

SPECIAL ISSUE

# “No One Can Force Vietnam to Choose Sides”: Vietnam as a Self-Reliant Middle Power

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**NOTE:** This essay was first presented at the March 2021 workshop “Middle Powers amidst U.S.-China Rivalry” organized by Hoo Tiang Boon and Sarah Teo at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University.

**KEYWORDS:** VIETNAM; MIDDLE POWER; U.S.-CHINA RIVALRY; SELF-RELIANCE; FOREIGN POLICY

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This essay examines how Vietnam is adapting to U.S.-China rivalry and argues that Vietnam's room for strategic maneuverability is diminishing as it faces growing internal and external pressure for policy adjustments.

### MAIN ARGUMENT

In the past few years, Vietnam has been increasingly labeled as a middle power. Vietnam's emerging middle-power status coincides with a shifting strategic environment marked by China's expansionism that has nudged Vietnam toward closer U.S. relations. However, Vietnam's persistent foreign policy of self-reliance and independence, informed by the country's historical experiences and concerns over regime security, ensures that Hanoi stays nonaligned. Thus, while retaining autonomy in developing closer U.S. ties, Vietnam strikes a delicate balance between the two superpowers. Instead of relying on a single security guarantor, Vietnam has actively sought to promote rules-based principles and multilateralism in advancing its national interests, particularly vis-à-vis the South China Sea and the Mekong River. However, external and internal developments have strained Vietnam's ability to balance between the two superpowers.

### POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- While increasingly wary of China's behavior, Vietnam is unlikely to enter a formal alliance with the U.S. due to its firmly held values of self-reliance and independence.
- Vietnam will continue to leverage multidirectional diplomacy to shape regional security and economic architectures in an effort to counterbalance China's influence and reduce Vietnamese dependence on China.
- Vietnam should exercise more flexibility and show greater resolve in protecting its national interests. To this end, without abandoning its foreign policy of self-reliance and independence, Vietnam should explore new options to advance security cooperation with other major and middle powers with which it shares strategic interests.

Amid heightening great-power competition in the Indo-Pacific theater, the role of middle powers is being increasingly examined or re-examined. Vietnam has attracted media and academic attention, not least because of its important geostrategic position and active diplomatic posture.<sup>1</sup> This begs the question: Is there a plausible basis for Vietnam to be called a middle power?

Each year since 2018, the Australia-based Lowy Institute's Asia Power Index, which ranks the aggregate power of 26 Asia-Pacific countries in terms of resources and influence, has classified Vietnam as a middle power.<sup>2</sup> Several scholarly articles have put forward the notion that Vietnam belongs to this category of secondary states based on the three common approaches in middle-power literature: capacity, behavior, and identity. Ralf Emmers and Sarah Teo, for example, consider Vietnam a middle power in the Asia-Pacific, as the country satisfies their proposed quantitative criteria in terms of population size, geographical area, trade as a percentage of GDP, and life expectancy at birth.<sup>3</sup> Building upon the behavior approach, Do Thanh Hai showcases Vietnam's middle-power status by focusing on the country's promotion of multilateralism and a rules-based order on issues concerning its national interests, particularly regarding the South China Sea dispute and water security in the Mekong River.<sup>4</sup> While Vietnamese leaders have never explicitly described the country as a middle power, Do Thi Thuy and others observe that discourse on foreign policy by Vietnamese leaders reflects a nascent middle-power identity.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Sung Chul Jung, Jaehyon Lee, and Ji-Yong Lee, "The Indo-Pacific Strategy and U.S. Alliance Network Expandability: Asian Middle Powers' Positions on Sino-US. Geostrategic Competition in Indo-Pacific Region," *Journal of Contemporary China* 30, no. 127 (2021): 53–68; Donald W. Keyser and Gi-Wook Shin, "Asia's Middle Powers: South Korea and Vietnam," in *Asia's Middle Powers? The Identity and Regional Policy of South Korea and Vietnam*, ed. Joon-Woo Park, Gi-Wook Shin, and Donald W. Keyser (Stanford: Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, 2013), 1–28; Rory Medcalf and C. Raja Mohan, "The U.S.-China Rivalry Has Asia on Edge: Can 'Middle Powers' Create Stability?" Brookings Institution, August 15, 2014 ~ <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-u-s-china-rivalry-has-asia-on-edge-can-middle-powers-create-stability>.

<sup>2</sup> Lowy Institute, Asia Power Index, 2021 edition ~ <https://power.lowyinstitute.org>.

<sup>3</sup> Ralf Emmers and Sarah Teo, "Regional Security Strategies of Middle Powers in the Asia-Pacific," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 15, no. 2 (2015): 185–216.

<sup>4</sup> Do Thanh Hai, "Vietnam: Charting Out Its Own Pathway" (paper presented at the conference "Between Scylla and Charybdis: Is There a Middle Path for Middle Powers in the Indo-Pacific Region?" U. S. Naval War College and the East Asia Security Centre, Bond University, October 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Do Thi Thuy et al., "Danh gia ve trien vong ngoai giao cuong quoc tam trung va khuyen nghi chinh sach cho Viet Nam" [Evaluation of Middle-Power Diplomacy Prospects and Policy Recommendations for Vietnam], in *Ngoai giao cuong quoc tam trung: Ly thuyet, thuc tien quoc te va ham y cho Viet Nam* [Middle-Power Diplomacy: Theories, International Empirical Cases, and Implications for the Case of Vietnam], ed. Do Thi Thuy (Hanoi: Political Truth Publishing House, 2021), 305–6.

Adopting an eclectic approach, Le Dinh Tinh and Vu Thi Thu Ngan characterize Vietnam as an “emerging middle power” on the world stage, suggesting that, to a certain extent, the country has met the capacity, behavior, and identity criteria of a middle power.<sup>6</sup> Regarding capacity, Le and Vu look at eight quantitative indicators (GDP, GDP growth, GDP per capita, trade, surface area, population, military expenditure, and human development index score) from a comparative perspective. In terms of behavior, Le and Vu underscore Vietnam’s espousal of multilateralism, strong support for a rules-based international order, independent and multidirectional foreign policy, and collaboration with other middle powers. Regarding identity, Le and Vu note that the academic and policymaking communities have increasingly viewed Vietnam through the middle-power lens. Indeed, several Vietnam experts have advocated for policy change within Vietnam to better reflect the country’s evident middle-power nature.<sup>7</sup> This growing body of literature suggests that, according to the traditional understanding of the term “middle power,” the use of such a label for Vietnam is appropriate.

Vietnam’s emerging middle-power status coincides with the intensification of great-power competition in the Indo-Pacific region. This essay examines Vietnam’s adaptation strategy amid this geopolitical context and shows that the shifting strategic environment marked by China’s expansionism has prompted Vietnam to deepen its engagement with the United States. Nonetheless, Vietnam’s persistent self-reliance and independent foreign policy, informed by its Cold War experience and need for regime security, ensures that Hanoi does not tilt too far away from Beijing and move too close to Washington. Thus, while retaining autonomy in developing closer ties with the United States, Vietnam is striking a delicate balance between the two great powers. “No one or no country can force Vietnam to choose sides,” stated Senior Major Lieutenant Nguyen Chi Vinh, Vietnam’s then deputy defense minister, when asked about Vietnam’s position in great-power competition.<sup>8</sup> He further asserted that Vietnam chose itself and was determined to use its internal strengths to stay independent and autonomous. Under this

<sup>6</sup> Le Dinh Tinh and Vu Thi Thu Ngan, “The Covid-19 Pandemic and the Emergence of Vietnam as a Middle Power,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* (2021): 1–23.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Le Hong Hiep, “Da den luc Viet Nam dinh vi minh la ‘cuong quoc hang trung?’” [Is It Time for Vietnam to Identity as a Middle Power?], VietNamNet, August 16, 2018 ~ <https://vietnamnet.vn/vn/tuanvietnam/dachieu/da-den-luc-viet-nam-dinh-vi-minh-la-cuong-quoc-hang-trung-469844.html>; and Huynh Tam Sang, “Should Vietnam Embrace Middle Power Status?” *Diplomat*, January 1, 2021 ~ <https://thediplomat.com/2021/01/should-vietnam-embrace-middle-power-status/>.

<sup>8</sup> Nguyen Chi Vinh quoted in Hoang Thuy, “Khong nuoc nao co the buoc Viet Nam chon ben” [“No Country Can Force Vietnam to Choose Sides”], VNExpress, September 2, 2020 ~ <https://vnexpress.net/khong-nuoc-nao-co-the-buoc-viet-nam-chon-ben-4155653.html>.

strategic thinking, Vietnam eschews relying on a single security guarantor. Instead, Hanoi has actively sought to promote rules-based principles and multilateralism, particularly vis-à-vis the South China Sea and the Mekong River, where China's growing clout is acutely felt. However, several external and internal developments have diminished Vietnam's strategic maneuverability in navigating the current geopolitical environment, which necessitates a recalibration of its adaptation strategy to Sino-U.S. competition.

This essay proceeds in five sections:

- ≈ pp. 155–62 address Vietnam's long-standing foreign policy aims of self-reliance and independence, including the historical and political reasons behind why the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) upholds the principles of self-reliance and independence.
- ≈ pp. 162–65 study the changing Asia-Pacific environment with the rise of the U.S.-China rivalry from the perspective of Vietnam.
- ≈ pp. 165–74 examine Hanoi's three-pronged adaptation strategy to the regional activities of the United States and China.
- ≈ pp. 175–78 analyze the threats diminishing Vietnam's strategic maneuverability and recognize the importance for policymakers of being flexible in dealing with the evolving strategic environment.
- ≈ pp. 178–79 conclude that, while maintaining its autonomy as much possible, Vietnam needs to exercise more flexibility and resolve in protecting its national interests, especially in the South China Sea and the Mekong River, by working with new partners in common cause.

## VIETNAM'S FOREIGN POLICY OF SELF-RELIANCE AND INDEPENDENCE

### *The Foundations of Vietnam's Self-Reliant Posture*

The 1986 Doi Moi (renovation) policy that paved the way for the opening of Vietnam to the outside world is a pivotal landmark that transformed the country's foreign policy. Prior to this point, as a member of the Soviet bloc in the Cold War, Vietnamese leaders strictly adhered to the Marxist-Leninist worldview that international relations were driven by the antagonism between Communism and capitalism, the struggle between “friends” and “enemies,” and *ai se thang ai* (who will trump whom).<sup>9</sup> By the 1980s, domestic socioeconomic crises stemming from an international embargo and the

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<sup>9</sup> Carlyle A. Thayer, “The Evolution of Vietnamese Foreign Policy, 1986–2006,” in *Vietnam's Foreign Policy under Doi Moi*, ed. Hong Hiep Le and Anton Tsvetov (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2018), 24.

breakdown of the central planning system forced the CPV to revamp its approach toward external affairs. In 1986, Vietnamese leaders decided to embark on economic liberalization under the Doi Moi policy, hoping to gain necessary outside assistance and resources to improve the country's internal situation. To this end, Vietnam adopted a new outlook on international affairs that recognized the interdependency between countries and the need to engage with the wider international community.

In 1988, the Politburo of the CPV issued Resolution No. 13, entitled "On the Tasks and Foreign Policy in the New Situation," which provided a springboard for overhauling Vietnam's foreign policy. The document outlined the objectives of having "more friends, fewer enemies," maintaining peace, initiating international integration, and taking advantage of conducive external conditions to ensure domestic stability and economic development.<sup>10</sup> Resolution No. 13 also mentioned the term "national interest" for the first time and identified the foreign policy goals of having "a strong economy, a sufficiently strong national defense, and expanded international cooperation."<sup>11</sup> In other words, Vietnam shifted from an ideology-based foreign policy framework to one primarily determined by national interests. Building upon this new international relations approach, the CPV adopted a multidirectional foreign policy at the 7th National Congress in 1991, calling for the diversification of economic diplomacy and the expansion of cooperation with all countries, regardless of differences in political systems.<sup>12</sup> In the same year, Vietnam re-established diplomatic ties with China. Four years later, in 1995, Vietnam normalized relations with the United States and entered the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

In 1998, Vietnam adopted the "three no's" defense policy that has served as the bedrock for a foreign policy of self-reliance and independence. Specifically, Vietnam's 2004 defense white paper stipulated that Vietnam's policy is "not to join any military alliance, not to allow any foreign country to establish military bases in Vietnam, and not to take part in any military

<sup>10</sup> Le Van Phong, "Qua trình bổ sung, hoàn thiện đường lối đối ngoại thời kỳ Đổi Mới" [The Process of Supplementing, Completing Foreign Policy Directions in the Doi Moi Era], *Ly luận chính trị*, May 7, 2015 ~ <http://lyluanchinhtri.vn/home/index.php/nguyen-cuu-ly-luan/item/915-qua-trinh-bo-sung-hoan-thien-duong-loi-doi-ngoai-thoi-ky-doi-moi.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Thayer, "The Evolution of Vietnamese Foreign Policy," 26.

<sup>12</sup> Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), "Báo cáo chính trị của Ban Chấp hành Trung ương khóa VI trình tại đại hội đại biểu toàn quốc lần thứ VII của Đảng" [The Political Report by the 6th Central Committee of the CPV at the 7th National Congress], 1991, Báo điện tử Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam ~ <https://tulieuvankien.dangcongsan.vn/ban-chap-hanh-trung-uong-dang/dai-hoi-dang/lan-thu-vii/bao-cao-chinh-tri-cua-ban-chap-hanh-trung-uong-khoa-vi-trinh-tai-dai-hoi-dai-bieu-toan-quoc-lan-thu-vii-cua-dang-1800>.

action that uses force or threatens to use force against another country.”<sup>13</sup> This policy signifies Hanoi’s desire to abstain from entering any collective defense arrangement, and it was formulated to reassure China that Vietnam harbored no hostile intent,<sup>14</sup> allowing Hanoi to improve ties with Beijing to create a stable and peaceful external environment for national development. Since then, Vietnam has upheld these three defense principles. The 2019 defense white paper reaffirmed the “three no’s” policy and added a fourth “no”: no use of force in international relations.<sup>15</sup>

Another cornerstone of Vietnam’s independent and self-reliant foreign policy is the “cooperation and struggle” principle, which was first introduced in 2003 in a CPV Central Committee resolution entitled “On the Strategy of National Defense in the New Conditions.”<sup>16</sup> The resolution replaced the Cold War-era dichotomy of friends and enemies with a new one: *doi tac* (target of cooperation) and *doi tuong* (target of struggle). Accordingly, targets of cooperation are those states that respect Vietnam’s independence, sovereignty, unification, and territorial integrity and that establish and expand friendship and cooperation with Vietnam based on mutual benefit.<sup>17</sup> By contrast, targets of struggle are any forces with schemes or actions that sabotage Vietnam’s revolutionary goals toward national construction and defense. Under this framework, a country could be seen as a target of cooperation in some areas but a target of struggle in others. Therefore, Vietnam would be able to conduct external affairs in a flexible and pragmatic manner without the need to align with or against any countries, allowing it to maximize benefits while hedging against potential threats. The economic and diplomatic gains made under Doi Moi allowed Vietnam to avert the collapse of its economy, thereby ensuring regime survival, and the CPV recognized that external support and assistance were critical to domestic stability and prosperity. For Vietnam, independence and self-reliance must go hand in hand with the “multilateralization” and “diversification” of foreign relations. Therefore, Hanoi’s foreign policy of self-reliance and independence is not one of autarky but a long-term strategy that entails working with as many partners as possible to bolster national strengths.

<sup>13</sup> Ministry of National Defence (Vietnam), *2004 Vietnam National Defence* (Hanoi, 2004), 5.

<sup>14</sup> Sebastian Strangio, *In the Dragon’s Shadow: Southeast Asia in the Chinese Century* (London: Yale University Press, 2020), 82.

<sup>15</sup> Ministry of National Defence (Vietnam), *2019 Vietnam National Defence* (Hanoi, 2019), 23–24.

<sup>16</sup> Pham Quang Minh and Nguyen Hong Hai, “Van de ‘doi tac’ va ‘doi tuong’ trong van kien dai hoi XIII cua Dang: Tu nhan thuc den thuc te” [The Topic of ‘Target of Cooperation’ and ‘Target of Struggle’ in Documents of the 13th Party Congress], *Tạp chí công san*, June 24, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

This strategic thinking has been explicitly spelled out in the CPV's official documents over the past two decades. The Political Report of the 10th National Congress in 2006 states that Vietnam would “carry out the foreign policy of openness, multilateralization and diversification of international relations [to] proactively integrate into the international economy and, at the same time, expand international cooperation in other domains.”<sup>18</sup> Subsequent national congresses have reiterated and built upon these points. Since the 12th National Congress in 2016, the CPV has promoted the principle that “Vietnam is a friend, reliable partner, and responsible member of the international community”<sup>19</sup>; and the 13th National Congress in 2021 reaffirmed that Vietnam would continue the “foreign policy of independence, self-reliance, multilateralization, diversification; proactive and active international integration.”<sup>20</sup>

While Vietnam has not joined any new formal alliances in the post-Cold War era, it has developed various friendly arrangements based on three different levels of strategic partnership: comprehensive, strategic, and comprehensive (or extensive) strategic. At the lowest level, comprehensive partnerships only aim to promote bilateral relations on a wide range of issues, since a deeper level of strategic trust is not present.<sup>21</sup> Built upon by a considerable degree of strategic trust, strategic partnerships serve as multidimensional arrangements to advance cooperation based on shared interests and attention to each other's strategic interests.<sup>22</sup> At the highest level, comprehensive strategic partnerships entail mutual cooperation in

<sup>18</sup> CPV, “Bao cáo chính trị của Ban Chấp hành Trung ương đảng khóa IX tại đại hội đại biểu toàn quốc lần thứ X của Đảng” [The Political Report by the 9th Central Committee of the CPV at the 10th National Congress], *Báo điện tử đảng cộng sản Việt Nam*, 2006 ~ <https://tulieuvankien.dangcongsan.vn/ban-chap-hanh-trung-uong-dang/dai-hoi-dang/lan-thu-x/bao-cao-chinh-tri-cua-ban-chap-hanh-trung-uong-dang-khoa-ix-tai-dai-hoi-dai-bieu-toan-quoc-lan-thu-x-cua-dang-1537>.

<sup>19</sup> CPV, “Bao cáo chính trị của Ban Chấp hành Trung ương đảng khóa XI trình tại đại hội đại biểu toàn quốc lần thứ XII của Đảng” [The Political Report by the 11th Central Committee of the CPV at the 12th National Congress], *Báo điện tử đảng cộng sản Việt Nam*, 2016 ~ <https://tulieuvankien.dangcongsan.vn/ban-chap-hanh-trung-uong-dang/dai-hoi-dang/lan-thu-xii/bao-cao-chinh-tri-cua-ban-chap-hanh-trung-uong-dang-khoa-xi-tai-dai-hoi-dai-bieu-toan-quoc-lan-thu-xii-cua-dang-1600>.

<sup>20</sup> CPV, “Bao cáo chính trị của Ban Chấp hành Trung ương đảng khóa VII trình tại đại hội đại biểu toàn quốc lần thứ VIII của Đảng” [The Political Report by the 7th Central Committee of the CPV at the 8th National Congress], *Báo điện tử đảng cộng sản Việt Nam*, 2021 ~ <https://tulieuvankien.dangcongsan.vn/ban-chap-hanh-trung-uong-dang/dai-hoi-dang/lan-thu-xiii/bao-cao-chinh-tri-cua-ban-chap-hanh-trung-uong-dang-khoa-xii-tai-dai-hoi-dai-bieu-toan-quoc-lan-thu-xiii-cua-3734>.

<sup>21</sup> Huang Le Thu, “Vietnam's Persistent Foreign Policy Dilemma: Caught between Self-Reliance and Proactive Integration,” *Asia Policy* 13, no. 4 (2018): 129.

<sup>22</sup> Pham Binh Minh, “Building Strategic, Comprehensive Partnerships—Viet Nam's Soft Power,” *Communist Review*, May 6, 2014 ~ [https://tapchicongsan.org.vn/web/english/international/detail/-/asset\\_publisher/ZeaSwTFJtMgN/content/building-strategic-comprehensive-partnerships-viet-nam-s-soft-power](https://tapchicongsan.org.vn/web/english/international/detail/-/asset_publisher/ZeaSwTFJtMgN/content/building-strategic-comprehensive-partnerships-viet-nam-s-soft-power).




all domains of shared interest, undergirded by a high degree of strategic trust. Unlike alliances, strategic and comprehensive partnerships often do not rest upon common struggle against an adversary but joint cooperative opportunities. As of 2021, Vietnam has established diplomatic relations with 189 countries and territories, formed strategic partnerships with 17 countries, established comprehensive partnerships with 13 countries, and signed fifteen free-trade agreements.<sup>23</sup> Hanoi entered a comprehensive strategic partnership with China in 2008 and a comprehensive partnership with the United States in 2013. Over the years, the implementation of a diverse network of high-level relations has allowed Vietnam to deepen relations with like-minded partners while remaining consistent with its foreign policy of independence and self-reliance.

In sum, the Doi Moi policy resulted in a drastic transformation of Vietnam's world outlook: Vietnam no longer viewed other actors solely based on ideology but instead considered their actions vis-à-vis its national interests. This mindset shift provided the foundation for Vietnam's current foreign policy: the "three no's" defense policy, the "cooperation and struggle" principle, and multidirectional diplomacy. Two factors have been salient in informing Vietnamese leaders' decision to stay on this course: Vietnam's historical experiences and regime security.

### *Historical Experiences and Regime Security*

Vietnam's "no alliance" principle is partly driven by its experiences in both fighting against and seeking support from external powers. First, having resisted the aggression and dominance of foreign powers throughout history to achieve national liberation and unification, Vietnam has treasured its hard-won independence. Vietnam's national motto is "Independence, Liberty, Happiness," and Vietnamese people are all too familiar with the saying "*Không có gì quý hơn độc lập tự do*" ("Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom") by the revolutionary hero Ho Chi Minh. The sacred value of independence has become a key theme in Vietnam's domestic political discourse, justifying the need to avoid formal alliances.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Bui Thanh Son, "Tu nen ngoai giao khang chien, kien quoc den nen ngoai giao toan dien, hien dai va phuc vu phat trien dat nuoc" [From a Revolutionary Foreign Policy to a Comprehensive, Modern, and For-National-Development Foreign Policy], *Dang cong san Viet Nam*, August 28, 2021  <https://dangcongsan.vn/thoi-su/tu-nen-ngoai-giao-khang-chien-kien-quoc-den-nen-ngoai-giao-toan-dien-hien-dai-va-phuc-vu-phat-trien-dat-nuoc-589381.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Le Thu, "Vietnam's Persistent Foreign Policy Dilemma," 134.

Second, Vietnam's unfavorable view of alliance politics also resulted from the bitter lessons of the Cold War, particularly the country's relations with China from the late 1970s to 1991. During the Vietnam War from 1954 to 1975, Vietnam bandwagoned with China, as the two countries shared Communist values and interests in fighting French and U.S. imperialism in Indochina.<sup>25</sup> However, following the end of the Vietnam War, this de facto alliance waned without a common enemy, and the two clashed over the issue of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. As China emerged as a new security threat, Vietnam established a defense treaty with the Soviet Union in 1978, but Hanoi's tilt toward Moscow inevitably increased the conflict with Beijing. In 1979, China launched a swift but bloody border war to "teach Vietnam a lesson" in response to what it saw as Hanoi's imperial ambitions in Cambodia and a Vietnam-Soviet alliance aiming to strategically enclose China. Vietnam learned the hard way that pursuing an alliance to balance China could provoke aggression from its northern neighbor.

Several other events during the Cold War reinforced the view that relying on external security guarantors was not a viable option for Vietnam, including U.S. abandonment of South Vietnam when China occupied the Paracel Islands in 1974 and the Soviet Union's inaction when China took over Johnson South Reef (which was administered by Vietnam) in the Spratly Islands in 1988.<sup>26</sup> That same year, Hanoi was also caught off guard by Moscow's announcement to end its naval presence in Vietnam's Cam Ranh Bay in exchange for U.S. withdrawal from bases in the Philippines.<sup>27</sup> Vietnam subsequently lost its biggest ally in 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union. By then, it was clear to Vietnam that military alliances did not serve the country's national interests. As Le Hong Hiep has observed, "it is obvious that neither bandwagoning nor balancing could help Vietnam ensure its security in the face of a more powerful China. Moreover, such strategies also undermined Vietnam's autonomy as they required a significant level of dependence on external powers."<sup>28</sup> Thus, for Vietnamese strategists, remaining nonaligned while diversifying external relations is a preferable option to cope with the threats from China.

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<sup>25</sup> Le Hong Hiep, *Living Next to the Giant: The Political Economy of Vietnam's Relations with China under Doi Moi* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2017), 157–58.

<sup>26</sup> Do Thanh Hai, *Vietnam and the South China Sea: Politics, Security, and Legality* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 21.

<sup>27</sup> Kawashima Shin et al., "Asia After the Soviet Union," *Diplomat*, December 1, 2021 ~ <https://thediplomat.com/2021/11/asia-after-the-soviet-union>.

<sup>28</sup> Le, *Living Next to the Giant*, 158.

Another important factor contributing to Vietnam's desire to stay self-reliant is regime security. As a one-party state, national security is inextricably tied to the survival and consolidation of power of the ruling party. Thus, as Huong Le Thu has argued, the foreign policy achievements under Doi Moi ultimately served the goals of persevering socialism and sustaining Communist rule.<sup>29</sup> In the late 1980s, domestic crises and international blocks on trade compelled the CPV to open the country; otherwise, it would have faced demise like the Communist regimes in the Eastern Bloc or harsh sanctions like those in North Korea and Cuba. Therefore, the CPV managed economic liberalization in a way that preserved its political primacy, meaning that there are inherent limitations on how much international integration Vietnamese leaders are willing to tolerate.<sup>30</sup>

Vietnam is comfortable embracing international integration to promote socioeconomic development. However, in the political and security realms, the CPV fears that too much integration would necessitate compromises in independence, sovereignty, self-reliance, and socialist ideology.<sup>31</sup> As the top leadership is resolute in pursuing the socialist path, the country's self-reliant posture must also rest upon socialism. In an interview, then deputy defense minister Nguyen Chi Vinh reaffirmed that "national independence must go hand in hand with socialism. Without these two closely attached factors, we would not have the August Revolution, the subsequent victories against France and America, as well as the national development progress that we have achieved today."<sup>32</sup>

A risk that has been associated with excessive international integration is *dien bien hoa binh* (peaceful evolution), which refers to efforts to initiate a regime change to Western-style democracy. Following the revolutions that led to the demise of Communist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the 1990s, the CPV began to stress the task of safeguarding against peaceful evolution in all aspects of leadership and governance, especially in foreign relations. An article in the journal of the Vietnam People's Army identifies four ways by which hostile forces seek to overthrow Communist rule in Vietnam in today's context: (1) facilitating economic liberalization to gradually eliminate the role of socialism, (2) colluding with corrupted Vietnamese officials to damage Vietnam, (3) working through foreign

<sup>29</sup> Le Thu, "Vietnam's Persistent Foreign Policy Dilemma," 132.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>32</sup> Nguyen cited in Thuy, "Khong nuoc nao co the buoc Viet Nam chon ben."

corporations to undermine Vietnam's economy, and (4) appealing to Western politicians to pressure Vietnam on issues of human rights and democracy.<sup>33</sup> Pro-democracy protests involving domestic unrest across the world in the past decade, such as the 2011 Arab Spring in the Middle East and the 2021 Cuban protests, have kept this fear alive within the CPV. Commentaries in the party's newspaper frame these events as peaceful evolutions sponsored by the United States and the West.<sup>34</sup> The Resolution of the 13th National Congress of the CPV in 2021 stated that a central priority for the party in the upcoming term is to strengthen the fight against all plots and activities by hostile forces.<sup>35</sup>

In sum, Vietnam's persistent foreign policy of self-reliance and independence has been informed by its historical experiences and concerns for regime security. From the perspective of Vietnamese leaders, the policy serves both the country's security interests and the CPV's long-term goal of sustaining Communist rule. However, Vietnam's desire to stay nonaligned is being tested in a rapidly evolving strategic environment marked by China's growing assertiveness and escalating Sino-U.S. tensions.

#### THE SHIFTING STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT: CHINA'S GROWING ASSERTIVENESS AND INTENSIFYING SINO-U.S. COMPETITION

Over the past decade, China's pursuit of national interests as a rising military and economic superpower has cast a shadow on its relations with smaller states in Southeast Asia. The impacts of China's growing influence are felt acutely by Vietnam, which has traditionally viewed its northern neighbor as a major security threat. In the past, various Chinese dynasties invaded or directly ruled Vietnam in their attempts to move southward, and the last large-scale armed conflict between the two countries was the 1979 border war. The Vietnamese are bitter over the fact that the country has lost control of the entire Paracel Island group and several features in the Spratly Islands

<sup>33</sup> Tan Long, "Nhan dien hoat dong loi dung hoi nhap kinh te quoc te de chong pha Viet Nam" [Identifying Activities that Abuse International Integration to Sabotage Vietnam], *Quan doi nhan dan*, November 26, 2018 ~ <https://www.qdnd.vn/phong-chong-dien-bien-hoa-binh/nhan-dien-hoat-dong-loi-dung-hoi-nhap-kinh-te-quoc-te-de-chong-pha-viet-nam-555447>.

<sup>34</sup> See Nguyen Viet Thao, "Cach mang sac mau o Cuba: Phien ban moi cua am muu co huu?" [Color Revolution in Cuba: New Version of an Old Scheme?], *Dang cong san Viet Nam*, July 15, 2021 ~ <https://dangcongsan.vn/the-gioi/tin-tuc/cach-mang-sac-mau-o-cuba-phien-ban-moi-cua-am-muu-co-huu-585485.html>; and CPV, "'Mua Xuan A-rap' va su can thiep cua phuong Tay" [The Arab Spring and Western Interference], *Dang cong san Viet Nam* ~ <https://dangcongsan.vn/su-kien-binh-luan/mua-xuan-arap-va-su-can-thiep-cua-phuong-tay-96395.html>.

<sup>35</sup> CPV, "Toan van nghi quyet dai hoi dai bieu toan quoc lan thu XIII cua Dang" [Full Resolution of the 13th National Congress of the CPV], *Bao chinh phu*, February 26, 2021 ~ <https://baochinhphu.vn/toan-van-nghi-quyet-dai-hoi-dai-bieu-toan-quoc-lan-thu-xiii-cua-dang-102288263.htm>.

to China. At the same time, China has been Vietnam's biggest trading partner since 2004—a factor that bolsters Vietnam's remarkable economic growth but also gives Beijing significant leverage over Hanoi.

The ongoing territorial and maritime disputes in the South China Sea with China have been a persistent security concern. China's massive campaign to reclaim and militarize the disputed maritime features since 2014 has produced considerable anxiety for Vietnamese policymakers. Apart from the question over the sovereignty of the Paracels and Spratlys, China's self-proclaimed nine-dash line has been a bone of contention as it overlaps with the majority of Vietnam's exclusive economic zone (EEZ). In 2009, China officially announced the nine-dash line map in response to the Vietnam-Malaysia joint submission on the extended continental shelf. In 2016, an arbitral tribunal established under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) ruled that the nine-dash line was unlawful, but China has ignored the ruling. Moreover, since the late 2000s, Beijing has been advancing its claims in the South China Sea through gray-zone tactics—ones short of war—resulting in frequent confrontation between Vietnamese and Chinese vessels. The most serious standoff was the 2014 Hai Yang Shi You 981 incident when China moved an oil rig into Vietnam's EEZ. The latest major spat occurred in 2019 when China deployed a survey vessel to waters near the Vietnam-controlled Vanguard Bank in the South China Sea.

The environmental and geopolitical challenges in the Mekong River basin have emerged as another pressing security concern for Vietnam. Roughly 17 million Vietnamese rely on the Mekong River for their livelihoods.<sup>36</sup> This vital waterway provides sediments for agricultural production in the Mekong Delta—a region responsible for much of the country's rice and aquacultural production. However, food security and socioeconomic development of this fertile region have been threatened by the devastating impacts of climate change and rising sea levels. In addition, hydropower dams in the upper basin have disrupted fish migration and restricted the flow of sediments and freshwater to the lower basin, making droughts and salinity intrusion in the Mekong Delta more acute.<sup>37</sup> As the upstream hegemon, China's dam operations and

<sup>36</sup> General Statistics Office (Vietnam), *Completed Results of the 2019 Vietnam Housing and Population Census* (Hanoi: Statistical Publishing House, 2020), 23 ~ <https://www.gso.gov.vn/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Ket-qua-toan-bo-Tong-dieu-tra-dan-so-va-nha-o-2019.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Dung Phung et al., "Hydropower Dams, River Drought and Health Effects: A Detection and Attribution Study in the Lower Mekong Delta Region," *Climate Risk Management* 32 (2021); Sameh Kantoush et al., "Impact of Upstream Hydropower Dams and Climate Change on Hydrodynamics of Vietnamese Mekong Delta," *Journal of Japan Society of Civil Engineers* 73, no. 4 (2017); and Yuichiro Yoshida et al., "Impacts of Mainstream Hydropower Dams on Fisheries and Agriculture in Lower Mekong Basin," *Sustainability* 12, no. 6 (2020): 2408.

dam-building activities along the Mekong have allowed Beijing to gain de facto control of this water resource. Meanwhile, as the most downstream state, Vietnam is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of upstream dams and any potential coercive water diplomacy by China.<sup>38</sup> For these reasons, the issue of water security in the Mekong Delta has been designated a national security risk by the top leadership in Vietnam.<sup>39</sup>

While U.S.-China relations began to heat up under Obama's "rebalance to Asia" strategy, the dynamics shifted dramatically when Trump replaced the previous administration's policy of engagement with one of strategic competition. The Biden administration has further pushed this approach, seeking to boost ties with allies and partners in the region to uphold a rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific region to counter China's growing clout. Tension has accelerated in all domains, ranging from trade, technology, and human rights to geopolitical hotspots such as Taiwan and Russia's war in Ukraine. Likewise, China's continued maritime assertiveness and its tightening grip on the Mekong River have prompted the United States to project a more confrontational posture in Asia. Over the past few years, the emergence of major power-led minilateral groupings such as the Quad, the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) nuclear submarine partnership, and various cooperative mechanisms in the Mekong region reflects the new reality of an intensified geostrategic competition in the Indo-Pacific.

Due to its proximity to China and important role in regional security issues as a middle power, Vietnam is inevitably entangled in the great powers' competition for regional influence. Both Beijing and Washington have sought to pull Hanoi to their side through various diplomatic attempts. Consecutive high-level visits by the United States and China to Vietnam in the latter half of 2021 illustrate this point. In July 2021, U.S. defense secretary Lloyd Austin traveled to Vietnam as a part of a Southeast Asian trip to demonstrate the United States' commitment to the region. He discussed a wide range of issues with his Vietnamese counterpart, including war legacies, maritime capacity building, and defense industry collaboration.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> See Frederick Kliem, "Asia's Troubled River: Dam(n)ing or Managing the Mekong?" *Journal of Greater Mekong Studies* 2, no. 1 (2020): 32; and Shang-su Wu, "Lancang-Mekong Cooperation: The Current State of China's Hydro-Politics," in *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific: The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism, and ASEAN*, ed. Bhubindar Singh and Sarah Teo (London: Routledge, 2020), 78–79.

<sup>39</sup> Phan Xuan Dung, "Vietnam's Mekong Middle Power Diplomacy," ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, Fulcrum, March 3, 2021 ≈ <https://fulcrum.sg/vietnams-mekong-middle-power-diplomacy>.

<sup>40</sup> "Vietnam, U.S. Agree to Beef Up Defence Cooperation," Voice of Vietnam, July 29, 2021 ≈ <https://english.vov.vn/en/politics/diplomacy/vietnam-us-agree-to-beef-up-defence-cooperation-878085.vov>.

Following Austin's trip, in August 2021, Kamala Harris became the first U.S. vice president to visit Vietnam. During her stay, Harris announced a donation of one million Covid-19 vaccine doses to Vietnam and urged action against Beijing's coercive behaviors in the South China Sea.<sup>41</sup> On the same day that Harris's plane arrived in Hanoi, the Chinese ambassador to Vietnam, Xiong Bo, offered two million doses of the Covid-19 vaccine to Vietnam<sup>42</sup>—a move to outcompete the United States in vaccine diplomacy. In addition, just two weeks after Harris's visit, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi also stopped in Vietnam during a Southeast Asian trip. During his visit, he emphasized the shared ideology between Vietnam and China, warned against external interference in the South China Sea (alluding to the U.S. presence in the region), and pledged to give the country more Covid-19 vaccine doses.<sup>43</sup>

#### VIETNAM'S ADAPTATION STRATEGY AMID RISING U.S.-CHINA RIVALRY

Amid these rising U.S.-China tensions in the Indo-Pacific region and the diplomatic power plays to bring Vietnam over to one or the other side, Hanoi has pursued a three-pronged adaptation strategy: (1) deepening engagement with the United States to counterbalance China's influence, (2) maintaining a delicate balance between the United States and China, and (3) promoting rules-based multilateralism. Underlying these foreign policy choices are Vietnam's deeply held values of independence and self-reliance.

#### *Deepening Engagement with the United States to Counterbalance China's Influence*

Vietnam generally favors the U.S. presence in the region as it provides a countervailing force to balance China's economic and military might, thereby ensuring a degree of strategic equilibrium in Hanoi's operating environment. Moreover, from the view of Vietnamese policymakers, a

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<sup>41</sup> "U.S. V-P Kamala Harris Urges More China Pressure in Meeting with Vietnam Leader," *Straits Times*, August 26, 2021 ~ <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/united-states/us-to-offer-vietnam-more-covid-19-vaccine-help-as-kamala-harris-visits>.

<sup>42</sup> "PM Receives Chinese Ambassador," *Nhan dan*, August 24, 2021 ~ <https://en.nhandan.vn/politics/item/10359902-pm-receives-chinese-ambassador.html>.

<sup>43</sup> Kinling Lo and Bac Pham, "China Warns Vietnam to Watch Out for Outside Interference in South China Sea," *South China Morning Post*, September 11, 2021 ~ <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3148419/china-warns-vietnam-watch-out-outside-interference-south-china>.

U.S.-led international order is more desirable than a China-led international order. This is not only because of the threats from and history with China but also because the principles espoused by a U.S.-led order, such as free and fair trade and adherence to international laws, are largely compatible with Vietnam's interests.<sup>44</sup> Notably, Vietnam has accelerated its rapprochement with the United States following the 2014 oil rig incident—a watershed event that convinced Vietnam that it needed to “struggle” more with China and “cooperate” more with the United States.

In 2015, General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong became the first CPV chief to visit the United States. Notably, he was received by President Barack Obama at the Oval Office as the Vietnamese head of state—a symbolic move that implicitly recognized Vietnam's one-party state system. One year later, Obama announced the complete lifting of the decades-old embargo on weapon sales to Vietnam, removing a lingering remnant of the Cold War. In 2017, then prime minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc was the first Southeast Asian leader invited to the White House by the Trump administration. These symbolic gestures by the United States have contributed to the enhancement of bilateral trust as they not only recognized the critical role of Vietnam in U.S. engagement with Asia but also alleviated some CPV concerns over a potential U.S.-sponsored peaceful evolution.

U.S.-Vietnam defense and security cooperation in this same period has witnessed notable achievements. During President Trump's visit to Vietnam in 2017, the two former enemies agreed to “deepen defense cooperation and shared resolve to address regional security challenges” and adopted the “2018–2020 Plan of Action for U.S.-Vietnam Defense Cooperation.”<sup>45</sup> From 2015 to 2019, Washington authorized the permanent export of more than \$32.3 million in defense articles to Vietnam and registered over \$162 million in active foreign military sales with Vietnam.<sup>46</sup> On the issue of the South China Sea, Vietnam is considerably more closely aligned with the United States than China, preferring a rules-based maritime order and frequently vocalizing its opposition to Beijing's expansionist moves at sea.

Shared concerns over China have prompted the expansion of U.S.-Vietnam cooperation on maritime security. Vietnamese ports have hosted two U.S.

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<sup>44</sup> Le Hong Hiep, *The Vietnam-U.S. Security Partnership and the Rules-Based International Order in the Age of Trump* (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2020).

<sup>45</sup> “U.S. President Donald Trump Visits Viet Nam in November 2017,” Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in the United States of America, November 13, 2017 ~ <https://vietnamembassy-usa.org/news/2017/11/us-president-donald-trump-visits-viet-nam-november-2017>.

<sup>46</sup> “U.S. Security Cooperation with Vietnam,” U.S. Department of State, July 27, 2020 ~ <https://2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-vietnam-2/index.html>.



aircraft carriers—the USS *Carl Vinson* in 2018 and the USS *Theodore Roosevelt* in 2020. The year 2018 also marked Vietnam’s first-ever involvement in the Rim of the Pacific exercise—the world’s largest international naval drill, hosted by the United States and its allies. From 2017 to 2021, Vietnam received around \$80 million in funds from the United States to upgrade maritime security and domain awareness capacity.<sup>47</sup> Washington has provided the Vietnam Coast Guard with 24 patrol boats and 2 decommissioned coast guard cutters, which bolster Hanoi’s capacity to defend its waters. Vietnam requested the transfer of another cutter when Vice President Harris visited in August 2021.<sup>48</sup>

Vietnam has also welcomed a greater U.S. presence in the Mekong subregion through the Mekong-U.S. Partnership (MUSP). Launched under the Trump administration and built upon the previous Lower Mekong Initiative, the MUSP was designed to help the lower Mekong countries, including Vietnam, ensure sustainable development through cooperation on connectivity, nontraditional security, resource management, and human resources development. Strategically, Washington aims to use the MUSP as a means to reduce its Mekong partners’ economic dependence on Beijing.<sup>49</sup>

Vietnam has signaled support for U.S.-led initiatives in the Mekong as they help mitigate its reliance on Chinese aid while creating more pressure on China to be more transparent with its dam operations. At a Lower Mekong Initiative meeting in August 2019, then U.S. secretary of state Mike Pompeo openly criticized China’s dam-building spree on the upper Mekong and its attempt to create new rules to dominate river governance.<sup>50</sup> Four months later, Vietnam co-hosted with the United States the first Mekong Policy Dialogue under the MUSP, at which then foreign minister Pham Binh Minh commented that the MUSP would bring about development opportunities and help the Mekong region overcome challenges.<sup>51</sup> Representatives of Vietnam have also welcomed the MUSP-funded Mekong Dam Monitor project at the Stimson

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<sup>47</sup> “U.S. Security Cooperation with Vietnam.”

<sup>48</sup> “U.S. V-P Kamala Harris Urges More China Pressure in Meeting with Vietnam Leader.”

<sup>49</sup> Kliem, “Asia’s Troubled River,” 5.

<sup>50</sup> “Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo Opening Remarks at the Lower Mekong Initiative Ministerial,” U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Vietnam, August 2, 2019 ~ <https://vn.usembassy.gov/opening-remarks-at-the-lower-mekong-initiative-ministerial>.

<sup>51</sup> Phuong Nguyen, “U.S. to Give \$153 Million to Mekong Countries for Collaborative Projects,” Reuters, September 11, 2020 ~ <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-asean-summit-mekong-usa-idUKKBN26221M>.

Center, which provides near real-time reports on the river's hydrological conditions and highlights the impacts of Chinese dams on the Mekong.<sup>52</sup>

On the economic front, increasingly robust economic cooperation between Vietnam and the United States showcases Hanoi's bid to balance Beijing's preeminent economic influence in the country. The United States is Vietnam's biggest trading partner after China and Vietnam's eleventh-largest investor. Vietnam has been active in attracting U.S. investments and economic assistance to strengthen its economic resilience. In a speech in Washington, D.C., ahead of the ASEAN-U.S. Special Summit in May 2022, Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh emphasized the ample opportunities in elevating economic ties between Vietnam and the United States in the areas of green growth, digital transformation, and supply chain diversification.<sup>53</sup> During this trip, Prime Minister Chinh also engaged directly with the U.S. business community and encouraged them to support Vietnam in capacity building, science and technology, and human resources training, a move aimed at mobilizing U.S. resources to boost Vietnam's economy as part of the country's Covid-19 recovery.

### *Maintaining a Delicate Balance between the United States and China*

Nonetheless, Vietnam's deeply held values of self-reliance and independence prevent the country from inching too close to the United States or veering too far away from China. China's proximity and importance to Vietnam's economic growth mean that Vietnam cannot afford to break ties with its neighbor. Thus, Vietnam has tried to compartmentalize its "struggle" with China from other positive aspects of bilateral relations. Trade and investment activities are the foundation of Vietnam-China ties. Regarding maritime security, Vietnam engages in a wide range of joint cooperative activities with China in the delimited Gulf of Tonkin, including annual patrols, fisheries, and resource conservation efforts. On the Mekong issue, Vietnam is an active member of the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC)—a

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<sup>52</sup> John Lichtefeld, "Evolution of U.S.-Vietnam Cooperation on the Mekong," in *From Foes to Partners: Rethinking 25 Years of U.S.-Vietnam Relations*, ed. Jeffrey Ordaniel and Ariel Stenek (Honolulu: Pacific Forum, 2021), 21.

<sup>53</sup> "Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh's Full Speech at CSIS," Bao chinh phu, May 16, 2022, ~> <https://en.baochinhphu.vn/prime-minister-pham-minh-chinh-s-full-speech-at-csis-111220516063545637.htm>.

China-led mechanism that seeks to promote socioeconomic development and cooperation on water resource management within the subregion.<sup>54</sup>

Crucially, Vietnam tends to see China as an ally in preserving Communist rule. Common struggle against interference by imperialist powers in the early and mid-twentieth century has historically bound the two Communist ruling parties together. Today, conservative leaders in both countries share the fear that the United States and other Western countries are plotting to overthrow their regimes through so-called peaceful evolution. Even with the declining dominance of the hardliners within the CPV in recent years, guarding against external hostile forces remains critical to the CPV's regime security, just as it does in its Chinese counterpart. As such, this has become a recurrent talking point in high-level meetings between the two countries. For example, when Chinese minister of defense Wei Fenghe visited Vietnam in April 2021, President Nguyen Xuan Phuc reassured him that Vietnam would uphold the one-China policy and oppose acts of interference in China's domestic affairs.<sup>55</sup> The two sides also reaffirmed their ideological affinity and cooperation on countering peaceful evolution schemes.

Vietnamese officials believe that appearing too close to the West could warrant retaliation from China in the form of economic sanctions or worse—that is, another “lesson” similar to the 1979 border clash. Thus, while deepening ties with the United States, they exercise caution in anticipation of Beijing's reactions. For example, in October 2018, Vietnam discreetly canceled fifteen planned defense exchange activities with the United States—a decision that appeared to be a balancing move by Hanoi in response to intensifying tensions between Washington and Beijing.<sup>56</sup> Another telling example of a balancing act occurred against the backdrop of Harris's trip to Vietnam in August 2021. Several hours before her plane landed in Hanoi, in a move to reassure China that Vietnam would not tilt too close toward the United States, Prime Minister Chinh held an unannounced meeting with Ambassador Xiong, during which he reaffirmed one of Vietnam's “four no's”: no aligning with one country against another.<sup>57</sup> He also reportedly pledged that Vietnam

<sup>54</sup> Hong Van, “Mekong-Lancang Cooperation for Peace, Sustainable Development,” Voice of Vietnam World, January 10, 2018 ~ <https://vovworld.vn/en-US/current-affairs/mekonglancang-cooperation-for-peace-sustainable-development-610234.vov>.

<sup>55</sup> Yang Sheng and Deng Xiaoci, “Vietnam Says It Won't Follow Others in Opposing China; Experts Note ‘U.S. Has No Chance to Use Sovereignty Issue to Divide Region,’” *Global Times*, April 27, 2021 ~ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202104/1222213.shtml>.

<sup>56</sup> Le, *The Vietnam-U.S. Security Partnership*, 15.

<sup>57</sup> “PM Receives Chinese Ambassador.”

and China will deepen interparty relations and guard against hostile forces' attempts to sow discord between the two countries.<sup>58</sup>

Despite growing strategic convergence between the United States and Vietnam, leaders in Hanoi have not agreed to the U.S. request to raise the current comprehensive partnership to a strategic one due to apprehension that such a move could alarm China. For the same reason, Vietnam's official documents have not embraced the term "Indo-Pacific"—a concept seen by Beijing as a tool created by the West to constrain China. Vietnam is signaling to China that it is firmly committed to its independent and self-reliant foreign policy, despite burgeoning ties with the United States.

In addition, differences over human rights and democracy remain a barrier in U.S.-Vietnam bilateral relations. Although concerns over a potential U.S.-sponsored peaceful evolution have dissipated in recent years, especially following General Secretary Trong's historic visit to Washington, this issue remains a matter of regime survivalism, and thus the CPV cannot afford to let down its guard. Trong has explicitly pushed back against the spread of Western liberal democracy and has sought to reinforce socialist ideology within the CPV. In an article published in August 2021, Trong argued that liberal democracy cannot guarantee the essential features of democracy, adding that this style of governance has been imposed upon the world by the West.<sup>59</sup> Trong's article also discussed how peaceful evolution attempts to erase socialism in Vietnam remain a challenge to national development.

The United States' potent rhetoric on promoting democracy abroad to counter Communist China's authoritarian influence has not struck a chord with Vietnam. In July 2020, then secretary of state Pompeo delivered a provocative speech in which he called for an "alliance of democracies" against Beijing, adding that "Communists almost always lie."<sup>60</sup> While his remarks were directed at the Chinese Communist Party, by using the terms "Communists," "democracies," and "alliances," Pompeo reminded the CPV of the ideological

<sup>58</sup> "Vietnamese PM Urges Awareness of 'Peaceful Evolution' at Meeting with Chinese Envoy Ahead of Harris' Visit," *Global Times*, August 25, 2021 ~ <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202108/1232394.shtml>.

<sup>59</sup> Nguyen Phu Trong, "Mot so van de ly luan va thuc tien ve chu nghia xa hoi va con duong di len chu nghia xa hoi o Viet Nam" [Several Theoretical and Practical Issues on Socialism and the Path Toward Socialism in Vietnam], *Nhan dan*, January 8, 2021 ~ <https://nhandan.vn/tin-tuc-su-kien/mot-so-van-de-ly-luan-va-thuc-tien-ve-chu-nghia-xa-hoi-va-con-duong-di-len-chu-nghia-xa-hoi-o-viet-nam-646305>.

<sup>60</sup> Mike Pompeo, "Communist China and the Free World's Future" (speech at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library, Yorba Linda, July 23, 2020) ~ <https://2017-2021.state.gov/communist-china-and-the-free-worlds-future-2>.

chasm between Vietnam and the United States—an enduring obstacle toward deeper strategic trust.<sup>61</sup>

The Biden administration has also accentuated the divide between democracy and authoritarianism by promoting human rights and democracy as a priority in its foreign policy agenda. In December 2021, Biden hosted more than one hundred countries at the Summit for Democracy.<sup>62</sup> This could be seen as a veiled attempt to build a coalition akin to Pompeo’s notion of an “alliance of democracies” to counter the United States’ two biggest geostrategic adversaries—China and Russia.<sup>63</sup> Unsurprisingly, Vietnam was not invited. In commenting on the event, a spokesperson for Vietnam said that the country’s policy is to build “a Socialist democracy in tandem with upholding people’s rights to democracy in all aspects of their social life,” implying the different views of values Hanoi and Washington hold.<sup>64</sup> Thus, despite rapid expansion of U.S.-Vietnam relations, U.S. insistence on countering authoritarianism and upholding democracy abroad will continue to give apparatchiks of the CPV grounds to call for more caution in engaging with the United States.

### *Promoting Rules-Based Multilateralism*

While the United States is the most important target of cooperation in Vietnam’s “struggle” against China, Hanoi also places strong emphasis on working with other partners to foster a more multipolar, rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific. Showing a preference for multipolarity and promoting international laws and norms are typical behaviors of middle powers.<sup>65</sup> A multipolar order is favorable for middle powers because they can seek support from and collaborate with multiple like-minded partners to influence the operating environment in a meaningful way—something that they lack the capacity to do independently. Middle powers also prefer

<sup>61</sup> Bich T. Tran, “No Trade-Off: Biden Can Both Deepen U.S.-Vietnam Ties and Promote Human Rights,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 3, 2021 ~ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/no-trade-biden-can-both-deepen-us-vietnam-ties-and-promote-human-rights>.

<sup>62</sup> “Summit for Democracy Summary of Proceedings,” White House, Press Release, December 23, 2021 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/12/23/summit-for-democracy-summary-of-proceedings>.

<sup>63</sup> Pompeo, “Communist China and the Free World’s Future.”

<sup>64</sup> “Vietnam Responds to U.S.-ASEAN Summit Rumours, Not Being Invited to the U.S.-Led Summit for Democracy,” VietnamNet, October 12, 2021 ~ <https://vietnamnet.vn/en/politics/vietnam-responds-to-us-asean-summit-rumours-not-being-invited-to-the-us-led-summit-for-democracy-799993.html>.

<sup>65</sup> Bruce Gilley and Andrew O’Neil, “China’s Rise through the Prism of Middle Powers,” in *Middle Powers and the Rise of China*, ed. Bruce Gilley and Andrew O’Neil (Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2014), 1–23.

an order governed by rules and institutions that can restrain great powers from imposing their preferences upon smaller states. These perspectives align with Vietnam's foreign policy.

Vietnam has strengthened partnerships not only with the United States but also with other major powers in beefing up its maritime defense capabilities. For example, Vietnam has inked deals with Japan and India to procure patrol vessels. Under a \$2 billion contract with Russia, Vietnam received its sixth and final Kilo-class submarine in 2017, making it the possessor of the largest submarine force in Southeast Asia. Vietnam has also enhanced maritime and naval exchanges and exercises with Quad members (the United States, Japan, India, and Australia) in response to China's intimidation and coercion in the South China Sea.<sup>66</sup> Through these arrangements, Hanoi is enmeshing various major powers in the regional maritime security architecture to encourage a multipolar order instead of a unipolar order dominated by China or any other power.

Vietnam prefers a multilateral and rules-based approach to managing interstate disputes and geopolitical tensions in the South China Sea. In recent years, Vietnam has pushed for the establishment of a "substantive and effective" code of conduct as a binding document to govern interactions in the South China Sea.<sup>67</sup> In its public statements, Hanoi has repeatedly stressed the importance of upholding the rule of law at sea, particularly UNCLOS, and called on all parties to adhere to UNCLOS-mandated dispute settlements. In addition, ASEAN remains an essential conduit for Vietnam to highlight China's assertive behaviors and internationalize the South China Sea dispute. As the 2020 ASEAN chair, Vietnam made the issue a key item on the agenda, with a focus on buttressing the role of UNCLOS and international law. At the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in 2020, in an implicit criticism of China's actions, then foreign minister Minh strongly expressed concern over "recent complex developments and serious incidents in the East Sea, which have gone contrary to international law and the UNCLOS, violated the legitimate rights and interests of littoral countries, intensified tensions, and undermined peace and security in the East Sea."<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Lye Liang Fook and Ha Hoang Hop, "Vietnam's Responses to China's Maritime Assertiveness in the South China Sea," *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 50 (2018): 10.

<sup>67</sup> Le Hong Hiep, "Vietnam's Position on the South China Sea Code of Conduct," *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 22 (2019).

<sup>68</sup> The South China Sea is known as the East Sea in Vietnam. Thuy Dung, "VN Frankly Expresses Concerns at AMM-53 over Serious Incidents in East Sea," Vietnam Government Portal News, September 9, 2020 ~ <https://en.baochinhphu.vn/vn-frankly-expresses-concerns-at-amm-53-over-serious-incidents-in-east-sea-11139252.htm>.

Vietnam is applying a similar playbook to the Mekong issue to promote a multipolar, rules-based order. Vietnam has welcomed the presence of non-riparian, outside players in the Mekong and expressed support for their respective Mekong initiatives. As of 2021, Hanoi had worked with more than twenty development partners in promoting sustainable development and water security in the Mekong subregion.<sup>69</sup> Many of these partners, such as Japan, Australia, and the European Union, are members of the MUSP, which directly competes with China's LMC. Therefore, greater external involvement provides countervailing forces to China's dominance in the Mekong. In a larger regional ambit, Hanoi is raising the profile of the Mekong within ASEAN so that the topic can be treated as a regional issue like the South China Sea dispute.

As the most downstream state affected by China's dam construction and operations, Vietnam has tried to promote rules-based and equitable cross-border water resource management. In addition to the LMC and the MUSP, Vietnam is a member of the Mekong River Commission (MRC), a minilateral organization among the lower river basin states that also includes Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand. The 2019 defense white paper states that Vietnam "endorses efforts of the Mekong River Commission and effective management and use of Mekong's water resources according to the rules of international law that govern interstate relations over transboundary rivers."<sup>70</sup> Vietnam has also proposed that the MRC create specific provisions and measures for dispute mechanisms to settle water-related conflicts among its members.<sup>71</sup> Hanoi has tried several times to convince China to join this subregional organization, hoping to bind Beijing to the rules of the MRC, which is the only existing Mekong cooperative mechanism with the function to develop legal frameworks for water resource management.<sup>72</sup> Through the China-led LMC, Vietnam has stressed the need to balance interests and responsibilities as well as to ensure that information on the implementation

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<sup>69</sup> Truong-Minh Vu and Tram Nguyen, "Adapting to Nature': A Preliminary Assessment of Vietnam's Mekong Water Diplomacy since 2017," *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 166 (2021) ~ <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-166-adapting-to-nature-a-preliminary-assessment-of-vietnam's-mekong-water-diplomacy-since-2017-by-truong-minh-vu-and-tram-nguyen>.

<sup>70</sup> Ministry of National Defence (Vietnam), *2019 Vietnam National Defence*, 32.

<sup>71</sup> "Management of Water Resources in Mekong River: 'Call for Help' from Figures," VietnamPlus, September 13, 2021 ~ <https://en.vietnamplus.vn/management-of-water-resources-in-mekong-river-call-for-help-from-figures/210043.vnp>.

<sup>72</sup> To Minh Thu and Le Dinh Tinh, "Vietnam and Mekong Cooperative Mechanisms," in *Southeast Asian Affairs 2019*, ed. Daljit Singh and Malcolm Cook (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019), 406.

of LMC projects is widely shared among member countries.<sup>73</sup> All these efforts are to safeguard against upstream states, especially China, exploiting the river at the expense of Vietnam.

On the economic front, Vietnam has sought to reduce its trade reliance on China through the diversification of economic partnerships. Particularly, the quest for economic self-reliance has driven Vietnam's fervent support for multilateral trade agreements. The most significant agreement for Vietnam was the proposed U.S.-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)—the predecessor to the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Vietnam was on board with the TPP, even though many of the requirements were incompatible with its socialist governance, such as reducing preferential treatment of state-owned enterprises and establishing independent trade unions. By 2016, Vietnamese leaders had reached a consensus on integrating the country into the U.S.-led agreement to modernize the country and cope with an increasingly assertive China.<sup>74</sup> Thus, Trump's decision to withdraw from the TPP greatly disappointed Vietnamese leaders, who have urged the United States to reconsider joining the now CPTPP.<sup>75</sup> Despite missing U.S. leadership, Hanoi worked with other partners, such as Japan and Australia, to facilitate the negotiation and signing of the CPTPP. Vietnam is a participating member of Biden's Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, a proposed multilateral trade arrangement meant to enhance U.S. economic engagement with Asia following the U.S. withdrawal from the TPP and provide an alternative to China's economic influence in the region. This came as no surprise given Vietnam's goal to actively integrate with the global economy.

Another important trade deal for Vietnam to pursue a multidirectional economic foreign policy is the European Union–Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA), which was signed in 2019 and went into effect in 2020. Like the CPTPP, the EVFTA also entails high standards in the areas of human rights and environmental protection. Still, for Vietnam, what is more important is reaping the benefits of international economic integration and diversifying away from reliance on China.

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<sup>73</sup> To and Le, "Vietnam and Mekong Cooperative Mechanisms."

<sup>74</sup> Do Thanh Hai, "Vietnam and China: Ideological Bedfellows, Strange Dreamers," *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* 10, no. 2 (2021): 177.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.



## DIMINISHING MANEUVERABILITY AND PRESSURE FOR POLICY ADJUSTMENTS

Vietnam's foreign policy of independence and self-reliance has so far allowed it to maximize gains from engaging with both superpowers. Ties with China remain critical to Vietnam's economic well-being and regime security, while the United States is increasingly becoming a close security and economic partner in dealing with China's expansionist moves in the region. However, the room for strategic maneuverability is diminishing as Vietnam faces growing internal and external pressure for policy adjustments. In particular, three factors have strained Vietnam's ability to walk the line between China and the United States.

First, the threats posed by China's ascendant influence not only remain unabated but also have significantly undermined Vietnam's economic and security interests in the past couple years. Since 2017, subject to frequent harassment by China, Vietnam has reportedly terminated planned operations to drill oil in its own EEZ with several foreign firms and instead paid them hefty compensation.<sup>76</sup> Meanwhile, Vietnam's efforts to reduce economic dependence on China have not been successful. It will take some time before Vietnam can benefit from CPTPP and EVFTA, and its trade deficit with China continues to rise.<sup>77</sup> As a major claimant in the South China Sea, Vietnam could be subject to Chinese economic pressure—something that Beijing has deployed against countries with which it clashes.<sup>78</sup>

While Vietnam puts much faith in ASEAN as a medium to foster a stable and peaceful regional order, the group has failed as yet to deliver tangible results with regard to restraining China. Due to divergent national interests and threat perceptions of China, members of the group remain divided on the South China Sea dispute and the substance of the code of conduct. For the same reasons, ASEAN states, except for Vietnam, have not been keen on formalizing the Mekong issue as an item on the bloc's agenda.

These developments show that Vietnam's efforts to restrain China's assertiveness through the use of bilateral and multilateral mechanisms has clear limitations. While no major crisis between Vietnam and China has

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<sup>76</sup> "China Pressurises Vietnam to Cancel, Compensate Offshore Firms Operating in South China Sea," *Economic Times* (India), July 27, 2020 ~ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/china-pressurises-vietnam-to-cancel-compensate-offshore-firms-operating-in-south-china-sea/articleshow/77189742.cms?from=mdr>.

<sup>77</sup> Bich T. Tran, "Vietnam Continues Efforts to Reduce Trade Dependence on China," *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 114 (2021): 9.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

occurred since the Vanguard Bank incident in 2019, the long-term trend of China's growing economic and military power indicates that the likelihood of maritime confrontation will increase in the coming years. As China consolidates regional and global dominance, gaining control of the South China Sea has become an important goal, even at the expense of harmonious ties with Southeast Asian neighbors. On the Mekong River issue, even though China has demonstrated some goodwill in water resource cooperation, its refusal to join the MRC and its planned dam facilities threaten the environmental and economic future of the Mekong Delta region.

Second, the emergence of rivalrous U.S.-led and China-led minilateral groupings makes it increasingly tricky for Vietnam to navigate the geostrategic dynamics of foreign policy. While not explicitly endorsing U.S.-led Indo-Pacific initiatives such as the Quad and AUKUS, Vietnam has quietly supported these groupings. A Vietnamese spokeswoman said in a 2021 press briefing that "Vietnam's consistent stance is [to] welcome regional connectivity initiatives, contributing to peace, stability, cooperation and development of the region based on rules and respect for international law, as well as respecting the legitimate rights and interests of all countries, including ASEAN's central role in the evolving regional structure."<sup>79</sup> In 2020, Hanoi joined the Quad Plus mechanism, which focuses regional cooperation on addressing the health and economic challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Vietnam will want to further engage with Indo-Pacific mechanisms as they offer tangible security and economic benefits. However, Beijing perceives the sprouting of these groups as driven by the West's Cold War mentality and desire to contain the rise of China. It is also no secret that the threats posed by China are the primary impetus for the United States and its allies to deepen their engagement through minilateralism across the Indo-Pacific region. Thus, overt support of U.S.-led groupings could be perceived by Beijing as collusion with the West to undermine China.

Third, growing distrust of China in Vietnam has made it more difficult for Hanoi to manage its relations with Beijing. Negative attitudes toward China have long been prevalent in Vietnam due to the country's long history of fending off Chinese aggression. In the past decade, the ongoing tensions in the South China Sea and Chinese harassment of Vietnamese vessels have intensified nationalism in Vietnam, manifesting in anti-China demonstrations. For example, following the 2014 oil rig crisis, Vietnamese patriots organized anti-China protests that

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<sup>79</sup> Thu Sau, "Vietnam Supports Peaceful, Stable Indo-Pacific Region," Public Security News, January 15, 2021 ~ <https://en.cand.com.vn/Politics/Vietnam-supports-peaceful-stable-Indo-Pacific-region-i587733>.

quickly morphed into violent riots. In 2018, protesters took to the street to oppose a draft law that would allow foreign investors to lease land in three strategic locations in Vietnam for up to 99 years. While nowhere in the bill was China mentioned, demonstrators believed it would open the door for Chinese firms to occupy Vietnamese land. Under public pressure, the government suspended the draft law indefinitely.<sup>80</sup> Vietnamese elites are also increasingly wary of China's intentions. The ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute's "State of Southeast Asia" survey for 2022 shows that 80.3% of Vietnamese respondents—comprising academics, government officials, civil society, and media representatives—are worried about China's growing strategic and political influence in the country.<sup>81</sup>

As negative public perceptions of China have the power to incite widespread nationalist movements, the legitimacy of the CPV could be seriously threatened if the party fails to protect national sovereignty and territorial assets in the face of Beijing's assertiveness. The party also needs to keep a tight lid on anti-China nationalism to preserve good bilateral relations, especially economic ties, to sustain the country's prosperity that has buttressed much of the CPV's legitimacy.<sup>82</sup> Balancing the tasks of deterring China's actions and promoting solidarity with China have become increasingly challenging amid the current geostrategic and domestic contexts. As Duong Trung Quoc, a historian and former member of Vietnam's National Assembly, said, "The Vietnamese leaders are pressed between these two lines: pressed by the Vietnamese people, and pressed by the Chinese."<sup>83</sup>

As a middle power, Vietnam has the capacity and the willingness to carve out a path of its own and thus resist the pressure to choose sides to a certain extent. However, given the aforementioned challenges, it remains to be seen how Vietnam can uphold its current strategy in the medium to long term, especially when current trends indicate that the reality of a fierce U.S.-China strategic rivalry is here to stay.

Vietnamese policymakers recognize the importance of being flexible in dealing with an evolving strategic environment. A fundamental of Vietnam's

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<sup>80</sup> Atsushi Tomiyama, "Vietnam's Economic Zones Derailed by Anti-China Protests," *Nikkei Asia*, September 3, 2018 ~ <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Vietnam-s-economic-zones-derailed-by-anti-China-protests>.

<sup>81</sup> Sharon Seah et al., "The State of Southeast Asia: 2022 Survey Report," ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, February 2022, 23 ~ <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/state-of-southeast-asia-survey/the-state-of-southeast-asia-2022-survey-report>.

<sup>82</sup> Strangio, *In the Dragon's Shadow*, 71.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

foreign policy is “firm in objectives, flexible in strategies and tactics,”<sup>84</sup> which leaves room for necessary changes in strategic thinking for the sake of protecting core national interests. Such “bamboo diplomacy” is central to how Vietnamese leaders and policymakers perceive the country’s behavior. Just as the strong roots of the bamboo stalk cling to the ground, Vietnam is steadfast in upholding its principles, including self-reliance and independence. At the same time, Vietnam is capable of adapting flexibly to external shifts, just like the way bamboo bends and sways in the wind without breaking. In practice, however, few concrete actions have been taken to accommodate the new era of U.S.-China competition. As Alexander Vuving described it, “Vietnam’s policymakers continue to view the world through the prism of a bygone era... they still do not seem to feel the urgency of having a new national security and foreign policy guidelines that reflect the reality of the new situation.”<sup>85</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This essay has shown that Vietnam is maintaining its foreign policy of self-reliance, independence, multilateralization, and diversification amid rising U.S.-China strategic rivalry. This quest for self-reliance is heavily influenced by Vietnam’s past experiences and the CPV’s desire for regime security. Vietnam is deepening its engagement with the United States in response to China’s growing assertiveness, particularly in the South China Sea and the Mekong River. However, Hanoi’s insistence on staying nonaligned limits how much it is willing to cooperate with the United States to counterbalance China. Vietnam is striving to balance between two superpowers while enmeshing other major and middle powers into the regional architecture and promoting a rules-based order with the hope of fostering a conducive strategic equilibrium. Vietnam is expected to continue this course for the foreseeable future.

Given the limitations of its adaptation strategy seen thus far, however, Vietnam needs to exercise more flexibility and show more resolve in protecting its national interests vis-à-vis the South China Sea dispute and Mekong water security. China’s unchecked ambitions in these two niche areas imperil not just Vietnam’s security but also the peaceful and stable regional environment

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<sup>84</sup> Le Xuan Huan, “On Applying the Principle of ‘Firm in Objectives, Flexible in Strategies and Tactics’ to Vietnam’s Diplomacy Today,” *National Defence Journal*, December 11, 2017 ≈ <http://tapchiquptd.vn/en/research-and-discussion/on-applying-the-principle-of-firm-in-objectives-flexible-in-strategies-and-tactics-to-viet/10948.html>.

<sup>85</sup> Alexander Vuving, “The Evolution of Vietnamese Foreign Policy in the Doi Moi Era,” in *Vietnam: Navigating a Rapidly Changing Economy, Society, and Political Order* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022).

within which Hanoi has prospered. It is unrealistic and unproductive for Vietnam to move from the current “cooperation and struggle” framework to open confrontation. Nonetheless, China’s continued expansionism at the expense of its neighbors calls for a recalibration of Hanoi’s tactics in safeguarding Vietnamese sovereignty and territorial assets. Concrete actions, not just statements, are required to demonstrate the credibility of Vietnam’s cooperation and struggle principle. To this end, without abandoning its self-reliant and independent foreign policy, Vietnam should explore new options in advancing security cooperation with other major and middle powers with which it shares strategic interests.

While preserving self-reliance as much as possible is desirable, some compromise is necessary in exchange for a more suitable adaptation strategy. Vietnam alludes to this possibility in its 2019 defense white paper, which states that “depending on circumstances and specific conditions, Vietnam will consider developing necessary, appropriate defense and military relations with other countries.”<sup>86</sup> Considering the strategic context that Vietnam faces, this sentence could be read as Vietnam retaining the autonomy to upgrade defense ties with the United States and other major powers should the situation require it, for instance, if military threats from China become unbearable. To put this theory into practice, Vietnamese leaders first must recognize a wide range of security arrangement options and different degrees of self-reliance. There are more forms of alignment than just Cold War–like collective defense pacts; Vietnam could still retain a significant level of self-reliance in new arrangements while maintaining the four no’s that are key to reassuring China of its nonaggressive intentions. Entering into formal agreements on defense industry cooperation, regular military exercises, or intelligence sharing, for example, does not translate to a complete loss of strategic autonomy, nor does it necessarily signal that Vietnam would side with a third party against China. Such arrangements formalize and routinize Vietnam’s security cooperation with like-minded partners—such as the United States, Japan, India, and Australia—thereby equipping the country with credible deterrence in peacetime and necessary defense capabilities in the worst-case scenario of an armed conflict. Limited security alignment with other countries for the purpose of bolstering internal strength would buttress Vietnam’s self-reliance and adhere to the spirit of being flexible in tactics. This is not a matter of choosing sides but choosing what is best for Vietnam’s security interests in the current geopolitical context. ♦

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<sup>86</sup> Ministry of National Defence (Vietnam), *2019 Vietnam National Defence*, 24.

