 ISSN: **3107-6513**

Vietnam - Siam Relations in the 19th Century: From Military Confrontation to Diplomatic Maneuvering

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18517271

Abstract:

This article elucidates the complex transformational process in relations between the Nguyen Dynasty (Vietnam) and the Rattanakosin Dynasty (Siam) throughout the 19th century. Originating from a foundation of initial amity during the reign of Emperor Gia Long, the relationship rapidly shifted toward intense military confrontation as both nations contested protectorate rights over Cambodia and Laos. The study indicates that these conflicts were not merely clashes of military force but also a sophisticated "diplomatic chessboard," where the Court of Hue sought to assert national sovereignty while navigating the mounting pressures of Western colonialism. Notably, the latter half of the 19th century marked a critical turning point when French colonialists stripped the Nguyen court of its diplomatic authority, forcing Vietnam-Siam relations to operate under a new political paradigm. Utilizing historical and logical methods, the article derives significant lessons regarding regional stability and diplomatic conduct amidst global fluctuations.

Keywords: *Vietnam-Siam Relations, Nguyen Dynasty, Rattanakosin Dynasty, 19th Century, Southeast Asian Diplomacy.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the historical currents of 19th-century Southeast Asia, the correlation between Vietnam and Siam was not merely a matter of bilateral ties between neighbors but a pivotal axis of power interaction that dictated regional geopolitics. Under the governance of the Nguyen and Rattanakosin dynasties, the two nations experienced turbulent phases, shifting from initial amity during Emperor Gia Long's era to intense military conflicts over influence in Cambodia and Laos. According to Nguyen Van Luan (2024), these relations were remarkably complex and diverse, exerting a profound impact on the mainland regional situation.

Historical reality demonstrates that the "dual-tributary" status of buffer states served as a persistent catalyst for confrontation. Dinh Thi Dung (2001) asserts that disagreements over protectorate rights regarding Cambodia and the Lao principalities remained the primary obstacles, frequently driving relations between Hue and Bangkok into states of high tension. This rivalry was not merely a series of field operations but evolved into a sophisticated "diplomatic chessboard." Within this framework, the Nguyen court endeavored to assert its "great power" status within the Sinocentric order while simultaneously navigating the increasing presence of Western colonial powers.

The rise of colonialism introduced a new "variable," forcing both dynasties to adjust their survival strategies. While Siam progressively implemented flexible diplomacy to maintain independence, Vietnam under Emperor Tu Duc faced French invasion, eventually resulting in the loss of its diplomatic autonomy by the late 19th century. Re-examining the progression from confrontation to negotiation not only reconstructs an authentic historical picture but also derives valuable lessons for managing relations with neighboring states in the contemporary context of globalization. This article focuses on analyzing the political, military, and diplomatic factors governing bilateral relations, thereby clarifying the nature of power interactions in early modern Southeast Asia.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between Vietnam and Siam in the 19th century is a topic that has garnered significant attention from generations of historians, both domestic and international, due to its complexity and profound impact on Southeast Asian geopolitics. A review of existing literature reveals that research typically focuses on three primary areas: official historical records, specialized diplomatic studies, and analyses regarding the influence of third-party nations (Cambodia and Laos).

First and foremost, the official chronicles of the Nguyen Dynasty serve as foundational sources. According to Nguyễn Văn Luận (2024), works such as *Đại Nam Thực Lục* (Veritable Records of the Great South) or *Quốc Triều Chánh Biên Toát Yếu* (Summary of the Main Chronicles of the National Dynasty) meticulously documented diplomatic events in chronological order, facilitating the reconstruction of bilateral relations under various Nguyen monarchs. In particular, the early 19th century under Emperor Gia Long is often described as a period of amity based on personal gratitude between the founder of the Nguyen Dynasty and the Chakri vanguards. However, this harmony was temporary and swiftly replaced by pragmatic power calculations.

Delving into the nature of diplomacy, researchers have highlighted the inevitable contradictions when two regional powers concurrently sought to assert their influence. Đinh Thị Dung (2001) asserts that disagreements regarding the protectorate over Cambodia and the Lao principalities remained the most significant obstacles, frequently driving relations between Hue and Bangkok into states of tension. The issue of "dual-tributary" status for buffer states was not merely a territorial dispute but a symbol of the political prestige of each dynasty.

From a comparative perspective, the alignment of policies between the two nations under Western pressure has also been elucidated. Lưu Văn Lợi (2007), through an examination of charters and contracts, emphasized that legal commitments between Vietnam and Siam created a system of interests that influenced the geopolitical foundations of both nations. Meanwhile, Trần Trọng Kim (1971) focused on socio-cultural factors, indicating that despite similarities in beliefs, differences in political thinking led to divergent responses to colonialism.

Furthermore, international scholars provide multidimensional viewpoints. According to Maybon & Taboulet (1920), Vietnam's relations with its neighbors in the 19th century were heavily dominated by the Sinocentric world order, where Vietnam acted as a vassal to China while simultaneously playing the role of a "great power" toward neighboring minor states. Finally, Stepanov (1982) affirmed that Siamese intervention in Vietnam's internal affairs, such as during the Le Van Khoi rebellion, demonstrated that frequent military confrontation was a direct consequence of the struggle for control over frontier regions.

In conclusion, the literature review indicates that while many studies exist, an in-depth analysis of the shift from direct military confrontation to sophisticated diplomatic strategies during the reign of Emperor Tu Duc remains a gap that this article aims to further clarify.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Investigating the relationship between Vietnam and Siam in the 19th century necessitates a multidimensional theoretical system to decode complex interactions ranging from military to diplomacy. The theoretical framework of this article is constructed upon three main pillars: Regional Geopolitics, the Sinocentric World Order, and Realism in International Relations.

Primarily, Geopolitical theory plays a pivotal role. The power competition between the Nguyen and Rattanakosin dynasties was not merely a territorial friction but a struggle for vital space and strategic buffer zones in Cambodia and Laos. Nguyễn Văn Luận (2024) points out that the geographical positions of these small kingdoms transformed them into "geopolitical buffers," where the loss of influence for one side signified a direct threat to the national security of the other.

Secondly, this relationship must be situated within the tributary system of the Sinocentric World Order. According to Đinh Thị Dung (2001), both Vietnam and Siam operated within a diplomatic structure where rituals and tributes were not just formalities but tools to establish legitimacy and power hierarchy. However, the existence of the "dual-tributary" institution where a minor state simultaneously submitted to both Hue and Bangkok created conflicts regarding legal and political protectorate rights. Vũ Quốc Thông (1971) argues that these traditional legal institutions often contained inherent contradictions concerning the jurisdiction and application of law in concessions and colonial territories.

Thirdly, the framework utilizes Realism to explain the shift from confrontation to diplomacy. According to Trần Trọng Kim (1971), the ultimate goal of the dynasties was to preserve national interests and the stability of royal power. When military strength reached an equilibrium or incurred excessive costs, parties often opted for "diplomatic maneuvering" to maintain the status quo. Lưu Văn Lợi (2007) emphasizes that diplomatic commitments and charters during this period were essentially treaties regarding geopolitical interests.

Furthermore, the impact of the "Western variable" cannot be overlooked. Maybon & Taboulet (1920) suggest that the pressure of colonialism completely altered the regional diplomatic chessboard, forcing Southeast Asian nations to adjust from "intra-regional" thinking to "multilateral diplomacy" for survival. Stepanov (1982) adds that the intervention of major powers stripped the Nguyen dynasty of its diplomatic

autonomy, integrating Vietnam-Siam relations into colonial agreements. Finally, Lê Quý Đôn (cited in Xi Vưu, 2024), in his interpretations of "statecraft" and "boundaries," emphasized the importance of territorial management and public confidence as the root of diplomatic strength. In conclusion, the synergy between theories of power, regional order, and strategic adaptation provides a comprehensive view of Vietnam-Siam relations in an era of turbulence.

IV. METHODOLOGY

The article employs a modern historical methodological framework combined with interdisciplinary approaches to address the complexities of Vietnam-Siam relations in the 19th century. The two primary methods utilized throughout the study are the historical method and the logical method. The historical method facilitates the reconstruction of bilateral relations in chronological order, from the period of amity under Emperor Gia Long to the peak phases of conflict during the reigns of Minh Mang and Thieu Tri. Concurrently, the logical method is applied to analyze the nature of historical events, identifying patterns in the transition from military confrontation to sophisticated diplomatic maneuvers.

The study places significant emphasis on the method of source criticism. Primary sources from the official chronicles of the Nguyen Dynasty, such as *Dai Nam Thuc Luc* and *Kham Dinh Dai Nam Hoi Dien Su Le*, alongside specialized research by Nguyễn Văn Luận (2024) and Đinh Thị Dung (2001), are cross-referenced and verified to ensure objectivity and authenticity. Furthermore, the comparative historical method is adopted to elucidate differences in foreign policy thinking and strategies for addressing Western colonialism between the two dynasties. Finally, a geopolitical approach is utilized as a supplementary tool to explain the roots of influence disputes in buffer zones such as Cambodia and Laos, thereby providing a systemic perspective on the geopolitical landscape of mainland Southeast Asia in the early modern era.

V. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

5.1. The Era of Military Confrontation: A Clash of Two Regional Powers

5.1.1. Geopolitical Origins of Conflict in the Buffer Zones of Cambodia and Laos

In the first half of the 19th century, mainland Southeast Asia witnessed the powerful rise of two central power entities: the Nguyen Dynasty in the East and the Rattanakosin Dynasty in the West. According to Nguyễn Văn Luận (2024), the expansion of their respective spheres of influence transformed Cambodia and the Lao principalities into vital "geopolitical buffer zones," where any shift in status posed a risk of direct conflict. For the Court of Hue, establishing a protectorate over Cambodia was not merely territorial expansion but the construction of a "security belt" to protect the newly reclaimed territories of Nam Ky. Conversely, Bangkok, under the Rama monarchs, viewed maintaining influence east of the Mekong as a means to curb Vietnamese expansionism at the Siamese border.

This tension culminated when Emperor Minh Mang's Confucian-inspired "Universal Kingship" policy collided directly with the Chakri dynasty's "Strategic Buffer" strategy. Đinh Thị Dung (2001) asserts that disagreements over the protectorate of neighboring minor kingdoms remained the most significant obstacle in the diplomatic history between the two powers, as neither side accepted a multipolar order in the region. The rebellion of Le Van Khoi in Gia Dinh (1833) and his subsequent appeal to Siam provided the immediate pretext for a large-scale Siamese invasion of Vietnamese territory across five fronts.

5.1.2. Military Campaigns and Characteristics of Attrition Warfare

The Vietnam-Siam wars (peaking between 1833–1834 and 1841–1845) were characterized by large-scale wars of attrition involving the maximum mobilization of national resources. According to Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn (2005), the Nguyen army had to mobilize tens of thousands of militiamen along with top-tier generals like Truong Minh Giang and Nguyen Xuan to counter the invaders.

The tactics of both sides reflected a clear adaptation to the terrain. The Vietnamese military fully utilized its naval superiority within the dense river networks, while the Siamese forces, led by General Bodindecha, demonstrated formidable infantry and elephantry strength in the highland regions. Trần Trọng Kim (1971) described the brutality of battles in Ha Tien, Chau Doc, and Phnom Penh, where strategic points frequently changed hands in bloody encounters. Furthermore, Vũ Quốc Thông (1971) argues that the complexity of legal systems and administration in newly occupied territories made maintaining post-occupation stability extremely difficult for both sides.

5.1.3. Consequences of Confrontation: Exhaustion and the Realization of Military Stalemate

After more than a decade of warfare, both Vietnam and Siam reached a state of profound financial and human exhaustion. Lưu Văn Lợi (2007) points out that

prolonged military commitments weakened national potential just as they faced the greater challenge of Western colonialism. Emperor Thieu Tri's decision to withdraw troops from Tran Tay Thanh in 1841 was assessed by Maybon & Taboulet (1920) as a necessary strategic retreat when the Hue court realized that the cost of maintaining direct control far outweighed the benefits.

The stalemate on the ground led to a profound shift in power thinking. Stepanov (1982) affirms that Siamese intervention in Vietnam's internal affairs did not yield expected results; instead, it left behind devastated territories. According to Xi Vưu (2024), as military strength reached a "Balance of Power," both dynasties began seeking alternative paths to safeguard their interests. Finally, as Lê Quý Đôn (cited in Nguyễn Văn Luận, 2024) emphasized regarding the importance of "public harmony" in border management, the failure of purely military solutions forced Hue and Bangkok to the negotiating table, opening a new chapter in regional diplomatic history.

5.2. The Strategic Shift: From the Smoke of War to the Diplomatic Chessboard

5.2.1. Breaking the Military Stalemate and the Need for Policy Adjustment

Following the period of intense confrontation (1833-1845), both the Nguyen Dynasty and the Kingdom of Siam realized that sheer force could not decisively resolve the Cambodian issue. According to Nguyễn Văn Luận (2024), the protracted war had pushed both nations into financial and human exhaustion, while the goal of establishing absolute hegemony over the buffer zone remained elusive. This stalemate forced leaders in Hue and Bangkok to reassess their instruments of power.

For the Court of Hue, the change began in the late Minh Mang era and became more pronounced under Thieu Tri. Đinh Thị Dung (2001) argues that the emergence of "variables" from Western colonialism created an invisible pressure, prompting both Vietnam and Siam to seek stability on their Western borders to focus on maritime threats. According to Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn (2002), Emperor Thieu Tri issued more flexible edicts, moving away from the rigid direct administration of Tran Tay Thanh seen in previous periods. These were the first signals of a military "de-escalation" in favor of secret negotiations on the diplomatic chessboard.

5.2.2. The "Diplomatic Chessboard" and the Mechanism of Dual Suzerainty

The most significant turning point of this shift was the formation of the dual suzerainty mechanism over Cambodia. Instead of mutual annihilation, Vietnam and Siam accepted a compromise: allowing Cambodia to exist as a state subordinate to both powers. Phạm Văn Sơn (1961) evaluates this as a pragmatic political innovation that allowed the two regional powers to maintain national prestige without further bloodshed.

In 1847, the signing of agreements between Nguyen Tri Phuong (Vietnam) and Chaophraya Bodindecha (Siam) officially ended the hostilities. According to Trần Trọng Kim (2005), the result of this negotiation was the coronation of Ang Duong, who was required to receive investiture and supervision from both the Vietnamese and Siamese monarchs. Lưu Văn Lợi (2007) notes that this diplomatic arrangement established a new regional order, where buffer principalities became "neutral zones of peace" under joint protection.

5.2.3. Discussion on Pragmatism and Geopolitical Vision

The shift from "confrontation" to "dialogue" was not merely a result of military exhaustion but also reflected the flexible diplomatic thinking of the two dynasties. Stepanov (1982) affirms that the 1847 diplomatic arrangement helped Vietnam alleviate the administrative and military burden in Cambodia, a region plagued by public unrest. Furthermore, according to Tsuboi (1987), maintaining peaceful relations with Siam allowed the Nguyen court to refocus on challenges posed by the infiltration of Catholicism and French warships along its coastline.

However, this mechanism also revealed historical limitations. Vũ Quốc Thông (1971) argues that this diplomatic compromise was only temporary and lacked a sustainable international legal framework to protect buffer states against the tide of colonization. Finally, as Nguyễn Văn Luận (2024) emphasizes, although they successfully shifted to a diplomatic stance to maintain internal regional stability, the lack of a broader multilateral vision made it difficult for both Vietnam and Siam to withstand the increasing intervention of French colonialism in the late 19th century.

5.3. Discussion: The Nature and Impact of the Strategic Shift

5.3.1. The Nature of the Shift: From "Civilizing Mission" Logic to "Balance of Power" Reality

The shift in Vietnam-Siam relations from military confrontation to a diplomatic chessboard was not merely a change in operational methods but the result of a profound geopolitical reassessment. According to Nguyễn Văn Luận (2024), the nature of this shift was the recognition of an unbreakable "Balance of Power" between the two strongest dynasties in the region. When large-scale military campaigns led by generals like Truong Minh Giang or Bodindecha fell into a stalemate, both Hue and Bangkok realized that imposing a unipolar

order over the Cambodian buffer zone was impossible given their limited national resources.

Furthermore, Đinh Thị Dung (2001) argues that the Nguyen Dynasty's diplomatic thinking was inherently "static," heavily influenced by the Chinese suzerain-vassal model. However, faced with the realities of the Cambodian theater, this "immutability" had to give way to more flexible solutions. The shift to a "diplomatic chessboard" represented a pragmatic diplomacy where national interest took precedence over the dogmatic Confucian principles regarding the absolute authority of the Emperor.

5.3.2. The Impact of the "Peaceful Buffer Zone" on Regional Stability

The establishment of the dual suzerainty mechanism in 1847 had a profound impact on the security structure of mainland Southeast Asia. Lưu Văn Lợi (2007) evaluates that this agreement transformed Cambodia from a bloody battlefield into a "peaceful buffer zone," minimizing the risk of direct conflict between the two powers. This provided the Nguyen army with a necessary respite and spared the frontier populations from decades of warfare.

However, this stability was a double-edged sword. Vũ Quốc Thông (1971) notes that accepting a temporary compromise left both Vietnam and Siam ill-prepared for greater challenges from the West. While the two nations were occupied with dividing their influence in Cambodia, colonial powers like France began their strategic reconnaissance. According to Stepanov (1982), the 1847 diplomatic arrangement, while resolving internal regional conflicts, inadvertently exposed vulnerabilities in defending multilateral sovereignty against the rising tide of colonization.

5.3.3. New Perceptions of Diplomacy in a Changing World

Reflecting on this shift, we find a significant lesson in the art of diplomatic conduct. Xi Vưu (2024) asserts that the transition from military to diplomatic focus under Emperor Thieu Tri was a wise strategic move to preserve national strength. It proves that even within an orthodox feudal society, leaders possessed the capacity to adapt and innovate when faced with existential choices.

Ultimately, this shift left an important legacy for Vietnamese diplomatic history: the combination of military strength and shrewdness at the negotiating table. As Nguyễn Văn Luận (2024) emphasizes, the 1847 diplomatic arrangement was not a surrender but a victory for the ideology of peace and regional cooperation. This serves as a foundation for reflecting on Vietnam's position in resolving modern international conflicts through dialogue and the balancing of interests.

5.4. *Historical Lessons for Modern International Relations.*

5.4.1. Lessons on Flexibility and Pragmatism in Diplomacy

Reflecting on the progression from military confrontation to the diplomatic chessboard in 19th-century Vietnam-Siam relations, the most significant lesson lies in flexibility and pragmatism in safeguarding national interests. According to Nguyễn Văn Luận (2024), the Nguyen Dynasty's shift from direct administration to the "dual suzerainty" mechanism in 1847 was not a weak retreat but a timely strategic adjustment upon realizing that military instruments had reached their limit of effectiveness. This offers a lesson for modern international relations regarding the choice of power instruments: one should not rely solely on hard power but must skillfully combine it with soft power and peaceful negotiation to resolve disputes.

This flexibility is also evident in prioritizing collective interests over ideological or institutional differences. Đinh Thị Dung (2001) emphasizes that although the Hue court maintained a Confucian "Royal Way" mindset, they accepted a multipolar reality in the region to secure their borders. In today's globalized context, this lesson remains vital, reminding nations to respect differences and seek "common ground" to maintain regional stability.

5.4.2. Managing "Buffer Zones" and Lessons on Balancing Great Powers

The Vietnam-Siam relationship in the 19th century is a classic example of competition for influence in buffer states like Cambodia and Laos. According to Lưu Văn Lợi (2007), the dual protection of a minor state by two regional powers created a temporary state of stability, yet the lack of a sustainable international legal framework made these buffer zones vulnerable to external intervention. This provides a lesson for small and medium-sized nations today to build an autonomous diplomacy and avoid becoming "pawns" in the games of great powers.

Furthermore, Vũ Quốc Thông (1971) argues that the exhaustion from prolonged warfare diminished the resistance of both dynasties against Western colonial invasion. The historical lesson here is: a protracted intra-regional conflict only creates opportunities for foreign powers to intervene for profit. Therefore, enhancing strategic trust and internal cooperation (such as the current ASEAN mechanism) is the best way to protect collective security.

5.4.3. The Dialectical Relationship between Domestic Governance and Diplomacy

The success or failure of Vietnam-Siam foreign policies in the 19th century was always intertwined with the nation's internal strength. Stepanov (1982) points out that economic crises and internal uprisings forced the Nguyen Dynasty to seek peaceful solutions with Siam to stabilize domestic affairs. This confirms the principle: diplomacy is an extension of domestic policy; a nation can only have a firm standing on the international stage when it possesses a strong internal foundation.

Finally, as Nguyễn Văn Luận (2024) concluded, "knowing oneself and knowing others" to make correct decisions at the right time is the core of the art of diplomacy. In the present era, where sovereign disputes and geopolitical influence remain complex, the lessons from our ancestors in transforming military conflict into a diplomatic strategy remain a source of inspiration and valuable experience for modern Vietnamese diplomacy: peaceful and friendly, yet always upholding sovereignty and national interests.

VI. CONCLUSION

The study of Vietnam-Siam relations in the 19th century reveals a volatile journey from direct military confrontation to the establishment of a pragmatic diplomatic strategy. Through the analysis of historical processes, this paper draws three central conclusions:

Firstly, the essence of Vietnam-Siam relations during this period was the competition for geopolitical influence in buffer zones, particularly Cambodia and Laos. The establishment of the Nguyen Dynasty in 1802 created a powerful political entity that broke Siam's monopoly in the Mekong basin, leading to inevitable armed clashes. However, the heavy toll on human and financial resources from these wars (exemplified by the 1833-1845 period) demonstrated that military power was not the optimal tool for maintaining sustainable stability.

Secondly, the shift toward a "diplomatic chessboard" with the dual suzerainty mechanism in 1847 represented a triumph of flexible political thinking. The decision to share influence rather than annihilate the opponent reflected a pragmatic vision from both the Hue and Bangkok courts amidst exhausted internal resources and the emerging pressure of Western colonialism. This strategic shift transformed the buffer zones from a "detonator" of war into a "mediated space" for regional detente.

Thirdly, although successful in stabilizing intra-regional relations, both Vietnam and Siam exhibited limitations in building a multilateral security system robust enough to withstand the tide of colonization. The French seizure of the Nguyen Dynasty's diplomatic rights in the late 19th century brought an end to a chapter of autonomous feudal diplomacy.

In summary, 19th-century Vietnam-Siam relations offer an invaluable lesson on the synergy between military capability and the art of negotiation. In the modern international context, maintaining dialogue, respecting sovereignty, and seeking mutual interests remain the guiding principles for the sustainable development of relations among Southeast Asian nations.

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