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VIET NAM'S BALANCE POLICY - LESSON FROM THE PAST BUT A HARD LINE TO WALK IN THE NEW CONTEXT

Dr. Pham Thi Yen

Faculty of Oriental Studies, Van Hien University, HCMC, Vietnam

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***Corresponding author:** Dr. Pham Thi Yen

Faculty of Oriental Studies, Van Hien University, HCMC, Vietnam

Abstract

The article provides a comprehensive analysis of Vietnam's balancing policy from both theoretical and practical perspectives. It underscores that Vietnam's consistent implementation of this policy is rooted in its past experiences, particularly during the period from 1954 to 1979, when the country was caught in the midst of a competitive power struggle among major nations. The author examines two phases: the first, where Vietnam adroitly balanced its ties with China and the Soviet Union to mobilize resources against the US from 1954 to 1975, and the second, when it lost its balance and partly contributed to the northern border conflict with China in 1979. She further emphasizes that, the historical narrative serves as a valuable lesson for Vietnam in balancing its relations with major countries, given the current context in which competition between the US, Russia, China, and many other great powers remains highly intricate. Vietnam's national interests are closely intertwined with those of these major nations, and it can only maximize its benefits by balancing its ties with all parties. However, sustaining such equilibrium presents formidable challenges for Vietnam to navigate.

Keywords: Sino - Vietnamese war, Vietnam - China relations, Soviet – China conflict, great powers relations, Vietnam's balance policy.

Introduction

One of the impacts of the Ukraine war is exerting pressure on the foreign policy-making of developing countries - which have good relations with both Russia, Ukraine and the West, including Vietnam. Given the historically positive relationship between Vietnam and Russia, Vietnam's reluctance to publicly condemn Russia, as expected by the West, is evident through five

abstentions (on March 2, 2022; March 24, 2022; October 12, 2022; November 14, 2022 and February 23, 2023) and one against vote (on April 7, 2022) at the United Nations General Assembly, leading to suspicions that Vietnam is "aligning with Russia". However, in reality, Vietnam's actions merely reflect the consistent and independent nature of its foreign policy, particularly in its

relationships with major powers, showcasing the well-known balancing policy of the Southeast Asian nation, which has historical ties with many large countries

The concept of relational balance, as introduced in Chih-yu Shih and colleagues' 2019 book "China and International Theory: The Balance of Relationships," refers to the process of creating and sustaining mutual obligations between states (Chih-yu et al., 2019). This theory posits that actors with divergent identities and interests pursue long-term stability by exhibiting self-restraint and improvisation, with the goal of fostering commonalities or shared identities in their bilateral relationships. Vietnam's balancing policy is based on the idea of relational balance, although it deviates from the traditional balance of relationships theory. While the latter focuses on self-restraint to maintain equilibrium in bilateral relationships, Vietnam's policy seeks to balance its relationships with multiple countries, particularly major powers. More specifically, it aims to balance the power and position of one great power with another in its foreign policy, in line with Ho Chi Minh's "equal nations" spirit and Vietnam's foreign policy of "multilateralization, diversification", and "fostering friendships with all parties in the international community" (Đảng cộng sản, 2020) as established since the 7th Party Congress in 1991.

From a theoretical perspective, Vietnam's balancing policy, with the element of "balancing power between major countries within its own country," can be seen as a derivative of the balance of power theory. Additionally, this policy also bears resemblance to the "hedging" policy, which is a form of ensuring national security through a combination of cooperation and struggle (John & Jurgens, p.367). However, to understand the principles and implementation of Vietnam's foreign policy, the practical aspect is the decisive factor. In reality, Vietnam's strategically balanced approach is derived from the lessons of the past, particularly during the period of the anti-American war (1954-1975) and the post-1975 period of siege and embargo.

Based on the evaluation of balancing policies from both theoretical and practical perspectives, this article aims to answer the question of why Vietnam consistently maintains a balancing policy despite the fact that it may conflict with a major power or has opportunities to establish closer relationships with other major powers. The article consists of two main parts: the first part focuses on clarifying Vietnam's foreign relations with major powers during the Vietnam War and the period from 1975 to 1986, corresponding to two processes in which Vietnam successfully maintained and lost its balance. The second part analyzes the benefits that a balancing

policy brings to Vietnam as well as the challenges of the new context that Vietnam must face when adhering to this policy.

1. The lesson from the past: Vietnam's relations with major countries in the period 1954 - 1979

1.1. Vietnam's balance toward great powers in Vietnam war

During the period of the anti-US resistance war (1954 – 1975), Vietnam's foreign relations were predominantly centered on two major powers: the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and China. This era represented Vietnam's adept management of an intricate triangular relationship, navigating the complexities arising from the bilateral conflicts between the two primary powers within the socialist bloc. Each nation had its own strategic considerations for involvement in the Vietnam War. Initially, China aligned itself with the USSR, driven by their shared socialist ideology and collaborative efforts during the conflict. However, starting from the late 1950s, the Sino-Soviet alliance began to unravel. Internal conflicts gradually escalated into a public confrontation, culminating in an armed conflict on the island of Damansky in 1969.

In the context of the conflicting relationships with two major powers, Vietnam endeavored to maintain its policy of independence in order to achieve maximum support from both sides. Despite the prolonged Sino-Soviet disagreement that lasted for more than two decades, Vietnam attempted to walk a delicate balance between USSR and China, receiving aid from both before the restoration of the US-China relations under President Richard Nixon. According to sources from Vietnam, during the resistance against the US, the total volume of aid that Vietnam received was estimated to be 2,362,682 tons with a value of 7 billion rubles (Bộ chính trị, 2000), including food, clothing, construction materials, weapons, and ammunition. Chinese aid accounted for over 50% of the total international aid received (Bin, 2015, p.235). Between 1954 and 1964, both the USSR and China provided assistance to Vietnam, with Chinese aid being especially critical during this period. After 1964, Soviet became more involved in providing aid to Vietnam, and by 1968, its support had surpassed that of China. CIA data supports this claim (see Tables 1 and 2). The current state of affairs saw China embroiled in a peak of conflict with the USSR. Consequently, while it continued to extend aid to Vietnam, China discreetly re-established connections with the US. Despite the tensions of the two largest socialist countries, Vietnam successfully maintained cordial relations with both nations and was able to secure assistance from both China and Soviet.

Table 1

The Soviet Union and China's aids to Vietnam from 1954 – 1967 (Million US \$)

		1954-1964	1965	1966	1967	Total
Military aid	USSR	70	210	360	505	1.145
	PRC	70	60	95	150	375
Economic aid	USSR	365	85	150	200	800
	PRC	457	50	75	80	662

Source: CIA, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000483828.pdf

Table 2
The Soviet Union and China's aid to Vietnam from 1968 - 1973 (Million US \$)

		1968	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973	Total
Military aid	USSR	415	175	90	160	455	150	1345
	PRC	115	140	100	110	215	100	780
Economic aid	USSR	305	385	345	315	200	185	1735
	PRC	120	90	60	100	85	200	655

Source: CIA, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP85T00875R001900020062-8.pdf>

Vietnam was cognizant of the Soviet-China rift from its emergence in the latter part of the 1950s. The Vietnam Labor Party believed that this divergence should be viewed in the global context of the Cold War era. Although both countries shared common goals, ideals, and enemies, they contradicted each other for "selfish national interests" (Cục lưu trữ, nd). However, Vietnam has adeptly avoided openly discussing this delicate and complex issue, not "touching" on either big brother. Vietnam consistently explained that its policy was to implement the Geneva Agreement, reunite the country with peaceful means, and that armed activities were only defensive and supportive of political struggle (Bin, 2015, p.189). Later, when the Sino-Soviet conflict was publicly revealed, the Vietnamese Labor Party expressed its desire to unite the two parties and countries. On February 10, 1963, the Politburo of the Vietnam Labor Party officially proposed stopping all party attacks and convening a conference of Communist parties to discuss this issue (Minh, 2007, p.163). Vietnam's shrewdness in not "choosing a side" in the Sino-Soviet split helped the country balance the complex pair of great power relations in the region, thereby mobilizing maximum forces to liberate the country.

The provision of military and economic aid from China and the USSR was a testament to this claim. Vietnam's strategic importance also offered an opportunity for Soviet-China cooperation in the face of tensions, as a significant portion of the military equipment and food aid that Vietnam received from Soviet traversed China. It is worth noting that Vietnam's ability to maintain a balance with the two major countries was partly due to these nations' strategic calculations. Vietnam was fighting against America, the leader of the capitalist bloc, which made it imperative for the two socialist states to support it.

However, following Vietnam's complete liberation in 1975, there was a significant shift in the balance of power. The level of Soviet and Chinese influence in Vietnam was no longer the same. The relationship between the USSR and China had considerably deteriorated after their armed conflict in 1969, and China had improved its relations with the US. In this context, Vietnam may have underestimated the new situation and failed to maintain its diplomatic balance. This led to increased cooperation with the Soviet Union, and subsequently, Vietnam had to confront two border wars while being surrounded by the West.

1.1. Vietnam's imbalance in the period 1975 – 1979

Entering the 1970s, the unexpected developments of the major powers—the United States, China, and the Soviet Union—had a

significant impact on numerous international events in the region and globally. The strategic calculations of these major nations, coupled with China's sudden shifts in actions, contributed to disrupting the balance in Vietnam's relations with the Soviet Union and China, a balance that Vietnam had endeavored to maintain during the wartime. The escalating tensions between the Soviet Union and China further exacerbated the deteriorating trend in the Vietnam-China relationship.

During the period when the United States leveraged the Sino-Soviet conflict to intensify military pressure on Vietnam, the nation increasingly turned to the Soviet Union for advanced heavy military weaponry that China lacked the capability to produce (Huynh, 1979, p.341). Consequently, Vietnam's relations with its largest neighbor experienced a gradual deterioration. In the context of the Soviet-Chinese conflict, the assistance received by Vietnam was construed as taking sides. Since the 1960s, China had sought to place Vietnam in a quandary, compelling it to choose between aligning with China or the USSR. In 1964, Deng Xiaoping discreetly proposed providing Vietnam with an annual billion-dollar aid package on the condition that it reject Soviet assistance. Nevertheless, Vietnam declined the offer (R. P. Paringaux, 1978; Huynh, 1979, p.341). During this period, the Sino-Soviet relations had not yet escalated into armed confrontation, allowing Vietnam to receive support from both sides.

Nonetheless, China was disconcerted by Vietnam's settlement of its fate at the Paris diplomatic table in 1973 without the presence of any socialist ally. Furthermore, Vietnam's image after 1975 - a small country that defeated the superpower US and led the revolutionary movement in Indochina - served as a hindrance to China's position in the region. Thus, China's ardor towards Vietnam gradually waned, prompting Vietnam to lean towards the Soviet Union in search of support to safeguard its revolutionary achievements and rebuild the country after the war.

Conversely, China's warming of relations with the US and eventual normalization in 1979, was considered by the Vietnamese people as a betrayal (William & Jeffrey, 1980, p.95). Vietnam also accused China of pressuring it to delay the unification of the North and South regions (John, 1981, p.446), which Vietnam was vigorously pursuing at the Paris negotiating table during that time.

Vietnam's frustration intensified following the Chinese occupation of the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea. After the signing of the Geneva Agreement in 1954, Vietnam was temporarily divided into two regions, in which the Paracel and Spratly Islands were

under the management of the southern government. Exploiting the transition period of island management between the French army and the Saigon army, China illegally occupied the eastern half of the Paracel Islands in 1956 (Thao, 1988, p.8). Subsequently, in January 1974, while the resistance war of the Vietnamese army and people was reaching its final stage and necessitating the mobilization of forces, China dispatched numerous battleships and occupied the western half of the Paracel Islands. The naval forces of the Republic of Vietnam fought tenaciously, and many soldiers sacrificed their lives. Despite their overwhelming advantage, the Chinese navy landed and took control of the remaining western territory.

It is evident that even during the period of good relations with the North, China did not miss the opportunity to exploit the situation and gain leverage within Vietnamese territory. This was a clear instance of public aggression by China. In 1974, when the Saigon Government requested assistance from the US, the latter refused to intervene, despite the presence of the 7th Fleet in the South China Sea (Khanh & Duvien, 2014). This was an unmistakable indication of America's compromise with Beijing and abandonment of its ally, the Republic of Vietnam, while turning a blind eye to China's aggression. These events significantly undermined Vietnam's confidence in China and made it easier for Vietnam to turn towards a distant ally who had never invaded its territory, the USSR, during the context of the Soviet-Chinese confrontation.

For the Soviet Union, Vietnam had become a more valuable partner. With China exhibiting signs of breaking out of its sphere of influence, Vietnam emerged as the ideal destination for the USSR to maintain its presence and influence in the region. Vietnam's victory over the US, with the assistance of the USSR, was a resounding affirmation of this goal. Additionally, Vietnam's possession of the strategic Cam Ranh port provided Soviet with a significant opportunity to compete with the US's Subic port in the Philippines, particularly in the context of the Cold War.

Therefore, as China's aid to Vietnam ended, Vietnam's connection with the USSR increased. In May 1977, a military cooperation agreement was signed by two sides that allowed Soviet personnel to access naval bases in Da Nang and Cam Ranh ports (Ezra, 2011, p.274). Subsequently, in June of that year, Vietnam joined the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON/SEV), led by the USSR. The timing of Vietnam's membership in SEV coincided with a significant increase in arms shipments from Russia to Vietnam. According to US officials, in August 1978, there were approximately 3,500 to 4,000 Soviet advisors in Vietnam (Ezra, 2011, p.281).

Vietnam-Soviet relations continued to tighten, and on November 2, 1978, the two countries signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation (TFC), which contained a provision for mutual consultations in case of an attack or threat of attack. China immediately accused this provision of being a publicity stunt for the Soviet-Vietnamese Military Alliance (Chen, 1992, p.147). This Treaty was also a precursor to a bilateral Protocol, which was signed a few months later, allowing the USSR to use Cam Ranh Bay as a logistics base of the Pacific Fleet until 2004 (Tư Linh, 2011). In March 1979, the first Soviet naval fleet arrived at Cam Ranh port, officially marking the Soviet presence at this prominent Asian army port.

In the context of the USSR's presence on China's northern border and the tightening of Soviet-India cooperation, the development of Soviet - Vietnam relations and Vietnam's dominant position in the Indochina made Chinese senior leaders, such as Deng Xiaoping, believe that China was being surrounded by the USSR. Thus, Deng Xiaoping considered the Soviet - Vietnam link to be the biggest threat in all of the Soviet's above-mentioned directions to China (Ezra, 2011, p.269). On this basis, China directed its resentment towards Vietnam, and Vietnam's defeat of the Khmer Rouge in the southwest border, as well as the presence of Vietnamese volunteers in Cambodia afterwards, was just an excuse for China to attack Vietnam. Obviously, the international context at that time was not easy for Vietnam to balance its relations with the two nations. Despite Vietnam's loss of objectivity and insufficient calculation of the effects of the Soviet-Chinese conflict, leading to its joining of SEV and signing the TFC, which only fueled China's rage, it must be acknowledged that maintaining equilibrium under such circumstances was an arduous task for Vietnam.

In addition to the Sino-Soviet conflicts, Deng Xiaoping's socialist development policy also played a significant role in shaping the actions of both Vietnam and China during this period. The withdrawal of the US from the Vietnam War in 1975 created a power vacuum in Southeast Asia that China saw as an opportunity to extend its influence. Tightened Soviet-Vietnam relations and Vietnam's position after the historic Spring victory made it an obstacle to China's interests. Therefore, China chose to use Cambodia as a stepping stone to prevent Vietnam's influence in the region by supporting the Khmer Rouge's invasion of Vietnamese territory. China also engaged in harassment activities inside Vietnam, politicizing the China problem and inciting hatred between the two peoples while gradually cutting aid to Vietnam. By July 3, 1978, China had completely withdrawn its support and aid to Vietnam (Bin, 2015, p.198). In February 1979, this country waged a border war with Vietnam, which it said was to "teach Vietnam a lesson" (Zhang, X., 2010). These actions by China further pushed Vietnam toward the USSR.

Moreover, Vietnam's missed opportunity to normalize its relationship with the US also contributed to China's advantage in preparing for the border war. In the early stages of the post-war period, the Jimmy Carter administration sought to reconcile with Vietnam in order to ease the "Vietnam syndrome" that was causing a crisis of confidence in American society. However, being caught in great-power conflict, Vietnam missed this opportunity and demanded war reparations, arguing that it was "...an undeniable obligation, in terms of the legal aspects of the Paris Agreement on Vietnam, international law, as well as morality and human conscience" (Tùng, 2007, p.358). Although the US was obliged to comply in principle, this was still an unwise condition for Vietnam to impose on a superpower like the US, especially when there were still some elements in the US Congress with a desire for revenge after the 1975 defeat.

Finally, when Vietnam abandoned its compensation demand, China seized the opportunity, and President J. Carter's viewpoint shifted, leading to the establishment of the US - China relations, rather than the former and Vietnam. Immediately after their normalization (1/1979), in February, 1979, Dang Xiaoping visited the US, demonstrating his shared commitment with American in countering the USSR while also informing the US of its plan to attack Vietnam. Dang Xiaoping cited the reason that "China was

forced to disrupt the Soviet Union's plan to dominate Southeast Asia through an alliance with Vietnam" (Patrick, 2008, p.468). Prior to China's announcement, although the US did not respond, it provided intelligence on the Soviet Union's troop deployment along the China-Vietnam border. This was seen as implicit approval by the US of Beijing's aggressive actions against Vietnam.

Laterly, the US took steps to assure the USSR that it had not foreseen the conflict and also requested China to swiftly withdraw its troops from Vietnam (A. Dobrynin, 2001, p.765). This action of "healing" with both the USSR and China aimed at two strategic objectives of the US, namely promoting conflict between the USSR and China while preventing excessive tension with the USSR. The war also revealed much about the Soviet Union's "friendship" with Vietnam. Despite the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in 1978, Soviet government seemed to forget its "responsibility" when Vietnam was attacked. Along with the Cambodian issue, the war to protect Vietnam's northern border demonstrated the dominance of the great powers in the international arena. Despite its efforts, Vietnam found itself being used as a bargaining chip in US-China and even Soviet-American and Soviet-Chinese relations. This expensive lesson taught Vietnam about the importance of balancing sides and avoiding being caught in the middle.

2. How balance policy benefits Vietnam and its challenges in the new context

2.1. Benefit

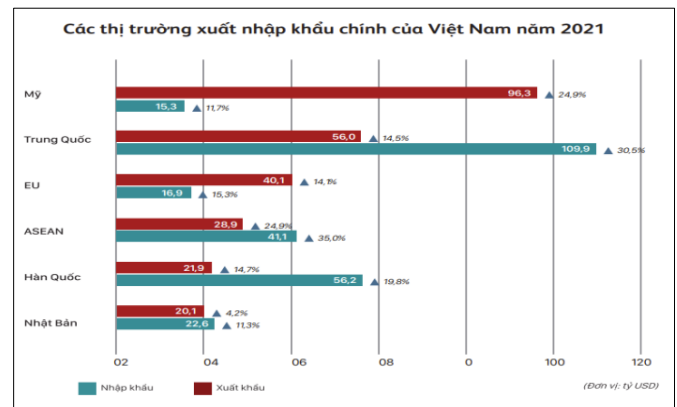
Given its historical background, Vietnam's consistent pursuit of a balanced approach in managing its relationships with major nations is not surprising. The effective implementation of this policy has yielded numerous advantages for Vietnam, fostering robust connections with major powers and aligning its national interests with theirs, encompassing both economic and security considerations. *From an economic perspective*, most major nations offer substantial markets for Vietnamese products, branded as "made-in-Vietnam," owing to their industrial scale and large populations. Furthermore, these nations have contributed invaluable technology transfers to support Vietnam's endeavors in industrialization and modernization. Over the years, the United States, China, the European Union, Japan, and South Korea have consistently stood as Vietnam's primary trading partners, with bilateral trade expanding notably in 2021 despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, the bilateral trade volume between Vietnam and China reached 165.9 billion USD in 2021 (200 billion USD, as per China Customs) (王冷一, 2022), while trade with the United States amounted to 111.56 billion USD (Hong Kong, 2022), with South Korea at 78 billion USD, the European Union at 57 billion USD, and Japan at 42.7 billion USD (see *Figure 1*). Noteworthy is the fact that China stands as Vietnam's largest trading partner, closely followed by the United States. In contrast, Vietnam holds the position of being China's primary trading partner within the ASEAN region and ranks as the sixth largest trading partner globally, trailing behind nations such as the United States, Japan, South Korea, Germany, and Australia. Additionally, Vietnam holds the 10th position on the list of the United States' largest trading partners (USTR, 2021).

Vietnam's foremost export market in 2021 was also the US, which contributed 28.6% to the country's overall export revenue, worth

US\$96.3 billion. Notably, the US displayed the most significant growth rate in exports among Vietnam's primary export markets, registering a growth rate of 24.9% from the preceding year. Furthermore, Vietnam maintained the largest trade surplus with the US, amounting to US\$81 billion, as its exports exceeded imports by over six times. Following the US, China and the EU ranked as Vietnam's second and third largest export markets in 2021, respectively (WTO center, 2021). While Japan and South Korea experienced a decline in the value of two-way trade compared to previous years, they still maintained their positions as Vietnam's major trading partners.

Figure 1

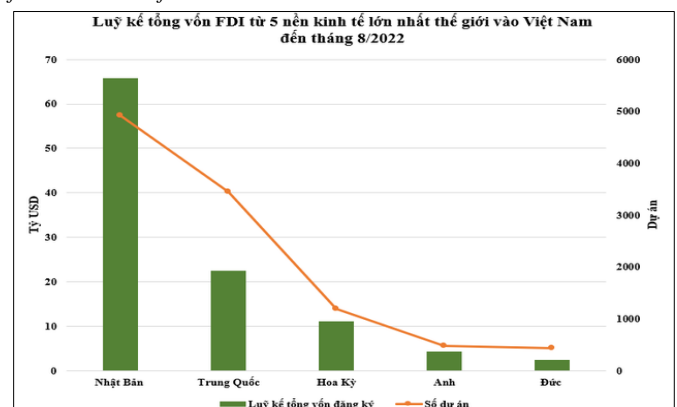
Vietnam's main import and export markets in 2021



Source: WTO center (Vietnam)

Figure 2

Total FDI from the world's 5 largest economies into Vietnam in the first 8 months of 2022



Source: Ministry of Planning and Investment (Vietnam)

Furthermore, the positive trend of trade exchange has also led to an increase in investments from large corporations in Vietnam. Japan is the largest economy to invest in Vietnam among the top five economies in the world, followed by China (*Figure 2*). The increasing investments from businesses in Japan, China, the US, South Korea, and other major countries further enhances Vietnam's economic significance and strengthens its ties with these countries. This, in turn, increases connectivity and interdependence between Vietnam and these major countries, leading to mutual economic benefits.

From a political and security perspective, maintaining positive relations with major countries has provided Vietnam with valuable opportunities to access modern defense equipment and receive favorable security support packages. While Vietnam's economic

relations with Russia and India may be modest, both countries enjoy strong political-security relations with Vietnam and are its primary sources of defense equipment. Russia sold a total of 10.7 billion euros worth of defense equipment to Southeast Asian countries between 2000 and 2019, with 61% of those sales going to Vietnam (SIPRI, 2019). Russia has been the source of nearly 80% of Vietnam's military equipment since 2000. From 2013 to 2017, Vietnam ranked as the world's third-largest purchaser of Russian arms, trailing only India and China. However, between 2017 and 2021, its position shifted to become the fifth-largest importer of Russian weaponry, with India, China, Egypt, and Algeria ahead of it in the rankings. Nonetheless, Vietnam still maintained its position as the top importer of Russian arms in Southeast Asia during this period (SIPRI, 2018). A unique aspect of the Vietnam-Russia defense trade is Russia's consistent offer of preferential pricing to Vietnam, which has contributed to Vietnam's ability to enhance its national security capabilities.

India is also an important supplier of defense equipment and training packages to Vietnam. In 2014, India granted Hanoi a credit package of USD 100 million to purchase Indian patrol boats (MEA, 2014). In 2016, India announced a new defense credit package worth US\$500 million (MEA, 2018) to deepen defense industry cooperation between the two countries. Additionally, during General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong's visit to India at the end of 2013, India pledged to train up to 500 Vietnamese sailors for submarines (Murray et al., 2014). The Indian Navy has operated Russian Kilo submarines since the mid-1980s, making India a valuable partner in ensuring technical safety for Vietnamese submarines, which are also Russian Kilo submarines.

In 2016, the US lifted its ban on the sale of deadly weapons to Vietnam, presenting Vietnam with greater options for its defense equipment procurement plans and the chance to obtain advanced military technology from the US, particularly in the domain of maritime security. As per the US Department of Defense, Vietnam is set to acquire six ScanEagle unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) with a combined worth of over \$9.7 million (Sputniknews, 2019). Additionally, the US has expressed its willingness to transfer other categories of defense equipment to Vietnam.

Vietnam not only benefits from defense trade but also has the opportunity to receive security assistance from major countries. The US State Department reports that Vietnam received over 150 million USD in security aid from the US Foreign Military Financing (FMF) program between 2016 and 2019 (US Department, 2020). Out of this amount, over 58 million USD was allocated for the delivery of two large Hamilton-class patrol boats of the US Coast Guard - the Morgenthau (WHEC 722) in 2017 and the John Midgett (WHEC 726) in 2021. FMF also supported the supply of 24 Metal Shark-type high-speed patrol boats to the Vietnam Coast Guard to improve their maritime capabilities, with the final six delivered in May 2020 (Anh Son, 2021).

Similarly, Japan has provided Vietnam with six patrol boats (Hidetaka, 2017, 306) as part of strategic Official Development Assistance (ODA). Patrol vessels are versatile and used for a range of purposes, including search and rescue operations, transportation, and environmental protection. Maintaining balance and positive relationships with major countries benefits Vietnam significantly. Increased interaction with major powers also serves to balance China's assertiveness and restrain its excessive unilateral actions in

the South China Sea, thereby contributing to the protection of Vietnam's maritime sovereignty.

Politically, it helps Vietnam garner favorable impressions from various major nations, thereby potentially gaining support from multiple parties within the international community, regardless of the quality of relationships among these major countries. In principle, when maintaining an imbalanced approach to relationships, a nation can form stronger ties with either side, or even establish alliances, thereby maximizing support from close partners (or allies). However, in the event of conflicts between the parties involved, the nation may find itself in direct opposition to the adversary of its close partner or ally, perceived as having "taken sides". Conversely, sustaining a balanced relationship with sending the message "not an implicit enemy" to anyone fosters a certain degree of similarity with all nations—essentially serving as a foundation for building bilateral and multilateral relationships in international affairs.

On the contrary, maintaining a balance in relationships with countries sends a message of neutrality, creating a foundation for building good bilateral and multilateral relations in international affairs. This policy is especially important for small and medium-sized countries that may lack the capacity to withstand the consequences of great-power competition or alliance. Great-power relations are inherently complex and can be reversed through compromise, potentially causing small countries to bear the brunt of bargaining. Vietnam has experienced the consequences of "choosing sides" in the past, most notably when the US "abandoned" its ally (the Republic of Vietnam), during the 1974 invasion of the Paracel Islands by China. Similarly, Vietnam's affiliation with the USSR during the tense Soviet-American and Soviet-Chinese relations resulted in animosity towards Vietnam. The Soviet Union's slow response to China's attack on Vietnam in the Spratly Islands in 1988 reinforced Vietnam's awareness of great powers' pragmatism. Therefore, Vietnam has mastered the policy of balance to avoid the risks of being caught up in great-power politics. This strategy allows Vietnam to maintain neutrality, cultivate positive relationships with all nations, and avoid suffering disproportionate losses in the event of conflicts between major powers.

1.2. Challenges

Vietnam has demonstrated adeptness in maintaining a balanced, multilateral orientation since 1991. However, the evolving and intricate global landscape marked by intense great power competition, notably the rivalry between the United States and China, tensions between China and India, and conflicts involving Russia, the United States and Western nations, presents considerable challenges for Vietnam in managing its relations with major powers. *Firstly*, the historical pattern persists, wherein tensions between great powers lead them to view the partners of their adversaries with suspicion. Vietnam's efforts to strengthen ties with major powers now carry the inherent risk of arousing suspicion. Depending on specific circumstances, Vietnam may find itself compelled to take sides or, at the very least, be perceived as doing so in the rivalries between the U.S. and China, U.S. and Russia, EU and Russia, India and China, and even U.S. and EU. This environment fosters suspicion, impeding the development of Vietnam's relations with major countries. Despite historical issues with China and the U.S., Vietnam has cultivated positive relationships with India and Russia. Currently, the Vietnam-China relationship faces challenges due to a territorial dispute, while

Vietnam-U.S. relations are flourishing due to the alignment of their strategic interests. Vietnam's unique features make it susceptible to suspicion of siding with Russia in the Russia-US and Russia-EU conflict, the US in the US-China competition, and India in the Indo-China conflict. Such doubts are inherent in the nature of relations between great powers and the calculations of benefits that they incorporate in their foreign policies. Vietnam's actions, which comply with international law and uphold the values of multilateralism and balance, may not suffice to demonstrate its "independence" in foreign affairs. Vietnam's six voting outcomes at the United Nations General Assembly on the Ukraine situation, including five abstentions and one against, have generated unwarranted controversy, which is a clear manifestation of this challenge. Accordingly, on March 8, 2022, a memorandum of understanding was signed by EU ambassadors, along with counterparts from Norway, Switzerland, and the UK in Hanoi, urging Vietnam to lend support to Ukraine (Delegation of the EU, 2022). Subsequently, in May 2022, an article endorsed by the United States, Canada, Australia, and several European nations called on non-European countries, including Vietnam, to condemn Russia's violations of international humanitarian law and human rights (US. Embassy, 2022). Additionally, there was Western media speculation about Vietnam "choosing Russia" based on its participation in the 2022 Army Games (Carl Thayer, 2022). However, it is important to note that Vietnam has been engaging in this defense exchange activity since 2021. The current tension between Russia and the United States, coupled with the longstanding proximity of Vietnam-Russia relations, has prompted comparisons to the triangular dynamics of Soviet-Vietnamese-American relations during the Vietnam War. While the USSR historically served as Vietnam's primary supporter against the US, the present circumstances pose challenges in avoiding the perception that Vietnam unequivocally supports Russia. Nevertheless, Vietnam's independent foreign policy has positioned the country in a morally justifiable stance, exemplified by its controversial decision of five abstentions and one vote against at the UN General Assembly.

Secondly, the intricate competition among major powers may render the image of these countries in Vietnam sensitive, thereby impacting the promotion of Vietnam's balanced relations with major powers. Collaborative efforts between Vietnam, the United States, and India could be interpreted by China in a negative and antagonistic light, especially concerning actions related to security-defense or areas deemed "sensitive" such as the South China Sea. Consequently, bilateral cooperation between Vietnam and the U.S., and Vietnam and India, though arising from the practical needs of the two countries, also have the potential to be interpreted by China as a form of "choosing sides" [Vietnam aligning with the U.S. against China in U.S.-China competition or Vietnam siding with India against China in the China-India competition]. This presents a challenge in balancing Vietnam's relations with the United States, India, and China. India's hesitation or caution in information related to the BrahMos missile deal with Vietnam following China's objections, viewing it as "provocative action and interference in the South China Sea dispute" (WorldTribune, 2017), is likely a result of considerations influenced by this dynamic. Especially, the complexities of the U.S.-China relationship pose the greatest challenges for Vietnam in maintaining a balanced policy. China's concerns regarding the development of Vietnam-U.S. relations revolve around three issues: (i) China fears that the U.S. may use Vietnam to "encircle"

or "contain" China; (ii) tightening relations between the U.S. and Vietnam, as well as with ASEAN, could implicitly undermine China's goals in Southeast Asia; (iii) tensions between Vietnam and China would provide the U.S. with a pretext for regular military presence in Southeast Asia (James Bellacqua, 2012, 23-24). Therefore, China reacts to every move in the Vietnam-U.S. relationship. During the period when Vietnam and the United States elevated their diplomatic relations to the highest level on September 10, 2023, Chinese officials responded by expressing concerns about a new type of Cold War unfolding in Southeast Asia. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning advised Washington to dispel "hegemonic mentality and Cold War thinking" (Xuan-Tung Le, 2023) when questioned about the comprehensive strategic partnership agreement between the United States and Vietnam, on par with Beijing's relationship with Vietnam. Due to China's sensitivity towards the United States, an event in late September 2023 (shortly after the U.S.-Vietnam upgraded their relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership) raised questions about China's response to the enhancement of Vietnam-U.S. relations. In this event, Vietnam had to revoke 74 cultivation area codes and 47 fruit packaging facilities due to violations of plant quarantine regulations following warnings from China (Nguyễn Hạnh, 2023). This incident underscores concerns about how China might react to the upgraded ties between Vietnam and the United States.

In the opposite direction, the tension in US-China relations is also likely to make the US "lose patience" with Vietnam's cooperative activities with China. Vietnam's continued maintenance and promotion of relations with China amid the two nations' tense conflict in the South China Sea has left many people uncomfortable and confused. During General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong's visit to China in late October 2022, some Western scholars have accused Vietnam of conducting bamboo diplomacy with new features of tribute to China, and have labeled Vietnam as a "swing state" (Alexander, 2022) between the US and China. Although Vietnam believes that swinging between the US and China will bring the greatest benefit, it is predicted that this rope will become too thin to walk as tensions between the two countries increase (Alexander, 2022). Consequently, many expect Vietnam to take stronger action against China, with some even proposing measures to pressure Vietnam and force it to lean towards the US. The US's move to designate Vietnam on the special watch list for religious freedom in December 2022 (Duy & Thanh, 2022) is likely one such pressure tactic. Despite Vietnam and the United States seemingly overcoming initial suspicions and establishing comprehensive strategic partnerships in September 2023, in the long run, Vietnam still needs to be cautious and skillful in order to maintain a balance between China and the U.S. Vietnam's balancing policy will, therefore, face challenges in the context of great power competition.

Conclusion

It can be observed that Vietnam's steadfast pursuit of a balanced policy is aimed at avoiding the repetition of the lessons of the past. In the post-1975 period, Vietnam's imbalance with the USSR and China, as well as its failure to timely improve its relations with the US, contributed to China's invasion in 1979. However, Vietnam's policies and actions during this period were strongly influenced by the triangle of US-China-Soviet relations and the strategic calculations of all three major powers. China's tilt towards the US and its anti-Soviet stance, its active mobilization of Southeast

Asian countries against the "Vietnamese danger" after 1975, as well as its support for the Khmer Rouge's attack on the southwestern border of Vietnam, pushed Vietnam into a situation where it had to strengthen cooperation with the Soviet Union. On this basis, China had further grounds to propagate the "Vietnamese-Soviet" connection in the region, creating a situation where Vietnam was encircled diplomatically.

Despite the impact of external factors, this period remains a valuable lesson for Vietnam on the importance of balancing great powers. During the Cold War, Vietnam aligned with the USSR and remained loyal to the socialist system. However, Vietnam's unwavering commitment did not prompt the USSR to prioritize Vietnam's interests. Instead, Vietnam became a "pawn" in Soviet's negotiations with China. In response to the growing US-China relationship, the USSR made concessions to China to prevent the balance of power from tilting towards the US. China's attack on Vietnam's northern border in 1979 occurred despite the Soviet Union's presence in Cam Ranh Bay, equipped with the world's top intelligence system, and its silence during the war exemplified the Soviet brother's ambivalence towards Vietnam. This was a crucial lesson for Vietnam, highlighting the dangers of leaning too heavily on one power. It laid the groundwork for Vietnam's present-day "four no" policy, which has proven beneficial for Vietnam in various fields, including politics, security, and the economy. This policy remains a significant motivator for Vietnam to pursue a balanced approach to great powers.

In the current complex geopolitical context marked by increasing competition among major powers, Vietnam faces numerous challenges in implementing its balancing policies. The sensitivity of these major powers towards each other demands that Vietnam adeptly navigate to maintain and strengthen its relationships. Up to the present moment, Vietnam has demonstrated diplomatic finesse in balancing its relations with major powers. In 2023, Vietnam upgraded its relations to a comprehensive strategic partnership with the United States and Japan, concurrently intensifying interactive activities with China. Vietnam's elevation of its relationship with the U.S. to a comprehensive strategic partnership, bypassing the strategic partner level, places the U.S. on an equal footing with China in the way Vietnam constructs its foreign relations. Meanwhile, tightening relations with China is a necessary action for Vietnam to uphold its "independence" and "autonomy" in its foreign affairs, as well as to reestablish a "balance" in its relations with China.

This approach by Vietnam simply stems from lessons of the past as well as the results of pragmatic calculations based on the actual dynamics of the Vietnam-China relationship. Despite the complexities and differences between the two countries, the geographical proximity of Vietnam and China is an unalterable reality. This fact has become a "curse" for Vietnam, and the country has no choice but to coexist with it. It cannot be denied that Vietnam pays attention to China's reactions while strengthening its ties with the United States; however, it is essential to note that this does not imply a tilt towards China. With the history of the Vietnam-China relationship, more than any other country in the region, Vietnam understands China's ambitions as well as its two-faced policy.

With the historical context of the Vietnam-China relationship, surpassing that of any other country in the region, Vietnam

comprehends China's ambitions as well as its dual-faced policies. Consequently, despite enhancing interactions with China, Vietnam remains extremely cautious not to engage in China's politically oriented initiatives. For instance, during President Xi Jinping's visit to Vietnam in December 2023, Vietnam agreed with China to build a Community of Shared Future for Vietnam and China (rather than a Community of Common Destiny). Here, what Vietnam supports is the promotion of building a Community of Shared Future for Mankind, endorsing the positive aspects of China's initiatives. Vietnam does not align its destiny with China, and it is not a part of the "Chinese destiny". This country's support for China's Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative and Global Civilization Initiative follows a similar pattern. The message of "independence and autonomy" from China by Vietnam can also be identified through the way Vietnam received President Xi Jinping. When Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh welcomed President Xi Jinping at Noi Bai International Airport, the two leaders walked on separate parallel carpets (VOV, 2023) - a notable difference from how Vietnam welcomes the U.S. President or other national leaders. Hence, Vietnam's positive approach towards China can be seen as a strategic maneuver by this Southeast Asian nation, especially in the context of the upgraded Vietnam-US relations. Nevertheless, without careful observation and a nuanced understanding of the history of Vietnam-China relations, particularly if overly influenced by the competition with China, the United States and other Western powers may misinterpret Vietnam's message.

On the other hand, the image of the United States in Vietnam also faces China's reactions. China's sensitivity to the United States and its determined efforts to assert global dominance, regardless of conflicting interests with other major nations, require Vietnam to carefully and tactfully consider promoting relations with major countries, especially with the United States. Based on this, Vietnam's promotion of its balancing policies needs to be built on the foundation of international law, with national interests as the goal. Simultaneously, transparency and openness in cooperation activities should be emphasized, grounded in international legal principles and the national interests of Vietnam, to avoid misunderstandings and potential conflicts.

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