

Is Japan Externalising Border Control through Development Cooperation with Vietnam?

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Summary

This paper examines how Japan's border control (BC) intersects with development cooperation (DC) in the governance of labour migration from Vietnam, which has become Japan's largest source of migrant workers. By comparing two major Official Development Assistance (ODA) projects—the *Hotline Project* on anti-trafficking and the *Direct Matching Project* on broker regulation—the study analyses divergent outcomes and shows how DC initiatives risk being drawn into *externalised BC* (FitzGerald, 2020). A *decolonial-assemblage* framework (Cappiali and Pacciardi, 2025, p.307; Cobarrubias et al., 2023, p.6) is developed to capture the fusion of security and development in the Japan–Vietnam migration nexus.

Migration today is central to development. Remittances now exceed ODA and FDI in many developing countries, yet their impact is contested, with benefits such as poverty reduction offset by concerns over inequality and shifting responsibilities from states to individuals. International cooperation has traditionally sought to address “root causes,” but recent global agendas also emphasise the control of mobility. This dual framing has given rise to externalised BC, where destination countries enlist sending states to regulate migration before departure. Such practices, widely seen in Europe, blur the line between aid and security, raising concerns over donor dominance and neo-colonial tendencies.

Japan is now exhibiting similar dynamics. Facing demographic decline, it increasingly relies on foreign labour while framing irregular migration as a security issue. Vietnam, as the main source of workers, has thus become a critical partner. This study asks: *how is Japan's BC externalised through DC with Vietnam, and how effectively does it function?*

The comparative analysis highlights two contrasting cases. *The Hotline Project*, focused on anti-trafficking, retained a humanitarian orientation shaped by Vietnam's geopolitical interests and Japan's diplomatic aims. It remained largely a conventional DC initiative, achieving modest but consistent outcomes. By contrast, *the Direct Matching Project* on broker regulation reflected Japan's *securitisation of ODA* (Shiga, 2023, p.255). Though framed in human rights terms, it overlooked Vietnam's structural dependence on brokers and the agency of stakeholders. Japan's concern with irregularisation redirected ODA toward broker elimination as externalised BC. Yet resistance from both Vietnamese stakeholders and some Japanese actors undermined implementation, leaving the project ineffective as either BC or DC.

Theoretically, the study proposes that DC becomes subsumed into externalised BC under three conditions: (1) *donor conditionalities dominate*, (2) *security concerns take precedence over development*, and (3) *structural drivers of migration remain unaddressed* (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013, p.16). It further stresses *the centrality of stakeholder agency* (Stock, Üstübcici and Schultz, 2019; Ostrand and Statham, 2021, p.27) in determining whether projects function as security instruments or development initiatives. This framework demonstrates that the security–development fusion is not linear but contingent and contested.

The findings yield three broader implications. First, even within a single migration corridor, outcomes vary depending on project timing and policy context: earlier cooperation, such as the Hotline, retained a humanitarian character, whereas later projects, like Direct Matching, reflected securitisation. Second,

externalising BC through DC has proven dysfunctional, failing both to control irregular migration and to deliver developmental gains. Third, Japan's trajectory parallels that of European donor states, suggesting similar risks of undermining aid legitimacy through neo-colonial dynamics.

In conclusion, this paper contributes new empirical evidence on Japan's externalised BC and advances a decolonial-assemblage framework for analysing the intersection of security and development. It argues that incorporating DC into BC externalisation not only weakens developmental objectives but also produces counterproductive security outcomes. For policymakers, the findings underscore the importance of recognising local agency, addressing structural causes of migration, and resisting the drift toward security-first logics if the goals of safe, orderly, and development-oriented migration are to be achieved.

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