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TUG’O WAR: VIETNAM’S STRATEGY FOR GREAT POWERS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Abstract

This paper will answer the question of the viability of Vietnam’s strategy for survival. How sustainable is the enmeshment and balancing strategy? Due to its geopolitical position, Vietnam has found itself on a precipice: almost all significant and regional powers find themselves seeking a partnership with Vietnam. Vietnam has also pursued these partnerships, hoping to stabilize and strengthen the state’s position. It is all the more important due to rising tensions in the South China Sea. Independence and survival are overreaching themes of Vietnamese foreign policy. The main strategy is for great and regional powers to balance each other out in the region, allowing Vietnam the greatest possible decision-making freedom. There is however a question of the viability of that balancing strategy. Certain strategic partnerships, like those with India, Japan, or the US, have been developed, but only to a degree, and their viability has yet to be tested. It is possible that this course of action, calculated to balance China’s influence in the region, might backfire in the end, returning the region to the Chinese sphere of influence as predicted by David Kang.

Keywords: Vietnam, Southeast Asia, ASEAN, foreign relations, balancing strategy

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Vietnam's strategy for survival has evolved quite radically over the last twenty years: from an ideological viewpoint to a much more pragmatic one. It can be best illustrated in Vietnam's approach to the Great and regional powers involved in Southeast Asia. Vietnam is actively trying to engage with the US, China, Russia, India, and Japan to create a network of partnerships and interdependency in the region and to ensure a stable regional environment and its survival and independence.

Surrounded by great and regional powers heavily invested in the South China Sea as well as the Southeast Asian region, Vietnam feels insecure. After all, "disparity in power generates insecurity, the way of providing for security is to establish a balance of power" (Vuving, 2006). This balance would mean a structural balance of power with multiple 'poles' invested in its stability. Such a balance has existed in Southeast Asia until now, and it is in Hanoi's interest to keep that balance and the existing system. Vietnam has employed a very nuanced strategy to attain that goal. The exact strategy is complex, as it uses more than one approach depending on the situation and the partner Hanoi is dealing with. As Vietnamese Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet put it: Vietnam should "interlock the diverse interests of different actors into situations that are favorable for Vietnam. Officials must even create new interests for the country's opponents and then enmesh them in networks beneficial to it" (Vuving, 2006). Indeed, this shows that elements of hedging, bandwagoning, and balancing can all be found in how Vietnam builds up its relations with the great powers. This pragmatism was evident in the "Strategy for Defense of the Fatherland in New Situation" released in 2003: the focus there was on a pragmatic approach to the defense of the country and on removing the ideological clause², which allowed the Vietnamese government to decide who friends and enemies are without looking at the communist solidarity.

Alexander Vuving calls Vietnam's omni-directional foreign policy a mixture of balancing and enmeshment (Vuving, 2006). While Evelyn Goh would lean much more towards enmeshing, or "omni-enmeshment", as she calls it (Goh, 2010). One can argue that balancing, as described by Vuving, is an integral part of enmeshment and is simply a hedging strategy with much more developed and prevalent soft balancing and direct engagement components³ (Le Hong Hiep, 2015). Those

² Military and political Organ of the Central Military Commission. 2015. "Strengthening defence and security to firmly protect Homeland of Socialist Vietnam." National Defense Journal. Hanoi: Ministry of National Defense, October 15. <http://tapchiquptd.vn/en/theory-and-practice/strengthening-defence-and-security-to-firmly-protect-homeland-of-socialist-vietnam/8189.html>

³ Le Hong Hiep believes Vietnam's hedging strategy has four main components: economic pragmatism engaging economically in partnerships beneficial for Vietnamese economy regardless of the political leanings; direct engagement – expanding and deepening various bilateral mechanisms; hard balancing – deterrence building; soft balancing – promoting participation in multilateral organizations and institutions.

components are the most important elements of Evelyn Goh's definition of enmeshment: "A process of engaging with a state to draw it into deep involvement into international or regional society, enveloping it in a web of sustained exchanges and relationships with the long-term aim of integration" (Goh, 2008, pp. 121–129).

Womack adds, "disparities in capacities create systemic differences in interests and perspectives between stronger and weaker". Balance of power in the region is therefore a key strategy for Vietnam. That strategy depends on the political framework⁴ ASEAN and its members have built in Southeast Asia. As one Vietnamese diplomat said, "For the first time, we are relying on diplomacy to safeguard security. In the past, it was only used as a crown to military victory" (Trung Nguyen, 2014).

This strategy aims to increase regional stability through increased institutionalization of cooperation and to keep the existing balance of power in the region, as it allows Vietnam the greatest range of decision-making capabilities and guarantees Hanoi continued sovereignty and territorial integrity. The 9th Party Congress decided, that "Vietnam sought to become a trusted partner of every country in the international community" (Nguyen Manh Hung, 2016). This was confirmed in Resolution 8 issued by the Standing Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam: "It is necessary to have a dialectical point of view: in every opponent, there may be some elements that we could cooperate with and take advantage of; in some partners, there may be differences and conflicts. Based on these facts, it is needed to overcome both trends, namely being vague and lacking vigilance or being inflexible in perceptions and in dealing with concrete situations" (Pham Quang Minh, 2011, p.104). It was also reconfirmed in Resolution 22, which called for "proactive and positive" integration (Chapman, 2017). That decisive integrationist policy stems from the experiences of Vietnam during the Cold War: isolation after the victory and unification in 1975 and subsequent further isolation after the war with China in 1979. Those lessons of over reliance on a single great power have been deeply ingrained in the mentality of Vietnamese decision-makers to the point where they are determined never to let it be repeated. For that reason, Vietnam is determined to build strong relations with as large several regional powers as possible.

The involvement of many powers in the region would not only help prevent isolation but also help stabilize the region characterized by insecurities caused by China's rise and increasingly assertive behavior. As many have pointed out, the existing balance of power in East Asia has been increasingly unstable due to changes in the relative power of the involved actors, especially China. This change in the balance of power could, in the future, result in a change in the international

⁴ The argument of balance of power depending on political framework is mostly associated with the English School of international relations, most notably Hedley Bull and his *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*.

system and hierarchy in international relations. Such a result would be against the interests of Vietnam, which prefers the existing balance of power and the current international system. For that reason, Vietnam, among other Asian states, is trying to maintain the existing balance in East Asia, so it would “consist of big powers in the region like United States, China, Japan, and India, and it would aim to prevent a single power from archiving dominance” (Pham Quang Minh, 2011, p. 100). This is all the more important as most Southeast Asian States, Vietnam included, do not look at the balance of power like most realists do (Goh, 2008). They do not balance against either the USA, which is the bigger power overall, or against China, which is seen as the greater threat, but instead, they work to maintain the existing balance, which leans in favor of the US to ensure maintenance of the regional order and hierarchy (Goh, 2013).

For Vietnam, keeping the existing balance of power is of paramount importance, as Hanoi has invested a lot of time and effort in integrating it into the system. What is more, the main perceived threat to Vietnamese sovereignty and territorial integrity is China, which could act in a much more assertive way should the scale of the regional balance of power tip in China's favor. It is simply a case of “strategic anxiety” (Zhang, 2015, p. 425) that Vietnam is trying to ease by strengthening ties with all the regional powers, including China. A Vietnamese White Paper about defense at the beginning of the 21st century shows that “preservation of a peaceful and stable environment for economic and social development and the achievement of industrialization under socialist orientation are the highest interests” (Manh, 2016).

This is a strategy often employed by states that must deal with asymmetrical relations, as it alleviates threats and makes the resistance against the larger state easier. Continued Multipolarity in East Asia would stabilize the existing balance of power and, if executed properly, strengthen the institutionalization of the region, hence constraining the possible behavior of great powers. There are three ways such a strategy can function: legitimate inclusion; institutionalized interaction; and cooperative security (Goh, 2008). “States fervently pursue the aim of bringing together the potential great power adversaries in the region in institutions to mediate their balancing tendencies” (Goh, 2008, p. 123).

One way Vietnam is trying to ensure the engagement of great powers is through strategic partnerships, which function in all three ways. The government in Hanoi has signed strategic partnerships with all regional powers. Those strategic partnerships are of different levels of commitment and different intensities of cooperation, but they all enable Vietnam to work closely with those great powers. After all, as Carl Thayer observes: “the purpose of strategic partnerships is to promote comprehensive cooperation across several areas and to give each major power equity in

Vietnam's stability and development in order to ensure Vietnam's non-alignment and strategic autonomy" (Thayler, 2016). The idea behind the strategic partnerships, then, is to ensure the great powers have stakes outside multilateral arrangements. It is all the more important since strategic partnerships have no limit to the time or scope of operation (Hiep, 2015) and allow the partners to shape the cooperation in ways that suit their needs. Strategic partnerships are so important for Vietnam that the 12th Party Congress in 2016 decided to make their acceleration a core part of regional integration until 2020.

One can argue that these strategic partnerships are indeed ways to 'enmesh' all the great powers in the region. At the same time, signals show that Hanoi is keen to develop these particular relationships further. The idea behind these partnerships is to engage as many partners as possible, not to be forced into overreliance on one partner. While not all cooperation or engagement with those regional and great powers take place within the scope of strategic partnerships, they indicate the will to enmesh them in Vietnamese interests and well-being. As a result, the strategic partnerships with the regional great powers all serve a primary purpose but also provide a security net for Vietnamese foreign policy. Le Hong Hiep divided Vietnamese strategic partners into four categories: political powers (USA and increasingly China); economic powerhouses (USA, China, and Japan); military powers (USA, Russia); countries that play a role in the South China Sea conflict (USA, China, and India) (Hiep, 2015). The United States, by virtue of being the hegemon in both the East Asian region and the world, is included in all categories.

China

"Since independence, Vietnam has pursued a two-pronged strategy to handle a preponderant China: on one hand, Vietnam has shown its unwavering determination to thwart Chinese attempts to undermine its political autonomy or territorial integrity. On the other hand, Vietnam has also paid deference to China as long as its autonomy and independence are respected" (Hiep, 2015, p. 334).

China remains the most challenging of all Vietnamese strategic partners. On one hand, the relationship with China is close out of sheer "tyranny of geography" (Thayer, 2011) and remains Vietnam's only threat to territorial integrity and sovereignty (Hung, 2016, p. 3) because of the ongoing conflict in the South China Sea. Vietnam must keep engaging with China due to its economic dependence on the northern neighbor and due to the growing security concerns stemming from the growing assertiveness of the Beijing government (Liu He, 2023). Enmeshment

with China is necessary for maintaining stability and cordiality of relations while not falling into total dependence.

This sentiment was also confirmed by General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam Nguyen Phu Trong, who said: 'China is a big neighbour. So, whether we like it or not, we still have to live close to that country. We do not have the right to select a neighbour' (Truong, 2015). The Vietnamese government has taken a pragmatic approach towards China: to seek a way to cooperate with the much more powerful state while at the same time cooperating with others to preserve national interests and their primacy in foreign policy (Nguyen Cao, 2020). The historical claims to the Spratly and Paracel Islands, running against the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, remain the biggest obstacle in otherwise cordial relations between Hanoi and Beijing. "Competitive claims over the Spratly's notwithstanding, Vietnam is generally viewed as not balancing against China, but seeking to engage and 'enmesh' China within the framework of ASEAN and ARF" (Chung, 2009).

Vietnam hopes that engaging with China on different levels and integrating it into the region could induce a behavior change. Hanoi hopes China could eventually start respecting Southeast Asian norms, as not respecting them would threaten Chinese interests in the region. That is, however, the long-term aim of the policy, which is being realized, among other things, through the strategic partnership signed by the two states to increase bilateral cooperation.

The strategic partnership between China and Vietnam was signed in 2003 and further enhanced in 2004, 2015, and then 2017. Both sides pay close attention to the development of this partnership. It is especially important in the context of the economy: China remains one of Hanoi's two most important trading partners and the single biggest source of imports. For that reason, Vietnam is likely to continue its engagement. The government in Hanoi is also fully aware of how easily China can weaponize Vietnamese economic dependence, as happened with South Korea after the installation of American THAAD missiles (Kim, 2023). Nonetheless, decoupling from China is impossible for Vietnam: instead, the state is trying to maintain cooperation with Beijing while increasing economic cooperation with other states and entities, such as the EU and Japan (EU, 2021).

Vietnam is also likely to continue deepening the relationship due to the support it receives: aid for the communist party, thus against the feared democratic revolution, and in favor of the current autocratic political system⁵. Dating back to 1999 and the cordial meeting between Jiang Zemin and Vietnamese President Nguyen Manh Cam, China has tried to maintain the appearance of an older brother, supportive of the younger sibling. This is of course, an extension of both Confucian values, where the older brother would be the head of the family, and an attempt at

⁵ This was confirmed during a visit of CPV General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong to China in 2015.

subtly bringing back the time when Vietnam was a tributary state. When the border treaty between the two states was signed⁶, Jiang Zemin ‘gifted’ Vietnam a sixteen-word guide for future relations: “Long-term stability and future orientation, friendly neighborhood, comprehensive cooperation” (Womack, 2006).

As a smaller state, Vietnam must pay a certain amount of deference to China. This is usually done through party channels: representatives of the Communist Party of Vietnam visit China often when there is an issue between the two states. The deference, so typical for asymmetric relations (Womack, 2006), is easy to spot when analyzing the visits between high officials from Vietnam and China. Much more often, it was the Vietnamese who had to go to Beijing, which, in a way, was similar to the historic tributes paid to the Chinese empire (Shambaugh, 2020; Kissinger, 2011). In 2004 a steering committee for relations between China and Vietnam was created. That committee was supposed to meet annually, alternating meetings in both states. Very soon, however, it was exclusively Vietnamese politicians making their way to Beijing. Even after Truong Tan San was reelected President of Vietnam, his first trip abroad was to China. Similarly, when a delegation headed by Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc went to the United States, a small delegation was swiftly sent to Beijing shortly after that.

This pattern continued even after the crises of 2014 and 2015 when the Chinese drilling platform HD-98 entered what Vietnam considers its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and refused to leave for months. It was the Vietnamese who had to go to China to make peace. The ongoing conflict remains the greatest obstacle in bilateral relations. Vietnam is forced to seek other strategic partners, including the United States, to ensure it will not be left alone to fend off China in the South China Sea. These problems, steadily growing despite the 2002 Declaration on the Code of Conduct and the 2011 Agreement meant to temporarily regulate the issues of contention in the South China Sea, are what is pushing Vietnam outside of its comfort zone in relation to China. Because of this, the strategic partnership between the two countries remains very active, primarily in the economic sector. Vietnam does not want to depend on China too much, seeing over-dependence on Chinese imports as problematic enough.

The reason for the Vietnamese push towards other strategic partnerships besides China is the fact that China no longer properly respects its smaller neighbor. “Asymmetric normalcy remains asymmetric, but both sides manage their affairs with the confidence that the power of the larger side will not be challenged, and the autonomy of the smaller side will not be threatened” (Womack, 2006, p. 18). The asymmetry is no longer (Wang, Tzeng, 2020) in the eyes of the Vietnamese,

⁶ The unregulated borders go back to the war of 1979, when Deng Xiaoping was trying to stop Vietnamese incursion into Khmer Rouge controlled Cambodia.

which forces them to seek solutions outside the relationship: that includes working with other states bilaterally and engaging with China within the scope of ASEAN and ASEAN-centered institutions. The government sees the growing conflict on the South China Sea in Hanoi as threatening the state's territorial integrity. With the asymmetric relations with China out of balance, Vietnam is trying to balance them out by enmeshing other states.

Naturally, a certain priority still has to be given to handling Sino-Vietnamese relations in Hanoi (Liu, Sun, 2015, p. 758). Chinese power will only continue to grow in the foreseeable future. The enmeshing strategy and the strategic partnership will force Vietnam to always consider the reaction from Beijing before making any political move.

USA

The strategic partnership between Vietnam and the United States is possibly one of the greatest breakthroughs in the modern foreign policy of both states. The comprehensive partnership signed in 2013 has been the final step in shedding Vietnam war animosity. Instead, the two states, sharing common regional interests, focused on cooperation.

The main question to be asked in this context is what form this cooperation between the United States and Vietnam will ultimately take. Relations between the two countries remain cordial: trade, military, and multilateral cooperation are developing dynamically. Both countries consider each other important partners. The chances to institutionalize this informal alliance between Washington and Hanoi are, however, very slim despite the significance of the two countries for each other. It is much more likely that the comprehensive partnership will be used as a loose framework for further cooperation that would not give China too many reasons for concern.

Vietnam sees the US as an integral part of the regional system: America is a hegemon, far removed, but one with the capability to balance the influence and strength of China. While the partnership was initially considered a way for both Vietnam and the US to increase their standing and power, it has been slowly evolving into a partnership aimed at safeguarding national interests in light of China's rise. The cooperation has a Chinese undertone for a very simple reason: the rise of China is threatening the existing balance of power in the region and the established regional system. Neither Vietnam nor the United States want that balance to change, as it would likely tip in China's favor. Robert Scher, Secretary Clinton's advisor in the Department of State, confirmed that the increased presence of the United States in

the region was motivated by conflicts and tensions observed in Asia in previous years. This is clearly reflected, for instance, in relations with Vietnam. In 2013, the two countries signed an agreement on a comprehensive partnership, which constituted a continuation of Hilary Clinton's policy towards Vietnam. Already in 2010, the Secretary of State spoke about the need for a strategic partnership agreement. In 2014, in turn, the US Department of Defense referred to Vietnam as one of the key partners in the region. In the latest National Security Strategy, China has been designated a strategic rival that "challenges American power, influence and interests" (Trump, 2017). Increasing the partnership with Vietnam is supposed to prevent those "attempts to erode American security and prosperity" (Trump, 2017).

Vietnamese Cam Ranh Bay has been the port of welcome for an increasing number of American navy vessels. Like many others (India and Russia in particular), the US Navy has been very interested in leasing the port from Vietnam to allow for a greater regional presence and easier power projection. Vietnam, however, continues to refuse any such offers. Instead, the visits are usually part of the broader cooperation connected to IMET (International Military Education & Training) training (Stern, 2015). That, in turn, is seen as a long-term strategy to increase the capabilities of the Vietnamese Navy and Coast Guard to ensure greater security and stability in the South China Sea. To further facilitate the growth of Vietnamese capabilities, President Obama lifted the embargo on the sale of lethal weapons to Vietnam. Hailed as the very last step in normalizing relations after the Vietnam War (Obama, 2018), this move allowed Hanoi to purchase weapons from a new source. While most of the offered systems would be too expensive for Vietnam (able to buy similar equipment elsewhere much more cheaply), it is very possible that the Vietnamese will order some radar technology soon to allow them to monitor the South China Sea better. Vietnam has been further facing pressure from the US to stop buying Russian arms after 2022 when the war in Ukraine began: while the government in Hanoi has refused to condemn Moscow's actions outright, it has for now lowered the intensity of cooperation.

For a long time, the United States has been the primary defender of the global commons in East Asia. The operations intensified during the Obama administration and were continued by the Trump administration after May 2017. The resumed FONOPs (Freedom of Navigation Operations) around the Spratly area were supposed to indirectly support other claimants to the archipelago, including Vietnam, as well as ensure the security of navigation in the area. Freedom of navigation in the area is of such crucial importance for both that it featured heavily during the May 2017 meeting between Trump and Vietnamese Prime Minister Phuc and again in 2023 during US Secretary of State Blinken's visit to Vietnam (Blinken, Phuc, 2022).

Vietnamese and American leaders also put much emphasis on economic relations. The United States remains the biggest importer of Vietnamese goods, primarily agricultural and textile products. United States trade has also been steadily increasing, to the point where Vietnam was invited by the US to participate in the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). That would have made Vietnam decidedly the weakest state in the trade organization in terms of GDP per capita and general level of development⁷, but the United States could not afford to include Hanoi. This was primarily motivated by the fear that Vietnam would become even more economically dependent on China and fall under Beijing's sphere of influence.

While the eventual withdrawal of the US from the TPP was a major blow to the US position in East Asia, continued engagement with Vietnam signals that the Obama-led rebalance has not been fully abandoned. Instead, the Asia policy of the Trump administration resembled that of President George W. Bush, Jr: done with a smaller emphasis, on a smaller scale, but as effectively. The United States cannot afford to abandon its Southeast Asian partner, as Vietnam is an ideal partner should the US want to increase its presence in the region further: Cam Ranh Bay is commonly recognized as the best natural deep seaport in the region, Vietnam boasts a long shoreline and a strategic location in relation to China.

Vietnam is generally keen to join any economic organization that can increase access to foreign markets. For that reason, Hanoi joined RCEP, but also the Indo-Pacific Framework for Prosperity, which the USA launched in May 2023. The organization can be seen as a belated response to the loss of CPTPP and the continued rise of China (Goodman, 2022). For Vietnam, which has been trying to lessen its dependence on the Chinese economy (Pham Thi to Hang, 2022), another organization and an increase in market access can only mean a good thing. The decoupling, however, even supported by states such as the US or Japan, will be a prolonged and challenging process (Yeo & Culter, 2023).

Washington is therefore a willing participant in the enmeshing strategy. By strengthening the Vietnamese position in the region, the United States advocates for the most crucial of its interests: the existing balance of power. In return, the US has supported internationalizing the South China Sea conflict. US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel sharply criticized China's actions in the South China Sea regarding the HYSY 981 rig and accused China of attempting to destabilize the region. While officially, the United States remains neutral towards the issue of territorial claims of the countries involved, in fact, the desire to ensure freedom of navigation in the region would mean preserving the status quo and leaving the islands in the care of Southeast Asian countries. The 2022 National Security Strategy clearly showed

⁷ Human Development Index for Vietnam is 0,703, while for Peru, the next least developed state, it is 0,762. https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Vietnam/human_development/

that the USA is becoming more and more engaged in the region with its statements about “powers that layer authoritarian governance with a revisionist foreign policy” and that “many non-democracies join the world’s democracies in forswearing these behaviors” (Biden, 2022). Such statements clearly point towards a desire for greater cooperation with non-democratic states in Asia against a common threat⁸.

Hanoi’s support for the concept of Indo-Pacific is of growing importance in the relations between the two states. Favour for Indo-Pacific-related initiatives can therefore be seen as another step to entangle the region’s great powers and help resolve the conflict in the South China Sea, or at least maintain the status quo (Giang, 2022). The intensification of the idea of a free and open Indo-Pacific is significant here since the Indo-Pacific doctrines put forward in Tokyo, Washington, or Canberra highlight exactly what is so important to Vietnam: freedom of navigation, freedom of economic activity, and the rule of law. These elements constitute an Indo-Pacific strategy that is a potential brake on China’s activities in the South China Sea. Mark Esper, U.S. Secretary of Defense, addressed this explicitly: “China’s unilateral efforts to secure illegitimate claims threaten other nations’ access to important natural resources, undermine the stability of regional energy markets and increase the risk of conflict” (Esper, 2019). This echoes Vietnam’s defense strategy, which claims to respond to “unilateral and forceful extortion, violation of international law, militarization, change in the status quo and violation of sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction” (Vietnam National Defense, 2019).

The strategic partnership between the US and Vietnam will remain one of the most pivotal relationships for the whole region. The common interests of the two states, strengthened by the fear of a changing regional order and balance of power, will ensure the relationship will remain strong, if not formalized beyond the partnership agreement.

Japan

Vietnam and Japan first signed their strategic partnership agreement in 2006. They declared deepening relations to an ‘extensive strategic partnership’ in 2014 (MOFA of Vietnam, 2018). For Vietnam, the partnership is poised to become one of the key elements of the enmeshment strategy aiming to maintain the existing balance of power. While for years it was argued that “Japan has not constructed enough legitimacy as a leader in Asia, making Asian countries hesitant to support Japan’s

⁸ U.S. Department of State. *U.S. Security Cooperation with Vietnam*. 27 July 2020. <https://2017–2021.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-vietnam-2/index.html> Accessed 17 March 2022

independent initiatives” (Katada, 2002), Japan has been helping to provide stability in the region (Goh, 2011, p. 889) and playing the very delicate role of a regional balancer.

Brought by historical problems, Japan has to maintain a balanced approach to any conflict or regional problem. Yet it remains the core supporter of US engagement in East Asia on the one hand and supports socializing China on the other (Goh, 2011, p. 893), both of which are also beneficial for Vietnam.

“Japan is likely to become a less reliable ally in an emerging Sino-US strategic competition because it will increasingly lack the requisite weight to substantially assist any designs that US policymakers might entertain to counterbalance China’s rise” (Taylor, 2011). Yet Japan remains determined not to let it happen. As Shinzo Abe declared in 2014, “Japan is not and never will be a tier-two country” (Abe, 2018). That determination, despite continuing economic stagnation, is of high interest to Vietnam (Lee, 2015), which has been seeking out new partners to engage with.

Some critics have feared Japan’s return as a regional power, yet until today, it has very little in common with what they really fear: a militaristic Japan. Instead, Tokyo has been engaged in a charm offensive with Southeast Asia since adopting the Fukuda doctrine (de Miguel, 2013). Abe was even more determined to keep to that track, as it allowed Japan to find partners to fight against the “systemic instability” (Lee, 2015) caused, in Tokyo’s view, primarily by the rise of China. This approach was continued after Abe’s resignation by subsequent prime ministers (Vogt, 2023).

“[...] Abe’s growing strategic interest in Southeast Asia is very much part of this Japanese desire to reinforce and strengthen the existing regional order vis-à-vis China’s rise by providing a partial check against Chinese ambitions and territorial claims, assertive actions and rising influence; in addition to offering greater hedging and balancing options for Southeast Asia” (Lee, 2015). Japan is then concerned about what China could do if it managed to change the balance of power in the region and is determined not to allow it (Yu, 2023). The subsequent governments in Tokyo had to contend with the fact that China had been a very important economic partner for Japan for years and that decoupling would not be an easy task. In the meantime, it would be crucial to strengthen smaller partnerships with Southeast Asian states with a twofold aim: weakening the ties between the region and China and strengthening Japan’s international position.

Having a similar mindset, Hanoi has decided to include Japan in the enmeshment strategy. The strategic partnership between the two states has led to further developments and closer cooperation, from the Vietnam-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement in 2007 to the Security Dialogue in 2013. Cooperation includes

both economic and political aspects. Japan is seen as a very reliable partner, if one with a limited scope of actions available.

The cooperation between Tokyo and Hanoi has taken on a defense component. The steadily evolving Security Dialogue led to Japanese troops being included in the ADMM-Plus (ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting) exercises in 2016, as well as the visit of two destroyers, Ariake and Setogiri, in Cam Ranh Bay.

Economically, Japan remains the single biggest donor of Official Development Aid to Vietnam as well as one of its key investors. Vietnam is fourth on the list of countries to which Japanese companies are planning expansion, encouraged by the government, which sees the growth of Vietnam as a chance for the Japanese economy as well, as the bilateral trade turnover in 2016 reached 27bln USD. An increased presence in dynamically growing Vietnam might help Japan overcome its stagnation (Luong, 2009) while maintaining good relations with Japan, allowing Vietnam to diversify sources of investment needed for further industrialization. After the failure of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, when Japan proposed the TPP11, it received full Vietnamese support for the endeavor, and eventually, the preliminary treaty was signed by all the TPP partners that remained after the US withdrawal (Japan Times, 2017).

Japan is also increasingly engaged in the conflict in the South China Sea. Despite not being a claimant and not having any direct interests, Japan wants to support Vietnam and other Southeast Asian states. It is directly connected to the Japan-China territorial conflict over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands, as the solution to one might eventually be applied to the other. In 2014, during the crisis with a Chinese drilling platform in the Vietnamese EEZ, PM Abe offered his “utmost support for efforts by ASEAN member countries to ensure the security of the seas and skies and rigorously maintain freedom of navigation and overflight” (Abe, 2018). For Japan, maintaining freedom of navigation through the South China Sea is crucial for not only political but also economic reasons, as most Japanese energy resources are delivered through the route. Defending the global commons indirectly is the preferred method, as it would allow Japan to avoid the accusations of rising militarism.

The support did not end there, as Japan promised Vietnam three repurposed naval vessels to increase the capabilities of the Vietnamese Coast Guard, all of which had already been delivered. Enhancing the capabilities of the Southeast Asian partners remains an important objective, however, it will remain very limited in scope. Japan, having its problems both with China and North Korea, will be unable to give Vietnam too much such equipment⁹, but there are possibilities for further defense cooperation and training. A further agreement was made in 2020 for Vietnam to purchase six additional vessels. Buying from Japan has an enormous advantage

⁹ Japan is however working on technological transfers and increasing arms sales to Vietnam.

over buying military equipment from almost any other state: it has fewer political connotations and provides a high-quality product. Buying from Russia or China would mean displeasure from the US while buying from the US would mean displeasure in Beijing. Japan offers a safe option (JICA, 2020).

Vietnam continues to have Japan's support in the South China Sea and the strategic partnership is very likely to deepen: any further joint security efforts would be entirely rational for both partners (Levitt, 2005). This will indirectly strengthen the Vietnamese position in the conflict and allow it greater international prestige.

Japan is likely to struggle in its regional rivalry with China, so building a network of cooperation with like-minded states is the only solution. Cooperation with Vietnam fits well with Abe's five principles of foreign policy: protection and promotion of universal values together with ASEAN; ensuring free and open seas; promotion of trade and investment; protection and nurturing of Asian cultures; and promotion of exchanges among the young generation.

Overall, the strategic partnership between Japan and Vietnam remains strong. For Vietnam, it is a model of enmeshing a regional power. It is easy since the interests of the two states align in key points such as sea lanes of communication and China's assertiveness. Thus, it has a chance to strengthen regional architecture (Goh, 2013) by virtue of being one of the most stable and growing partnerships of this kind in the region, not to mention a partnership between two key regional states. It has an opportunity to stabilize the regional balance of power without provoking any response due to its institutional emphasis and long-term cooperation.

Russia

Russia was among Vietnam's first strategic partners, as the agreement was signed as far back as 2001. It was reaffirmed and upgraded in 2012 with a focus on seven areas: oil and gas, energy cooperation for hydro and nuclear power, military equipment and technology, trade and investment, science and technology, education and training, culture, and tourism (Chapman, 2018). The Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with Russia is only one of three Vietnam has. The others are with India and China. This puts relations with Russia in a special, highly preferential place in Vietnamese foreign policy.

While the strategic partnership and, indeed, friendly relations between Moscow and Hanoi stretch back to the Cold War and the first Indochina War, the relations themselves are not what they used to be. That is because Russian foreign policy is shaped mainly by what is happening outside East Asia, especially by confrontation with Europe and the United States (Baev, 2015). This means that while Russia

would like to become more engaged in East Asia, European events are taking most of the attention in Moscow. The preoccupation with other areas, most notably Europe and Central Asia, in which Russia has found itself competing against China, made it possible for other great powers, most notably the US and China, to increase their influence in East Asia at the cost of Moscow.

For now, Russia's main aim in the region is identical to the Vietnamese one: regional security and stability that enables positive economic development. The opinion in Moscow is that such a goal is easier to realize with a strong and influential Vietnam. That is why the 2013 Russian Foreign Policy Concept's article 87 said Russia should "consistently strengthen the strategic partnership with Vietnam" (Russian MOFA, 2018). The relations with Vietnam will likely remain markedly friendly as long as neither of the two states is forced to pick a side. Both Russia and Vietnam prefer to remain out of the direct confrontation and rivalry between China and the United States in the region. While Vietnam, engaged in a sophisticated network of partnerships and institutions, might be able to escape it, it would be much more difficult for Russia, which is increasingly dependent on China for trade.

The area where cooperation between Vietnam and Russia is strongest is the military relations and weapons sales. Vietnam, trying to modernize its army and navy to balance China indirectly, has been buying Russian military equipment for years. This is problematic in its own right, as Russia is also working on developing closer relations with Beijing while supplying arms to a country that could potentially use them against the Chinese. This is problematic for Russia, which seeks to engage Asian states beyond just China and preserve its political maneuverability, but its political dependence on China has been growing over recent years. Eventually, this might lead to a scaling down of the relationship with Vietnam, should Beijing require it.

Another essential area is cooperation in oil and gas exploration. Three different Russian companies have signed agreements with Vietnam about joining the exploration of parcels in the South China Sea. While not all projects are as yet underway, and while Vietnam has tried to ensure none take place in contested waters, the significance of their sheer existence should not be undervalued. Oil and gas are increasing sources of income for Vietnam, which sells petroleum to many regional states, including China. It has been estimated that the maritime economy will contribute around 55% of Vietnam's GDP by 2025 (Agarwala, 2018) Russia decidedly wants to be part of this.

The conflict in Ukraine is another obstacle in Russian-Vietnamese relations: the seizure of territory and the failure of the international institutions, in this case, make it an important case for Vietnam, as that is precisely what Hanoi is afraid will happen with the Spratly and Paracel islands. Russia, on the other hand, does not want

to get involved in the conflict, which is slowly becoming one of the focal points of Vietnamese foreign policy. Moreover, Moscow has clearly sided with China in the matter by supporting bilateral solutions instead of the institutional ones Hanoi has been lobbying for. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said, "Our position is determined by the wish, natural for any normal country, to see disputes resolved directly between the countries involved in a peaceful political and diplomatic manner, without any interference from third parties or any attempts to internationalize these disputes" (Lavrov, 2018).

However, the war Russia started with Ukraine has also put Vietnam under much political pressure: Vietnam remains unwilling to outright condemn the actions of the government in Moscow and instead tried to appeal for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. In this instance, Vietnam is in a difficult situation: condemning the Russian actions would alienate the state from Hanoi and possibly limit the supply of arms coming from Russia¹⁰. Not condemning the actions of Russia put Vietnam under pressure from Tokyo and Washington. Furthermore, this war could set a precedent that would be very dangerous for Vietnam regarding its conflict in the South China Sea (Marston, 2023).

This is one of the reasons Vietnam is not focusing on deepening relations. "While [Vietnam] seeks to maintain its ties to Moscow, its attempts to balance against China are now anchored primarily in deepening relations with the US, India, Japan, and its membership in ASEAN" (Baev, 2015). The problem remains that Russia has little to offer East Asia and Vietnam outside of energy cooperation and arms sales. While Russian strategies continue to try and "insert Russian diplomatic and political presence into the Asia Pacific region" (Rozman, 2006) and mention how more significant ties to East Asia could help rebuild international standing (Herspring, 2009), they are bound to fail unless priorities in Moscow change. Russia is one of the few states that continue to ignore Asian summits by sending low-ranking diplomats, while most states are represented either by the head of state or government. While in 2012 Presidential Decree 605 listed Asia Pacific as the third most important region in Russian foreign policy, right after Europe and Central Asia, 2013 saw the Asia-Pacific downgraded to fourth place.

Another reason for not deepening the relations, even before the war in Ukraine, was the ambiguity of the Russian stance on the South China Sea. While Russia does not explicitly support the Chinese claims, many of the speeches given by the Russian politicians point towards a neutrality that favors Moscow instead of Hanoi. This was always an important signal for Vietnam that Moscow was among those who supported the status quo and would not commit to greater help in the

¹⁰ The supply is already dwindling due to the needs of the Russian army at the front in Ukraine: many of the orders were not delivered as they have instead been requisitioned.

international arena, as was evident after the 2016 ruling of the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (Kapoor, 2021).

For Vietnam, this is an unambiguous signal that Russia is unable or unwilling to invest more in the region or to engage with it properly. This is a shame, as greater engagement in the ASEAN Regional Forum or East Asia Summit would allow Russia to regain some of the trust and the ground lost to other great powers. The annual Russia-Vietnam meeting could be a good place to start: cooperation based on bilateral meetings can easily be intensified. The Russian navy is already receiving preferential treatment in the Cam Ranh Bay international port: while most states can only use the facilities once per year, Russia can use them more often and use them for refueling of its strategic TU-95 bombers.

Vietnam values the strategic partnership with Russia. It has proven useful regarding arms sales and the development of energy resources¹¹, but that partnership has long been a much less indispensable element of Vietnamese foreign policy than Moscow would prefer. Of course, Vietnam would prefer to see Russia play a greater role of a balancer in the region, but Russia is facing economic and capability constraints that might severely limit the scope of engagement Russia would be willing to provide in the region. While relations between Russia and Vietnam are always referred to as historic and traditional, inertia and the ongoing war might cause that relationship to ossify and crumble slowly.

India

The strategic partnership between Vietnam and India was renewed and reinvigorated in 2014 with India's new emphasis on Southeast Asia in Prime Minister Modi's Act East Policy. It has then been upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2016. This made Vietnam perhaps the most important partner of New Delhi within Southeast Asia. For Vietnam, a close relationship with India certainly had its advantages, especially in light of aggressive Chinese policies on the South China Sea. India seemed to be the perfect balancer of Chinese influence on Vietnam. Vietnam was for India a geo-strategically placed ally that could be the key to the third phase of its Act East Policy.

This new reality, in which India and Vietnam both found themselves, prompted them to seek the most natural allies: India and ASEAN countries have always considered each other safe partners. Devbrat Chakraborty notes that the potential of a threat in that relationship has always been low (Bateman, 2010). Thus, both

¹¹ Russia has built Ninh Thuan 1, the first Vietnamese nuclear power plant, and provides training and services for it.

sides embraced the strategic partnership, as their regional interests are very much aligned: a secure and free South China Sea, free trade area and an anti-imperial stance in world politics are the most obvious characteristics of both Indian and Vietnamese policies in the region as well as of their strategic partnership.

John Ciorciari writes, "Alignment preferences and policies can be best understood as efforts to optimize the risks and rewards of alignment under conditions of strategic uncertainty" (Ciorciari, 2010). For Vietnam, this means seeking out the greatest degree of autonomy within the political framework of Southeast Asia and Asia-Pacific, as well as seeking out the optimal allies to ensure such autonomy. For India, it is mostly the latter: seeking the optimal ally alignments that would allow New Delhi to pursue and perhaps even aid its regional policies. So far, within ASEAN and Southeast Asia, Vietnam has proven to be the optimal ally for India. Similarly, India has established itself as a valuable associate of Vietnam, especially under Ciorciari's conditions of security uncertainty.

Both Vietnam and India have a strong tradition of anti-imperialistic, anti-hegemonic stances, and both countries have been reorienting themselves towards pragmatic, anti-hegemonic alignments (Viving, 2006). The partnership is all the easier for the common threat: China, the biggest rival of India on the continent and the country with great geostrategic influence over Vietnam. The convergence of interests is very simple: India must secure key points in Southeast Asia to remain the dominant power in the Indian Ocean. Vietnam considers the balance of forces or, as they named it, considerations of relative power chief imperatives of foreign policy¹². India can therefore balance the Chinese policy of "long-term stability, future orientation, good neighborliness and all-round cooperation"¹³ in Vietnam with its mere presence in the region.

The strategic partnership between Vietnam and India started in 2007 during the visit of Nguyen Tan Dung, the Vietnamese Vice-Minister of Defense, to India. Officially, it covered only security matters: promotion of regional security and fortification of defense supplies, training cooperation, intelligence exchanges, and enhanced cooperation in the areas of capacity building, technical assistance, and information sharing. In reality, India and Vietnam have enjoyed a close and friendly relationship for decades, ever since the Geneva Peace Convention in 1954, when the first Vietnam War officially came to an end. At the time, India chaired the International Control Commission for Indochina States.

¹² Vietnam has been surrounding itself with strategic partners in the Asia-Pacific: in 2009, it was Japan, Thailand, and Indonesia in 2013.

¹³ After China and Vietnam settled their land border disputes, Prime Minister Kieu was given those key words to be the basis of future China-Vietnam relations.

India remains a close partner of Vietnam, not only in politics but also in military relations. India has offered to train Vietnamese naval officers serving on submarines. This is possible because the Indian and Vietnamese navies buy their submarines from Russia and, therefore, use the same systems. This allows the Vietnamese government to diversify sources of training (Russia, USA, and India) and strengthen the partnership with New Delhi at the same time.

India is also a growing economic partner. A credit line for defense purchases, open for Vietnam since 2015, increased from 100 to 500 million USD in 2017. India is also increasingly investing in Vietnam, especially oil and gas exploration. For Vietnam, it is a good temporary solution to a long-term problem: the conflict over the Spratly and Paracel Islands is unlikely to be resolved soon, and joint exploration with India allows Vietnam to exploit offshore territories with less fear of repercussions from China.

Vietnamese predictions about Indian backing proved correct when, after Beijing sent to New Delhi a *démarche* protesting the cooperation, the Indian Minister of Foreign Affairs defended the enterprise: “Energy ties with Vietnam are as per international regulations”. India has, therefore, by defending its interests in exploring the natural resources of the South China Sea, become a defender of Vietnam’s right to explore its shore. This is a strategic issue for the Vietnamese regime: “Concerning the disputes over sovereignty, sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the territories in the East Sea, the complicated developments so far have seriously affected many activities and the maritime economic development of Vietnam” (Vietnam White Paper, 2020).

From the Vietnamese perspective, India has become increasingly important as a member of the Quad (Smith, 2021). The potential stabilizing factor and the overall cooperation of India as a member of the Quad (ASPI, 2021) and as a natural alternative to China makes the state an important partner. India has also been more and more engaged in Southeast Asia, trying to use connections to ASEAN and Vietnam as tools of power projection. Both show that the enmeshment of India by Vietnam has largely been a success (Baruah, 2020). India is interested in maintaining Vietnam’s international position, as a weaker Vietnam would mean a weaker India and a relatively stronger China (Economic Times, 2023).

India is, therefore, an increasingly important partner for Vietnam: from political backing to military and economic cooperation, this strategic partnership is likely to grow and evolve further, strengthening Vietnam’s position in the region and drawing India closer to Southeast Asia.

Conclusions

The Vietnamese strategy of enmeshment and regional balancing will likely continue for as long as possible, even within the scope of challenges in the international system, like the war in Ukraine and the growing US-China rivalry. Vietnam has so far been successful to varying degrees in engaging with great and regional powers and making them interested in the status quo of Vietnam. While all the regional powers are at different stages of a strategic partnership with Vietnam, most of those are only likely to deepen further. Those relations will likely be substitutes for any formal arrangements, which remain unlikely for now due to Vietnam's 4 No policy: no to foreign bases in Vietnam, no to formal alliances, no to relations with one state against another, and no to use of force. This will ensure China shall remain appeased, at least on a symbolic level, and that proper deference be paid to the greatest regional power. China will remain the most problematic partner for Vietnam, however, omitting it in the framework of strategic partnerships would have been a grave blunder. Vietnam will likely continue using the ideological connection to build relations with China while working not to become too dependent on them.

Strategic partnerships with other states will help Vietnam achieve this goal. The flexibility of the arrangements will allow for the framework to be filled depending on the needs and limitations of the given partner. The relations with India and Japan are likely to continue on the existing track, though they could possibly speed up depending on how assertive China will be in both South and Southeast Asia. Long plagued by inertia, relations with Russia are unlikely to be strongly invigorated unless something changes in Moscow's priorities and capabilities. While the defining factor will be the ongoing rivalry between the US and China as well as Vietnam's relations with the two states, the regional powers also have a role to play in Vietnam's strategy. They will continue to play smaller balancing roles and provide opportunities outside of the rivalry, which is the key to maintaining a neutral stance in the region and cordial relations with Beijing and Washington.

Finally, relations with the United States are likely to progress as they are until the situation in the region stabilizes enough for Washington and Hanoi not to need each other as much as they need each other right now. As long as the balance of power in the region remains threatened, they are likely to continue cooperation. As long as the stalemate in which the great powers function in Southeast Asia exists, Vietnam will continue to reap benefits and maintain the current strategy.

Minghao Zhao sums it up this way: "A political game of great importance is developing in Indo-Pacific Asia. The United States, India, Japan, and other players want to cooperate to build an Indo-Pacific order that favors their interests." Since these interests also largely coincide with those of Vietnam, the country is ready

to support Indo-Pacific initiatives and is doing so more and more clearly. Likely, there will not be an explicit statement supporting such activities shortly. Vietnam will actively support those elements of the Indo-Pacific that will guarantee the stability of the existing international system, maintain the existing regional hierarchy, and foster economic development. In the end, Vietnam's strategy is to pragmatically include all the important players and increase its standing by engaging them and promoting Vietnamese interests and the economic and political growth of Vietnam. The government in Hanoi will thus maintain a balancing position between great powers for as long as possible. This position can be maintained precisely for Vietnam because all states have stakes in maintaining good relations with Vietnam.

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