Bamboo in the Wind: Vietnam's Quest for Neutrality

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NGUYEN KHAC GIANG, JUL 12 2024

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Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, Vietnam's foreign policy has gradually transformed from an ideologically-driven approach to a more interest-based one. In doing so, Hanoi has managed to overcome its isolation and deeply integrate into the international society. This integration has been achieved by normalizing relations with global and regional powers, particularly the United States and China, and actively participating in various multilateral platforms, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), with a primary focus on economic integration. Through its neutrality and flexibility in dealing with great powers, Vietnam has greatly benefited from the post-Cold War world order. It has maintained strong military ties with Russia while enjoying access to the vast export markets of the West and reaping the benefits of trade with China. As a result, Vietnam has emerged as one of the top performers in terms of economic growth over the past four decades, all the while enjoying a relatively peaceful international environment. Hanoi has also become a leader within ASEAN.

Although not formally articulated in Vietnam's foreign policy doctrine, neutrality serves as a strategic cornerstone in Hanoi's approach to international relations. This principle has facilitated Vietnam's transition from a state of isolation to becoming an integrated member of the global community. Known as 'bamboo diplomacy' (*Ngo*ại *giao cây tre*), Hanoi is lauded for its ability to ensure its own security without the need to align or 'bandwagon' with any major powers for a security umbrella. However, this approach is not without challenges. The increasing assertiveness of China poses one of Vietnam's most pressing security challenges, forcing the country to make difficult policy decisions regarding potentially closer alignment with the United States. Moreover, the inability of multilateral platforms like ASEAN to effectively resolve transnational disputes has limited Hanoi's options for achieving its foreign policy objectives without jeopardizing its neutral stance. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has strained Vietnam's longstanding military ties with Russia, its primary armament supplier, making it more challenging to balance relations with Beijing. Like other countries in the region, Vietnam is reluctant to choose between the United States and China. Nevertheless, as competition between these great powers intensifies, the option of delaying a decision may become increasingly untenable.

This chapter aims to comprehend Vietnam's foreign policy transition from Cold War bandwagoning to its current strategy of bamboo diplomacy. In doing so, it outlines the key characteristics of Vietnam's neutrality, the factors influencing its foreign policy decisions, and how Hanoi navigates its strategic autonomy within the uncertain geopolitical landscape of twenty-first century Asia.

From Communism to Pragmatism: The Pillar of Vietnam's Multi-directional Foreign Policy

Vietnam presents a fascinating case study which encapsulates the shifting dynamics of the global world order. This ranges from the post-Second World War independence movements to the intense superpower rivalry between the US and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, then on to the peace dividend of the post-Cold War era, and finally to the contemporary resurgence of great power competition between the US and China. Over the same period, Vietnam's foreign policy has undergone a significant transformation, beginning with its revolutionary foundations,

transitioning through an ideologically- driven approach, and ultimately evolving into a framework deeply rooted in pragmatism.

Since the declaration of Vietnamese independence in 1945, extending through to its unification in 1975, Vietnam's foreign policy was fundamentally dominated by ideology. This period, deeply rooted in the Cold War, was heavily influenced by communism, and diplomacy served primarily as a weapon in their battles for liberation, first against the French in the First Indochina War (1945–1954), and subsequently during the Vietnam War (1954–1975). As a fledgling communist state, Vietnam's agency in its foreign policy was significantly curtailed, with the course largely charted by its larger allies – China and the Soviet Union. This reality was starkly evident in the 1954 Geneva Convention, which resulted in the partition of North and South Vietnam after France's defeat in Dien Bien Phu. This outcome satisfied the interests of major powers like the Soviet Union, the US, and China, but left Hanoi greatly disillusioned, setting the stage for another two decades of war.

The shift in Vietnam's foreign policy began post-1975, following the Fall of Saigon and the country's unification. Bolstered, and perhaps overconfident, by victory, Vietnam sought greater autonomy in international relations, as evidenced when it joined the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1976, signalling a desire for a larger role within the communist bloc. However, conflicts, notably with the invasion of Cambodia to overthrow the Khmer Rouge in 1978 and the subsequent Chinese invasion of Vietnam in 1979, disrupted these aspirations. The resulting international blockade and consistent northern threats compelled Vietnam to tighten its relationship with the Soviet Union. Upon signing an alliance in 1978, Vietnam effectively became a regional satellite of the Soviet Union, often dubbed the 'little Soviet Union'.

The end of the Cold War prompted another transformation in Vietnam's foreign policy. Left isolated following the Soviet Union's collapse, communist Vietnam had to rethink its strategy for survival. Initially, Hanoi sought to collaborate with Beijing in reinvigorating dwindling global communist movements. But when faced with a lukewarm response from China, which said it considered Hanoi as a comrade but not an ally, Vietnam came to the realization that to survive and prosper in the new world order, an ideological approach to foreign policy would not suffice (Tung 2021). This insight sparked a strategic reorientation in Hanoi's foreign policy, transitioning from revolutionary communism to pragmatism (Vu 2016).

This shift manifested with the normalization of relations with former adversaries – China and the United States – in 1991 and 1995, respectively. Vietnam began participating in various international organizations, from the World Trade Organization to regional platforms such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), and ASEAN. In this diplomatic era, Vietnam re-established and maintained relations across a broad spectrum, from autocratic states such as North Korea to advanced capitalist countries it once considered adversaries. This pragmatic approach allowed Vietnam to benefit significantly from the post-Cold War 'peace dividend', boasting an economic growth rate surpassed only by China over the past four decades. Vietnam has emerged as a new Asian tiger, drawing substantial foreign direct investment from around the world.

Despite its communist roots, Vietnam's relations with fellow communist nations such as North Korea and Cuba have been minimized, further underscoring its turn towards pragmatic foreign policy. Aside from symbolic exchanges, these countries play no significant role in Vietnam's foreign policy calculations. For the world's remaining communist nations – Laos and China – Hanoi's relations are driven more by geopolitical and economic considerations than by ideology.

Vietnam has achieved success with its strategic adjustments in the post-Cold War era, effectively safeguarding its main national interests. However, the evolving geopolitical landscape in East Asia and globally, characterized by China's ascent and increasing maritime tensions, presents fresh challenges. Particularly, incidents such as China's 2014 deployment of an oil rig into Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), the introduction of China's self-proclaimed nine-dash line claiming 80 per cent of the South China Sea, and its aggressive land reclamation and militarization of regional waters have put Vietnam's neutrality policy under strain. While the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) rejected China's claims in a 2016 ruling, it could not halt Beijing's ambitions. As security concerns gain prominence, the question of how Vietnam can maintain its 'neutral' stance in an increasingly polarized world

comes to the fore.

Bamboo Diplomacy: Neutrality With Vietnamese Characteristics

The term 'neutrality' (*trung lập*) is not positively viewed within the context of Vietnamese foreign policy. Official documentation never labels Vietnam asa 'neutral state'. Instead, Vietnamese thinkers and writers – both within and outside the regime's framework – often use the term to depict countries with inadequate defensive capabilities that rely on astute diplomatic manoeuvring for survival (e.g. Cambodia, Finland, Switzerland, and Sweden). For instance, in its coverage of the Finnish elections in 2015, the Vietnam News Agency praised Finland as a 'small nation' for its wisdom in not 'aggressively rearming itself' and maintaining a delicate balance between NATO and Russia (Vietnam News Agency 2015). Moreover, when the Russian invasion of Ukraine occurred, several state-affiliated commentators criticized Kyiv for abandoning 'neutrality' and moving too close to the West (Dung 2022). In this context, neutrality signifies passivity in defence policy and vulnerability amidst great power competitions.

Conversely, 'neutrality' can also refer to states that implement a robust pragmatic foreign policy to maximize their interests, a descriptor often applied to Thailand and Singapore, particularly during the Cold War. In both interpretations, neutrality implies pragmatism and the absence of idealism.

Hanoi, identifying itself as a socialist state, believes that foreign policy must align with the state's political ideology. This was evident during the Cold War, as Vietnam adopted a revolutionary foreign policy, but has been challenging to implement following the collapse of the communist bloc and Vietnam's deep integration into global society. Consequently, there is a noticeable incongruity between Hanoi's intentions and its actions in post-Cold War foreign policy.

Despite Hanoi's commendation of communism, its relationships with its former allies are largely symbolic. While Russia is one of the only six countries that share a 'comprehensive strategic partnership' with Vietnam, their bilateral relationship – in terms of culture, trade, or investment – falls short compared to those with countries like the United States or Japan, two of Vietnam's former democratic enemies. Moscow remains crucial for Hanoi in two strategic areas, namely oil exploration in the South China Sea and weapon supply. However, both are under considerable challenges in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Besides exchanging ceremonial greetings on special occasions, Hanoi lacks substantial economic ties with the remaining communist states of Cuba and North Korea. Its relations with the other two communist nations, China and Laos, are driven by economic and geopolitical needs rather than ideological ties. In fact, since the end of the Cold War, Vietnam's foreign policy has increasingly prioritized national interest and pragmatism over ideology (Thayer 2018, 24). In an effort to reconcile the discrepancy between ideology and pragmatism, Vietnamese foreign policy thinkers have attempted to integrate traditional factors into the post-Cold War equation. This is apparent when examining how the Vietnam Communist Party (VCP) addresses foreign policy in its political reports, which represent the country's key grand strategy documents and guide all major policy decisions for the subsequent five years.

During the 7th Party Congress in 1991, just a few months before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the focus remained on Vietnam's relationships with key communist states and on its 'class solidarity' with communist movements around the world (Vietnamese Communist Party 2006, 75–76). However, since then communist objectives in foreign policy have been gradually supplanted by more nationalist goals. By the time of the 12th and 13th Congresses (in 2016 and 2021 respectively), the prevailing theme in Vietnamese foreign policy had shifted towards multilateralism, respect for international law, protection of national interest and identity, and deeper integration into regional and international communities. Cooperation with other communist movements and parties is mentioned only in passing, and with a stipulation that it should be carried out 'on the basis of national interest'.

In terms of military policy, Hanoi upholds a rigid 'Four No's' policy (originally the 'Three No's,' with the final point added in 2020). This policy asserts: 'no participation in military alliances, no alignment with one country against another, no hosting of foreign military bases on Vietnamese territory or using Vietnam as a fulcrum to counteract other countries, and no use or threat of force in international relations'. These various aspects make Vietnam's

foreign policy quite similar to that of a 'neutral' state. However, since 'neutrality' is not a favoured concept, a new interpretation of Vietnam's foreign policy is necessary.

Vietnamese foreign policy thinkers have adeptly navigated this tricky balance, maintaining ideological integrity while promoting pragmatism under the banner of 'Ho Chi Minh thought' (Vu Khoan 2015). Party theorists have defined Ho Chi Minh's thought in foreign policy as an emphasis on multilateralism, strategic autonomy, and policy flexibility (Tuan 2015), traits closely aligned with 'neutrality'. After the 12th Party Congress in 2016, the conceptualization of Vietnam's foreign policy was developed even further, focusing on two main concepts: strategic autonomy (Tự chủ chiến lược) and 'bamboo diplomacy' (ngoại *giao cây tre*). The latter term was especially publicized after VCP General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong used the term publicly in late 2021.

Vietnam's interpretation of 'bamboo diplomacy', akin to that of Thailand's, symbolizes its inherent flexibility and resilience. Despite the strong winds of geopolitical tension, Vietnam has managed to bend without breaking, sustaining robust military relations with Russia, opening its doors to the massive export markets of the Western world, and maintaining vital trade relationships with China. This unique approach has created a conducive environment that allowed Vietnam to emerge as one of the world's top economic performers over the past four decades.

Vietnam's bamboo diplomacy puts a premium on multilateralism, with a special focus on regional integration. As a country that was ensnared in bloody proxy wars throughout the twentieth century, Hanoi has entirely renounced the 'bandwagon' strategy. Instead, it relies on a robust network of friendships and partnerships based on mutual interests (Giang 2022). A notable Vietnamese policy thinker once remarked that among the 60 countries possessing 'significant national power', Vietnam needs to establish sound cooperation frameworks with at least half of them in order to safeguard its interests (Tran Viet Thai 2015). As of 2024, Vietnam has established various degrees of partnerships with a multitude of countries. In hierarchical order, these include three 'special partnerships', seven 'comprehensive strategic partnerships' (CSPs) – with Russia, China, India, and South Korea, the US, Australia, and Japan – eleven 'strategic partnerships', and twelve 'comprehensive partnerships'. Each category defines the extent of cooperation Vietnam is willing to engage in with its partners. The 'special' category only refers to three countries which Hanoi had special relations during the years of the wars of independence (Laos, Cambodia, and Cuba). A comprehensive partnership typically emphasizes collaboration in non-security areas like economic cooperation, trade, and cultural exchanges. Conversely, CSPs theoretically permit a fully comprehensive approach, meaning governments at all levels can collaborate with their CSPs on a wide range of topics without any restrictions, even in sensitive areas such as intelligence-sharing or defence cooperation. In particular, the double-upgrade in bilateral ties with the US, from comprehensive partnership to CSP level in September 2023, marked a significant milestone in Vietnam's 'bamboo diplomacy'.

Despite some dismissals of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as inconsequential amidst the re-emergence of major power rivalry, this regional consortium retains paramount importance for Vietnam. Vietnam utilizes the ASEAN platform to voice its positions, engage with countries that share similar views, and rally international support in its efforts to counter China's increasing assertiveness in the South China Sea. Enhanced ASEAN- led forums, such as the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), provide venues for discussions on sensitive topics that may be too delicate for bilateral conversations.

Hanoi's approach to multilateralism invariably involves trade. With a trade-to- GDP ratio nearing 200 per cent, Vietnam has become one of the world's most trade-dependent economies. The country is a party to 15 free trade agreements (FTAs), including the rigorous EU-Vietnam FTA (EVFTA), signed in 2019, and the expansive Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), established in 2018.

Second, as a smaller state, Vietnam remains committed to international law, especially the United Nations Charter and relevant conventions. In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, although Hanoi didn't explicitly name Moscow, it implicitly criticized Russia by urging all parties to 'respect sovereignty and independence' as stipulated in the UN Charter. In its struggle with China's increasing assertiveness regarding the South China Sea, Vietnam consistently advocates resolving disputes based on international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on

the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) 1982.

Third, Vietnam places significant emphasis on economic and trade relations as the primary focal point of its diplomacy. Hanoi views economic development as a less contentious issue, making it more amenable to compromise compared to other aspects of foreign policy. Consequently, Vietnam has actively pursued the signing of numerous free trade agreements (FTAs), having accumulated 19 FTAs by 2023, with three more currently under negotiation. Vietnam is regarded as one of the most trade-friendly nations globally, with a trade-to- GDP ratio of approximately 200 per cent, placing it second in Asia only to Singapore. This economic pragmatism allows Vietnam to swiftly overcome ideological differences and past grievances, leading to the United States and the European Union emerging as its primary and secondary export markets, respectively.

Fourth, Vietnam's bamboo diplomacy implies proactive engagement rather than passivity, with a specific focus on niche diplomacy where it has the capacity to exert influence, such as climate change, peacebuilding, and transnational water management (Do 2022). This proactive approach is crucial because, given its limited influence and resources, Hanoi must utilize them wisely. In doing so, Vietnam assumes the role of a middle power with a strong sense of agency. This distinguishes Vietnam's 'bamboo diplomacy' from the approaches of other 'neutral' states. During a Centre for Strategic Studies (CSIS) speech in May 2022, Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh, when asked about which side Vietnam was on in the Ukrainian war, stated that Vietnam does not pick sides but stands for 'justice'. This statement reaffirms Hanoi's emphasis on adhering to international law, particularly the UN Charter, even though it did not explicitly criticize Russia by name.

Vietnam's bamboo diplomacy exhibits certain similarities to Thailand's approach, but there are notable differences between the two. First, while Thailand considers itself a 'small power that can never…make a significant impact on the system' (Busbarat 2016, 236), resulting in a tendency to be less proactive and more reactive to geopolitical changes, Vietnam has been keen on taking diplomatic initiatives, particularly in the last decade (2014–2024). It organized the historic Donald Trump-Kim Jong Un summit in Hanoi in 2019 and has been a driving force for a more proactive stance within ASEAN on regional issues. Vietnam has also actively participated in UN activities, including peacekeeping operations, and served as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council twice, first in 2008–2009 and then in 2020–2021. In contrast, Thailand's last tenure on the Security Council was during the Cold War in 1985–1986. Second, due to ideological restrictions, Vietnam's foreign policy has less room for manoeuvre compared to Thailand. For instance, while Thailand was able to shift from being a neutral state after the Second World War to adopting an anti-communist stance during the Vietnam War, Hanoi did not have the same flexibility to deviate significantly from its ideological core as a socialist country. This explains why Bangkok can forge an alliance with the United States while maintaining close economic ties with China, or vice versa, while such options are less feasible for Hanoi. Third, Vietnam's geographical position as a neighbour of China, both on land and at sea, presents challenges to its pursuit of 'strategic autonomy' if it implies explicitly moving away from Beijing. This will be further discussed in the upcoming section.

Bamboo and the Dragon: Vietnam's China Dilemma

Vietnam's bamboo diplomacy had experienced significant success from the late 1990s to the late 2010s, benefiting from the post-Cold War peace dividend and a global focus on economic cooperation. During this period, Vietnam's trade-oriented economy thrived, with trade volume increasing from US$9.6 billion in 1991 to US$77.4 billion in 2007, the year it joined the World Trade Organization (WTO). Embracing multilateralism, Vietnam aimed to position itself as a regional middle power.

However, the dynamics have shifted with China's growing assertiveness and its pursuit of a 'peaceful rise' narrative to reclaim its status as a global superpower. As part of this vision, China has sought to consolidate its control over the South China Sea and exert influence over the Southeast Asia region. This shift has compelled Vietnam to confront China's expanding influence, which not only extends to Vietnam's own territory and waters but also impacts its traditional allies of Laos and Cambodia, which are crucial to Vietnam's security considerations. Consequently, Vietnam can no longer afford to overlook China's overarching influence and must navigate the complexities of this evolving geopolitical landscape.

To counter China's influence, Hanoi has adopted a comprehensive set of policies as part of its grand strategy. These policies encompass various approaches, including economic pragmatism, direct engagement, hard balancing, and soft balancing (Le Hong 2013). First, economic pragmatism is evident in Vietnam's approach. Despite concerns over China's influence, Vietnam continues to develop a deeply intertwined economic relationship with its neighbour. China remains Vietnam's largest trading partner, and its economic link with China remains vital in Hanoi's development strategy. Second, direct engagement is pursued when necessary. Vietnam maintains both party-to-party and state- to-state channels of communication with China. These engagements serve to manage bilateral issues and de-escalate tensions, particularly in times of crisis such as the oil rig incident in 2014. Third, hard balancing is a key aspect of Vietnam's strategy. Hanoi recognizes the importance of modernising its military capabilities, particularly in the context of maritime defence. Vietnam has invested in improving its naval capabilities and maritime infrastructure to enhance its ability to protect its territorial integrity and interests in the South China Sea. Lastly, soft balancing is employed as Vietnam seeks to constrain China's freedom of action. Hanoi actively reaches out to external partners, both within the region and beyond, to foster relationships and cooperation. By building a strong web of friends and partners, Vietnam aims to create a network of support that can provide a counterbalance to China's influence.

The final aspect of Vietnam's strategy to counter China's influence includes seeking a closer alignment with the United States, cultivating relationships with other regional powers, and embedding itself in the liberal world order. Despite a history of conflict, the relationship between Vietnam and the US has significantly improved. The US has become Vietnam's largest export market, a preferred destination for Vietnamese students studying abroad, and holds a positive image in the eyes of the Vietnamese public. In public polling by Pew Research Centre, Vietnam has always topped the list of the countries which view the US most positively. This might be attributed to the public perception of Washington as being aligned with Vietnam in its maritime disputes in the South China Sea with China, the perception of the US as a formidable economic power, and the perception of American society as desirable. The comprehensive partnership between the two countries extends beyond mere symbolism, with increasing levels of diplomatic, military, and intelligence cooperation. Vietnam sees the US as a significant counterbalance to China's influence in the South China Sea and leverages its relationship with Washington to manage its relations with Beijing.

In addition to the US, Vietnam seeks closer relationships with other regional powers. This includes potential great powers such as India, economic great powers like Japan, and active middle powers such as South Korea and Australia. By cultivating partnerships with these countries, Vietnam aims to establish a network of friends and allies that can provide support and assistance in times of need, particularly in dealing with challenges posed by China. Vietnam also aligns itself with the liberal world order by actively participating in multilateral institutions and emphasising the importance of international law and order. Vietnam's approach to addressing disputes, particularly those related to China's excessive claims in the South China Sea, is rooted in the principles of UNCLOS. By adhering to international norms and using legal frameworks, Vietnam seeks to uphold the rule of law and maintain its position within the existing liberal world order.

Vietnam continues to face a dilemma in its relationship with China. Despite its inclination towards the US, China still exerts a significant influence on Vietnam's foreign policy. Beijing has various means to pressure Hanoi into compliance, such as deploying maritime forces alongside research vessels or oil rigs deep into Vietnamese Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), using the China Coast Guard to harass Vietnamese fishing vessels, or imposing informal economic coercive measures by suddenly closing border gates. China accounts for more than half of Vietnam's agricultural exports, which is significant for a country where half the population live in the countryside. Furthermore, despite territorial disputes, the communist parties of Vietnam and China maintain an ideological bond rooted in their shared history. China was a primary financial supporter of Hanoi during its wars of independence against France and the United States, until a shift in policy after the China-US rapprochement in 1972 altered their relationship. In the post-Soviet era, China remains the sole communist nation that Vietnam can draw lessons from. Beijing capitalises on this, exploiting the Vietnamese party's apprehension of regime change to create divisions in the emerging Vietnam-US partnership and stoke fears of potential 'colour revolutions' (Giang 2022). Lingering scars from historical invasions, including the most recent conflict in 1979, contribute to a perpetual sense of security concern from the northern border. This concern likely explains why Vietnam and the United States have not yet upgraded their relationship to the level of a 'strategic partnership' despite discussions on the matter since 2018, as Hanoi is cautious about becoming an unintended casualty in escalating US-China tensions.

Concluding Remarks

Nguyen Co Thach, a former Vietnamese Minister of Foreign Affairs and a key architect of Vietnam's post-Doi Moi foreign policy, astutely remarked that countries like Vietnam are often perceived as mere pawns in international politics. However, he emphasized that even a pawn can survive and thrive, if it knows when to make strategic moves. Vietnam's current approach of active neutrality, or bamboo diplomacy, seems to follow this advice. Yet, as tensions between China and the United States continue to escalate, Vietnam's ability to maintain neutrality is becoming increasingly challenging.

China's assertive actions in the South China Sea, including the construction of artificial islands and constant harassment of Southeast Asian claimants, match its aggressive maritime claims. Vietnam, being at the forefront of these disputes, faces the most significant consequences. This is further complicated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Although Vietnam's economic and trade relationship with Russia may be minimal, Moscow plays a crucial role in Vietnam's hedging strategy against China. As Vietnam's largest arms supplier, Russia provides vital support to Vietnam's defence capabilities. Additionally, Russia is the biggest foreign investor in Vietnam's oil and gas exploration activities in the South China Sea, an area that has faced mounting pressure from China. While Russia continues to be Vietnam's largest arms supplier, payment difficulties and the risk of sanctions have made importing weapons from Russia increasingly challenging. Moreover, Russia's performance in Ukraine raises doubts on the effectiveness of its weaponry. Meanwhile, the alignment between Russia and China resulting from the Ukrainian invasion carries significant geopolitical implications for Vietnam. Moscow may be inclined to offer concessions on its cooperation with Vietnam in the South China Sea, which holds less strategic value given its current position, in exchange for China's support. Hanoi remembers well being abandoned by its former ally, the Soviet Union, in the Johnson South Reef Skirmish in 1988 – at a time when Moscow wanted to normalise its relationship with Beijing.

Recognizing the limitations in its bilateral relationship with the United States, Vietnam has turned to regional multilateral frameworks to pursue its foreign policy goals. ASEAN, despite its imperfections, offers crucial avenues for Vietnam to advance its objectives. Within ASEAN, Vietnam can voice its concerns, forge alliances with like-minded partners, and garner international support in countering China's increasing aggression in the South China Sea. Expanded forums such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM+) provide valuable platforms for discussing sensitive issues that might be difficult to address bilaterally. Similarly, other platforms like APEC and ASEM also offer opportunities for engagement and cooperation.

However, traditional regional institutions like ASEAN also face big challenges. First, while its 'centrality' and non-interference principle might work well in a peaceful environment, that is no longer the case in an increasingly tense great power rivalry in the region. ASEAN fails to address pressing regional issues, from the South China Sea tensions to Mekong River-related issues. ASEAN's consensus decision-making process often hampers countries with shared interests from effectively working together, while providing a convenient platform for Beijing to sow discord, as demonstrated in its interactions with Cambodia in 2012 and Laos in 2016. These countries, without direct interests in the South China Sea, were willing to downplay the issue during their ASEAN chairmanship to secure China's favour, be it more concessional loans or infrastructural investments. Second, the rise of 'minilateralism' of exclusively security-centric groups like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad, consisting of Australia, India, Japan, and the United States) and AUKUS also presents an additional challenge (Ha 2022). While Vietnam tacitly endorses these new security initiatives, which aim at containing China more effectively, Hanoi has legitimate concerns about the potential diminishment of ASEAN's central role. It does not want its security decided in either Washington or Canberra, similar to what happened during the Cold War.

Such developments have led policymakers in Hanoi to further prioritise expanding partnerships with other powers in the region. Among these, Japan and South Korea are Vietnam's most important economic partners. In the past decade, both countries have expanded ties with Hanoi into security cooperation, perhaps with an eye on China's growing regional ambitions. South Korea has joined Japan in this regard. Additionally, India and Australia have also deepened their defence cooperation with Vietnam. South Korea, which replaced Russia as the biggest arms supplier for Southeast Asia since 2022, is interested in Vietnam's arms imports market, which is trying to diversify from

Russia. India, on the other hand, offers an attractive alternative for Hanoi, given that India has developed its defence industry based on Russian systems. These relations will also provide an effective backchannel for Hanoi to indirectly cooperate with the US on areas such as intelligence sharing or maritime security without overtly displeasing Beijing. The strong web of partnerships with other regional powers provides Vietnam with a broader platform for economic and political cooperation, opportunities to access advanced technology and capital for development, and a means to buffer itself against the potential pitfalls of an increasingly bipolar regional power structure, where its interests might be eclipsed by those of superpowers like the United States and China.

It is important to also note that Vietnam faces a multitude of challenges beyond geopolitical concerns. Chief among them is its vulnerability to climate change, with rising sea levels and extreme weather events posing significant threats to its populous coastal areas and its crucial agricultural sector. Moreover, Vietnam contends with a pressing infrastructural deficit that impacts its economic growth and quality of life, as the country struggles to keep pace with the demands of its rapidly growing economy and urbanizing population. Compounding these issues, Vietnam is also wrestling with deforestation, biodiversity loss, and water and air pollution, resulting from unbridled industrialisation and urban expansion. Many of these issues, such as the damming of the Mekong River, are transnational and require Vietnam to actively engage with multiple stakeholders. Internally, the Vietnamese Communist Party remains paranoid about the risk of mass uprisings that could challenge its long-standing rule. The country's increasingly well-educated, open-minded, and prosperous middle class may demand greater political rights and reforms. This adds another layer of complexity to Hanoi's strategic calculations as it navigates these issues alongside the external challenges mentioned in this chapter.

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About the author:

Nguyen Khac Giang is a Visiting Fellow at the Vietnam Studies Programme, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. He was formerly Head of the Political Research Unit of the Hanoi-based Vietnam Institute for Economic and Policy Research (VEPR). His academic work has appeared in, among others, *Asian Journal of Political Science*, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, *Constitutional Political Economy*, *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* and *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies*. He holds a PhD in Political Science from Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. He is a frequent commentator on Vietnamese affairs and writes extensively for Vietnamese and English news outlets.