles in the context of strategic competition; and policy implications for Vietnam.

## ***2. Theoretical and Legal Basis of Maritime Economic Cooperation in the East Sea***

### **Maritime economic cooperation from the perspective of the blue economy and shared resource management**

Essentially, maritime economic cooperation in the East Sea needs to be approached not merely as trade or resource exploitation, but more broadly as shared maritime spatial governance. The sea is naturally interconnected: marine resources migrate across many sea regions; marine pollution can spread across borders; shipping lanes serve the interests of many countries; and ecosystems such as coral reefs, seagrass beds, estuaries, and upwelling zones are not limited by administrative boundaries or sovereignty claims. Therefore, if each country pursues only unilateral interests, the East Sea could easily fall into a "common resource tragedy," in which all parties overexploit resources but none have sufficient incentive to exercise restraint without a cooperative mechanism.

The blue economy approach expands the scope of marine economic cooperation from exploitation to the management of marine values. According to UNDP Vietnam, the blue economy encompasses many sectors, including fisheries, renewable energy, oil and gas, tourism, maritime transport, the environment, and ecosystems; the goal is not only growth but also the sustainable use of marine resources and ecosystems (UNDP Vietnam, 2022). This approach is particularly suitable for the East Sea because the region is both a space of resource competition, a vulnerable ecological space, and a vital international trade route.

From a theoretical perspective, maritime economic cooperation in the East Sea can be explained through three main approaches. Firstly, the common resource governance approach emphasizes that marine resources, such as fisheries, biodiversity, the marine environment, and maritime safety, are transboundary in nature. No single country can effectively protect these interests unilaterally without regional coordination. Secondly, the liberal institutional approach posits that international law, regional mechanisms, and norms of conduct can help reduce uncertainty, increase predictability, and build trust

among parties. Third, the realist approach emphasizes that cooperation in the East Sea is always constrained by power competition, sovereignty disputes, and nations' security calculations.

It is noteworthy that these three approaches are not mutually exclusive. In the context of the East Sea, the need for cooperation stems from the sea's interconnectedness, but the possibility of cooperation is influenced by power distribution, legal disputes, and the level of strategic trust. Therefore, maritime economic cooperation in the East Sea cannot be designed according to the logic of "absolute depoliticization," but must be built on the principle of "principled cooperation": cooperation in areas of common interest, but without harming the sovereignty, sovereign rights, jurisdiction, and legal positions of the countries involved.

### **International legal basis: UNCLOS 1982**

The most important legal basis for maritime economic cooperation in the East Sea is the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. UNCLOS not only establishes maritime zones and the rights of coastal states, but also creates a framework for countries to cooperate in the management, exploitation, and protection of the sea. For the East Sea, Articles 122 and 123 of UNCLOS are particularly significant because they address the legal regime for enclosed or semi-enclosed seas.

Article 122 of UNCLOS defines an enclosed or semi-enclosed sea as a sea surrounded by two or more States and opening to another sea or ocean through a narrow channel, or comprising mainly the territorial sea and exclusive economic zone of two or more States. On that basis, Article 123 stipulates that enclosed or semi-enclosed coastal states should cooperate with each other in the management, conservation, and exploitation of marine living resources; the protection and preservation of the marine environment; coordinated marine scientific research; and invite relevant international organizations to participate where appropriate (United Nations, 1982).

The significance of Article 123 for the East Sea lies in the fact that cooperation is not merely a discretionary political choice but also a legal requirement consistent with the region's geographical and ecological characteristics. The East Sea is a region with numerous coastal states, overlapping maritime claims, and interconnected ecosystems. Therefore, issues such as fisheries conservation, marine pollution control, ecosystem protection, marine scientific research, search and rescue, and maritime safety all have clear legal grounds for promoting cooperation.

However, it is important to emphasize that the obligation to cooperate under UNCLOS does not require states to abandon their legal positions. Conversely, UNCLOS allows for temporary, functional, or coordinated cooperation in specific areas without prejudice to positions on sovereignty, sovereign rights, and jurisdiction. This is a crucial point for Vietnam: it can promote maritime economic cooperation, but only within clear legal limits, avoiding the possibility that such cooperation is interpreted as an acknowledgment of illegal claims or as undermining long-term legal positions.

In addition to Article 123, UNCLOS provides numerous other fundamental principles for maritime economic cooperation in the East Sea. The provisions on the exclusive economic zone and continental shelf establish the sovereign rights of coastal states over biological and non-biological resources and related economic activities. Regulations on marine environmental protection create obligations for countries to prevent, mitigate, and control marine pollution. Regulations on marine scientific research help distinguish between legitimate research activities and those that may affect the sovereignty and jurisdiction of coastal states. Therefore, UNCLOS is an irreplaceable "framework of rules" for all maritime economic cooperation initiatives in the East Sea.

### **The 2016 East Sea arbitration ruling and its significance for maritime economic cooperation**

The July 12, 2016, ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration, established under Annex VII of UNCLOS, in the case of the Philippines v. China, is a significant legal milestone for the maritime order in the East Sea. While the ruling did not resolve the issue of territorial sovereignty over the islands, rocks, and shoals in the East Sea, it clarified many legal issues related to maritime claims, the legal status of certain entities, and the scope of maritime rights under UNCLOS (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016).

In terms of maritime economic cooperation, the ruling has at least three implications. First, it reinforces the principle that maritime claims must be established on the basis of UNCLOS and cannot be based on vague historical claims that exceed the limits permitted by UNCLOS. This has direct implications for maritime economic activities such as oil and gas, fisheries, marine exploration, and offshore energy, as investors, businesses, and nations all need a predictable legal environment.

Secondly, the ruling clarifies that not every maritime entity is capable of generating an exclusive economic zone or a continental shelf. This narrows the scope of potential legal disputes, thereby facilitating the determination of which maritime areas fall within the legitimate sovereignty and jurisdiction of the coastal state and which require negotiation or delimitation.

Third, the ruling emphasizes the link between maritime disputes and marine environmental protection. In the East Sea, unsustainable reclamation, construction, or exploitation activities can seriously damage marine ecosystems. Therefore, maritime economic cooperation cannot be separated from the obligation to protect the environment and conserve marine ecosystems.

For Vietnam, the policy significance of the ruling lies not in confrontational "internationalization of the dispute," but in strengthening the principle of the rule of law at sea. Vietnam can apply the spirit of the ruling to affirm that all maritime economic cooperation must be based on UNCLOS, respect the sovereignty and legitimate jurisdiction of coastal states, and not legitimize claims that exceed international law.

### **Regional institutional framework: ASEAN, DOC, and prospects for COC**

Besides UNCLOS, regional mechanisms led by ASEAN are important institutional foundations for maritime economic cooperation in the East Sea. The 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the East Sea between ASEAN and China, commonly known as the DOC, affirms the commitment to resolving disputes peacefully, refraining from the threat or use of force, exercising self-restraint in activities that could complicate disputes, and promoting cooperation in areas such as marine environmental protection, marine scientific research, maritime safety, search and rescue, and combating transnational crime (ASEAN, 2002).

The DOC is valuable because it creates a political framework for maintaining dialogue and managing disagreements. However, a major limitation of the DOC is its weak legal binding force and enforcement mechanisms. This makes it difficult for the DOC to completely prevent actions that alter the status quo or escalate tensions at sea. Therefore, the process of developing a Code of Conduct in the East Sea, or COC, is expected to create a more stable framework for governing the East Sea.

However, the COC is only truly meaningful if it meets several conditions: it must be consistent with UNCLOS; it must not prejudice the legitimate rights and interests of coastal states; it must have a clear scope of application; it must have a mechanism for monitoring and handling violations; and it must not restrict the legitimate right of ASEAN countries to cooperate with partners outside the region. If the COC remains merely a political declaration or is designed to undermine the strategic autonomy of smaller countries, it will be difficult for it to become an effective foundation for maritime economic cooperation.

Besides the DOC and COC, the ASEAN Vision on the Indo-Pacific 2019 is also significant. This document emphasizes ASEAN's central role, an open, inclusive, transparent, and rules-based approach, and identifies maritime cooperation as one of ASEAN's priority areas within the Indo-Pacific architecture (ASEAN, 2019). This allows Vietnam to place maritime economic cooperation in the East Sea within a broader context, linked to maritime connectivity, trade, sustainable development, green transition, and ocean governance.

### **Vietnam's policy basis: sustainable development of the marine economy in conjunction with the protection of sovereignty**

At the national level, Vietnam's most important policy foundation is Resolution No. 36-NQ/TW of 2018 on the Strategy for Sustainable Development of Vietnam's Marine Economy to 2030, with a vision to 2045. The Resolution sets the goal of making Vietnam a strong, sustainably developed, prosperous, secure, and safe maritime nation, while emphasizing the need for close integration between marine economic development and the protection of national sovereignty, sovereign rights, jurisdiction, and the marine environment (Central Committee, 2018).

Vietnam's approach, as outlined in Resolution 36-NQ/TW, shows that the maritime economy is not just a sector, but a comprehensive development space. This means that maritime economic cooperation in the East Sea must be considered within the context of development, sovereignty protection, maritime security, foreign relations, science and technology, and environmental protection. This forms the basis for Vietnam to both promote cooperation with regional and international partners and maintain its principled stance on international law.

Government Resolution No. 26/NQ-CP of 2020 further concretizes the implementation of Resolution 36-NQ/TW through a master plan and a five-year plan, thereby providing a basis for implementing programs in the marine economy, marine spatial planning, marine environmental protection, and the sustainable development of coastal areas. From a public policy perspective, this represents a shift from a "marine exploitation" mindset to a "marine governance" mindset, meaning that marine development relies not only on available resources but also on institutions, technology, data, planning, and coordination capacity.

Regarding maritime economic cooperation in the East Sea, Vietnam's policy framework can be summarized into three principles. First, cooperation must be consistent with UNCLOS and international law. Second, cooperation must serve sustainable development, without sacrificing the environment and coastal livelihoods for short-term growth. Third, cooperation must be linked to protecting national sovereignty, sovereign rights, and jurisdiction, preventing economic initiatives from being exploited to undermine Vietnam's strategic interests.

### ***3. Opportunities for Maritime Economic Cooperation in the East Sea***

#### **Cooperation on maritime connectivity, logistics, and supply chains**

The East Sea is a vital shipping lane for regional and global trade. The increasing uncertainty at maritime choke points, such as the Red Sea, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Malacca Strait, further highlights the need for security, freedom of navigation, and supply chain resilience. UNCTAD argues that global maritime trade is strongly affected by geopolitical disruptions and maritime choke points, leading to higher shipping costs and a trend toward rerouting ships (UNCTAD, 2024, 2025).

For Vietnam, the opportunity lies in developing its port system, coastal logistics, maritime services, transshipment centers, and green supply chains. Strategic competition and the restructuring of global supply chains create conditions for Vietnam to upgrade its role in the regional production network.

However, to capitalize on this opportunity, Vietnam needs to shift from a "seaports as cargo handling points" mindset to a "maritime logistics ecosystem" mindset, linking seaports with coastal industrial zones, economic corridors, railways, expressways, customs digitalization, and value-added services.

### **Sustainable fisheries cooperation and ensuring coastal livelihoods**

Fishery resources in the East Sea play a crucial role in food security, fishermen's livelihoods, and seafood exports. However, this is also the area most prone to conflict due to overfishing, overlapping fishing grounds, competition among fishermen from different countries, and the involvement of paramilitary or maritime law enforcement forces. Zhang (2018) argues that fisheries cooperation in the East Sea should aim for three objectives: meeting economic and food security needs, ensuring the sustainability of resources, and reducing the risk of fisheries conflicts.

FAO (2024) shows that global fisheries and aquaculture production continue to play a major role in food security; at the same time, overfishing pressure remains a major challenge to marine resources. This implies that fisheries cooperation in the East Sea is not only an economic issue but also a matter of resource governance, human security, and regional stability.

Vietnam can promote fisheries cooperation by establishing mechanisms for exchanging resource data, early warning of fishing conflicts, combating illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, developing high-tech aquaculture, and supporting livelihood transitions for fishermen in areas under heavy fishing pressure. This approach aligns with the recommendations of East Sea studies that fisheries cooperation is only sustainable if it is accompanied by the creation of alternative onshore livelihoods and a reduction in dependence on natural exploitation (Zhang, 2018).

### **Cooperation in marine environmental protection and marine scientific research**

Marine environmental degradation is one of the serious non-traditional risks in the East Sea. Coral reef ecosystems, seagrass beds, fisheries resources, and coastal environments are affected by overfishing, plastic pollution, land reclamation activities, coastal urban development, and climate change. Studies on the marine environment in the East Sea show that declining resources and ecosystems are creating urgent pressure for regional cooperation (Trajano, 2017; Ahmad, 2024).

This is an area where Vietnam can promote relatively feasible cooperation because it is less sensitive than oil and gas exploration or maritime delimitation. Possible initiatives could include: a marine environmental monitoring network; a common database on marine biodiversity; cooperation in research on ocean acidification, sea-level rise, and coastal erosion; a mechanism for responding to oil spills; and cooperation in reducing marine plastic waste. These areas are consistent with the spirit of Article 123 of UNCLOS concerning cooperation in scientific research and protection of the marine environment in semi-enclosed waters (United Nations, 1982).

### **Offshore renewable energy cooperation and energy transition**

The East Sea has great potential for offshore renewable energy, especially offshore wind power. In the context of countries committing to emission reduction and energy transition, cooperation on technical standards, equipment supply chains, grid connectivity, green finance, and human resource training could become a new pillar of maritime economic cooperation. For Vietnam, developing offshore wind power not only helps ensure energy security but also creates momentum for the development of new maritime industries, including marine surveying, precision engineering, port services, operations and maintenance, and project finance.

However, offshore energy is also a sensitive area if a project is located near disputed areas or overlapping claims. Therefore, cooperation in the marine energy sector needs to be designed on the basis

of respect for UNCLOS, avoiding complicating disputes, while prioritizing maritime areas under Vietnam's clear sovereignty and jurisdiction. The UNDP report on Vietnam's blue economy also identifies renewable energy as one of six important marine economic sectors to be considered in sustainable marine development scenarios (UNDP Vietnam, 2022).

### **Cooperation in marine tourism, marine culture, and coastal economy**

Coastal tourism is a sector with great potential for cooperation among countries bordering the East Sea. Cruise tourism routes, island-shore linkages, marine ecotourism, heritage tourism, and coastal community tourism can generate direct economic benefits, increase people-to-people exchanges, and reduce confrontational attitudes. However, to avoid uncontrolled development, cooperation in coastal tourism must be accompanied by environmental standards, controls on destination carrying capacity, protection of sensitive ecosystems, and equitable distribution of benefits to local communities.

For Vietnam, the development of marine tourism needs to be linked to marine spatial planning, resource conservation, digital transformation of tourism services, and the branding of safe, green, and responsible marine destinations. This direction is consistent with the goal of sustainable marine economic development established in Resolution 36-NQ/TW (Central Committee, 2018).

## **4. Barriers to Maritime Economic Cooperation in the East Sea**

### **Sovereignty disputes and disagreements on maritime claims**

The biggest obstacle to maritime economic cooperation in the East Sea is the existence of territorial sovereignty disputes and disagreements on maritime claims. When parties disagree on the scope of sovereign rights, jurisdiction, and legal status of maritime areas, economic activities such as oil and gas, fishing, marine exploration, offshore energy, and scientific research can all be politicized. The 2016 ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration clarified many important legal issues, but its implementation and acceptance still depend on the parties' attitudes. This shows that the gap between international law and the practice of power remains a major challenge in governing the East Sea (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016).

### **Strategic competition and the security logic of economic cooperation**

In the context of strategic competition, maritime economic projects can be viewed through a security lens. Seaports, submarine cables, offshore energy, maritime data, logistics, oceanographic research, and fishing fleets can all have dual-use implications. This reduces trust, increases the risk of suspicion, and makes economic cooperation mechanisms more susceptible to stagnation. A notable feature of strategic competition in the East Sea is the intertwining of civilian, economic, legal, and security instruments. Fishing activities, marine research, infrastructure development, or maritime law enforcement can sometimes be used as tools to assert presence and claims. This blurs the lines between economic cooperation and power competition.

### **Lack of trust and limitations of regional mechanisms**

Although ASEAN and China have had the DOC since 2002 and are negotiating the COC, the confidence-building process remains slow. The DOC has significant political value but lacks robust enforcement mechanisms; the COC still faces challenges with legal binding, geographical scope, monitoring, and the handling of violations. Recent analyses suggest that the COC process is hampered by legal disagreements, strategic differences, and internal divisions within ASEAN (Lin & Sothirak, 2025). Lack of trust makes maritime economic cooperation initiatives prone to "formal cooperation": many declarations, few substantive projects; many forums, few binding mechanisms; many common

commitments, few shared data. This is a major challenge if we want to turn maritime economic cooperation from a slogan into action.

### **Internal limitations of Vietnam**

In addition to external barriers, Vietnam also faces several internal limitations. Firstly, marine spatial planning and intersectoral coordination still need further improvement to avoid overlaps among seaports, tourism, fisheries, conservation, energy, defense, and security. Secondly, the capacity for marine science and technology, marine data, and ocean forecasting is not yet commensurate with the requirements of modern governance. Thirdly, financial resources for the blue economy are limited, while offshore energy projects, green port infrastructure, marine monitoring, and livelihood transformation require large capital investments, long timeframes, and high levels of risk. Fourthly, the capacity for maritime law enforcement, combating IUU fishing, and supporting fishermen in livelihood transformation still needs to be strengthened.

### **5. Policy Implications for Vietnam**

First, maintaining a firm approach based on UNCLOS 1982

Vietnam needs to continue affirming that UNCLOS 1982 is the comprehensive legal framework governing all activities at sea. This is the foundation for protecting Vietnam's legitimate rights and interests and for promoting maritime economic cooperation with other countries. Cooperation should not be understood as concessions on legal principles; rather, sustainable cooperation can only be achieved when all parties respect international law.

In policy practice, Vietnam should clearly categorize three groups of maritime areas: areas under Vietnam's clear sovereignty and jurisdiction; overlapping areas requiring demarcation; and areas with complex disputes. Each group requires a different cooperative approach. In areas with clear sovereignty and jurisdiction, Vietnam should proactively develop its marine economy, attract investment, and build capacity. In overlapping areas, a temporary cooperation mechanism that does not prejudice the legal position could be considered. In areas with complex disputes, priority should be given to less sensitive areas such as environmental protection, search and rescue, scientific research, and maritime safety.

Secondly, shifting from a Marine Exploitation Mindset to Blue Marine Economic Governance

Vietnam needs to accelerate the transformation of its marine development model from resource exploitation to marine value management. This requires the development of new, high-value-added marine economic sectors such as offshore renewable energy, marine logistics, ocean technology, green port services, marine ecotourism, high-tech aquaculture, and community-based conservation.

Resolution 36-NQ/TW has created a strategic framework for this direction, but the challenge lies in implementation: integrating marine spatial planning, mobilizing green finance, building a marine database, training marine human resources, and establishing inter-sectoral coordination mechanisms. Vietnam needs to consider the blue marine economy not just as an environmental slogan but as a new growth model, linking economic development with national sovereignty, security, and resilience.

Third, prioritize Cooperation in Less Sensitive but Strategically Valuable Areas

In the context of ongoing and complex disputes, Vietnam should prioritize cooperation in areas that are highly feasible and less controversial. These areas include: marine environmental protection, marine climate monitoring, oil spill response, search and rescue, combating marine plastic waste, biodiversity conservation, combating IUU fishing, sharing fisheries resource data, and marine human resource training. While less sensitive, these areas are of great strategic value because they help build

trust, foster cooperation, and form networks of experts and shared data. This could be the foundation for cooperation in more complex areas in the future.

#### Fourth, developing Sustainable Fisheries Cooperation Mechanisms and Transforming Fishermen's Livelihoods

Vietnam needs to place fisheries cooperation within a broader strategy of coastal livelihood security. Simply strengthening fishing control is insufficient; it is necessary to simultaneously develop high-tech aquaculture, fisheries logistics, deep processing, fisheries insurance, new vocational training for fishermen, and support livelihood transformation in areas under high fishing pressure. At the regional level, Vietnam can promote an East Sea fisheries dialogue mechanism, primarily through expert and local channels, focusing on resource data, fishing seasons, conservation areas, rules for avoiding collisions between fishing vessels, and a coordinated humanitarian response in cases of distressed fishermen. This approach aligns with Zhang's (2018) recommendation that fisheries cooperation should be linked to the goal of sustainable resource management and conflict risk reduction.

#### Fifth, building National Marine Science and Technology Capacity and Marine Data

A strong maritime nation relies not only on its fleet or seaports, but also on its marine knowledge capacity. Vietnam needs to invest more heavily in seabed mapping, oceanographic data, marine environmental monitoring, remote sensing technology, early warning systems for marine disasters, biodiversity research, and marine legal and economic databases. Marine data is the foundation for marine spatial planning, environmental protection, offshore energy development, fisheries management, and the protection of legal rights. Vietnam also needs to promote marine science diplomacy through cooperation with research institutes, international organizations, ASEAN programs, the United Nations, Japan, South Korea, India, the EU, Australia, and other partners. Marine science cooperation serves both development and enhances Vietnam's position in regional marine governance.

#### Sixth, leveraging ASEAN and Sub-Multilateral Mechanisms

ASEAN remains the most important institutional space for Vietnam to promote maritime cooperation. However, given the difficulty ASEAN faces in reaching a deep consensus on sensitive issues, Vietnam needs to combine the broad ASEAN mechanism with flexible sub-multilateral mechanisms. For example, Vietnam can promote cooperation with Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand in areas such as combating IUU fishing, maritime safety, marine environmental protection, green ports, and logistics. The signing of the exclusive economic zone delimitation agreement between Vietnam and Indonesia in 2022, after more than a decade of negotiations, demonstrates that maritime delimitation and legal cooperation can lay the foundation for reducing tensions, increasing legal clarity, and supporting marine resource management. Developments related to the ratification process of this agreement will continue to be monitored in 2025 (Reuters, 2025).

#### Seventh, linking the Maritime Economy with Economic Diplomacy and Sovereignty Protection

Vietnam needs to view maritime economic cooperation as a component of maritime economic diplomacy. This includes attracting investment in green ports, offshore wind power, logistics, sustainable marine tourism, and high-tech aquaculture, while ensuring these projects are consistent with maritime spatial planning, international law, and national security interests. In projects involving foreign elements, strategic risks, data risks, technological risks, and supply chain dependency risks need to be carefully assessed. Maritime economic cooperation must serve development goals without creating new strategic vulnerabilities. In other words, Vietnam needs to both open up to cooperation and enhance its self-reliance.

## Conclusion

Maritime economic cooperation in the East Sea is an objective necessity stemming from the interconnectedness of the sea, the dependence of nations on shipping lanes, fisheries resources, the marine environment, and emerging maritime economic sectors. However, this cooperation takes place against a backdrop of intense strategic competition, complex sovereignty disputes, and increasingly serious resource degradation. Therefore, maritime economic cooperation in the East Sea cannot be approached solely as an economic development issue, but must be placed within the broader context of development, security, international law, and regional governance.

For Vietnam, the appropriate path is "principled cooperation": steadfast adherence to UNCLOS 1982, protection of sovereignty and legitimate rights, and proactive promotion of practical cooperation mechanisms in less sensitive but strategically valuable areas. Vietnam needs to shift strongly towards a blue economy model, increase its marine science and technology capacity, develop national marine data, promote sustainable fisheries cooperation, leverage ASEAN and other multilateral mechanisms, and link marine economic cooperation with economic diplomacy and sovereignty protection.

In the long term, a stable and prosperous East Sea can only be formed when coastal states collectively recognize that the sea is not only a space for power competition but also a space for shared survival. Maritime economic cooperation, if properly designed and implemented, can serve as a channel for reducing tensions, building trust, and contributing to a rules-based maritime order.

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