Opinion – Could Vietnamese-Style Hedging Have Prevented an All-Out War in Ukraine?

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When discussing foreign policy strategies available to medium and small powers, IR experts tend to focus on bandwagoning and balancing – concepts popularized by scholars such as Kenneth Waltz and Randall Schweller. Bandwagoning is considered a strategy of weak states whose hopes of survival, in a system dominated by great powers, can be shored up by closely aligning with a regional hegemon. Balancing is thought to be suitable for medial states who feel confident about counteracting a rising or revisionist power, together with other like-minded, status quo actors. However, there is a middle path not receiving nearly enough attention from academia and practitioners. The approach is called hedging, and it revolves around three central tenets: avoiding explicit association as well as confrontation with great powers; being simultaneously deferent and defiant toward the regional hegemon; and diversifying diplomatic relations and economic cooperation with a wide range of regional and global actors, with the goal of averting dependency from any single power.

An excellent example of a successful hedging strategy is Vietnam. As a country sharing a land and sea border with the People's Republic of China – including an ongoing territorial dispute in the South China Sea – Vietnam was expected (along with other countries in Southeast Asia) to join a U.S.-led balancing coalition that would counteract China's rise, and ensure a rules-based order in the wider Indo-Pacific region. According to prevailing neo-realist thinking, this would be a rational choice for Hanoi, which has ample evidence from its national history regarding Chinese encroachment. However, there are no signs that Vietnam is pursuing an external balancing strategy towards its big neighbor in the North. The country's leadership remains steadfast regarding the "Four No's" defense policy. These are: 1. no partaking in military alliances, 2. no siding with one country to act against another, 3. no foreign military bases on Vietnamese territory or using Vietnam as leverage to counteract other countries, and 4. no using force or threatening to use force in international relations. As long as the "Four No's" remain integral to CPV's party line, Hanoi's membership in AUKUS, QUAD or any similar security partnership is out of the question.

When it comes to strengthening one's own defense capabilities, Vietnam is doing what it can to modernize its heavily Soviet/Russian-based military systems and sustain a credible deterrent force. According to GlobalData, Vietnam's total defense budget is expected to grow from $ 6.5 billion in 2020 to $ 10.2 billion by the end of the decade. Although this represents a noticeable increase, it is still a far cry from China's defense budget for 2024, worth $ 231.4 billion. Moreover, Hanoi's boost of defense spending corresponds to Vietnam's overall economic growth and is consistent with the country's official foreign policy of independence, self-reliance, multilateralization and diversification; particularly the first two points. In other words, it would be farfetched to claim that Vietnam is investing in a military buildup aimed at matching China's capabilities.

Against Western, or more precisely – American expectations, Vietnam has obviously chosen not to balance China. There are several reasons for this strategic decision. First and foremost, Vietnam doesn't perceive China as an existential threat; the long-standing feud over territorial waters and exclusive economic zones in the South China Sea is simply not as severe as Western observers thought or hoped it would be. Secondly, up to this point China hasn't given Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries strong enough incentives to create or join an anti-Chinese coalition. However, this could change easily should Beijing opt for coercive reunification with Taiwan. The third and fourth reasons aren't related to China at all, but its chief competitor – the United States. Hanoi is weary of

Washington's persistent democracy versus autocracy narrative and suspects "hostile forces" of contemplating a regime change in Vietnam, if not in the short or medium term, then certainly in the long run. Additionally, Vietnam's leaders are not persuaded by the U.S.' powerful presence in the Indo-Pacific, fearing possible abandonment should Washington embark on an isolationist course under a reelected Donald Trump or a like-minded presidential administration in the future. Finally, on a purely theoretical note, Hanoi is aware that balancing China would lead to a stabilization of the bipolar order, and bipolarity inevitably leads to the creation of spheres of influence which are dominated by the respective great powers, leaving very little (if any) room for the maneuvering of lesser states. In short, by refusing to balance China, Vietnam is protecting its autonomy in international affairs.

Too big (a country of 100 million inhabitants) and too self-confident (a nation that has prevailed against Japanese, French and American armies) to choose bandwagoning, Vietnam has opted for the hedging strategy. As explained in the introduction, hedging involves equidistance to the major centers of power. Additionally, due to their Taoist-Confucian cultural base, the Vietnamese do not perceive other countries as black or white, but rather as black and white (yin and yang). This means that great powers, and all other international actors for that matter, are simultaneously perceived as friends and foes, as potential partners and possible threats. Consequently, Hanoi is careful not to provoke Beijing by getting too intimate with Washington, while at the same time it is deepening its economic and cultural ties with the U.S. and other liberal-democratic states such as South Korea, Japan and Australia. Similarly, the Vietnamese leadership tacitly approves U.S.' engagement in keeping the Indo-Pacific "free and open", while resisting American overtures for tighter security cooperation. The Vietnamese variant of strategic ambiguity has ensured that Hanoi is courted by all and threatened by none; at least not in the way that Ukraine's very existence is threatened by Russia.

Regarding the ongoing war in Eastern Europe, Vietnam remains neutral in line with its policy of not publicly opposing great powers. It has abstained on four UNGA resolutions condemning Russia's attack on Ukraine. Expectedly, it has equally refrained from recognizing Russia's illegal annexations of Ukrainian territory. Hanoi was Moscow's ally during the Cold War and Russia remains Vietnam's biggest supplier of weapons. However, the analogies between Sino-Vietnamese and Russo-Ukrainian relations are hard to miss. In both cases there is a vast asymmetry of power, as well as a long history of political domination and cultural influence by the larger state. How is it then, that China and Vietnam successfully avoid escalation despite a protracted maritime dispute, whereas the Russia and Ukraine got embroiled in the worst armed conflict on European soil since the end of World War II?

From a Vietnamese perspective, it could be argued that Ukraine had miscalculated when it chose to balance Russia by aligning with the West in the aftermath of the 2004 Orange revolution (yet another reason for Vietnam's ruling communist party to fear regime change in Hanoi). The drive towards membership in the European Union and NATO under presidents Viktor Yushchenko and Petro Poroshenko was a clear signal that Ukraine wanted to steer clear of the "Russian world" and join the "collective West". In other words, it was a zero-sum game that would result in an advantage for Washington (Brussels being a secondary actor) and an equivalent loss for Moscow. In comparison, Hanoi always makes sure that any rapprochement between Vietnam and a Western or liberal-democratic country is not perceived as detrimental to Beijing. For example, a U.S. aircraft carrier can make a port call in Da Nang, but the United States Navy shouldn't expect to gain permission to use it as its permanent base in the South China Sea. Every move Hanoi makes, or doesn't make, is intended to serve Vietnam's national interests without upsetting the regional status quo.

Since 2004, the tumultuous Ukrainian democracy has produced three openly pro-Western presidents (Yushchenko, Poroshenko and Zelenskyy) who sought to balance Russia, and one unabashedly pro-Russia head of state (Yanukovych), who bandwagoned with the Eastern side. According to the Vietnamese philosophy of foreign policy, both approaches have been wrong. Instead, Kiev should have opted for the hedging strategy and should have treated Moscow ambivalently, as both a partner and a threat. Perhaps, by studying China-Vietnam relations and maintaining a policy of equidistance vis-à-vis Russia and the U.S., Ukraine could have averted an all-out war. The different outcomes – peace between China and Vietnam, war between Russia and Ukraine – of these otherwise most similar cases point to a strategic rethinking of foreign policy at large. That is, to carefully assess the pros and cons of strategies available to medium and small powers in light of their relations with revisionist states and rising powers. It might just be that balancing is not the appropriate reaction to every (potential) hegemon.

The views and opinions expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Croatia or the Croatian Military Academy.

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