


# Chapter 11

## Maritime Sovereignty and Governance in Seventeenth–Eighteenth Century Dang Trong: Vietnam’s Strategic Role in the South China Sea

**Ngoc Phuong Mai**

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-1334-3680>

*Vinh University, Vietnam*

**Vinh Hong Nguyen**

*Vinh University, Vietnam*

### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter analyzes Vietnam’s role in the South China Sea maritime system during the 17th–18th centuries—a critical period for contemporary maritime sovereignty formation. Examining the Nguyen Lords’ regime in Dang Trong, it demonstrates how Vietnamese polities organized, controlled, and defended maritime space amid regional trade fluctuations and international interactions. Using Vietnamese and international historical sources, the chapter explores three areas: (1) coastal port organization and foreign vessel control, including merchant management and taxation; (2) maritime security through anti-piracy operations and trade route protection; (3) sovereignty practices at SCS islands and archipelagos. The chapter argues that Vietnam actively established regional maritime order rather than remaining passive. These historical practices secured economic-security interests*

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*while establishing legal and organizational foundations for modern Vietnamese maritime policy. Examining this maritime heritage is essential for understanding continuity in Vietnam's contemporary maritime strategy.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The South China Sea has long been not merely a resource space but also a strategic commercial axis of Southeast Asia. Located on international maritime routes, this region plays a pivotal role in connecting continental Asia with the maritime world and has become a site of continuous interweaving between trade, security, and regional power structures (Kiet & Tuyen, 2023; Hiep et al., 2024). In this context, Vietnam—with its coastline extending along the western side of the South China Sea—is not simply a coastal area subject to external influences but an active agent in organizing, controlling, and expressing maritime power (see more at Trinh, 2025; Kiet et al., 2025; That et al., 2025).

In research on Vietnamese maritime history, the modern period, particularly from the 20th century onward, has often been analyzed through the lens of international law and geopolitics (Kiet et al., 2025; Trinh, 2025; Hiep et al., 2024). For the medieval period, including the 17th-18th centuries, important works have addressed commercial activities, diplomacy, and East-West contacts (Wheeler, 2006; Vy, 1961; Tana, 1999; Tana, 2024). However, the aspect of maritime power practice and maritime governance mechanisms of Vietnamese polities during this period has not yet been examined in a specialized and systematic manner. During these centuries, the two regions chose different institutional configurations: Dang Ngoai (Tonkin) managed foreign trade through a centralized mechanism with conditional openness, restricting international merchants to designated ports such as Pho Hien and Van Don with strict regulations on seasons, commodities, and residence; meanwhile, Dang Trong developed a more open model, linked to the prosperity of port cities, where Hoi An emerged as a representative center, accompanied by institutional systems ensuring trade and maritime security.

Based on this observation, this chapter selects Dang Trong as a case study to clarify how a pre-modern Vietnamese polity designed, implemented, and expressed power over maritime space in the context of Southeast Asia's rapid transformation in trade and international contacts. The analytical scope is limited to the 17th-18th centuries. The research draws on Vietnamese historical sources such as “Phu Bien Tap Luc” (Records of the Pacified Frontier), “Dai Nam Thuc Luc” (Veritable Records of Dai Nam), “Toan Tap Thien Nam Tu Chi Lo Do Thu” (Complete Collection of Maps and Records of Thien Nam Four Routes), and is cross-referenced with foreign sources, thereby developing three main analytical directions: (i) organization and control of

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