



DA NANG MARINE ECONOMY: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: This article analyzes Da Nang's marine economy as a process of spatial restructuring of the Han River estuary–Da Nang Bay area under the combined impacts of natural conditions and institutional transformations. The study draws upon archaeological evidence, administrative records, and maritime accounts. The analysis is structured into four coherent historical phases: (1) the prehistoric–ancient period, marked by the formation of marine livelihoods and river–sea exchange networks; (2) the eleventh to eighteenth centuries, characterized by Da Nang's repositioning within the Central Vietnam port network through a “fore-port–central hub” model associated with Hoi An; (3) the nineteenth century to 1945, involving the modernization of the port city and its integration into the colonial economic system; and (4) the period from 1945 to the present, featuring reconstruction, renovation, and diversification of the marine economy (ports and logistics, fisheries, and marine tourism) under the imperatives of sustainability. The findings highlight Da Nang's role as a strategic maritime “nodal point” and offer policy implications for dual-use and risk-adaptive marine governance.

Keywords: Port city; Da Nang; Marine economy; History.

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1. Introduction

In Vietnamese history, estuary–bay spaces have consistently functioned as key interfaces between land and sea, where coastal livelihoods, inland–maritime transportation and trade, and strategic control over maritime space converged. Da Nang represents a salient example of this type of spatial formation. Benefiting from favorable natural conditions—most notably a sheltered bay and a river mouth connecting the coast to the hinterland—Da Nang has repeatedly been repositioned within shifting political and economic orders, from Champa and Đại Việt to the colonial era and the modern nation-state.

From the perspective of economic history, the development of Da Nang's marine economy did not follow a linear trajectory of cumulative port-city growth. Instead, it evolved through successive cycles of expansion, contraction, and functional transformation, punctuated by historical “rupture points.” These shifts reflected the interaction between relatively stable natural factors—such as navigation channels, sedimentation patterns, and anchorage capacity—and changing institutional arrangements, including estuary governance, trade regimes, militarization, and later market-

oriented reforms. The economic role of Da Nang's maritime space was therefore contingent not only on geography, but also on the ways in which political authorities and commercial actors sought to organize and exploit that geography.

Existing scholarship has examined Da Nang and its surrounding region from multiple angles, including archaeology (Sa Huỳnh and Champa cultures), the medieval and early modern history of the Thuận–Quảng region, the commercial history of Hoi An, colonial port-city development, and contemporary urban and regional planning. While these studies have generated valuable insights, they remain largely fragmented along disciplinary lines. In particular, there is still a lack of an integrated synthesis grounded in marine economic history that focuses on the mechanisms through which maritime and port-city spaces were repeatedly restructured over time. Such an approach is essential for explaining why the same estuarine space could successively function as an anchorage and transshipment point, a strategically controlled sea gate, a colonial port city, and later a diversified maritime economy shaped by war, reconstruction, and integration.

This article addresses that gap by framing Da Nang's maritime past as a long-term process of spatial and institutional



reconfiguration. It poses three main research questions. First, what natural foundations and historical–archaeological evidence point to the early emergence of river–sea economic interactions in the Da Nang area? Second, how did shifts in sovereignty, institutional arrangements, and regional political orders reposition Da Nang within the Central Vietnam port network, particularly in relation to Hoi An and East Asian maritime trade routes? Third, from the nineteenth century to the present, how did colonial rule, warfare, postwar reconstruction, and economic renovation transform the structure of Da Nang’s marine economy, and what implications do these transformations hold for contemporary debates on sustainable marine governance?

The objectives of the article are threefold. It seeks to systematize the historical evolution of Da Nang’s marine economy within a unified analytical framework; to identify the key drivers shaping functional change in maritime and port-city space—namely natural and infrastructural conditions, governance institutions, trade networks, colonialism and warfare, and processes of marketization and integration; and to propose a periodization that highlights spatial restructuring and the dual economic and strategic functions of the port across different historical phases.

In terms of scope, the study focuses on the Han River estuary–Da Nang Bay area and port sites associated with Da Nang in a broader interregional context, especially in relation to Quang Nam and Hoi An. Methodologically, it combines historical analysis with interdisciplinary perspectives from historical geography and economic history, drawing on archaeological and geomorphological evidence, administrative records, and secondary scholarship. A network-based approach is also employed to explain Da Nang’s transshipment role, its symbiotic relationship with neighboring ports, and shifting patterns of maritime centrality over time.

2. From Early Formation to the Tenth Century: The Construction of Estuarine Space and an Early Marine Economy

The marine economic history of Da Nang can be traced back to prehistoric times, when coastal communities in Central Vietnam gradually developed livelihood systems centered on the exploitation of maritime space and riverine networks. In the Quang Nam–Da Nang area, archaeological evidence identifies this region as an important sphere of the Sa Huỳnh cultural tradition and, subsequently, Champa. In these early formations, the sea functioned not only as a source of subsistence but also as a transportation corridor and a medium of exchange linking river basins, coastal zones, and offshore routes.

Understanding this early development requires attention to geomorphological conditions. The Da Nang–Han River estuary was primarily shaped by long-term sedimentary processes at the river mouth and along the coast. Geological studies suggest that around 4,500 years ago, the sea covered much of the Danak (Da Nang) area before gradually retreating eastward, leaving behind interconnected waterways and estuarine channels (Đức & Hương, 2024). Sedimentation from the Han River, combined with coastal currents, formed extensive sandbanks and a funnel-shaped estuary, producing a maritime space favorable for settlement, anchorage, and exchange (People’s Committee of Da Nang City, 2010). These natural conditions effectively preconfigured an open spatial system

that linked inland areas to the sea through the estuary, laying a structural foundation for early marine economic activity.

Archaeological discoveries further substantiate this interpretation. During the prehistoric and protohistoric periods (c. 300 BCE–100 CE), numerous Sa Huỳnh sites were identified along the Thu Bồn–Vu Gia river system, extending from upstream zones to the coastal lowlands (Da Nang Institute for Socio-Economic Development Studies, 2017). Artifacts such as bronze mirrors, bronze tools, Han-period coins, and materials of Indian origin—including agate, precious stones, and gold—indicate the existence of exchange networks extending beyond the local scale. These findings point to a vertically organized economic structure, in which river routes connected upland and lowland areas, combined with horizontal coastal connections through estuarine nodes. Together, these dynamics formed the basis of an early waterborne economy centered on estuary-mediated interaction.

In the ancient period, administrative and political frameworks further clarify Da Nang’s role within the regional maritime system. Under the Han dynasty, the area belonged to Nhật Nam Commandery; from the late second century onward, it formed part of Lý (Ri) Prefecture under Lâm Ấp, later Champa. Within the Champa polity, Da Nang was not merely a zone of dispersed settlement but also showed evidence of emerging urban and port-city functions. Several studies suggest that by the late ninth to early tenth century, the Amaravati region—corresponding to present-day Quang Nam–Da Nang—hosted the urban center of Rudrapura, tentatively located around today’s Cẩm Lệ area and extending toward Nại Hiên (Da Nang Institute for Socio-Economic Development Studies, 2017). This urban configuration indicates the early integration of settlement, administration, and maritime exchange within a shared estuarine space.

Nại Hiên, located in the present-day Hải Châu–Sơn Trà area, is widely regarded as an ancient Cham port. Later historical narratives recount that King Lê Thánh Tông anchored his fleet at Nại Hiên in 1471 to obtain freshwater from Bộng Well, whose origins are dated to the tenth century (Da Nang Institute for Socio-Economic Development Studies, 2017). While such accounts must be treated cautiously due to their retrospective nature, they nonetheless reinforce the interpretation of Nại Hiên as a long-standing technical stopover and transshipment node within coastal navigation networks.

At a broader analytical level, Wheeler’s (2005) study of coastal societies within the “Faifo trading world” conceptualizes the sea as a unifying pathway rather than a barrier. Short rivers and narrow coastal plains functioned as interconnected “islands,” linked by coastal navigation. Within this regional logic, Da Nang Bay and the Han River estuary emerge as a strategic maritime space where fishing, island resource exploitation, and exchange with China and Southeast Asia could converge. Historical geological research further indicates that sustained sediment accretion—estimated at an average of approximately 28 meters per year in parts of Central Vietnam—supported the formation of estuarine ecosystems conducive to marine economic activities, including fishing and early aquaculture (Hung & Hao, 2019).

Taken together, evidence from geomorphology, archaeology, and historical geography suggests that by the end of the first millennium, Da Nang had already developed as a structurally significant estuarine maritime space. Its early marine economy was shaped not by isolated growth, but by the interaction between

natural estuarine conditions, river–sea connectivity, and emerging port-city functions, establishing a durable foundation for later transformations in the region’s maritime history.

3. From the Eleventh to the Eighteenth Centuries: Restructuring Maritime Space within a Regional Order

Between the eleventh and eighteenth centuries, Da Nang’s marine economy entered a pivotal phase marked by the reorganization of estuarine maritime space under shifting political authority and regional trade dynamics. Building upon the early estuary-based maritime foundations outlined in Section 2, this period witnessed two interrelated structural transformations: first, the transfer of sovereignty and governance from Champa to Đại Việt; and second, the functional repositioning of Da Nang within the Central Vietnam port-city network, particularly in relation to Faifo under the Nguyễn Lords.

During the eleventh to fifteenth centuries, the Da Nang area remained part of the Champa polity, a maritime-oriented political entity integrated into Southeast Asian trade routes linking the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. Champa’s strength derived not only from long-distance maritime exchange but also from its ability to mobilize estuarine and coastal spaces as nodes of resource extraction, anchorage, and circulation. Within this system, Da Nang—known by names such as Danak or Cửa Hàn—functioned as an estuarine maritime space embedded in a wider network of coastal stopovers and exchange points rather than as an autonomous port-city. Its role was typically interpreted in relation to more prominent centers such as Indrapura (Đồng Dương) and the port of Đại Chiêm (later Faifo) (Da Nang Institute for Socio-Economic Development Studies, 2017). From an economic-historical perspective, this configuration reflects a pattern of distributed maritime functions, in which multiple estuaries collectively sustained regional connectivity.

From the fourteenth century onward, Đại Việt’s southward expansion fundamentally reshaped this maritime order. The incorporation of the Ô and Lý prefectures in 1306 and the administrative consolidation of Quảng Nam in 1471 marked a decisive shift in coastal governance (Da Nang Institute for Socio-Economic Development Studies, 2017). These changes did not merely redraw political boundaries; they reconfigured the institutional framework through which estuarine and maritime spaces were managed. Champa’s relatively decentralized maritime system gave way to Đại Việt’s more territorially integrated governance, laying the groundwork for a new organization of port-city functions.

By the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, with the establishment of the Nguyễn Lords’ regime in Đàng Trong, Da Nang’s maritime space was increasingly organized according to a sea-oriented development strategy. This period saw the consolidation of an integrated river–sea port system designed to facilitate exchange with Japan, China, and, increasingly, European trading partners (Pham, 2013). Within this system, Da Nang emerged as a port-city node with distinct technical and logistical functions. Operating under a “fore-port–central hub” model, Faifo served as the primary center of international trade, while Da Nang (Cửa Hàn/Tourane) functioned as the main anchorage for ocean-going vessels, providing shelter, resupply, and transshipment

services before goods were transported inland via estuarine and riverine routes.

This functional differentiation relied on a network of waterways, most notably the Cỏ Cò River (Lộ Cảnh Giang), which linked Da Nang Bay to Faifo. Large vessels typically anchored in the bay, transferring cargo to smaller boats for onward movement through estuaries and rivers. As a result, Western observers often conceptualized Da Nang and Faifo as components of a single maritime complex with two complementary entrances—Cửa Hàn (Turon) and Cửa Đại (Pulluciambello)—serving different segments of the same port-city system (Da Nang Historical Science Association, 2007). This arrangement highlights the importance of estuarine connectivity in sustaining regional trade and underscores Da Nang’s role as a logistical extension of Faifo rather than a competing center.

From the mid-sixteenth century, Da Nang also became an early site of contact with European maritime actors, beginning with Antonio de Faria’s arrival in 1535 and followed by Spanish, Dutch, English, and French merchant vessels. European navigators frequently described Da Nang Bay as a large, well-protected harbor, emphasizing its strategic value for long-distance maritime routes (Da Nang Historical Science Association, 2007). Within the broader East Asian trading order, although Faifo concentrated Japanese and Chinese merchant communities, Da Nang functioned as a secure maritime gateway, particularly when weather conditions and the anchorage requirements of large vessels shaped navigational choices.

Maritime commerce in this period was inseparable from political and military considerations. In the context of rivalry between Đàng Trong and Đàng Ngoài, the Nguyễn Lords leveraged ports such as Da Nang to access strategic materials and weaponry, including copper and zinc. Port trade thus became embedded in a broader logic of state-building and power consolidation, illustrating how maritime space served both economic and strategic purposes (Phuong, 2017).

By the late eighteenth century, environmental change introduced new dynamics into this system. Sedimentation at Cửa Đại and along waterways such as the Cỏ Cò River reduced Faifo’s capacity to accommodate large vessels, weakening the established “fore-port–central hub” configuration. These geomorphological constraints encouraged a gradual shift of maritime activities toward Da Nang, where anchorage conditions remained more favorable. Although extending beyond the chronological scope of this section, early nineteenth-century institutional decisions—such as the 1835 edict concentrating Western vessels at Cửa Hàn—demonstrate the continuity of trends already visible in the late eighteenth century (Quốc, 2012). These developments anticipate the more explicit transformation of Da Nang into a colonial port-city, examined in Section 4.

In sum, between the eleventh and eighteenth centuries, Da Nang’s marine economy evolved through a process of maritime space restructuring shaped by institutional change, regional trade integration, and environmental conditions. Building on early estuary-based interactions, Da Nang transitioned from a component of the Champa maritime system to an integral node within Đại Việt’s port-city network, operating in close symbiosis with Faifo. The gradual shift toward greater functional autonomy by the late eighteenth century reflects the combined effects of natural advantages—such as a sheltered bay and deep anchorage—and

strategic governance choices under the Nguyễn Lords, setting the stage for Da Nang's emergence as a colonial port-city in the nineteenth century.

4. The Nineteenth Century to 1945: Port-City Modernization and Integration into the Colonial Maritime Economy

From the nineteenth century to 1945, Da Nang underwent a fundamental functional transformation: from a defensive military outpost protecting the imperial capital of Huế to a modern port city (*ville portuaire*), becoming a key node in the French colonial extraction strategy in Indochina.

Early nineteenth century: defensive maritime logic under the Nguyễn dynasty

During the early nineteenth century, under the Nguyễn dynasty, maritime policy in Da Nang was primarily defensive in nature. A dense system of fortifications—such as Điện Hải, An Hải, and associated coastal defenses (the *Trấn Dương thất bảo*)—was constructed to control navigation channels and prevent seaborne incursions. Although Emperor Minh Mạng issued a decree in 1835 requiring Western vessels to concentrate at the Hàn River estuary, the primary objective remained surveillance and security rather than the promotion of free trade.

French conquest and the establishment of a colonial port-city

Following the French invasion of 1858, Da Nang (Tourane) was selected as the initial point of attack and subsequently occupied as a military base. In 1888, it was formally designated a concession under the Patenôtre Treaty. This occupation reflected France's strategy of "naval colonialism," which viewed ports as strategic gateways linking the South China Sea to inland territories and facilitating the extraction of resources from central Vietnam. Under colonial rule, Da Nang's maritime economy was integrated into the Indochinese network, specializing in the transshipment of rice, rubber, coal, and agricultural products from Huế and Quảng Nam (Galloudec, 2021). However, local resistance and global economic crises constrained its growth, preventing Da Nang from developing into a major commercial port comparable to Saigon or Hải Phòng.

Between 1858 and the 1880s, France gradually consolidated control after its initial military setbacks, using Da Nang as a strategic base in the conquest of southern Vietnam and the establishment of the Indochinese Federation in 1887, within which Da Nang was administered as an autonomous concession. The 1884 treaty opening ports such as Da Nang to international trade led to the creation of the Navelle Commission, which proposed an expansive concession plan including the Tiên Sa Peninsula for deep-water port development. In 1888, a royal decree transferred approximately 1,366 hectares of Da Nang to French administration, allowing the application of French law and the construction of separate colonial infrastructure (Galloudec, 2021). During this period, Da Nang became a functional "brick" in the Indochinese port system, linked to railways and later aviation to support inland resource extraction. Local uprisings, notably the Cần Vương movement (1885–1887), delayed economic development and forced colonial authorities to prioritize security over commercial expansion.

Port modernization under colonial extraction policies

Modernization of Da Nang port began in 1901 as part of the French colonial exploitation agenda. Key projects included dredging the Hàn River and the construction of a 60-meter metal pier in 1910. During the 1920s, ambitious plans were proposed—such as a 2,850-meter breakwater and the dredging of 900,000 cubic meters of sediment to accommodate large vessels—but most were abandoned due to financial constraints and local resistance (*Bulletin économique de l'Indochine*, 1901). By 1930, two 1.5-ton steam cranes and a 1,800 m² warehouse had been installed, increasing cargo-handling capacity to 112,320 tons by 1924 (*Bulletin économique de l'Indochine*, 1901). Additional improvements included the construction of the Zlet lighthouse in 1903 and a buoyage system to facilitate safer navigation, reflecting broader nineteenth-century port modernization trends such as reinforced concrete structures and mechanized dredging.

Despite these investments, by the 1930s the port continued to handle mainly small-scale cargo, while large vessels were forced to anchor offshore due to limited depth. The global economic crisis of 1929–1933 further stalled development, leaving Da Nang a secondary port compared to Saigon, which emerged as Southeast Asia's principal maritime hub.

Integration into the colonial maritime economy

Da Nang's integration into the colonial maritime economy was evident in its dual commercial and military roles, supporting the export of rubber, coal, and rice from central Vietnam. French firms such as *Société des Docks et Houillères de Tourane* controlled port operations, while colonial authorities imposed tariff systems and commercial monopolies. Mandatory consumption of opium, salt, and rice alcohol by local communities financed infrastructure projects and accounted for approximately 44 percent of the colonial budget by 1920. Da Nang's connection to the Da Nang–Huế railway (1905) and the establishment of an airport in 1926 strengthened transport networks supporting agricultural extraction. Major colonial enterprises—including *Banque de l'Indochine* and *Union Commerciale Indochinoise*—dominated maritime trade, using Da Nang as a transshipment point for goods bound for East Asia and Europe. Local labor was heavily exploited: approximately 2,000 dockworkers worked 10–18 hours per day for low wages, reflecting a colonial economic system based on coercive labor and heavy taxation (SASGES, 2015). By the 1930s, Da Nang had become part of the so-called "Indochinese moment," marked by the expansion of colonial conglomerates through state subsidies, followed by decline after the 1928 crisis.

Assessment

Within the logic of French colonial exploitation in central Vietnam, Da Nang was deliberately shaped as a strategic port rather than a purely commercial hub. Its sheltered bay, proximity to Huế, and location along the north–south axis made Tourane particularly suitable for military control, logistics, and deterrence, rather than large-scale civilian trade. Consequently, despite selective investments in port modernization, Da Nang functioned primarily as a "strategic auxiliary port" within the Indochinese system, while major commercial roles were concentrated in Saigon and Hải Phòng—ports directly linked to primary production zones and export networks. This institutional choice helps explain why the colonial modernization of Da Nang's port was selective, discontinuous, and did not result in a commercial breakthrough,

setting the structural constraints inherited by the port-city on the eve of independence.

5. From 1945 to the Present: Reconstruction, Transformation, and Diversification of the Modern Maritime Economy

From 1945 onward, Da Nang's maritime economy entered a new historical trajectory marked by discontinuity, reconstruction, and functional diversification. Building on the long-term evolution of the estuary-based maritime space (Section 3) and the selectively modernized colonial port-city (Section 4), the post-1945 period witnessed a gradual shift from a security-dominated port to a multi-sector maritime economy integrating port-logistics, fisheries, and marine-based services, increasingly constrained by coastal environmental governance. This process can be analytically divided into four phases: 1945–1954, 1954–1975, 1975–1986, and from 1986 to the present.

1945–1954: Rupture of commercial functions and wartime logistics

In the immediate postwar years (1945–1954), Da Nang's maritime economy experienced a sharp rupture. Armed conflict disrupted trade flows, reduced port capacity, and destabilized transport routes. The port-city, whose colonial-era infrastructure had been oriented toward strategic control rather than autonomous commercial growth (Section 4), now operated primarily under military constraints. Conventional maritime commerce largely collapsed.

Nevertheless, at the local scale, the maritime space did not become economically inert. Informal coastal shipping and inland waterway networks continued to function through small vessels, sustaining the movement of food, materials, and resistance logistics. Fisheries during this period remained predominantly artisanal and nearshore, constrained by limited access to offshore grounds, shortages of vessels and labor, and heightened insecurity. As a result, coastal livelihoods became increasingly precarious, and capital accumulation within maritime communities remained minimal.

1954–1975: Militarization of port infrastructure and constrained fisheries modernization

Between 1954 and 1975, Da Nang's maritime space was deeply shaped by prolonged warfare. Port infrastructure was increasingly militarized, particularly in areas capable of accommodating large-tonnage vessels. This reinforced Da Nang's role as a strategic logistics node rather than a civilian port-city. While military supply and transport capacities expanded, civilian maritime economic activities struggled to develop coherent value chains due to security priorities, blockades, and the disconnection between infrastructure investment and civilian market demand.

In fisheries, a process of limited modernization unfolded. State-led management structures were introduced, vessels were gradually motorized, and fishing gear improved. Archival records indicate that catch volumes occasionally reached around 24,000 tons in the main season and 10,000 tons in the secondary season, supported by a workforce of nearly 19,000 fishers by 1971. These figures reflect a transition from purely artisanal practices toward semi-industrial production. However, structural constraints persisted: security conditions restricted offshore fishing, fishery ports and logistics services were underdeveloped, processing

industries remained weak, and production organization was inefficient. Consequently, most output was absorbed by local consumption, with only limited interregional circulation.

Overall, during the resistance wars against France and the United States, Da Nang's maritime economy was characterized by functional imbalance: the port operated primarily as a military asset, while civilian maritime sectors remained fragmented and underdeveloped.

1975–1986: Postwar reconstruction under a centrally planned economy

Following national reunification in 1975, Da Nang's maritime economy entered a phase of postwar reconstruction within a centrally planned economic framework. In the port sector, policy priorities focused on restoring cargo-handling capacity, storage facilities, and transport services to support commodity circulation for Central Vietnam and the Central Highlands. In 1976, Da Nang Port was formally re-established as a state-owned port enterprise. Cargo throughput initially reached approximately 0.535 million tons and gradually increased to about 0.602 million tons by 1979, reflecting incremental improvements through dredging, rehabilitation of warehouses, and equipment repairs.

Despite these gains, the centrally planned system constrained operational efficiency and capital accumulation. Investment decisions, pricing mechanisms, and circulation controls limited technological upgrading and reduced the port's capacity to respond flexibly to market signals.

Fisheries in this period faced the dual challenges of postwar recovery and adaptation to collective production models. Although policies encouraged offshore fishing, limited vessel capacity, inadequate preservation technology, and weak support services constrained effectiveness. By the late 1970s, Da Nang's fishing fleet comprised nearly 3,000 vessels, with annual catches of around 30,000 tons, largely destined for local consumption. While recovery was evident, the sector failed to establish an integrated maritime value chain.

From Đổi Mới (1986) to the present: Marketization, integration, and diversification

The introduction of Đổi Mới reforms in 1986 marked a structural turning point. Da Nang's port-city was progressively re-integrated into regional and global maritime networks through market-oriented reforms, infrastructure modernization, and institutional restructuring. Major investments upgraded port facilities, most notably through the expansion of Tiên Sa Port. By the late 2010s, total cargo-handling capacity reached approximately 10–12 million tons per year, reflecting Da Nang's repositioning as a regional logistics hub.

This transformation extended beyond the port itself. Da Nang's maritime economy diversified along three interrelated pillars. First, port and logistics services developed through modernization of governance and infrastructure, increased specialization, and integration into containerized global supply chains. Second, marine-based services and coastal tourism emerged as a major growth sector, leveraging beaches, bay landscapes, and waterfront urban space. Tourism growth was embedded in regional networks linking Da Nang with Faifo (Hoi An), Huế, and neighboring destinations, reinforcing the city's role as a service-oriented port-city rather than a standalone commercial harbor.

Third, fisheries and aquaculture diversified through a combination of offshore capture fisheries and aquaculture development. By the mid-2020s, Da Nang's fishing fleet had expanded significantly, and total fisheries output exceeded 150,000 tons annually. At the same time, sustainability challenges became increasingly visible. Overexploitation of marine resources, coastal pollution, and climate-related risks placed growing pressure on the maritime economy, necessitating stronger coastal governance and environmental regulation.

Policy framework and long-term implications

Since the late twentieth century, Da Nang has shifted from a security-oriented maritime space to a diversified maritime economy integrating logistics, services, and fisheries. This transition has been strongly shaped by national policy frameworks, particularly Vietnam's strategy for sustainable marine economic development articulated in Resolution No. 36-NQ/TW (2018). Within this framework, Da Nang has been repositioned as a regional node for maritime transport, logistics, marine services, and innovation.

From a long-term historical perspective, the post-1945 trajectory of Da Nang's maritime economy represents neither a linear continuation of the early modern estuary-based system (Section 3) nor a simple extension of the colonial port-city model (Section 4). Rather, it reflects a cumulative process in which inherited spatial advantages—such as the sheltered bay and estuary configuration—interacted with shifting institutional priorities, from defense and reconstruction to market integration and sustainability. Contemporary outcomes are thus best understood not solely in terms of growth indicators, but in the city's evolving capacity to balance economic expansion with environmental governance in a complex maritime space.

6. Conclusion and Implications

An interdisciplinary historical approach to the maritime economy makes it clear that Da Nang's maritime development has not followed a linear growth trajectory. Rather, it has evolved through successive cycles of spatial restructuring of the estuary–port-city system, shaped by the combined effects of natural conditions and institutional choices across different historical periods. The Han River estuary–Da Nang Bay, with its sheltered waters, anchorage capacity, and river–sea connectivity, provided a durable geo-economic foundation. Yet it was the ways in which political authorities and governing institutions exploited and managed this maritime space that ultimately determined Da Nang's shifting role over time.

During the prehistoric, ancient, and medieval periods, Da Nang's maritime economy developed within a network-based logic. Initially, it functioned as a coastal settlement and exchange node closely tied to littoral livelihoods; later, it became an important link within the port-city system of central Vietnam. The “fore-port–core port” linkage between Da Nang and Faifo (Hoi An) in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries demonstrates that regional maritime trade did not operate through isolated port-cities, but rather through flexible functional specialization among multiple nodes. This system was strongly conditioned by geomorphological dynamics and maritime technical requirements. Processes such as sedimentation and channel shifts, combined with changes in governance and trade policy, gradually redirected commercial gravity toward Da Nang, laying the groundwork for

the strategic significance of the Han River estuary in subsequent periods.

The period from the nineteenth century to 1945 marked a major turning point, as Da Nang was incorporated into the colonial maritime economy. Although port infrastructure was selectively modernized, Da Nang did not emerge as a primary commercial hub. Instead, it was shaped primarily as a strategic port serving control, logistics, and naval operations within the framework of French maritime colonialism. This experience highlights the dual-use character of port space: ports function simultaneously as economic infrastructure and instruments of power. It also explains why port modernization in Da Nang was fragmented and selective, failing to produce the commercial scale achieved by Saigon or Hai Phong.

From 1945 to the present, Da Nang's maritime economy has continued to evolve in close interaction with political and institutional contexts. Prolonged warfare led to a structural imbalance, in which port infrastructure and maritime space were oriented toward military objectives rather than the development of civilian value chains. The centrally planned period after 1975 prioritized the restoration of port capacity and commodity circulation, but its effectiveness was constrained by limited resources and rigid operational mechanisms. Only after the Đổi Mới reforms of 1986 did Da Nang's maritime economy enter a sustained phase of market-oriented restructuring and international integration. This phase witnessed the emergence of a multi-pillar model combining port–logistics, marine-based services and tourism, and fisheries/aquaculture. At the same time, it exposed significant challenges related to resource depletion, environmental pressure, and the growing need for sustainable coastal governance.

Viewed across the full historical trajectory, a central conclusion emerges: Da Nang's maritime capacity and position have been shaped by the intersection of natural advantages inherent in the estuary–bay system, its nodal role within regional maritime networks, and the ways in which states and institutions have deployed the port as a strategic asset in different historical contexts. Consequently, contemporary assessments and development strategies for Da Nang's maritime economy cannot rely solely on short-term growth indicators. They must be grounded in a long-term historical perspective capable of identifying underlying drivers, structural constraints, and latent risks, thereby supporting a development model that balances economic efficiency, strategic security, and ecological sustainability.

Research and Policy Implications

From a historical perspective, the case of Da Nang demonstrates that the sustainable development of an estuarine maritime space depends not only on natural endowments or infrastructure expansion, but fundamentally on governance arrangements and functional coordination within the broader sea–port–city network. The historical experience of the “fore-port–core port” relationship between Da Nang and Faifo, as well as Da Nang's role as a strategic port during the colonial period, suggests that maritime development should be approached through a systemic and interregional framework. This perspective helps avoid narrow growth strategies or unnecessary competition among ports.

Moreover, historical cycles of sedimentation, warfare, and overexploitation underscore the critical importance of evidence-based coastal governance that integrates economic growth with ecosystem protection and risk resilience. The overarching lesson drawn from Da Nang's maritime history is that a maritime economy can only achieve long-term sustainability when embedded within a dual-use governance framework—one that harmonizes economic objectives with national security considerations and the long-term conservation of marine resources.

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