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Realpolitik à la XXI Century Communism: Vietnam's Quest for Power in the Age of Multipolarity

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***Realpolitik à la XXI Century Communism:
Vietnam's Quest for Power in the Age of Multipolarity***

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May 2025

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The twenty-first century poses unique challenges to Vietnam's domestic politics and geostrategic standing. The regime faces a series of domestic challenges to its legitimacy and political supremacy, both of which rely on the Party's deliverance of sustained economic growth. Regardless of this, popular sentiments contrary to the established one-party system continue to gain traction, and it will be difficult for Hanoi to strike a correct balance between maintaining sufficient economic growth so as to not endanger its own ruling legitimacy, but also prevent an ever-more westernized general population from publicly espousing ideals of political pluralism and democracy. For the medium-to-long term, the current political system would only appear sustainable if the Party adequately integrates both sensible political reform with successful economic policy, as well as ensuring external geopolitics do not compromise the integrity and sovereignty of the nation.

These external threats, in a general sense, are due in part to China's ever-more assertive stance in regional geopolitics—specifically when concerning both countries' clashing territorial claims in the South China Sea. Beijing has correctly identified Hanoi as a key obstacle to regional hegemony and is attempting to strategically encircle Vietnam via economic domination over Laos and Cambodia and the effective exercise of maritime power to constrain Vietnam's freedom of navigation and exploitation of its own natural resources—even within its own Exclusive Economic Zone. China's global ambitions, primarily reunification with Taiwan, threaten to expose Vietnam's strategic vulnerabilities, especially when regarding its own defence capabilities. This is the inevitable consequence of the hard-fought, principles-driven foreign policy Hanoi has conducted since the political and economic reforms of the 1980's: its strive to maintain its independence and sovereignty is an obstacle to China, who would much rather prefer a subdued and complacent Vietnam.

Vietnam would then see little alternative elsewhere; surrounded by a geopolitical panorama of political fracturing and polarization, Hanoi could find it difficult to find like-minded partners who are as willing to address the threat posed by China's global ambitions. To its south, ASEAN remains politically fractured and bogged down by complex conflicts, such as Myanmar's drawn-out civil war—a nuisance for several within the bloc, but also a valuable

opportunity for Hanoi to increase its international reputation. To the northeast lies Washington's long-time chain of allies and Indo-Pacific partners, as well as internationally isolated North Korea, whom Vietnam should be wary of engaging in any official partnership. To the West, India is emerging as a regional power, but its capabilities remain untested, and its intentions unclear. This report will present a series of possible outcomes, each describing the different approaches Hanoi could take in the next ten years with regards to harmonizing its national strategy with its complex position in the Sinosphere. Particular attention will be paid to the possibility of Vietnam seeking an official security guarantee from its former enemy, the United States. The significant economic concessions Hanoi is capable of granting the United States, particularly in supporting (and no longer facilitating China's evasion of) Washington's protracted trade war with Beijing, will be a critical factor in this consideration.

This report will then come to a series of conclusions, including but not limited to, that:

- The Communist Party of Vietnam has tied its political legitimacy to the exercise of sustained economic growth, which might in turn endanger popular support for the one-party system.
- Vietnam's national security interests are incompatible with China's rise as a global power and its regional ambitions.
- Vietnam's economy is poised to enjoy significant growth for the next decade, likely at the expense of China's recent economic challenges.
- The Russian Federation, historically Vietnam's largest arms supplier and defence guarantor, is not a reliable security provider for the country.
- China has embarked on a strategy of encircling Vietnam with geopolitical allies, especially due to Beijing's influence in Laos and Cambodia.
- As ASEAN is not prepared to overcome its internal political fractures and does not yet offer the possibility of a true role of political leadership to any of its member states. Vietnamese prospects to bid for a leadership role are therefore limited.
- Vietnam would benefit significantly from further developing its partnership with like-minded regional actors, such as India, Japan, and South Korea, but avoid further cooperation with rogue states, like North Korea.
- Vietnam would see significant gains from strengthening relations with the United States, putting aside Cold War legacies.
- The United States is a reasonable and reliable choice for a security provider for Vietnam.

INTRODUCTION

“Nhẫn nại là chìa khóa dẫn đến thành công.”

“Patience is the key to success.”

- Vietnamese popular proverb

Fifty years ago, the last American troops left Saigon in full retreat, after the decades-long push from Washington to contain the spread of communism. A few years after that, the People’s Republic of China withdrew its invasion force from the north of Vietnam, after its punitive expedition failed to accomplish its larger goal of forcing Vietnam’s hand into abandoning the occupation of Cambodia. It is difficult to imagine a country, neither small nor irrelevant, but out of the aforementioned modern-day superpowers’ geopolitical league, refusing to cede ground on the independence of its political system and foreign policy not once, but time and time again. Yet, these strategic victories have not seen a relaxation of Hanoi’s geopolitical anxieties—if anything, the regime is walking the diplomatic tightrope at a more precarious height than ever before.

Situated at the crossroads between South East Asia and the Chinese mainland, Vietnam is a uniquely positioned nation whose geographic composition and delimitations have shaped its history as a tale of resilience against foreign occupation and colonialism. Up until the tenth century, Vietnam underwent several periods of occupation by the successive Han, Jin, and Tang dynasties. This thousand-year period of Chinese occupation firmly entrenched the principles of Confucianism in Vietnamese society in several key areas, perhaps most notably in the political and administrative *modus operandi* of the country, which utilizes a modern interpretation of Confucian principles. This, among other important contributions like rice-farming techniques, architectural influence, and integration into the Silk Road, firmly immersed Vietnamese society into the Sinosphere. Even after the Chinese were ousted in the Battle of the Bach Dang River (938 CE), their cultural influence remains, to this day, strong.

Therefore, Vietnam has been forced to overcome several key challenges in its geography to successfully manage its relationship with the successive Chinese states. If it is not possible to completely extricate itself from the cultural orbit of the Sinosphere, it should find a way to ensure political and economic independence from its larger neighbor — this approach has been effective, at least during periods of political weakness in China. However, whenever the ruling

Chinese dynasty, be it Mao or Kublai Khan, consolidated control over the Chinese heartland and threatened southward expansion, Vietnam's political and territorial integrity has been at risk. Originally concentrated around the Red River Delta, Vietnamese civilization began to expand southward after achieving its independence from the Tang dynasty. This centuries-long process culminated in the formation of a Vietnamese state (Dai Viet, or Great Viet) which incorporated the former territories of Champa and modern-day Cambodia. At its largest territorial extent, Dai Viet controlled the entire coast of Indochina, from the border with the Qing dynasty to the Gulf of Thailand, protected from the inner rainforests of Mainland Southeast Asia by the Annamese Mountain range.

Although the geopolitical reconfigurations of post-World War II decolonization limited Vietnam's territory to its current borders, it remains Indochina's most influential actor, with a population of 100 million—Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia, by comparison, hold a combine population of 95 million. Its wide access to the South China Sea has provided ample opportunities to engage in both regional and global commerce for centuries. Boasting the mouths of two of Southeast Asia's longest and most economically significant rivers, the Red and the Mekong, Hanoi has created a strong agricultural sector centered on the production of rice, of which it is the world's third largest exporter. Its workforce of more than 57 million also places it as a reliable economic player in the region, especially considering the demographic advantages it holds over the larger and more developed East Asian economies, like China, South Korea, and Japan; with a fertility rate of 1.96, a low unemployment rate of 2.1%, and a balanced population pyramid, Vietnam has all the necessary tools to maintain its economic competitiveness, and even surpass its neighbors in key manufacturing sectors.

Nestled along the coastline of the Indo-Pacific region's most tense geopolitical neighborhood, the South China Sea, Vietnam is experiencing the archetypal dilemma of smaller states amidst great power competition. Having first gone from bystander to casualty in the geopolitical dynamics of the twentieth century, Hanoi has undergone a geopolitical transformation over the years, fixated on maintaining its geopolitical independence and flexibility. Wide-ranging economic reforms (Doi Moi) were introduced in 1986 to help transition the country from a command economy to a socialist-oriented market economy. These reforms have been a resounding success, skyrocketing the country's GDP from US\$ 13 billion in 1986 to US\$ 430 billion in 2023. Political reforms have also followed, particularly in the field of foreign policy: Introduced in 2016's 29th Diplomatic Conference, recently-defunct Secretary General of the

Communist Party of Vietnam, Nguyen Phu Trong's Bamboo Diplomacy exemplifies the framework within which Vietnam's foreign policy will operate in the medium-to-long term—a strong, independent stance on national sovereignty and its territorial integrity, just as the roots of the bamboo plant are sturdy; and a pragmatic perspective on international affairs which seeks to harmonize national interests with ever-changing regional and global geopolitical dynamics, like the flexible branches of the bamboo plant, which may be bent or shaped in many ways, but rarely broken. This delicate balance between independence and adaptability has enabled Vietnam to carve out its own place as a critical actor in global power dynamics. However, these same dynamics involving the global powers, particularly the prevalent superpower, the United States, and the emerging apparent superpower, the People's Republic of China, are testing the limits of Hanoi's ability—and willingness—to act on the international stage in a manner increasingly conflicting with its national principles.

Unlike the bilateral system dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union for the larger part of the twentieth century, today's international order is becoming increasingly defined by multilateralism and the integration of smaller states into both regional and global power dynamics. Vietnam's position is both complex and challenging; a first-row seat in the theatre of China's geopolitical rise, wherein Beijing's maritime disputes in the South China Sea, the expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative, and the rise of China as the global manufacturing powerhouse have had profound consequences for its neighbors, and, especially in Vietnam's case, stoked particularly uncomfortable tensions rooted in both countries' difficult yet highly interconnected history. After extensive periods of colonial rule and a series of protracted independence wars which defined Vietnam's current borders, the country is highly adamant on maintaining its territorial integrity—China's recurring incursions into Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone, such as the 2014 drilling rig incident, therefore constitute an important obstacle in the relationship between the two countries. However, it is not only the headline-grabbing disputes in the South China Sea which Hanoi is preoccupied with; several issues regarding possible artificial disruptions in the flow of the Mekong River, the growth of foreign direct investment in Vietnam at the expense of evermore dissatisfied investors in China, and the possible construction of a canal in Cambodia all represent important sticking points in the Sino-Vietnamese relationship.

Vietnam is not the only actor concerned with the regional consequences brought about by the rise of China. The other two largest member states of the Association of Southeast Asian

Nations (ASEAN), Indonesia and the Philippines, have also clashed with China regarding maritime disputes in the South China Sea. Vietnam could see a legal appeal to international arbitration as a plausible avenue to resolve its maritime disputes with China. However, it is unlikely this could result in anything but further escalation of regional tensions. Peaceful mitigation—if not ideally, resolution—of existing disputes in the region could well prove an important springboard for regional political leadership; in a region rife with border disputes and inter-state tensions, foreign policy strategies focused on facilitating and mediating successful resolutions to these disputes have consistently proven to be highly rewarding in political prestige—Indonesia has been particularly adept at this, and it could be said this same prestige has played a key role in deterring Beijing from adopting a more aggressive stance towards Jakarta on the matter of the dispute over the sovereignty of the Natuna Islands. Could Vietnam strive to follow the example of Indonesia and strengthen its position as a regional power? This last point may depend not only on the relationship between Hanoi and its neighbors, but with external powers as well.

Thirty years after establishing official diplomatic relations, Vietnam and the United States now maintain a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, the highest possible distinction allowed in Hanoi's diplomatic playbook, which is especially adamant on refusing to enter any and all military alliances. Vietnam has also signed similar agreements with other regional U.S. allies, such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia. Even if these partnerships remain within the permissible framework of Hanoi's 2019 National Defense White Paper, which outlined its famous "Four No's" policy of no foreign military bases on the national territory, no military alliances, no use of force in international relations, and no siding with one country against the other, the recent flexibilization of Vietnamese foreign policy should remain an important variable to take into account. After transitioning from an ideologically-driven foreign policy into a more pragmatic one and reintegrating into the international community, the regime continues to balance its position between two highly contrarian poles: the rejection of Western values and influence, and thus, alienation from the international community; or discreet cooperation, if not alliance, with the United States in order to deny Chinese regional hegemony, thereby risking its relationship with its largest neighbor and economic partner. In contrast with the twentieth century trope of proxy warfare and military assistance to friendly regimes in countries immersed in armed conflict, Vietnam has emerged as a vivid representation of the arena wherein the new "Cold War," the byproduct of the twenty-first century's "New World Order," is being fought; if the United States spent billions of dollars, from Kennedy to Nixon,

in fighting Ho Chi Minh and the Vietcong sixty years ago, it is now preoccupied with fighting the long arm of Beijing in terms of influence and security guarantees.

This struggle is fundamentally different from that of the past century, as all-out armed conflict remains—for now—a relatively distant possibility. Ever since the Obama administration's decision to fully lift the United States' lethal arms sale embargo on Vietnam in 2016, Washington has rapidly accelerated the strengthening of its strategic ties to Hanoi. The possibility of further cooperation—and a possible scenario wherein the White House were to extend significant security guarantees to Vietnam—will define Hanoi's role in twenty-first century geopolitics.

This work will first outline how the domestic politics of Vietnam shape its outlook on the world, and subsequently how Hanoi chooses to conduct its foreign relations. Subsequently, a profound analysis on Vietnam's complex relationship with China will be provided, and the security dilemmas Beijing presents Hanoi with today. This will be followed by a discussion of Vietnam's foreign relations with other regional and global powers, including the United States, while analyzing whether Vietnam will find itself forced to compromise the principles of its foreign policy in order to secure their national interests, and therefore, the political survival of Hanoi's take on twenty-first century communism.

I. STRATEGIC PRIORITIES OF VIETNAM

Before discussing Vietnamese foreign affairs, it is worth analyzing how domestic politics influence decision-making. In communist one-party states, foreign policy is usually insulated from public sentiments and determined solely by the highest-ranking officials of the state apparatus. However, Vietnam's unique socio-political circumstances convey important considerations—and even red lines—which any sensible foreign strategy should take into account. This section will explore how these domestic circumstances condition Vietnamese geopolitics.

A. Vietnam: National Unity, from North to South.

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is a unitary one-party state ruled by the Communist Party of Vietnam. It holds both local and national elections, described as neither “free nor fair”¹, yet at the same time “some of the most open and active”² in the so-called communist world. Unlike other communist states, Vietnam allows a certain degree of openness and transparency in its electoral process:³ members of the National Assembly of Vietnam are directly elected, in contrast with China's indirect representation system from the local level to the national one; more than one candidate is allowed to run for the same seat, unlike in Cuba; and there is even a number, albeit a limited one, of non-communist party members who are allowed to run, with them currently holding almost 3% of the National Assembly. However, these caveats should not obscure the reality — Vietnam remains a highly authoritarian state with limited civil liberties. Constitutionally, any citizen over the age of 21 is allowed to run for office, regardless of political affiliation.⁴ Yet, despite the token opposition represented in the current National Assembly, most independent candidates were barred from running for office. Political campaigning is highly limited and, whenever allowed, closely orchestrated by Party officials.⁵ Most worryingly, the electoral process is often rife with a wave of reports of intimidation and

¹ U.S. State Department, “Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2011,” State.gov, 2017, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2011humanrightsreport/index.htm?dliid=186319>.

² Ronkin Noa, “FSI | Shorenstein APARC - News,” [aparc.fsi.stanford.edu](https://aparc.fsi.stanford.edu/news/balance-power-role-vietnam%E2%80%99s-electoral-and-legislative-institutions), January 28, 2021, <https://aparc.fsi.stanford.edu/news/balance-power-role-vietnam%E2%80%99s-electoral-and-legislative-institutions>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ The Constitution of Vietnam: Article 27. 2014.

⁵ Ronkin Noa, “FSI | Shorenstein APARC - News,” [aparc.fsi.stanford.edu](https://aparc.fsi.stanford.edu/news/balance-power-role-vietnam%E2%80%99s-electoral-and-legislative-institutions), January 28, 2021, <https://aparc.fsi.stanford.edu/news/balance-power-role-vietnam%E2%80%99s-electoral-and-legislative-institutions>.

harassment towards independent candidates,⁶ the credibility of which remains contested. In the end, both the minor representation of non-party candidates in the legislative assembly and the continued efforts by various activist individuals and groups in the country to push for further openness and transparency in the electoral process — pushing for outright democratization could entail a lengthy prison sentence — illustrates the CPV's supremacy, albeit not total control, over the country's political system. Any opposition is tightly controlled and holds virtually zero influence over policy-making and national governance.

At the same time, Vietnamese society is markedly divided by its two geographical poles — its two largest urban centers, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon). Ever since the Geneva Accords of 1954 granted independence to all three Indochinese states from France, and the subsequent war between both ideologically opposed Vietnamese states — and their respective foreign supporters — split the country in half, the north and south of Vietnam have each developed distinct political perspectives regarding both the unity of the country and the future of its politics. After the military withdrawal of the United States in 1974, and the subsequent annihilation of the Saigon regime by the North, southern Vietnamese politics were forced to abandon the way of free market economics and alignment with the West. However, even if the South has been successfully assimilated into the communist regime, the political leanings of both its citizens and local politicians remain markedly adrift of Hanoi's preferred perspective. Saigon is generally more open to market reforms, exhibits less dependency on state-owned enterprises, and is a far larger recipient of foreign direct investment, estimated at double what Hanoi received for the last year of available data.⁷ Ho Chi Minh City has retained strong Western influences⁸ from its colonial past, which have helped it naturally settle into its role as Vietnam's largest commercial and financial center. Its population is also more westernized and politically active; anti-China protests tend to take a stronger tone in Saigon, perhaps because local authorities are less adamant about suppressing them, especially during situations of active conflict with China.

⁶ Amnesty International, "Fresh Crackdown in Viet Nam as Election Looms," Amnesty International, April 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/04/viet-nam-fresh-crackdown-election/>.

⁷ Ho Chi Minh City attracted approximately US\$ 5.85 billion in 2023, the highest among Vietnam's regional administrative divisions. Hanoi ranked sixth, with approximately US\$ 2.9 billion in direct capital inflow for that same year. Data retrieved from "Vietnam Briefing: Top 6 FDI Locations in Vietnam in 2023 and Why."

⁸ Both the French colonial presence and the American military presence had long lasting consequences for the south of Vietnam: from economic models to architectural styles, both foreign powers left their mark on the region. This is also a plausible explanation as to why Ho Chi Minh City has displayed a more significant openness to Western social influences, economic ideas, and foreign intervention.

Legitimacy and Security Challenges: An Internal Perspective

On one hand, rising geopolitical tensions are continually forcing Vietnam's hand into higher degrees of political and economic pragmatism, which could have consequences for the regime's internal cohesion and legitimacy. On the other hand, it is impossible to escape the fact that, ever since the implementation of Doi Moi in the 1980's, the regime's political legitimacy has become inextricably tied to the economic performance of the nation, and overall, the welfare of its citizens, and these improvements in living standards have given Vietnamese citizens a voice they did not possess before — a voice both to support and legitimize the regime and to criticize and express their distaste for it. This implies two logical consequences: first, that any significant drop in living standards and economic growth is bound to seriously threaten both regime and national security (which, in Vietnam's case, are implicitly identical); second, that the continued growth in living standards will increasingly elevate those voices more critical of the regime, especially in the more international setting of the country's south. This means the CPV has effectively tied itself to a Faustian political bargain, wherein economic development will both legitimize the regime and sabotage it from within at the same time, yet not in a parallel manner.

In one-party states, regime security is naturally tantamount to national security. Hanoi consistently incorporates regime security into all areas of policy-making and ensures that even branches of the government traditionally unconcerned with internal politics, such as its foreign policy department, conform with, and help strengthen the regime's grip on the political system.

Scenario Set I: Will Economic Growth Threaten the CPV's Political Supremacy?

The following section provides a prospective analysis on a series of scenarios aimed to analyze possible future outcomes for the CPV's political legitimacy in the medium-to-long term, focusing on the next ten years (2025-2035), primarily focusing on how Vietnam's economic outlook, the regime's disposition to political and economic reform, and public support for the one party system affect the efficacy of the CPV's grip on Vietnamese political life.

Figure 1: Morphological Analysis for Scenario 1

	Regime Legitimacy⁹	Economic Outlook¹⁰	Public Support for One Party System¹¹	Regime Disposition to Reform¹²
Possibility A	Strong	Overperformance	Widespread	Successful
Possibility B	Challenged	Underperformance	Majority	Adaptable
Possibility C	At Risk	Stagnation	Uncertain	Slow
Possibility D	Weak	Recession	Opposition	Failure

Scenario 1: Accounting for variables 1B, 2A, 3B, and 4A.

In this scenario, economic growth for the medium to long term in the country has been considerable and relatively equitable among the lower and middle class. As a consequence, public support for the current regime remains, at least, majoritarian. A strong economic performance and a successful maneuver from the regime to implement the correct reforms in time has strengthened the regime's position, although the drastic range of social improvements and growth of the middle class has ensured some vocal opposition still remains to the one-party system.

Were this the case, the regime could feel confident enough to win, for example, a public referendum on the continuity of the one-party system. Vietnam would see sustained economic growth and be heralded as one of the major booming global economies. As far as the status of civil liberties with regards to public opposition to the regime or the electoral process, there

⁹ "Regime Legitimacy" refers to the performance-based mandate to govern which the CPV wields in its favor to ensure political stability within the one-party system.

¹⁰ "Economic Outlook" refers to the general economic performance of the country within the next five to ten years, taking into account both macroeconomic indicators as well as standards of living, quality of life, and average income.

¹¹ "Public Support for One-Party System" refers to the disposition of the general population to be either supportive or apathetic of the current political configuration of the country under the CPV's supremacy.

¹² "Regime Disposition to Reform" refers to three things: the willingness of the regime to implement political and economic reforms; the scope and effectiveness of these reforms upon implementation; and the speed and agility with which these reforms are put into action.

would be little change. This scenario is the closest to the status quo, and the most likely to occur.

Figure 2: Morphological Analysis for Scenario 2

		Economic Outlook	Public Support for One Party System	Regime Disposition to Reform
Possibility A	Strong	Overperformance	Widespread	Successful
Possibility B	Challenged	Underperformance	Majority	Adaptable
Possibility C	At Risk	Stagnation	Uncertain	Slow
Possibility D	Weak	Recession	Opposition	Failure

Scenario 2: Accounting for variables 1C, 2C, 3C and 4C.

In the second scenario, medium term prolonged economic underperformance, or worse, short term economic stagnation, could cast a profound blow to the regime's performance-based political legitimacy.

The balance of priorities within the regime would favor strengthening the hardline stance on political stability, and therefore be slow to implement sufficiently wide-ranging reforms. Public support for the one-party system could plummet, and portions of the general population who express neither support nor opposition, but rather indifference, towards the regime, could in turn espouse a more vocal anti-establishment stance.

In this course of events, the regime would face increasingly higher pressure to reform. Failure to address ongoing or plausible economic stagnation would significantly ramp up civilian willingness to engage in anti-regime activism. Anti-China protests could entail national security crises: were the government to violently crack down on the protests, its legitimacy and public support could be mortally wounded, especially considering the already significant degree of resentment within the general population with regards to China; if the government were to give free rein to the protests, its relationship with its most important neighbor and economic partner could break down completely.

Figure 3: Morphological Analysis for Scenario 3

	Regime Legitimacy	Economic Outlook	Public Support for One Party System	Regime Disposition to Reform
Possibility A	Strong	Overperformance	Widespread	Successful
Possibility B	Challenged	Underperformance	Majority	Adaptable
Possibility C	At Risk	Stagnation	Uncertain	Slow
Possibility D	Weak	Recession	Opposition	Failure

Scenario 3: Accounting for variables 1C, 2A, 3C, and 4C.

This final scenario is a possible “black swan” for the CPV. After a five to ten year period of sustained economic growth, Vietnam would see significant increases in living standards and quality of life, as the distribution of wealth, even if notably uneven, is bound to significantly impact the pockets of everyday citizens. However, even if economic reform did not become an immediate priority for the regime, a significant delay or ineffectiveness of political reform to accommodate the growing liberal sentiments of the general population would exacerbate tensions and anti-regime activism. The regime’s legitimacy would suffer significantly, which would pose serious risks to political stability in the country. Vietnam was a witness to the generalized collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980’s, and suffered greatly from the international isolation of communist states after the collapse of the Soviet Union, not to mention the vacuum left by the fall of its largest security provider.

Should these circumstances occur, the CPV would be under immediate threat of regime change. The increasing attractiveness of liberal political systems, which is usually tied to an increase in living standards and political awareness, was the engine behind the fall of communist regimes at the end of the Cold War. While the current international system is fundamentally distinct to that of the twentieth century, especially in the matter of great power relations with middle and smaller states, this trope is not to be taken lightly and should be addressed as a serious threat by Hanoi. It remains to be seen whether the great powers of the West, chiefly the United States, would choose to actively interfere in this scenario: the most extreme possibility is for Washington to engage in rollback — perhaps seeking to convert a pragmatic ally into an ideological one; the other end of the spectrum would see a passive, yet not indifferent stance,

especially if the White House came to consider any policy of active interference to be harmful to its regional interests. The latter is more likely, as both China and the United States would probably find that interfering in a situation of domestic political turmoil and regime change in Vietnam would negatively impact their own standing with Hanoi—Vietnam has a strong history of resisting imperialism and foreign intervention. It is therefore unlikely any regime change would directly align the country with either superpower, but seek its own independent course.

B. The Evolution of Hanoi's Foreign Affairs: From Dogma to Pragmatism

The foreign policy of Vietnam has undergone significant shifts since the end of the Second Indochina War in 1975. Originally, as a communist state firmly aligned with the Soviet Union, Vietnam faced several key challenges in its foreign relations. First, addressing its relationship with China, the second largest and most influential communist nation. Even if China had been a supporter of the North Vietnamese regime in the face of American intervention, traditional geopolitical anxieties between Hanoi and Beijing still remained. Secondly, Hanoi faced international isolation outside of the communist world; the United States, despite its strategic setback in Vietnam, was nearing the peak of its power projection in international politics, as the Soviets lagged increasingly behind the Americans in virtually all matters of geopolitical importance. Thus, Vietnam was forced to, at least eventually, consider the consequences of alignment with a geopolitical bloc which became increasingly less powerful by the year. Third, Vietnam held considerable concerns about potential security risks from its two smaller neighbors, Laos and Cambodia. Since its independence, Hanoi had been particularly supportive of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP). The same year of the fall of Saigon, Vietnamese support ensured the LPRP's victory in the Lao civil war, securing a valuable communist partner which, like Hanoi, favored Moscow over Beijing. Cambodia, however, presented a challenge. The Khmer Rouge claimed the Mekong River Delta as the rightful territory of Democratic Kampuchea, and both planned and conducted several expeditions to take over Vietnamese lands. The Vietnamese army eventually invaded and occupied Democratic Kampuchea, resulting in the Sino-Vietnamese war and further international isolation.

The overarching paradigm for this era of Vietnamese foreign policy is that, faithful to the principles outlined from Moscow to the rest of the communist world, the country's foreign

affairs should be conducted primarily through an ideological lens. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, this approach left the country internationally isolated, except for the few communist holdouts, such as Cuba or North Korea, and its weakened and unstable former security provider, the new Russian Federation. Hanoi, faced with the necessity to adapt, came to several conclusions: first, that the emerging international system was primarily characterized by interdependence and multilateralism; second, that it was not necessary to view ideologically opposed countries as strategic enemies;¹³ and finally, that it was possible to harmonize ideological conviction at home and diplomatic pragmatism abroad. As former general secretary of the CPV Nguyen Van Linh put it: “Vietnam wants to be friends with countries around the world.”¹⁴

Vietnam Wants to be Friends to All

Vietnam’s international non-alignment has several positive consequences. Hanoi has been able to enjoy its proximity to the Chinese economy and become a critical trade and manufacturing power of its own. It has effectively promoted its image as an international mediator and power-broker in the region by adhering to strict non-intervention principles, in a manner akin to other regional powers, such as Indonesia and Malaysia. Hanoi has also made sure to fully integrate into all major Western-backed international organizations, many of which have been critical for its economic success, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO).

However, some consequences have not exactly been to the CPV’s liking — Hanoi has not been spared the wrath of Beijing during the numerous incursions of Chinese vessels into Vietnam’s rightful territorial waters and Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Unlike several other regional powers, like Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines, Vietnam has received no significant security guarantees from either China or the United States. Furthermore, the lack of formal military alliances hampers technological innovation in this sector, which, compounded with the fact that Vietnam’s military-industrial complex and defence budget remain inadequately undersized, helps ensure Vietnam will remain, for at least the next decade, heavily dependent on arms imports.

¹³ Alexander Vuving, “Vietnam’s Search for Its Place in the World,” September 1, 2022, <https://ideas.repec.org/p/osf/socarx/df8t3.html>.

¹⁴ Nguyen Van Linh, 7th Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam.

Vietnam has repeatedly made clear it will not abandon its “Four No’s” policy.¹⁵ However, it is worth considering how flexible the regime is willing to be in this regard; even if Hanoi has been quite strict in its interpretations of this policy, there is certain leeway to be exploited. Despite the only explicit consideration which would render the “Four No’s” obsolete —armed conflict—the possibility of Vietnam having to fight a war is not, and has not been the only driver behind recent years’ flexibilization of foreign relations. Above all, Vietnam has committed to a pragmatic approach to foreign affairs — Southeast Asia’s version of *Realpolitik à la* twenty-first century communism, in which current considerations over regional tensions seem to trump ideological concerns. In short, Hanoi is willing to bend the rules.

For the Future: Post-Phu Trong

The death of former general secretary Nguyen Phu Trong in July of 2024 could have significant implications for the regime’s strategy in the short to medium term. Phu Trong’s replacement, former Minister of Public Security To Lam, has been one of the regime’s instrumental figures in the matter of law enforcement and internal security. His accession to power would seem to indicate an upward trend in general rearmament, suppression of civil liberties, and an increased hardline stance from within the government. However, not all of these trends will be so straightforward, and there remain several key dependencies on foreign circumstances.

The accession of a military officer to the post of general secretary would typically signal an upcoming proclivity towards rearmament and the development of military capabilities. However, this generalization ought to be analyzed within the context of Vietnam’s geostrategic situation: the country currently does not possess the military-industrial capabilities necessary to satisfy its defence necessities via domestic production alone. Thus, the strengthening of international security partnerships is critical for any Vietnamese rearmament to succeed. Although foreign arms purchases have decreased in recent years,¹⁶ military expenditure is expected to rise to more than US\$ 10 billion by 2029,¹⁷ and recent deals have been closed to

¹⁵ Francesco Guarascio and Khanh Vu, “Vietnam PM Eyes Expansion of Defence Cooperation, U.S. Offers to Play Role,” Reuters, December 19, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/vietnam-pm-says-arms-expo-is-message-peace-cooperation-development-2024-12-19/>.

¹⁶ Francesco Guarascio, “Vietnam Arms Imports Drop to a Trickle despite Regional Tensions,” Reuters, March 14, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/vietnam-arms-imports-drop-trickle-despite-regional-tensions-2024-03-14/>.

¹⁷ Asian Military Review, “Modernization Initiatives to Spur Vietnam Defense Budget at 5.6% CAGR over 2025-29, Forecasts GlobalData - Asian Military Review,” Asian Military Review, March 5, 2024, <https://www.asianmilitaryreview.com/2024/03/modernization-initiatives-to-spur-vietnam-defense-budget-at-5-6-cagr-over-2025-29-forecasts-globaldata/>.

acquire special operational equipment, such as a US\$ 680 million deal for two Israeli advanced spy-satellites.¹⁸ Hanoi has sought for years now to diversify its pool of foreign arms providers, as the sanctioned Russian economy struggles to keep up with global demand for arms. However, even if this diversification is sensible, the regime would benefit most from a stable relationship with a reliable security provider, the plausibility of which will be analyzed in Section C, or a legitimate security guarantee, which will form the basis for Scenario 2.

Nevertheless, when analyzing whether Mr. Lam's tenure will see a significant increase in rearmament, it must be acknowledged that Vietnam, regardless of its circumstances or current tensions, is bound to be cautious whenever considering any increase in defence expenditure. Any overt military buildup, such as the Philippines' under President Marcos Jr., is likely to be taken as a direct challenge by China, and entail due consequences. Vietnam does not wish to escalate any existing tensions in the region to the point of armed conflict. Therefore, it would be more sensible to say Mr. Lam's tenure will be marked by heightened rearmament if and when Vietnam considers the risk of antagonizing China to be worth going through to secure worthwhile foreign security guarantees.

C. Security Concerns amid Global Tensions

As balancing internal security and economic development while maintaining its independent foreign policy presents a unique challenge, Hanoi should seek to accomplish three things: first, to continue to develop new and maintain current partnerships with its most critical economic and commercial partners; second, to focus on strengthening its relationship with a dependable security partner; and finally, to ensure any diplomatic overtures do not compromise the integrity of its foreign policy — to neither become a sidepiece subordinate to the great powers, nor decouple itself from the international system. There are two logical candidates for Vietnam to engage as security providers: its historical ally, the Russian Federation, and its old enemy, the United States.

The Russian Federation has long supplied the CPV with a range of Soviet-era military equipment. After the Sino-Soviet split, the USSR made maintaining Hanoi on its side of the

¹⁸ Yossi Melman, "Wary of China, Vietnam to Buy Two Spy Satellites from Israel," Haaretz.com (Haaretz, March 2, 2025), <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/security-aviation/2025-03-02/ty-article/.premium/wary-of-china-vietnam-to-buy-two-spy-satellites-from-israel/00000195-57b3-d965-a395-57b347380000>.

communist world a strategic priority. Moscow has consistently been one of the world's primary arms exporters for the last century. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has forced the Kremlin to reorganize its military assets, focus on domestic contracts, and restrict the flow of arms to the international market, as they are desperately needed on the frontlines; recent data suggests Russia's revenue from international arms sales has collapsed by 92% due to the war in Ukraine, down from US\$ 14.6 billion in 2021 to less than US\$ 1 billion by the end of 2024.¹⁹ Vietnamese arms imports from Russia also decreased significantly in tandem.

However attractive the prospect for the CPV's more conservative wing to strengthen ties with the country's decades-long provider of more than 80% of its military equipment,²⁰ notwithstanding the historical and ideological ties it shares with Moscow, Hanoi must stand by the prevalent, pragmatic perspective of current geopolitics. As mentioned before, the war in Ukraine has severely depleted Russia's military equipment stocks. Some ex-Soviet republics, like Armenia and Kazakhstan, have transitioned away from security dependence on Moscow after internal and external security threats were not seen as priorities for the Kremlin. Even one of Putin's key allies, Syria's Bashar al-Assad, was unceremoniously deposed by Hay'at Tarir al-Sham's takeover of the country last December, with no visible or timely response from Moscow. The writing on the wall should be clear for Hanoi: Moscow is not a dependable security provider.

The other military superpower with reasonable credentials as a security provider is Vietnam's former enemy, the United States. Washington has made clear its intentions to maintain freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific, particularly considering Beijing's expansive claims in the South China Sea, Hanoi's maritime front yard. The United States provided Vietnam with almost US\$ 200 million in security assistance between 2017 and 2023.²¹ As per the State Department, Washington aims to support Vietnam in its capacity building efforts to "maintain the rights and freedoms specified under international law of the sea."²² Vietnam was also invited to the Rim

¹⁹ John C.K. Daly, "Russian Arms Exports Collapse by 92 Percent as Military-Industrial Complex Fails," Jamestown.org, January 15, 2025, <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-arms-exports-collapse-by-92-percent-as-military-industrial-complex-fails/>.

²⁰ Nikkei, "Vietnam Seeks Alternatives to Russian Arms at Defense Expo," Nikkei Asia, December 19, 2024, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Aerospace-Defense-Industries/Vietnam-seeks-alternatives-to-Russian-arms-at-defense-expo>.

²¹ "U.S. Security Cooperation with Vietnam - United States Department of State," United States Department of State, September 11, 2023, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-vietnam/>.

²² Ibid.

of the Pacific (RIMPAC) military exercise in 2018 to deepen security cooperation with the United States and its allies. Furthermore, Washington is actively seeking to address its war legacy in Vietnam via location and destruction of unexploded ordnance, providing assistance for survivors, and other humanitarian work.²³

However, a brutal history of invasion and resentment, coupled with ideologically opposed political systems, mitigate this rapprochement. China's global ambitions, in which regional hegemony seems to be non-negotiable, naturally draw concerns from Moscow. In turn, the Kremlin, resolute in its ambitions to reclaim superpower status, is conscious it cannot hope to challenge Washington's title as the reigning superpower without political, economic, and diplomatic subordination to China. The United States' strategic concerns have slowly pivoted from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific, and the apparent death of Atlanticism under the Trump administration suggests Washington's eye is fixed on Beijing. Could, therefore, the United States agree to play out the role of Vietnam's formal security provider? This depends on how flexible Hanoi is willing to be with its foreign policy, which in turn depends on how willing the CPV is to allow the deterioration of its relationship with its largest partner and threat — China.

²³ Ibid.

II. CHINA: NO LONGER AN ALLY

The rise of China has undeniably become the key idiosyncrasy of twenty-first century geopolitics. Beijing's meteoric rise over the past hundred years, from war-torn backwater to communist pariah state, all the way to industrial powerhouse, has upended the American-led Western world order of the post-Cold War consensus. Deng Xiaoping's transformational reforms of the country in the 1980's became a significant inspiration for other like-minded countries—particularly Vietnam. This section will explore Vietnam's inseparable relationship with its largest neighbor, discussing both the positive aspects of belonging to the Sinosphere, as well as the seemingly mounting security challenges Beijing is presenting Hanoi with.

A. Strategic Encirclement: Laos and Cambodia as Pressure Points

Strategic Overview

Over the years, China has sustained territorial disputes with nearly every single country it borders. Most of these disputes, especially land-based ones, have been resolved. These were mostly unimportant disputes, with the notable exception of the Sino-Indian border conflict, left over from Beijing's claim to historical Greater China's claimed sphere of influence. However, there remain two critical reclamations which Beijing is not willing to compromise on: its demand to incorporate, peacefully or otherwise, the territory of the Republic of China (Taiwan), and the enforcement of its proposed nine-dash line plan for the Chinese exclusive economic zone in the South China Sea. The first of these is out of Vietnam's reach, as far as its strategic capabilities and influence go — though it is by no means inconsequential to Hanoi. The Chinese claim to supremacy in the South China Sea, however, is little short of an existential threat to Vietnam, as it compromises a core tenet of the CPV's legitimacy — the defence of the national territory. Vietnam claims sovereignty over, among other minor islets, the Paracel and Spratly islands. The former have been under the de facto control of the People's Republic of China since its 1974 victory over the Saigon regime, while the latter remain contested between Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, the Philippines, Taiwan and China. Hanoi controls the largest number of features in the archipelago (21)²⁴, followed by the Philippines (9),²⁵ and China (7).²⁶

²⁴ "Vietnam Tracker," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, n.d., <https://amti.csis.org/island-tracker/vietnam/>.

²⁵ "Philippines Archives," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, n.d., <https://amti.csis.org/island-tracker/philippines/>.

²⁶ Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, "China Island Tracker," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2016, <https://amti.csis.org/island-tracker/china/>.

Territorial reclamations, although the basis of other points of contention, are not the only disputes in the region. Significant hydrocarbon deposits exist within both countries' clashing claimed zones of maritime control. The Nam Con Son basin, located approximately 350 km from Ho Chi Minh City, less than 160 nautical miles into Vietnam's exclusive economic zone as established by the United Nations Charter for the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), is the largest and most significant source of energy for Hanoi, providing around 40% of the country's electricity. Vietnam began reporting incidents involving clashes with and pursuits of Chinese vessels in the area as early as 1994.²⁷ The Paracel Islands, which also host significant hydrocarbon reserves in their vicinity, have also seen direct confrontations between Vietnamese and Chinese vessels, such as a 2014 incident in which a Chinese state-owned oil platform moved into the area to begin drilling operations. Vietnamese vessels promptly mobilized, beginning a two-month standoff which also triggered mass anti-Chinese protests in both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Significant tensions also arise due to illegal Chinese fishing activity, typically within Vietnam's EEZ. Chinese fishermen have been reported to undertake these activities, typically around the Gulf of Tonkin or the Paracel Islands, with escorts of Chinese Coast Guard vessels alongside them.

Another strategic vulnerability for Hanoi has its origins within China itself: the Mekong River, Vietnam's largest source of freshwater and agricultural asset, begins its descent into the Indochinese peninsula from the Tibetan Plateau, within China's Yunnan province. The Mekong Delta is responsible for around half of Vietnam's rice production, and around a fifth of the country's population lives in its immediate vicinity; it is the cornerstone of the Vietnamese economy. The economic advantages of controlling the river's delta are clear — its strategic vulnerabilities, however, escalate in tandem with China's activity in the upper reaches of the river. The construction of hydroelectric dams, specifically, directly impacts the river flow, thus threatening the stability of the Vietnamese economy and its citizens' welfare. Beijing has not hesitated in the past to utilize this strategic leverage against its smaller Indochinese neighbors. Some countries, like Laos, are especially dependent on the river flow, both for its agricultural importance as for the energy provided by a series of hydroelectric dams, virtually all of which have been constructed, at least in part, with Chinese investments.

²⁷ Philip Shenon, "China Sends Warships to Vietnam Oil Site," *The New York Times*, July 21, 1994, <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/07/21/world/china-sends-warships-to-vietnam-oil-site.html>.

Finally, it is worth reiterating that Vietnam and China share especially strong economic bonds. Vietnam depends on China for almost half of its imports,²⁸ making Beijing its largest supplier of consumer goods by far. China is also Vietnam's second largest export destination, representing 20.8% of exports.²⁹ Although Vietnam has remained a skeptical participant in China's Belt & Road Initiative (due to strategic concerns over developing an unhealthy economic dependency on Beijing), it has also benefited from significant infrastructure projects from the BRI's development network, as well as a significant increase in GDP.³⁰ Both countries made effective transitions from centrally planned economies characterized by agricultural collectivization and a nonexistent private business sector, to more open, socialist-oriented market systems while upholding the supremacy of the communist party. While China has experienced a significant slowdown in economic growth over the past years however,³¹ Vietnam has not only seen steady, sustained economic growth, but has successfully weathered global crises; during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, when GDP growth dropped to 2.6% for 2021 (its lowest since the implementation of Doi Moi), the economy bounced back with an impressive 8.1% GDP growth for 2022.³²

Foreign investment has played a critical role in both countries' economic growth over the past decades. However, China faces considerable challenges in this respect: first, geopolitical tensions are becoming increasingly influential in western-based investors' decision-making process over whether investing in China is worth the risk; second, business conditions within China are no longer as attractive to foreign companies seeking cheap labor, or at least not as profitable as other alternatives, particularly emerging Southeast Asian economies, due to rising wages; third, China's long term economic outlook does not look as favorable as the CCP would

²⁸ "Where Does Vietnam Import From? (2023) | the Observatory of Economic Complexity," The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2023, https://oec.world/en/visualize/tree_map/hs92/import/vnm/show/all/2023.

²⁹ "Where Does Vietnam Export To? (2023) | the Observatory of Economic Complexity," The Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2023, https://oec.world/en/visualize/tree_map/hs92/export/vnm/show/all/2023.

³⁰ François de Soyres, "The Growth and Welfare Effects of the Belt and Road Initiative on East Asia Pacific Countries 1 François de Soyres," October 1, 2018, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/896581540306960489/pdf/131211-Bri-MTI-Practice-Note-4.pdf?utm>

³¹ "World Bank Open Data," World Bank Open Data, 2015, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?end=2023&locations=CN&start=2000>.

³² Ibid.

perhaps like it to—a shrinking labor force,³³ poor returns on domestic investment,³⁴ and an escalating trade war with the United States are throwing a shadow of uncertainty over Beijing’s economic future. Vietnam, on the other hand, boasts an open, burgeoning market with strong demographics for the medium term³⁵ and friendly business conditions—with particularly low wages, even for regional standards.³⁶ It is therefore plausible that Vietnam could, in comparative terms, not only draw in a higher share of foreign investment than China,³⁷ but also possibly overtake China in specific manufacturing sectors.

Laos and Cambodia: Neighbors and Vulnerabilities

Although overshadowed by Beijing, Vietnam’s two smaller neighbors, Laos and Cambodia, still present both significant interests and security challenges for Vietnam. Even if their combined population represents less than a quarter of Vietnam’s, their geostrategic positioning continues to influence certain policymaking aspects in Hanoi. All three Indochinese nations were granted their independence from France in the 1954 Geneva Accords, and went on to wage three separate, yet intertwined wars against the regional governments supported by Washington. All three conflicts ended in 1975, after the withdrawal of American troops and the fall of Saigon paved the way for North Vietnam, the Pathet Lao, and the Khmer Rouge to consolidate power in their respective countries.

Laos and Vietnam share a particularly close “special relationship”, the highest echelon of Vietnam’s diplomatic overtures. This is likely due to several reasons: first, the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP) and the CPV share a strong ideological affinity; secondly, both countries share strong economic ties; lastly, and most importantly, Laos’ geographic position is highly strategically significant for Vietnam. Their border runs mostly along the Annamese mountains and has historically supposed a vulnerability for Vietnamese civilization —

³³ National Bureau of Statistics of China, “China Statistical Yearbook 2024,” Stats.gov.cn, 2024, <https://www.stats.gov.cn/sj/ndsj/2024/indexeh.htm>.

³⁴ World Bank, “The World Bank in China,” World Bank, October 24, 2024, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/china/overview>.

³⁵ United Nations Population Fund Agency, “Vietnam Population Projections 2019-2069”. 2019 https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://vietnam.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/factsheet_on_pop_projections_en_final_for_posting_1.pdf&ved=2ahUKEwjlfuywZOMAxVrg_0HHeAxK54QFnoECBsQAQ&usg=AOvVaw3Wky5qT5KFsr5SMFSliTGX

³⁶ Trading Economics, “Wages - Countries - List | Asia,” Tradingeconomics.com, 2025, <https://tradingeconomics.com/country-list/wages?continent=asia&utm>.

³⁷ This comparison is evidently relative to both countries' size—Vietnam could not realistically hope to overtake China in absolute terms.

territorial high grounds suppose a significant advantage in the case of invasion, and open up neighboring populations to raids and incursions, as was the case for many centuries. Vietnam also faces the threat of Beijing's growing economic control over Laos, which could spiral into full military cooperation—a prospect Hanoi, historically Vientiane's most important ally, cannot afford.

Cambodia, whose larger population and access to the Gulf of Thailand grant it significantly greater strategic depth than landlocked Laos, has not enjoyed particularly positive relations with Vietnam. The deposal of the Khmer Rouge and subsequent occupation by the PAVN is, understandably, the most evident and recent example of conflict between Hanoi and Phnom Penh. However, both countries have sustained significant tensions for centuries; the Vietnamese were responsible, alongside the Siamese kingdom of Ayutthaya, for partitioning post-Angkor Cambodia and attempting to subvert the local population's cultural identities via assimilation policies;³⁸ the second Nguyen emperor, Minh Mang (1791-1841) saw the Khmer as inferior, and strived to increase Vietnamese influence in the country in tandem with Siam; and during the revolutionary struggles which enveloped the Second and Third Indochina Wars, successive Cambodian governments on all sides of the ideological spectrum were continuously coerced to suit the interests of both Hanoi and Saigon. This foreign policy dissonance helped accelerate the Cambodian Civil War, after a falling out with Hanoi led to increased support for the Khmer Rouge and the joint Saigon-Washington effort to remove communist elements from the country was inadequate. Relations between Phnom Penh and Saigon had also seriously deteriorated due to border disputes on which neither party was willing to compromise. Anti-Vietnamese sentiments in Cambodia run high today,³⁹ with many incidents involving mob violence against ethnic Vietnamese minorities in the country occurring over the past years.⁴⁰ These minorities are often scapegoated in day-to-day politics for all kinds of scandals, particularly electoral interference.⁴¹ Though Hanoi and Phnom Penh often partake in friendly

³⁸ Ben Kiernan, *Việt Nam : A History from Earliest Times to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 283–84.

https://books.google.es/books?id=C1EjDgAAQBAJ&pg=PA283&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false

³⁹ Kimkong Heng, “2022/36 ‘Cambodia-Vietnam Relations: Key Issues and the Way Forward’ by Kimkong Heng,” *Www.iseas.edu.sg* 2022, no. 36 (April 12, 2022): 8, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2022-36-cambodia-vietnam-relations-key-issues-and-the-way-forward-by-kimkong-heng/>.

⁴⁰ Amnesty International, “Cambodia: Arbitrary Killings of Ethnic Vietnamese,” Amnesty International, September 19, 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/es/documents/asa23/005/1993/en/>.

⁴¹ Index on Censorship, “Cambodia: Human Rights Defender Threatened for Opposing Hate Speech,” Index on Censorship, January 20, 2014, <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2014/01/cambodia/>.

diplomatic engagements, this popular discontent has significant repercussions for Cambodia's foreign strategy. Beijing, the country's most important investor, naturally stands to benefit from this.

Backyard Threats to Strategic Depth

China's strategic approach to Laos and Cambodia is no happy accident for both nations. The growing range of Chinese involvement in developing infrastructure projects, providing significant loans and acting as their principal security provider, is a strategy intended to surround Hanoi with friends and allies of Beijing. China wields this influence on several different fronts. For example, Laotian and Cambodian voting attitudes have been instrumental in preventing joint communiqués denouncing Chinese actions in the South China Sea from being approved by ASEAN.⁴² The degree of military cooperation between Beijing and Phnom Penh is also concerning for Hanoi, as it leaves its southwestern flank exposed to a possibly revanchist Chinese-sponsored puppet state.⁴³ China has also invested heavily⁴⁴ in Cambodia's Ream Naval Base, a strategic outpost in the Gulf of Thailand which had remained in disrepair since the ending of the Cambodian Civil War. Satellite imagery has depicted Chinese vessels stationed at the base, possibly hinting at yet another uptick in military cooperation between both countries.

However, there remain relevant obstacles to Beijing-sponsored initiatives in the region which Hanoi could yet exploit. For example, the joint Sino-Cambodian effort to build the Funan Techo canal, a massive waterway which would connect the Mekong River to the Gulf of Thailand, has faced significant drawbacks since its announcement last year. While Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet initially claimed a Chinese state-run company would cover 49% of the canal's building costs,⁴⁵ Beijing has not yet officially committed any funding for the project.

⁴² Edgar Pang, "2017/66 'Same-Same but Different': Laos and Cambodia's Political Embrace of China," Iseas.edu.sg, 2017, <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/201766-samesame-but-different-laos-and-cambodias-political-embrace-of-china/>.

⁴³ Describing Cambodia as a "Chinese puppet state" should be taken with a grain of salt, and is merely an illustrative statement on Phnom Penh's apparent willingness to continuously bandwagon on China's foreign policy. Cambodia is not explicitly a puppet state, and retains its sovereignty and autonomy, albeit with significant Chinese influence.

⁴⁴ Jonathan Head, "Does China Now Have a Permanent Military Base in Cambodia?," *BBC*, October 7, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2k42n54kvo>.

⁴⁵ Francesco Guarascio, "Cambodia's Flagship Canal in Hot Water as China Funding Dries Up," *Reuters*, November 21, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/cambodias-flagship-canal-hot-water-china-funding-dries-up-2024-11-21/>.

Even if the strategic advantages of both the Funan Techo canal and a potential leasing of Ream Naval base are evident for China, the CCP faces uncertainty over its capacity to increase its foreign investment outflows for the coming years.⁴⁶ Vietnam has also been successful in drawing international observers' eyes to the issue, driving three important narratives which could hinder support for the canal's construction: first, that the construction of the canal would significantly impact the flow of the Mekong River to Vietnam's southern regions, thereby risking a food security crisis; second, that the construction of the project would displace a significant amount of local communities⁴⁷, citing social and humanitarian concerns; and third, that China's strategic capabilities in the South China Sea would be significantly boosted should the People's Liberation Army (PLA) be allowed to operate more freely in the Gulf of Thailand.

B. Beijing's Maritime Frontier of Power

The South China Sea: Historical Claims and Claimants

As discussed so far, Vietnam's coastline of 3,260 km is the country's main access to world commerce and global affairs. It is also, however, Hanoi's paramount security dilemma. The South China Sea, or as it is referred to in Vietnam, the East Sea, and the security challenges it represents, both define Vietnamese foreign policy in the region and act as a *raison d'être* for the country's military rearmament. This section will be structured into two halves: first, an outline of the territorial claims Vietnam, China, and other states have in the Sea, as well as a detailed analysis of China's larger regional strategy to dominate the freedom of navigation, control of natural resources, and the establishment of maritime outposts to aid its global aims; and secondly, Vietnam's plausible range of responses to Chinese activity in the region will be discussed, with the principal question remaining: how far is Hanoi willing to bend?

Vietnam is entitled to an Exclusive Economic Zone that extends 200 nautical miles from its coastline, as per the United Nations Charter on the Law of the Sea. This grants legal validity to

⁴⁶ Bloomberg, "China Has Record Foreign Investment Outflow as US\$ 168 Billion Exit," The Business Times, 2025, <https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/international/global/china-has-record-foreign-investment-outflow-us168-billion-exit>.

⁴⁷ Business & Human Rights Research Centre, "Cambodia: Affected Communities Demand Updates on Funan Techo Canal Construction While Foreign Media Critical of Lack of Progress due to Funding Issues from China - Business & Human Rights Resource Centre," Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2025, <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/cambodia-affected-communities-demand-updates-on-funan-techo-canal-construction-while-foreign-media-critical-of-lack-of-progress-due-to-funding-issues-from-china/>.

Vietnamese claims over several strategic resource deposits, such as Nam Con Son basin. UNCLOS also regards Vietnam's claims over specific features in the South China Sea, such as Spratly Island, as valid, as they meet the requested criteria of being "naturally formed island[s] which can sustain human habitation."⁴⁸ The Charter also validates Vietnam's claimed continental shelf. However, UNCLOS only partially addresses claims over the Spratly Islands archipelago, as though some claims fully align with the definition of naturally formed and habitable, other reefs or artificial features controlled by Hanoi, such as Barque Canada Reef, a coral atoll which has been artificially expanded to sustain government activity, do not. Furthermore, another of Vietnam's principal claims, the entirety of the Paracel Islands, exceeds the scope of UNCLOS; as the territories were militarily annexed by China from South Vietnam in 1974, when Saigon was still recognized as a distinct geopolitical entity to Hanoi. This forces Vietnam to seek other legal avenues, backed by their historical claim to the islands. Both the Paracels and Spratlys were incorporated into Vietnamese territory by the Nguyen dynasty as far back as the 17th century. After the arrival of the French, both archipelagos came under the administration of French Cochinchina, from whom South Vietnam inherited these claims after the Geneva Accords.

Successive Chinese dynasties have often regarded the South China Sea as belonging to its traditional sphere of influence. Beijing has submitted a series of historical documents which allege China has always "maintained its sovereignty"⁴⁹ in both the Paracels and the Spratlys. These historical claims mostly constitute imperial-era maps or records of expeditions of Chinese navigators to the islands. However, none of these claims constitute a formal, historical record which would indicate Imperial China ever directly controlled or administered the islands—moreover, Chinese records explicitly detail their protesting of French Cochinchina's administration of the island territories. The most fact-based historical narrative, thus, would be that 1974's annexation of the Paracels was the first time Beijing came to formally administer the islands. Nevertheless, neither Beijing nor Taipei have relented their claims over the region as of today. The Republic of China (ROC) submitted the Eleven-Dash Line in 1947, an expansive claim over what is, in practice, the entirety of the South China Sea. After the end of the Chinese Civil War and the consolidation of power of Mao Zedong's regime in Beijing, the

⁴⁸ United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, Dec. 10, 1982, 1833 U.N.T.S. 397, entered into force Nov. 1, 1994. Article 121.

⁴⁹ Priscilla Tacujan, "Revisiting China's Rationale for Its South China Sea Claims," U.S. Naval Institute, August 6, 2024, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2024/august/revisiting-chinas-rationale-its-south-china-sea-claims>.

People's Republic of China (PRC) modified the previous claim to its contemporary form, the Nine-Dash Line, which importantly still comprises the most critical features of the Sea for Beijing's long-term goals: the Paracel and Spratly Islands, Scarborough Shoal, and key hydrocarbon deposits, such as the Reed Bank basin.

The exploration and exploitation of hydrocarbon reserves is an illustrative example of how diplomacy and geopolitics work in the region. While Vietnam has repeatedly sought to conduct exploration ventures in hydrocarbon reserves within its own exclusive economic zone, China has always rebuffed these efforts and pressured Hanoi into backing down, at least on the understanding of a moratorium or temporary suspension of these ventures, while promising future expeditions of a joint nature. In doing this, Beijing seeks three primary goals: first, to assert its diplomatic and geopolitical dominance over its neighbors—if China allows Vietnam to act unilaterally in this department, so will the Philippines, Malaysia, and other regional claimants to the Sea; second, to monopolize the extraction of natural resources in the region, and prevent its smaller neighbors from gaining control over critical energy industries; and third, to appear as the “peaceful” party in the dispute, by proposing de-escalation measures to what it considers trespassing on its natural borders. In this manner, China continues to impose its own ruleset for the exploitation of natural resources in the region, a key stepping stone to regional hegemony.

Beijing's Strategic Backyard

The South China Sea is Beijing's strategic backyard. Encircled by American allies via Washington's First Island Chain and logistically constrained by the key chokepoint of the Malacca Strait, China's global ambitions face a critical lack of strategic depth. While Beijing retains its capacity to act as a quasi-global superpower, much more so in its own geopolitical neighborhood, the strategic encirclement built over the years on the back of East Asian middle powers' reservations over Chinese hegemony (and the power of Washington to back them) effectively denies the CCP total control over its surroundings, and constrains its strategic capabilities in the case of conflict or crisis. Moreover, this strategy addresses a fundamental reality of China's foreign relations: that Beijing's outward stance always reveals something, if not everything, about the state of its domestic politics. The fervent nationalism which the CCP has fostered since its inception forces the hand of policymakers into decisive action, both at home and abroad. This tactic, although common within autocracies who face crises of

legitimacy or democratic governments with disgruntled electorates, entails unique circumstances in China. Chinese irredentism is significantly popular,⁵⁰ and continues to garner support from historical narratives which portray the nation as a victim of the past few hundred years' domination by Europe and Japan.

The importance of the South China Sea for Beijing has often been compared to the United States' equivalent hegemony in the Caribbean, which Washington has cemented over the past centuries via three key mechanisms: first, the exercise of effective maritime power, in both security and economic areas; second, the maintenance of strategic alliances and partnerships in the region, like Panama and the Dominican Republic; and finally, timely interventions on foreign soil which have led to strategic territorial acquisitions, such as Puerto Rico and Guantanamo. This three-pronged strategy has worked to Washington's benefit in a region adjacent to important matters of national security, such as the mouth of the Mississippi or the Texas oil fields. It is precisely because of this strategic importance that the Soviet Union attempted to sabotage Washington's grip over the region by stationing nuclear warheads in Cuba in 1962—and why the White House immediately treated it as a vulnerability of the most grievous kind. It is not difficult, then, to conjure a similar analysis for Beijing's situation in the South China Sea. China is already exercising the first two mechanisms previously discussed, and is threatening to unleash the third to fully incorporate the Republic of China into the mainland. Washington, unwilling to compromise on its status as sole superpower, is seeking to prevent this.

Chinese exercise of maritime power in the region is clear. The Chinese coast guard is often deployed in a number of operations, including as escorts to Chinese fishing boats operating within a foreign country's exclusive economic zone, or as the first line of naval muscle intended to dislodge foreign vessels from territorial waters claimed by Beijing. China regularly conducts incursions into foreign territorial waters, like the 2014 oil rig incident, presumably to test response times and strategies. There is little Vietnam or any other Southeast Asian nation can do in response to this, as China's naval capabilities far exceed those of any actor in the region, barring the United States, whose fleet is spread far and wide elsewhere. The second mechanism, the establishment of strategic partnerships and alliances, is also an inevitability; not only is

⁵⁰ Hayley Wong, "Just over Half in Mainland China Back Full-Scale War to Take Taiwan: Poll," South China Morning Post, May 21, 2023, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3221238/just-over-half-mainland-chinese-people-back-full-scale-war-take-control-taiwan-poll-finds>.

Beijing free to conduct foreign relations with whomever it pleases, but it also holds the most diplomatic leverage with small-to-middle regional actors by a longshot: Laos and Cambodia are highly dependent on Chinese investment, Myanmar's military junta has been diplomatically protected by China at the United Nations, and the rest of ASEAN's growing economies benefit too much from proximity to the Chinese mainland for their governments to be willing to incur the wrath of Beijing. The fact that some states with significantly minor power projection, such as the Philippines, publicly and violently oppose China's actions, does not and will not deny Beijing regional supremacy.

Thus, the only missing piece for the Chinese strategy is the third mechanism: intervention and acquisition of territory. To this day, Beijing has successfully gotten minor, yet forceful territorial gains in the region, such as control of the Paracel Islands in 1974 after a confrontation with South Vietnam. However, there have also been highly successful and peaceful acquisitions, such as the British return of Hong Kong in 1997. China therefore publicly espouses an attitude of peaceful willingness to negotiate and engage in diplomacy. However, this tone sours considerably whenever Chinese territorial integrity—or whatever Beijing considers to be its rightful territory—is threatened by foreign actors. Even if peaceful acquiescence to Chinese control is, at least nominally, the first course of action the CCP presents its desired subordinates with the implicit threat of a forceful takeover is still evident. Beijing has also made it clear it is unwilling to compromise on this matter, much less kowtow once more to foreign diktats on East Asian politics, determined to bury the memory of the century of humiliation deep. As Xi Jinping himself put it: “No one can stop Chinese reunification.”⁵¹

China's Grand Plan

As discussed above, the reasoning behind China's pretensions for regional hegemony is both long and complex. However, it is possible to establish a few motives which supersede the rest—a hierarchy of geopolitical motivations specifically. It is evident that China's increase in activity in the region is due to its heightened status as a global power, and there is no surprise its foreign policy is becoming more assertive by the minute. Deng Xiaoping's elder motto of “hide your strength, bide your time” no longer finds much justification in the more polarized state of world

⁵¹ Reuters Staff, “Xi Says No One Can Stop China's ‘Reunification’ with Taiwan,” *Reuters*, December 31, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/xi-says-no-one-can-stop-chinas-reunification-with-taiwan-2024-12-31/>.

politics, especially considering China's domestic situation has demonstrated it is not immune to acute threats, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and is yet to face long-term problems which could put the CCP's political legitimacy at risk, like the looming demographic crisis. It is also worth mentioning, given the role its history and interpretation of the past two centuries' events, that no small part of Beijing's reasoning to pursue a more aggressive foreign strategy stems from an issue of prestige and legitimacy: while overlordship over the South China Sea might not conform as strictly as the issue of Taiwan to Beijing's narrative that the Chinese Civil War is yet to conclude, and will only conclude with the subordination of Taipei, it still represents part of what China sees as, historically, its own. The CCP has, to a certain extent, painted itself into a corner in this area. In the same vein as Hanoi, Beijing has tied its political legitimacy to the unity of the Chinese nation; the China which emerged victorious over Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang, but has not yet achieved total domination over the "rebels" in Taipei. In short: Beijing is determined to act.

When discussing the possibility of Chinese interventions on foreign soil in the South China Sea, it is important to separate two distinct scenarios: on the one hand, a smaller-scale intervention, wherein China would forcefully occupy and assume control over small amounts of territory—at its largest, an operation similar to the 1974 takeover of the South Vietnamese-controlled Paracel Islands; on the other hand, there is the possibility that Beijing may be sufficiently prepared, in the short-to-medium term, to embark on a large scale military operation to forcefully annex the Republic of China. These two possible courses of action need not be mutually exclusive, either: as mentioned before, the United States made effective use of both within their strategic aims of achieving hegemony over the Caribbean. Likewise, China has slowly but steadily built up its capabilities in the South China Sea via small scale foreign interventions, sustained construction of military infrastructure,⁵² and land reclamation projects in the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos.⁵³ This strategy enables Beijing to make effective use of its naval muscle and police maritime traffic, whether civilian or military, in the region—an enhancement of strategic capabilities which would not only represent a significant advantage in the case of armed conflict, but a critical deterrent for foreign intervention in the case Beijing

⁵² Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, "China Island Tracker," Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 2016, <https://amti.csis.org/island-tracker/china/>.

⁵³ Matthew Southerland, "China's Island Building in the South China Sea: Damage to the Marine Environment, Implications, and International Law | U.S.- China | Economic and Security Review Commission," www.uscc.gov, April 12, 2016, <https://www.uscc.gov/research/chinas-island-building-south-china-sea-damage-marine-environment-implications-and>.

should decide to up the ante and engage in large-scale military action against the crown jewel of its territorial claims: Taiwan. However, it is important to take into account the nature of a presumed Chinese invasion of the island, especially when attempting to decipher Vietnam's most likely reaction: a conventional military takeover of Taiwan is not the only available path for the CCP to achieve its long-term goals. Such a campaign is bound to be highly expensive, both economically and diplomatically, and would threaten to strain relations with the United States to an intolerable degree in which direct conflict becomes inevitable.

Beijing is not interested in instigating a global war between nuclear powers. In consequence, two questions arise: does China consider itself logistically, militarily, and diplomatically capable of executing a military takeover of Taiwan without drawing the United States and its allies into a conflict, or would the CCP favor a more covert method of de facto annexing the island? If Beijing were to favor the latter option, it could decide to enact a naval blockade of Taiwan, inspecting imports and restricting exports to strangle any economic lifeline Taipei may reach for. The PLA Navy is significantly more capable than its Taiwanese counterpart,⁵⁴ and the island is not prepared to weather a protracted blockade, as its food and fuel reserves are significantly lacking.⁵⁵ This scenario also avoids direct confrontation with the United States, putting Washington in a dangerous diplomatic position where it may be considered the aggressor if it were to militarily intervene first.

C. Vietnam's Way Forward

Hanoi's Response on Land

A significant portion of Chapter I was dedicated to highlighting the importance of maintaining the integrity of the national territory for the CPV's political survival. While the Party's legitimacy was built on the Cold War victories during the Indochina Wars, it continues to be threatened by Chinese encroachment on what is perceived in Hanoi to be rightful Vietnamese territory. Illegal Chinese fishing activity, unilateral exploration ventures, and subsequent exploitation of hydrocarbon deposits (all within Vietnam's exclusive economic zone); continued harassment of Vietnamese vessels by their Chinese counterparts within Hanoi's

⁵⁴ Benjamin Brimelow, "New Pentagon Charts Lay out China's Growing Military Advantage over Taiwan," Business Insider, January 18, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/pentagon-charts-show-chinas-military-advantage-over-taiwan-2022-1>.

⁵⁵ Gustavo F. Ferreira & J. A. Critelli, "Taiwan's Food Resiliency—or Not—in a Conflict with China," *Parameters* 53, no. 2 (2023), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.3222. p. 41.

territorial waters; and the outright seizure of territories claimed by Hanoi in the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos, have all contributed to a climate of hostility and resentment for the Chinese within the Vietnamese general population. This is a situation of serious concern to the CPV. Chapter I also established sustained economic growth as a critical factor in ensuring both the CPV's political supremacy and that popular opposition to the regime is kept away from mainstream political discourse. This chapter discussed how the rise of China has served as the catalyst for Vietnam's own economic development. Beijing is not only acutely aware of this, but also knows how to leverage Hanoi's economic dependency to facilitate its geopolitical ambitions. So far, the main point of discussion has been Vietnam's twenty-first century "dilemma"—the rest of this work will be dedicated to analyze how Vietnam might build up and leverage its strategic depth to untangle this dilemma.

Vietnam's medium-to-long term economic prospects are far less challenging, in relative terms, to China's. In short, as long as the CPV continues to espouse a considerably business-friendly environment, encourage FDI inflows, and ensure the country's energy security, there is no reason not to believe that Vietnam's economic output will see significant gains in the next five to ten years. However, the regime must keep into consideration that, even if Vietnam is still far removed from facing the common challenges of the larger, stagnant East Asian economies,⁵⁶ it is not exempt from them in the long term. Demographic decline will begin to pose a considerable hurdle beginning in the next decade.⁵⁷ Vietnam's significantly low median wages will be hard to keep at current levels if the country's socioeconomic outlook improves dramatically. The CPV will also need to distance itself, in a manner convincing of foreign business, from Beijing's recent domestic clampdown on the private sector: overbearing regulations,⁵⁸ unforeseen impact of policy on economic output,⁵⁹ and an increasingly uncertain future regarding Western capital inflow. The outbreak of COVID-19 also showed the Vietnamese economy is not invulnerable to shocks from supply chain disruptions and a slowdown in international trade and tourism. A global pandemic aside, it can be said most, if

⁵⁶ This is meant to highlight that Vietnam's economic outlook, especially considering demographics and labor force, is currently far more stable and promising than other large economies struggling in this respect, such as Japan or South Korea. It is not meant to imply the Vietnamese economy is exempt from future challenges.

⁵⁷ The World Bank, "Vietnam: Adapting to an Aging Society," World Bank, 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/vietnam/publication/vietnam-adapting-to-an-aging-society>.

⁵⁸ Peter Hoskins, "China Says Crackdown on Business to Go on for Years," *BBC News*, August 12, 2021, sec. Business, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-58182658>.

⁵⁹ Bloomberg, "China's \$100 Billion Tutoring Ban Backfires, Spawning Black Market," *The Japan Times*, July 22, 2023, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/07/22/asia-pacific/china-private-tutoring/>.

not all, economic indicators favor Vietnamese growth for the medium-to-long term, and its comparatively advantageous position as a prime candidate for “China+1”⁶⁰ business policy provides Hanoi with all the tools to capitalize on Beijing’s economic weaknesses, particularly in its ability to attract Western capital inflows.

In a more confrontational aspect of the relationship between both countries, Hanoi also faces the question of whether to continue compromising on its energy security for appeasing Beijing’s qualms about non-Chinese exploitation of natural resources in the region. Vietnamese energy consumption is projected to rise by almost 10% on an year-to-year basis. As mentioned above, Vietnamese exploration ventures in natural gas basins within its exclusive economic zone have often been sabotaged by harassment from Chinese vessels, or diplomatic pressure from Beijing directly. Notably, a 2018 hydrocarbon prospecting effort by Spanish energy firm Repsol was halted and compensated by PetroVietnam after significant pressure from China.⁶¹ It is evident that Hanoi would wish to more easily and effectively be able to utilize natural resource deposits which it is entitled to exploit under UNCLOS. Even if it will be impossible for Beijing not to, at the very least, strongly express its disapproval and threaten consequences in the case Vietnam were to embark on unilateral hydrocarbon prospecting ventures, there is reason to believe the effects of this on Hanoi’s policymaking could be mitigated. For instance, Vietnam could seek to brace its future efforts with a more powerful and reliable energy partner—American energy giant ExxonMobil has already been a part of several prospecting and extraction projects in Vietnam. Some of these have even taken place in locations previously singled out by China as no-go zones as far as Vietnam’s hydrocarbon extraction ambitions are concerned.⁶² Deepening relations with American energy firms in tandem with Washington’s increasingly stauncher stance on opposing Chinese ambitions in the South China Sea could help Hanoi overcome the hurdle of Chinese opposition to unilateral hydrocarbon prospecting ventures—if only at the cost of heightened hostilities.

Pivoting away from the economic side of things, Vietnam also faces strategic challenges in its relationship with its two smaller neighbors, Laos and Cambodia. The question for Hanoi is:

⁶⁰ The “China+1” policy refers to several major international companies’ efforts to diversify offshoring destinations by moving some of their manufacturing to other, emerging economies while not completely abandoning China.

⁶¹ Bill Hayton, “China’s Pressure Costs Vietnam US \$1 Billion in the South China Sea,” *thediplomat.com*, July 22, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/07/chinas-pressure-costs-vietnam-1-billion-in-the-south-china-sea/>.

⁶² Helen Clark, “ExxonMobil Stares down China for Vietnam Gas - Asia Times,” *Asia Times*, December 7, 2021, <https://asiatimes.com/2021/12/exxonmobil-stares-down-china-for-vietnam-gas/#>.

Can Vientiane and Phnom Penh be either relied upon, in a best case scenario, to commit not to threaten Vietnam's territorial integrity in the event of an uptick in hostilities with China? Or could Hanoi, in a worst-case scenario, evaluate whether it would better suit its interests to pursue a rearrangement of the territorial configuration of Indochina? The former, while evidently the CPV's preferred and less challenging outcome, is shrouded in uncertainty: the degree of Chinese involvement, particularly in Cambodia, appears strong and quasi-puppeteering of both countries, even if significant hurdles have yet to be addressed. The latter option would serve to assuage Hanoi's anxieties about potential Beijing-sponsored security risks emerging from its southwestern flank. However, it is evident that all significant parties involved, including all other ASEAN member states, would be staunchly opposed to any territorial losses of one or more smaller members to a larger one. It is unlikely any foreign powers, less so the increasingly war-wary United States, would commit to supporting territorial concessions on the other side of the globe. Finally, the CPV should be wary of espousing an irredentist stance to back these claims: Vietnam has carefully built up its reputation as a defender of international law to remedy its post-war diplomatic isolation—the CPV is unlikely to sabotage decades of foreign policy by instigating wars of conquest, much less so when its two principal arms providers, Russia, and Israel, remain embroiled in conflicts of their own. The possibility of territorial expansion then, while alluring, is out of the question—for now.

Hanoi's Response at Sea

On the issue of maritime disputes with China, Vietnam seemingly faces insurmountable obstacles: its naval capabilities do not and will not constitute a credible deterrent to Chinese activity, even if naval rearmament is significantly upscaled in the medium-to-long term, and there is no realistic scenario where Vietnam would be able to forcibly dislodge Chinese settlers from the Paracel Islands. Even if international arbitration efforts have continually concluded that China's claims from the Nine-dash line have no validity under international law, there is little indication that Beijing may be persuaded to cede control of the islands to any entity, let alone to a regional competitor. If anything, the current global geopolitical configuration indicates a notable downward trend in the legitimacy of international law. Therefore, unless a major paradigm shift were to indicate China would voluntarily choose to cede control of the Paracel archipelago and its occupied features in the Spratlys (itself unlikely), it is highly improbable Vietnam will regain territorial control of these islands.

However, this is not to say Vietnam would ever roll over and accept a subordinate role in the geopolitics of the South China Sea. It would be, considering the strong anti-Chinese resentment rooted in Vietnamese society, political suicide for the CPV. Vietnam finds itself thus obligated to significantly expand its strategic capabilities in the region, acknowledging a full return of territorial control of the now Chinese occupied islands and features to be unlikely, with the necessity to fulfill three key objectives: first, an effective rearmament program to achieve some measure of deterrence against any possible rivals (who is to say China will be the only threat in the future?), including a comprehensive diversification of its arms and security providers; second, the protection of its economic and commercial interests in the region, included but not limited to hydrocarbon extraction and fishing rights; and finally, the consolidation of the present territorial integrity of the nation, insofar as the current Chinese occupation of claimed territories allows. The protection of economic interests, however, will be a difficult task for the CPV if the national defence forces are not sufficient to act as an appropriate deterrent against Chinese aggression.

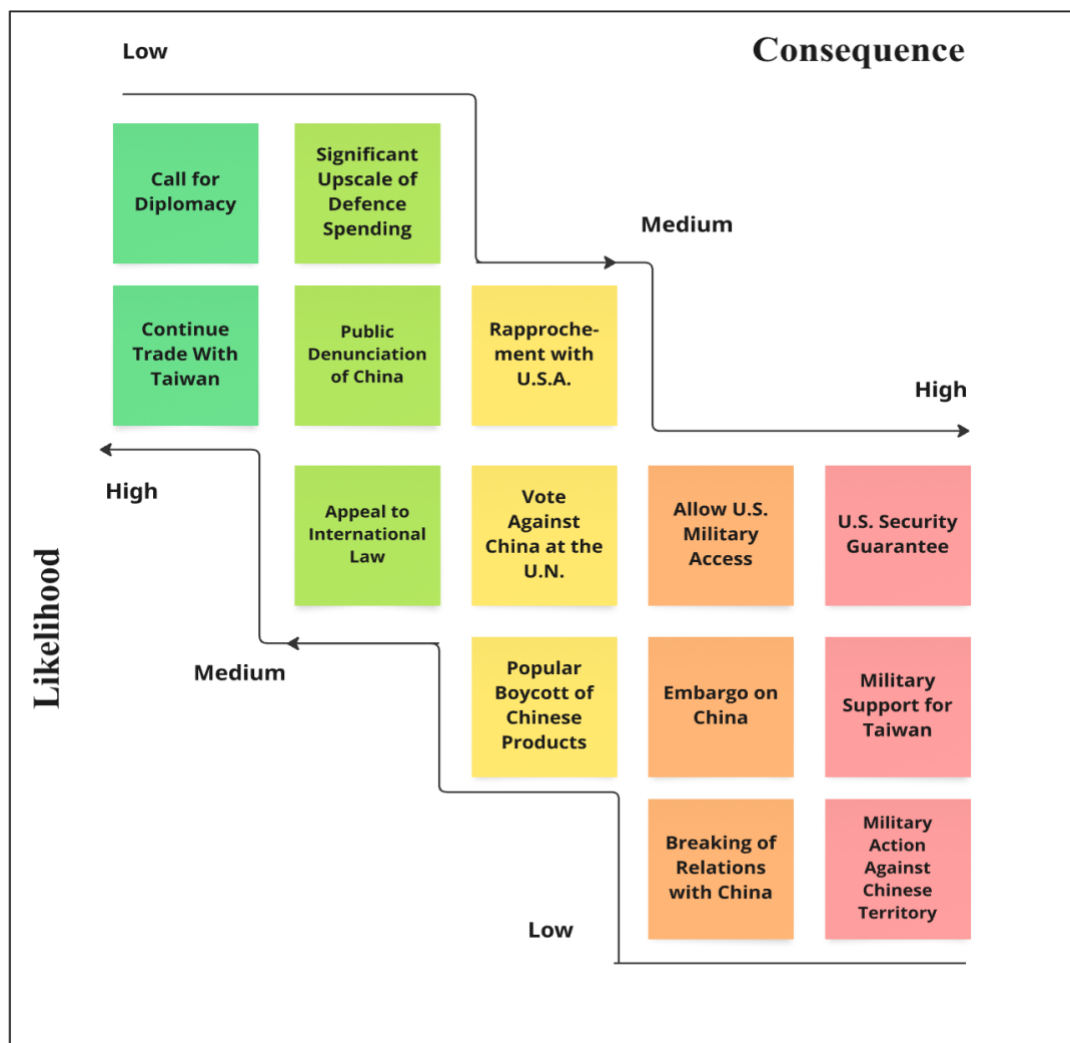
Still, certain geopolitical realities remain outside the realm of Vietnam's capabilities or influence. A Chinese invasion of the island of Taiwan (regardless of whether it be a conventional military operation or a grey zone blockade) is often cited as the most likely geopolitical scenario to engulf the region (or perhaps the globe) in armed conflict. However, Vietnam, due to its self-imposed neutrality and abstinence from military alliances, is unlikely to play any significant role in said conflict. It would however be a mistake to presume such an event would have no political consequences for Hanoi: the forceful seizure of a nation's territory—and one who enjoys significant security guarantees from Washington—by the PLA would be nothing short of a political earthquake for the CPV. Vietnam has repeatedly been the victim of Chinese aggression for millennia, and the current paradigm is no different. Therefore, two questions are bound to dominate Vietnamese political thinking in this scenario: What is there to do in the face of Chinese aggression and seizure of foreign territory, and what good is a security guarantee from the United States, world superpower in name now only,⁶³ if a country it continually swore to protect⁶⁴ can fall to the hand of Beijing?

⁶³ This statement is meant to underscore the United States' presumed loss in prestige and international reputation in the event of a Chinese annexation of the island of Taiwan. It is not a comment on the current state of the United States as a "superpower".

⁶⁴ Phil Stewart and Idrees Ali, "How the US Is Preparing for a Chinese Invasion of Taiwan," Reuters, January 31, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/logistics-war-how-washington-is-preparing-chinese-invasion-taiwan-2024-01-31/>.

The following risk matrix outlines a series of possible response scenarios for Vietnam in the case of a Chinese takeover of Taiwan. In this graph, the X axis represents the degree of consequence each response might entail, while the Y axis represents the likelihood of each response. While most actions on the left-hand side discuss diplomatic action or standard government responses, actions on the right-hand side are of a more extreme nature, outlining popular outcry against China or even military action.

Figure 4: Risk Matrix
Vietnamese Responses to a Chinese Takeover of Taiwan



Source: Author's elaboration

III. THE UNITED STATES: NO LONGER AN ENEMY

*“No matter what changes at the political level in Washington and Hanoi, the two states will continue to share similar views of regional security and anxieties about China. That has been and will remain the ballast in their security relationship.”*⁶⁵

- Lauren Mai, Gregory B. Poling, and Japhet Quitzon.

The United States remains the world’s premier superpower, despite the global trend towards multilateralism in the last decades. Vietnam’s relationship with its former enemy is complex, yet increasingly characterized by cooperation and rapprochement. This chapter will analyze precisely what the implications of a U.S.-Vietnamese rapprochement would look like, as well as, in tandem with the last chapter, present a series of scenarios for Vietnam’s regional relations for the next ten years.

In the year 2000, U.S.-Vietnam relationships took a pivotal turn when, then-Secretary of Defence William Cohen visited Hanoi to strengthen bilateral relations and set an important precedent for future security cooperation which would define the next decades of the U.S.-Vietnam relations.⁶⁶ Washington and Hanoi subsequently upgraded their diplomatic relationship to a Comprehensive Partnership under the presidency of Barack Obama in 2013. The Obama administration also lifted the lethal arms embargo on Vietnam in 2016, shortly before the incoming Trump administration. Both countries’ relationship continued to grow during the Trump presidency, but it was not until President Biden’s state visit that relations between both countries reached a newer level — the highest — in Hanoi’s diplomatic playbook, a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.⁶⁷ This puts the United States on the same level as Hanoi’s Cold War allies, China and Russia, and signals Washington’s formal identification of Vietnam as a critical security partner in the Indo-Pacific.

⁶⁵Lauren Mai, Gregory B Poling, and Japhet Quitzon, “An Indispensable Upgrade: The U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership,” Csis.org, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/indispensable-upgrade-us-vietnam-comprehensive-strategic-partnership>.

⁶⁶ Lewis M. Stern, “U.S.-Vietnam Defense Relations: Deepening Ties, Adding Relevance,” July 2009, <https://digitalcommons.ndu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1066&context=strategic-forums>.

⁶⁷ Ananta S B De Gurung, “LongTerm Economic Objectives and ShortTerm Strategic Gains,” *Indian Journal of Asian Affairs* 36, no. 1/2 (2023): 83–92, <https://doi.org/10.2307/27307177>.

A. Strategic Interplay

Hanoi: A Strategic Test for Washington

The United States has several reasons to consider Vietnam a country of significant strategic importance: first, there still exists the imperative to right the wrongs of the Vietnam War, such as aiding survivors and removing unexploded ordnance⁶⁸; second, the potential of a prosperous security partnership between both countries presents Washington with a unique opportunity to rehabilitate its international image in a time of geopolitical polarization; and lastly, the most evident interest is that Vietnam is one of the most significant obstacles in the way of Chinese regional hegemony.

The prospect of a successful security partnership between both countries is undeniably attractive to Washington for its global ramifications as well. Amid the twenty-first century's paradigm of geopolitical division, the United States increasingly finds the handling of foreign relations more difficult. One of the key pillars of the new multipolar world order is the growing disillusionment of developing countries with the hegemony of the United States.⁶⁹ The international institutions sponsored by Washington since the end of the Cold War are suffering a crisis of legitimacy, particularly in the Global South, with concerns over interventionism, economic asymmetry, and a deep worry about the constraints of smaller states' strategic autonomy that come from aligning closely with global powers.⁷⁰ The prospective strengthening of the U.S.-Vietnamese relationship serves as a testament to Washington's diplomatic capabilities and adaptability to engage, constructively, with nations that have diverse and non-aligned political systems. At the same time, it provides a model for a more flexible and pragmatic approach to diplomacy in an era where rigid alliance structures are no longer the sole determinant of strategic influence. If the United States can deepen its economic and security partnership with Vietnam while respecting its strategic autonomy, it sets a precedent for how Washington might more effectively engage with other non-aligned states. This ultimately serves Washington's larger geopolitical interests—detering the rise of China.

⁶⁸ US Department of State, "U.S. Relations with Vietnam - United States Department of State," United States Department of State, January 10, 2025, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/bureau-of-east-asian-and-pacific-affairs/releases/2025/01/u-s-relations-with-vietnam>

⁶⁹ Ayesha Arshad, "Erosion of U.S Hegemony: Redefining Diplomacy by the Rise of Multipolarity," Modern Diplomacy, September 26, 2024, https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2024/09/27/erosion-of-u-s-hegemony-redefining-diplomacy-by-the-rise-of-multipolarity/?utm_

⁷⁰ Leslie Vinjamuri and Max Yoeli, "America's Last Chance with the Global South," Foreign Affairs, November 15, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/americas-last-chance-global-south>.

As Washington seeks to maintain a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), Vietnam stands as a key strategic partner, offering a range of military, economic, and diplomatic advantages that contribute to balancing China's growing influence in the region.⁷¹ The United States thinks of Vietnam as a critical player due to its strategic location, both geographically and politically, along vital maritime trade routes, and sees in its contested territories and waters with China an opportunity for fulfilling American interests. Vietnam's control over key islands and features in the South China Sea strengthens the First Island Chain's defensive capabilities, therefore helping develop Hanoi's military infrastructure on these islands helps create a buffer zone that can deter Chinese naval and air operations.

By maintaining strong ties with Vietnam, the United States rests in an advantageous position and solidifies its ability to counter Chinese assertiveness in these waters, ensuring that international sea lanes remain under the principles of the freedom of navigation. It is worth noting that Washington would inevitably attempt to leverage Vietnam's strategic interests as an incentive to further develop the relationship between Hanoi and the White House.

Washington: An Opportunity for Hanoi

Vietnam also has several reasons to consider the United States a country of significant strategic importance and a valuable opportunity to achieving its strategic objectives: first, a strong partnership with the United States could meaningfully contribute to enhance Vietnam's image as a strong regional leader; second, it could potentially benefit Hanoi's efforts to safeguard its territorial integrity by renewing its own security forces and helping enforce international law and, possibly, acquire meaningful securities guarantees; lastly, the backing of the United States remains the most advantageous source of political deterrence, even today.

Vietnam's strategic partnership with the United States provides a crucial opportunity to elevate its status as a regional power in Southeast Asia. If Vietnam's foreign policy begins to unfold in concert with Washington's, Hanoi could gain power projection and recognition from other regional players and international institutions, mainly among its ASEAN peers.⁷² Having consistent American support for Vietnam's enhanced role within ASEAN and other multilateral

⁷¹ Lauren Mai, Gregory B Poling, and Japhet Quitzon, "An Indispensable Upgrade: The U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," Csis.org, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/indispensable-upgrade-us-vietnam-comprehensive-strategic-partnership>.

⁷² Lauren Mai, Gregory B Poling, and Japhet Quitzon, "An Indispensable Upgrade: The U.S.-Vietnam Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," Csis.org, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/indispensable-upgrade-us-vietnam-comprehensive-strategic-partnership>.

platforms reinforces Hanoi's position as a key actor in regional security matters. Although ASEAN political structure remains weak (as will be addressed further in Chapter V), and the general perspective on the United States might differ among ASEAN populations, Washington's support for Hanoi could foster a more unified ASEAN which is willing to embrace the FOIP. Additionally, Vietnam's active participation in the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) and its growing defense cooperation with the United States signal a commitment to maintaining stability in the region.⁷³ This partnership enables Vietnam to exert greater influence in ASEAN-led initiatives, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asia Summit, where it could play a balancing role against China's assertiveness.⁷⁴

Vietnam's security concerns, particularly in the South China Sea, make its relationship with the U.S. strategically vital. With China's continued militarization of disputed islands and its aggressive enforcement of maritime claims, Hanoi faces growing security threats. A closer defense partnership with Washington allows Vietnam to modernize its armed forces, particularly its navy and coast guard, with access to advanced technology, military training, and intelligence sharing. The United States has already facilitated arms sales and defense transfers, including surplus U.S. Coast Guard vessels, which have strengthened Vietnam's maritime enforcement capabilities. Furthermore, Vietnam's security partnership with the U.S. underscores its commitment to upholding the UNCLOS. By reinforcing its territorial claims with international legal backing and American support, Vietnam could strengthen its ability to counter Chinese coercion while maintaining its sovereignty.

The ultimate strategic advantage for Vietnam in deepening its partnership with the U.S. lies in its long-term geopolitical ambitions in the South China Sea, particularly in the Paracel and Spratly Islands. According to what author Le Hong Hiep assesses, *the rising strategic competition between China and the United States means that Vietnam can leverage its strengthened ties with Washington to improve its bargaining position vis-à-vis China in the South China Sea*.⁷⁵ The United States has consistently opposed China's actions by conducting

⁷³ Linh H. Dang and Linh T. T. Tran, "Vietnam and the IPEF: Negotiating Prospects, Opportunities and Challenges. The Making of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF)," November 2023, https://kas-japan.or.jp/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/IPEF-Discussion-Paper-Series_Chapter-14.pdf.

⁷⁴ Vietnam+, "Vietnam Attends 30th ASEAN Regional Forum," Vietnam+ (VietnamPlus), July 14, 2023, <https://en.vietnamplus.vn/vietnam-attends-30th-asean-regional-forum-post256406.vnp>.

⁷⁵ Le Hong Hiep, "The Vietnam-US Security Partnership and the Rules-Based International Order in the Age of Trump," Cambridge Core, no. 1 (August 2021): 1–27, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/vietnamus->

Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) and strengthening military ties with regional partners, including Vietnam; and even though these operations have caused regional tensions and confusion due to their coercive nature (as the primarily vessels used during their conduction are warships)⁷⁶, they represent a potential deterrence tool from which Vietnam could benefit. Therefore, Hanoi can rely on the White House’s diplomatic and military support in asserting its own claims.

Additionally, Vietnam's increasing participation in joint military exercises with the United States and its regional allies, signals its readiness to counterbalance Chinese ambitions. In the long term, Vietnam’s engagement with the U.S. may position it to gain greater control over disputed territories, securing vital maritime resources and asserting itself as a dominant player in regional geopolitics.

B. Scenario Set 2

Will Vietnam move closer to the United States going so far as to revise its Four No’s policy?

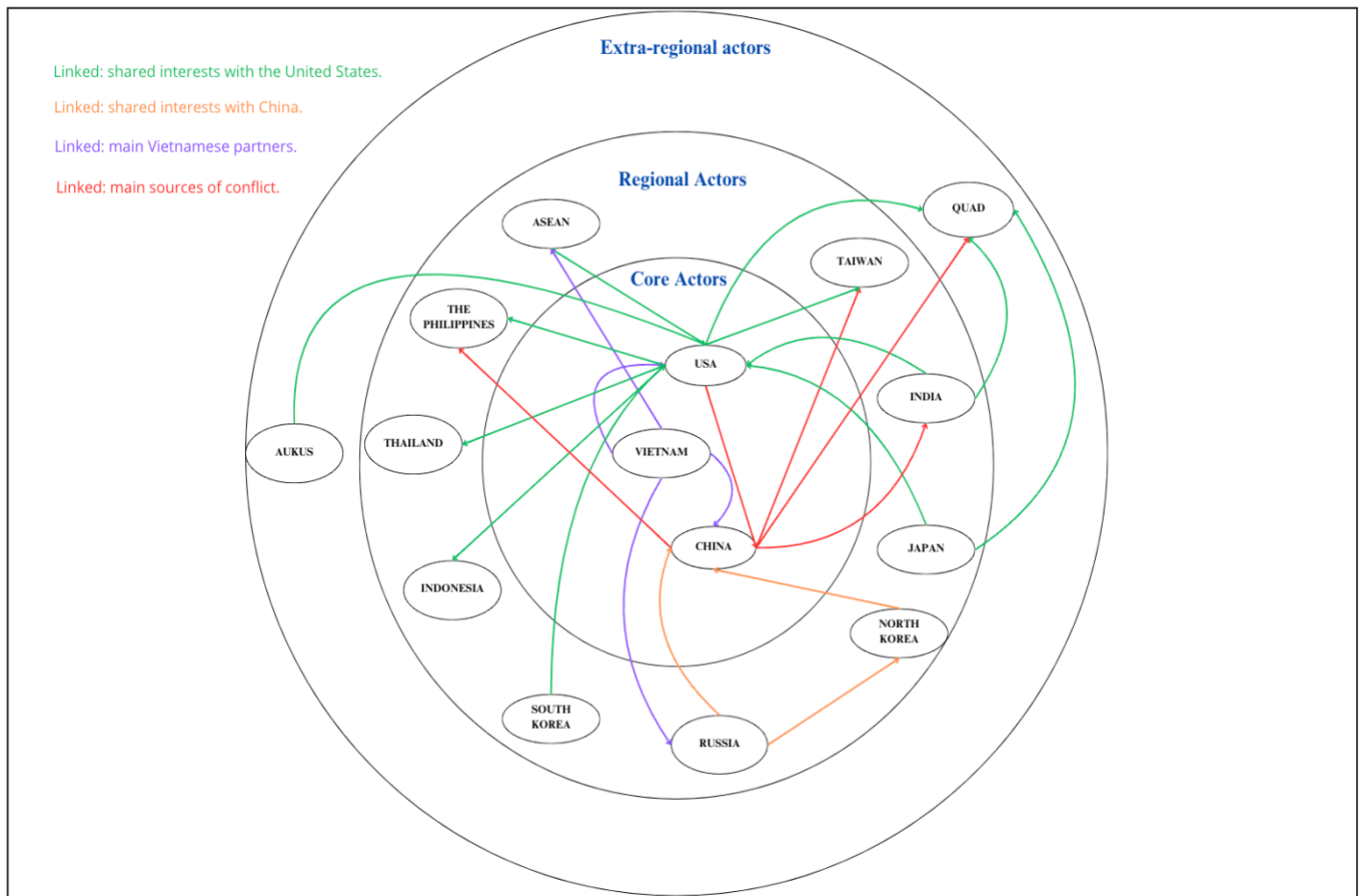
The following section provides a prospective analysis of a potential expansion of U.S.-Vietnam relations, wherein Washington would provide Hanoi with significant security guarantees for a number of concessions. The authors will present a variety of scenarios, each with its own consequences and implications. Given the rapid evolution of relations over the past decades—considering that less than 30 years passed between the normalization of diplomatic ties and their upgrade to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership—it is worth exploring whether the two countries will grow even closer in an increasingly tense regional context.

This analysis will focus on a selected timeframe of ten years, from 2025 to 2035. Before entering into the process of constructing scenarios, a map of actors has been developed to showcase the variety of stakeholders influencing this partnership and the relations between each one of them.

security-partnership-and-the-rulesbased-international-order-in-the-age-of-trump/vietnamus-security-partnership-and-the-rulesbased-international-order-in-the-age-of-trump/7D5055CE8F702B95FE15B2B5BCE7C97B

⁷⁶ Hyun-Binn Cho and Brian C Chao, “Muddied Waters: Freedom-of-Navigation Operations as Signals in the South China Sea,” *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, June 18, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481241257807>.

Figure 5: Map of actors and relations



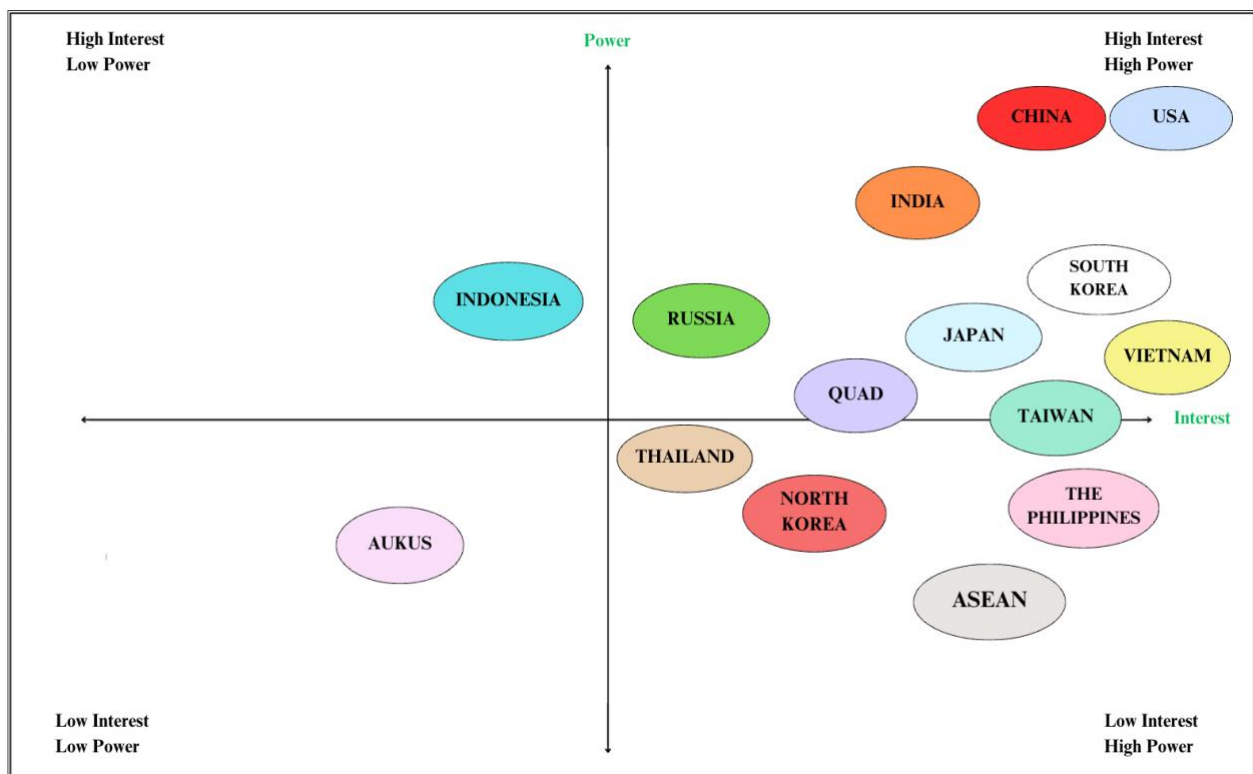
Source: author's elaboration

Once the actors have been identified and their main relationships have been presented, the next step in the analysis is to determine: first, the power capabilities each actor possesses, and second, the interest each of them holds in the regional dynamics. In order to do so, a stakeholders map (figure 6) has been created to highlight the position of every actor in a power/interest axis.

This stakeholder power-interest map describes the geopolitical landscape surrounding Vietnam's strategic positioning. The dominant high-power, high-interest actors, primarily the United States and China, drive regional security and economic policies, with Vietnam positioned closely due to its strategic location and sovereignty concerns. A cluster of regional allies support U.S. interests, while Russia and Indonesia act as swing actors with moderate engagement. Middle powers, such as Thailand, and organisations like QUAD, contribute to

regional stability without directly shaping major policymaking. Meanwhile, lesser powers such as the Philippines and ASEAN lack sufficient strategic autonomy to act independently, yet hold significant interests in the region. AUKUS has a growing role in the Indo-Pacific, however its hard power influence remains limited. Therefore, Vietnam’s trajectory will largely depend on balancing U.S. security cooperation and China’s economic leverage.

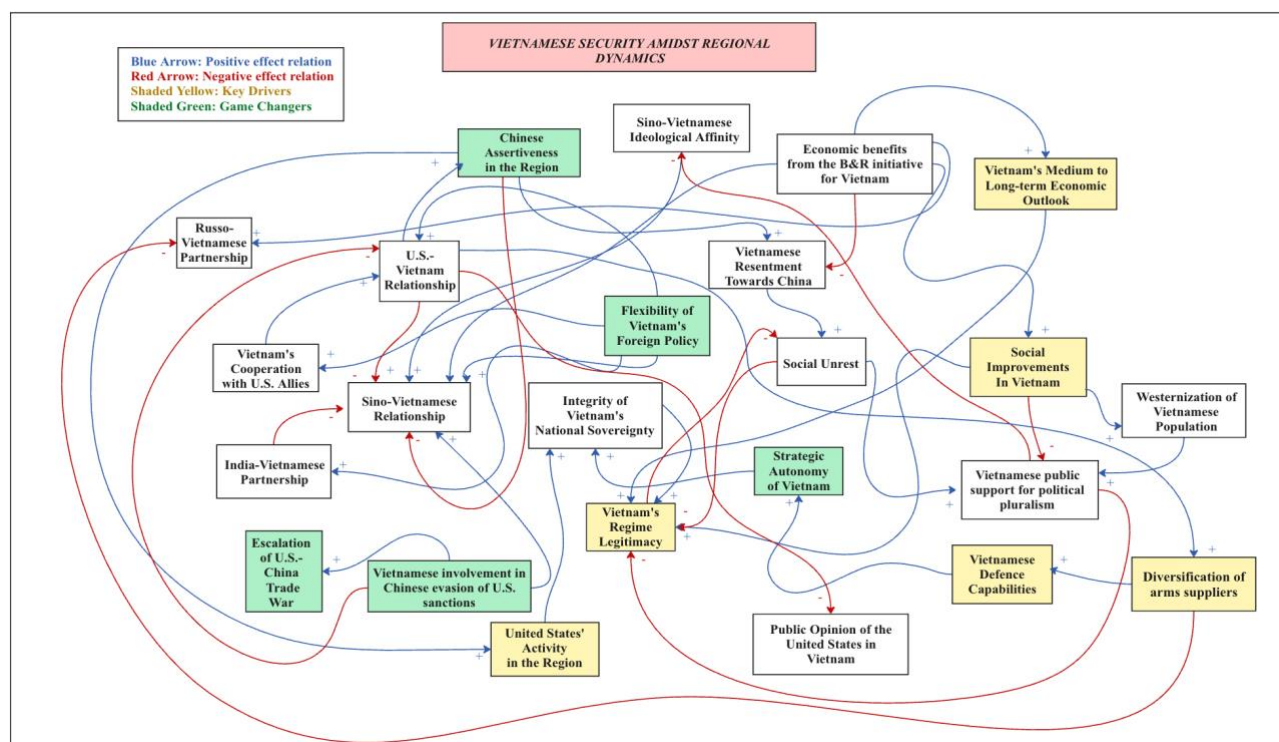
Figure 6: Stakeholders power/interest map



Source: author's elaboration.

Consequently, the most relevant variables which affect the issue originally raised will be analyzed. In order to do so, a set of questions was put to discussion: “What are the key issues at stake for Vietnam?” “Which are the most determining factors for any possible outcome?” and finally, “How much longer can the status quo in the region hold?” A diagram of regional influences will follow to attempt to answer these questions.

Figure 7: Diagram of regional influences



Source: author's elaboration

This diagram depicts how Vietnam's most critical security issues are intertwined with regional geopolitical dynamics. Blue arrows depict positive relationships, in which one variable reinforces another, while red arrows depict cases where one variable's positive reinforcement negatively reinforces another variable. The web of influences makes particular emphasis on several key drivers, which will then support this set of scenario's four critical game changers: the escalation of the U.S.-China trade war, and how Vietnam may be embroiled in it, Vietnam's flexibility for diplomatic maneuvering, China's military and economic response to a strengthening of U.S.-Vietnam relations, and the prospective Vietnamese development of strategic autonomy. These game changers will be key to determine the specific circumstances and outcomes which define each scenario. The key technique employed for determining these drivers is backcasting: four separate future scenarios were drawn up, and consequently, the most determining drivers and game changers for the realization of these scenarios were brainstormed, arranged within the influence diagram showcased above, and subsequently expanded upon. What follows is a table detailing each key driver and game changer, along with their specific nuances, as well as the corresponding morphological analysis utilized to craft the scenarios.

Figure 8: Description of drivers

WILL VIETNAM MOVE CLOSER TO THE UNITED STATES GOING SO FAR AS TO REVISE ITS FOUR NO'S POLICY FROM 2025 TO 2035	
DRIVERS	
United States' activity in the region	The United States is deepening its engagement in Southeast Asia through economic partnerships, defense cooperation, and diplomatic initiatives. Its increased naval presence in the South China Sea signals a commitment to regional security. Washington has also enhanced military ties with Vietnam's neighbours (Philippines, Thailand) and other allies in the Indo-Pacific (QUAD) for defense collaboration.
Chinese activity in the region	China's growing military assertiveness in the South China Sea and expanding influence in Southeast Asia remain key concerns for Vietnam. China's economic diplomacy, including the Belt and Road Initiative, continues to shape regional politics, making Vietnam cautious about openly siding with the United States while managing its relations with Beijing.
Vietnam's economic outlook	Vietnam's economy is projected to grow steadily, benefiting from trade diversification and foreign investment. However, deeper integration with the United States supply chains might provoke Chinese economic retaliation, impacting key industries like manufacturing and electronics.
Vietnam's regime legitimacy	The CPV's legitimacy depends on economic performance, public trust, and political stability. A strong economy and effective governance reinforce legitimacy, while economic stagnation, social unrest, or foreign policy missteps could weaken it. If legitimacy is challenged, Vietnam may face internal resistance to aligning with major powers like the US or China.
Vietnam's sociopolitical outlook	General resentment and significant reservations over further engaging with China or the United States among the Vietnamese general population could have significant influence over Hanoi's willingness to strengthen its diplomatic relations with either country.
Vietnam's defence capabilities	Vietnam continues modernizing its military, more specifically its naval assets, maritime surveillance and cybersecurity, to deter potential conflicts, particularly in the South China Sea. Increasing defense cooperation with the United States, including arms sales and joint exercises, could signal a shift toward a more formalized alliance, but Hanoi remains wary of overreliance on any single partner.
Vietnam's diversification of defence imports	Vietnam has traditionally sourced weapons from Russia but is now expanding its suppliers to include the United States, India, Israel and other nations. A deeper security alignment with Washington may accelerate this shift, reducing dependence on Russian and Chinese military equipment.
GAME CHANGERS	
United States - China escalation of trade war	Will rising trade tensions between the US and China push Vietnam to choose sides, or can it continue benefiting from both economies?
Vietnam's diplomatic maneuvering	Will Vietnam continue its hedging strategy, balancing both powers, or will external pressures force a strategic realignment toward an official alliance with the United States?
China's economic and military response	If Vietnam deepens its alliance with the United States, will China retaliate with economic sanctions, trade restrictions, or military provocations? Could this backfire and further push Vietnam towards Washington?
Vietnam's strategic autonomy	Can Vietnam successfully develop an independent defense posture by diversifying arms imports and strengthening its domestic military industry, or will external pressures force it to rely more on U.S. security guarantees?

Figure 9: Chart used for the morphological analysis

United States' activity in the region	Chinese activity in the region	Vietnam's economic outlook	Vietnam's regime legitimacy	Vietnam's sociopolitical outlook	Vietnam's defence capabilities	Vietnam's diversification of defence imports	United States - China escalation of trade war	Vietnam's diplomatic maneuvering	China's economic and military response	Vietnam's strategic autonomy
A ₁ Increased	B ₁ Increased	C ₁ Sustained Growth	D ₁ Strong	E ₁ Approval	F ₁ Strong	G ₁ Strong	H ₁ Severe	I ₁ Flexible	J ₁ Aggressive	K ₁ Strong
A ₂ Status Quo	B ₂ Status Quo	C ₂ Limited Growth	D ₂ Significant	E ₂ Tolerance	F ₂ Significant	G ₂ Continued	H ₂ Moderate	I ₂ Pragmatic	J ₂ Significant	K ₂ Growing
A ₃ Limited	B ₃ Limited	C ₃ Stagnation	D ₃ Challenged	E ₃ Skepticism	F ₃ Standard	G ₃ Limited	H ₃ Détente	I ₃ Strict	J ₃ Moderate	K ₃ Declining
		C ₄ Recession	D ₄ Weak	E ₄ Rejection	F ₄ Limited	G ₄ Weak		I ₄ Unyielding	J ₄ Insufficient	K ₄ Absolute Dependency

Figure 10: Combination of values and drivers that form three scenarios

	SCENARIOS	DESCRIPTION
1.	A ₂ , B ₂ , C ₁ , D ₃ , E ₃ , F ₄ , G ₃ , H ₂ , I ₃ , K ₂	The United States and Vietnam maintain their current Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with no further involvement from Washington. Status quo in the region. The CPV continues to struggle to maintain legitimacy, and to build strong defence capabilities.
2.	A ₂ , B ₁ , C ₁ , D ₂ , E ₃ , F ₁ , G ₁ , H ₂ , I ₃ , J ₂ , K ₁	Vietnam manages to build up its defence capabilities, through diversifying its arms suppliers and domestic military development to a point where it no longer has any incentives to seek foreign security guarantees, realizing effective strategic autonomy.
3.	A ₂ , B ₁ , C ₃ , D ₄ , E ₄ , F ₃ , G ₂ , H ₂ , I ₁ , J _{N/A} , K ₄	There is a rapprochement between China and Vietnam in an attempt to boost Hanoi's economic standing, regardless of maritime security concerns and tensions. The CPV struggles to obtain public support and the party's legitimacy is challenged.
4.	A ₁ , B ₁ , C ₂ , D ₂ , E ₁ , F ₂ , G ₂ , H ₁ , I ₁ , J ₁ , K ₃	The United States is willing grant significant security guarantees to Vietnam as China becomes more assertive in the region, and trade war intensifies between the two global powers. Beijing is outraged, and tensions rise significantly in the South China Sea.

Scenario 1 describes a “status quo” for both Vietnamese domestic attitudes and regional geopolitics. Hanoi will attempt to continue a hedging strategy amidst China and the United States’ growing geopolitical rivalry and an escalating trade war. Rearmament continues to be upscaled, backing up increased military spending and arms imports with strong, sustained economic growth. The CPV will continue to stick by its Four No’s paradigm. However, there is reasonable doubt as to whether Hanoi will be able to fulfill its desired strategic autonomy in this manner. Domestic challenges to the Party’s legitimacy and public support will continue to present a problem. This scenario is a risk-averse choice for the CPV, and therefore carries significant plausibility.

Scenario 2 depicts a situation wherein Vietnam has embarked on a strategy to independently achieve sufficient autonomy in its defence capabilities. Through the diversification of its defence suppliers, Hanoi would seek to fully reduce its dependence on major powers such as the United States, China or Russia, and continue to expand its partnerships with middle powers like India, South Korea and Japan. In this context, on the back of sustained economic growth, Vietnam could assert greater agency in regional security and economic policymaking. However, this approach carries significant risks, as China may use economic coercion or military pressure to undermine Hanoi’s ambitions for greater autonomy, and the United States’ willingness to prorogue its investments and fulfill its commitments in Vietnam would remain uncertain.⁷⁷ Domestically, the CPV should balance nationalist sentiment with pragmatic policymaking. If successful, Vietnam would secure its sovereignty and become a more influential regional actor, but long-term stability would still depend on sustaining economic resilience and diplomatic flexibility. Ultimately, the logistical constraints of this forecast are significant, and it is uncertain whether the Vietnamese economy is capable of sustaining such an effort. Therefore, this scenario is relatively unlikely.

In the third scenario, Vietnam would deepen economic cooperation with China, prioritizing trade and infrastructure development, and accepting deeper integration into the Belt and Road Initiative. This shift would be due in part to continued economic underperformance, or even, stagnation. It is worth noting the CPV’s political legitimacy would suffer a significant blow due to the popular social upheaval which would ensue from accepting a subordinate regional

⁷⁷ David Rising and Aniruddha Ghosal, “USAID Cuts Jeopardize Agent Orange Cleanup and Other Efforts Critical to Ties with Vietnam,” AP News, March 19, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/usaaid-cuts-trump-agent-orange-vietnam-bien-hoa-2d55174970ef36c3247f6981150913de>.

role to Beijing. Moreover, Hanoi would be compromising on one of its key national interests—the protection of the national territory. A new Beijing-Hanoi partnership would imply an unequal alliance, wholly in violation of the CPV's Four No's, and effectively guarantee Chinese control of the Paracel and Spratly islands. Lastly, U.S.-Vietnamese relations would be severely damaged, as Hanoi would no longer be capable of providing Washington with any significant strategic advantages in its great power rivalry with China. The plausibility of this scenario thus remains highly unlikely.

Scenario 4 proposes far higher risks for both Vietnamese domestic politics and regional geopolitical stability. In this scenario, Hanoi would voluntarily request a formal security guarantee from the United States, akin to those Washington has already extended to South Korea or the Philippines. Vietnam could offer valuable concessions to the United States in this deal: first and most importantly, Hanoi could allow, solely under circumstances of armed conflict, for the United States to refuel its vessels in Vietnamese ports, or even temporarily station its troops in Vietnamese territory. This would evidently imply the CPV would need to espouse a highly liberal interpretation of its own foreign policy principles; even if the Four No's paradigm allows for certain leeway and flexibility in a scenario of armed conflict, any profound degree of strengthened cooperation with the United States would likely have challenging consequences for the CPV on its domestic front. However, it is impossible to extricate this scenario from a point in time in which Hanoi would feel actively threatened, whether economically or militarily. Furthermore, it is highly unlikely to separate this possibility from its likely source: China. It is plausible that popular skepticism in Vietnam could be quelled if it were seen as a necessary remedy to deter Chinese aggression. On the other hand, Hanoi could offer Washington a valuable concession: to actively cooperate to ensure Chinese companies involved in Vietnam are not facilitating the evasion of U.S. tariffs amidst both superpowers' raging trade war. It is uncertain how precisely Hanoi would go about clamping down on this practice of circumventing U.S. tariffs—yet it is bound to be a tempting offer for Washington.

Faced with this, Beijing is bound to react quickly, and could castigate Vietnam in a manner similar to previous instances (whenever Hanoi and Washington have enjoyed any degree of rapprochement). China's military assertiveness in the region would face a direct threat on its borders, and the region would likely be engulfed in geopolitical turmoil, with a serious risk of armed conflict. This scenario, although seemingly unlikely, carries significant opportunity for

Hanoi, particularly if its territorial integrity becomes actively threatened; be it by Chinese incursions on land or at sea, or via the escalation of a maritime incident, initially caused by diverging economic interests (perhaps fishing or oil drilling rights), but rooted in both countries' seemingly irreconcilable concepts of national security. This dissonance between two ideological allies is likely to reach a breaking point in the medium-to-long term, leaving Hanoi strategically poorly defended. This scenario provides an adequate solution to Vietnam's age-old security dilemma.

C. Raging Global Trade War

Recent events regarding the global trade war between the United States and China, as well as the imposition of tariffs by the Trump administration on a worldwide basis may have an impact on the issues considered above. The dynamics of U.S.–Vietnam relations, as well as Vietnam's broader foreign policy, may shift or adapt in response to the situation.

On April 2, 2025, President Donald Trump announced a set of global tariffs during a White House Rose Garden ceremony, declaring the day as “Liberation Day” and framing it as a “declaration of economic independence” for the United States. These measures marked a significant escalation in the ongoing trade tensions between the United States and China. The newly introduced tariffs included a baseline 10% levy on all imports into the United States, effective April 5, 2025, with the exception of goods from Canada and Mexico. Additionally, the administration imposed higher, country-specific “reciprocal” tariffs on imports from 57 countries, including China, set to enforce on April 9, 2025.

Earlier measures targeted specific sectors or countries, but the 2025 tariffs apply more universally, affecting a wide range of industries and trading partners, and impacting mainly the technology and semiconductors supply chains, the agricultural sector, and the energy industry. The announcement of these tariffs led to immediate economic repercussions. Financial markets reacted negatively, with the S&P 500 index experiencing a significant drop in the days following the announcement. On April 9, 2025, the U.S. imposed a 145% tariff on Chinese goods, intensifying the trade conflict. In response, Beijing announced a retaliatory tariff of 125% on U.S. goods, effective April 11, 2025, further escalating the trade war. Vietnam's trade deficit with the United States was signaled out by the White House as one of the most egregious on its list of retaliatory measures, and Hanoi was subsequently subjected to a 46% tariff. Amid these developments, President Trump addressed Vietnam via a post on “X” as one of the first

countries with which the administration was willing to negotiate, stating that President Lam expressed a desire to reduce tariffs to zero if an agreement could be reached. Shortly thereafter, both leaders agreed to receive President Trump in Hanoi to initiate discussions aimed at removing the imposed tariffs. Yet, as White House trade advisor Peter Navarro made clear, tariff elimination alone would not satisfy the United States, alleging the fact that Vietnam has been acting as a channel for Chinese goods, enabling the evasion of U.S. sanctions. Navarro's accusation of "non-tariff cheating," such as the transshipment of Chinese products and intellectual property concerns, placed substantial pressure on Vietnam to demonstrate its alignment with Washington's strategic objectives.

In this high-pressure setting, *Scenario 4* of the set of *Scenario Set 2* becomes far less far-fetched. Hanoi's willingness to enter economic negotiations paired with Washington's security concerns and the CPV's desire to prevent reputational and economic fallout suggests that Vietnam may contemplate deeper strategic concessions. These could include intelligence cooperation or stronger enforcement against tariff avoidance by Chinese firms operating in Vietnam.

In essence, this scenario's plausibility is rooted in Vietnam's need to respond to simultaneous economic pressure from the United States and potential diplomatic coercion or economic retaliation from China. If Vietnamese domestic opinion begins to view U.S. alignment not as ideological betrayal but as a strategic necessity to preserve sovereignty and stability, the CPV may find room to reinterpret the 'Four No's' policy more liberally, especially under the banner of hedging for survival. Moreover, the offer to clamp down on tariff evasion could serve as an immediate, tangible concession to Washington, one that sidesteps overt military commitments while still signaling strategic alignment.

IV. FOREIGN RELATIONS AND REGIONAL LEADERSHIP.

Reducing Vietnam's foreign relations to a story of balance and hedging between two world superpowers would fall short of reality. Vietnam has successfully transitioned from an international pariah to a key player fully integrated into world politics. Since joining ASEAN in 1995, Vietnam has also become one of the leading members of Southeast Asia's geopolitical bloc, which has in turn become a pillar of economic growth for the nation, standing as one of its largest trade partners.⁷⁸ However, not everything has gone according to plan for Hanoi within ASEAN, as the bloc has failed to officially espouse a unified stance on Chinese expansionism in the South China Sea. Laos and Cambodia, effectively subordinate to China, have made sure no such action has been taken. Aside from this, ASEAN also maintains deep political divisions within its members, from Myanmar's military junta to the large democracies of Indonesia and the Philippines. Of all ten members, Indonesia, the bloc's largest and most economically powerful, is commonly seen as the "leader" of the organization. However, it is complicated to assign a leadership role to a bloc as politically fractured as ASEAN. This chapter will discuss both what a purported role of leadership could look like within ASEAN for Vietnam, as well as a discussion on how Vietnam's foreign relations could develop with other regional actors.

To its northeast, Vietnam maintains good relations with the economically advanced democracies of East Asia: Japan, South Korea, and the Republic of China. All three countries rank among Vietnam's largest investors, and Hanoi is keen to continue to strengthen economic ties with them. However, there are certain challenges to this. China's principal regional competitor is also rapidly becoming a valuable strategic partner for Hanoi. India shares many of Vietnam's anxieties about Beijing's progressively more assertive foreign policy, and has come to view Hanoi as an increasingly important regional partner. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's expansion of the "Act East" policy established a framework for counterbalancing Chinese influence, primarily in Southeast Asia.

⁷⁸ National Statistics Office of Vietnam, "Exports and Imports Value by Months of 2022," National Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2022, <https://www.gso.gov.vn/en/data-and-statistics/2022/03/exports-and-imports-value-by-months-of-2022>

Relations with Close Neighbors: ASEAN

ASEAN's unanimity-based decision making process is the primary paradigm for what regional leadership ought to look like: a strong leader for ASEAN is a leader who is able to operate by consensus and mediate disputes between member states. Because of this, Indonesia has emerged as the organization's de facto leader. Jakarta is geopolitically focused inwards and holds few significant territorial disputes with other countries. The Widodo administration also chose to take a more lenient stance on China, even if several ASEAN member states are being directly affected by Beijing's claims in the South China Sea. However, even if it is true that a consensus-based order is inseparable from ASEAN's current political structure, diplomatic neutrality is not; this means that political leadership of ASEAN need not necessarily imply permanently abstaining from favoring China over the United States (or vice versa), but fostering consensus on the matter amid member states. Indonesia's domestic focus does not grant the country the more adequate tools for such an approach, and has chosen relative neutrality. Vietnam, however, could strike a different tone.

Vietnam carries many of the credentials of ASEAN leadership. Above all, Hanoi is particularly adept at maintaining good relations with even the most problematic of the bloc's member states, such as internationally isolated Myanmar. Notably, Indonesia's foreign ministry was uncharacteristically critical of Myanmar's military junta,⁷⁹ which likely shattered any significant progress to a bloc-wide response to the crisis in the country. Hanoi, while clearly more overt in its stated geopolitical goals, could use this scenario to its advantage. Any relevant progress ushered in by Vietnam on the resolution of Myanmar's civil war will yield three significant benefits for the CPV: first, it will help further Vietnam's reputation as a regional mediator with strong diplomatic capabilities; second, it will have the added benefit of countering Chinese influence in Myanmar;⁸⁰ and third, a resolution (or being a significant part of it) of the crisis in Myanmar would skyrocket Hanoi's reputation as a regional leader—at the expense of Jakarta—who is willing to operate via consensus, even if not diplomatically neutral. However, this is a complicated scenario, as the conflict in Myanmar seems to drag on

⁷⁹ Sebastian Strangio, "Indonesian FM Criticizes Myanmar Junta over ASEAN Peace Plan," *The Diplomat*.com (The Diplomat, July 26, 2024), <https://thediplomat.com/2024/07/indonesian-fm-criticizes-myanmar-junta-over-asean-peace-plan/>.

⁸⁰ Joaquin Matamis, "China in Myanmar: How the Game-Changing Neighbor Would Continue to Maintain Its Influence • Stimson Center," Stimson Center, August 26, 2024, <https://www.stimson.org/2024/china-in-myanmar-how-the-game-changing-neighbor-would-continue-to-maintain-its-influence/>.

indefinitely.⁸¹ There is also the question of whether Vietnam's claims over the South China Sea, some of which significantly overlap with other member states', would risk sabotaging its relationship with ASEAN. This is unlikely; Vietnam has been very successful at resolving disputes via diplomatic means with Malaysia and the Philippines, the two largest claimants in the region (China aside). There is no indication this will not continue to be the case; if anything, a reinvigorated ASEAN with political unity and leadership will be more likely to resolve internal disputes via diplomatic means. Ultimately, any bid for leadership would require Vietnam to build a new consensus within the bloc, one which will no doubt be in conflict with China's partners, Laos and Cambodia: that a firm, diplomatic stance against Beijing's aggressive claims on some ASEAN members is not incompatible with the bloc's consensus-based order.

Relations beyond Southeast Asia: India, North Korea, and others

However, Hanoi's ability to maintain good relations with countries of varied political systems should not be taken as a willingness to tolerate pariah states. Even if Vietnam chooses to maintain good relations with Myanmar's military junta, it is primarily because it suits Hanoi's regional interests and international reputation as a possible conflict mediator. It is not a statement on Hanoi's tolerance for states who routinely violate international law. North Korea is a good example of this. Even if Vietnam and North Korea are both ideologically aligned⁸² and economically heavily linked to China, both countries share opposing views on their role within the international community: while Hanoi has chosen to adapt its own domestic politics and foreign strategy to the ever-changing international order, Pyongyang has resolved to obstinately pursue its own objectives (primarily the political supremacy of the Kim family) and defy the international community at all costs. These contrasting strategies have evidently led to very different developments, especially on the economic front. Furthermore, North Korea has jettisoned itself out of any possible candidacy for a partnership of value for Vietnam: it possesses no significant military capabilities (which are not the possession of Soviet-era military equipment which precedes even that of Hanoi's) outside of an illegally obtained

⁸¹ Luke Hunt, "Amid Hope and Despair, Myanmar's Civil War Enters Its Fifth Year," *The Diplomat*.com (The Diplomat, January 30, 2025), <https://thediplomat.com/2025/01/amid-hope-and-despair-myanmars-civil-war-enters-its-fifth-year/>.

⁸² This is a mere statement on Vietnam and North Korea both espousing one-party, communist political systems. It is not a direct comparison. Moreover, the following analysis details the vast differences between both.

nuclear arsenal of uncertain reliability⁸³, no economic opportunities, and represents a significant diplomatic liability, more so if Hanoi hopes to sustain good ties with the United States. Even a major conservative shift within the CPV would do little to improve Hanoi's perspective of rogue actors like Pyongyang, who inherently oppose Vietnam's modern image as a supporter of international law. It is therefore highly improbable that Hanoi will pursue any special partnership with Pyongyang in the short-to-medium term.

A more advantageous opportunity lies immediately south of the 38th parallel. South Korea has already positioned itself as Vietnam's second most important source of FDI⁸⁴ and one of its key trading partners.⁸⁵ Similarly, Japan has developed significant economic ties with Vietnam in recent decades.⁸⁶ Both East Asian giants' largest conglomerates, such as Samsung, LG, and Toyota, already offshore a significant amount of their manufacturing to Vietnam.^{87 88} A strengthening of economic ties between all three countries would undoubtedly have immediate benefits, such as increased supply-chain resilience to foreign shocks, infrastructure development, and above all, a preventative strategic balance against future Chinese monopolization of key industries, such as semiconductors. The possibility of a Chinese takeover of Taiwan raises several questions on the future of the semiconductor industry; if Vietnam were to pursue special economic ties with Japan and South Korea in this regard, Hanoi would likely benefit from increased strategic economic depth. Japan and South Korea's know-how and expertise in this market would be well-served by Hanoi's emerging manufacturing hub, thereby solidifying an economic alliance which would reduce dependence on both China and the United States, who are otherwise poised to dominate the industry. The possibility of this alliance is uncertain, yet highly likely in the case of a Chinese annexation of Taiwan.

⁸³ Hans M. Kristensen et al., "North Korean Nuclear Weapons, 2024," Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, September 3, 2024, <https://thebulletin.org/premium/2024-07/north-korean-nuclear-weapons-2024/?utm>

⁸⁴ General Statistics Office of Vietnam, "Statistical Yearbook of Vietnam," 2023, 347.

⁸⁵ Thuong Cong, "Vietnam Is South Korea's Third-Largest Trade Partner," Emidas-magazine.com, January 22, 2025, <https://emidas-magazine.com/en/news/vietnam-is-south-koreas-third-largest-trade-partner-4372>.

⁸⁶ Japanese Trade Minister Ken Saito, "Viet Nam-Japan Economic Forum Held in the Presence of Prime Minister Chinh." 2023.

⁸⁷ Reuters, "Samsung Plans to Invest \$1.8 Bln More in Vietnam for OLED Manufacturing," Reuters, September 23, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/technology/samsung-invests-18-billion-more-vietnam-oled-manufacturing-plant-2024-09-23/>.

⁸⁸ MTA Vietnam, "Automobile Enterprises Increase Production in Vietnam," MTA Vietnam, January 6, 2023, <https://mtavietnam.com/2023/01/06/automobile-enterprises-increase-production-in-vietnam/?lang=en>.

India and Vietnam share significant political and economic ties, cemented over the past decades of independence on the basis of shared historical roots.⁸⁹ Most importantly, India considers Vietnam to be a key element of Modi's "Act East" policy. Vietnam borders a large portion of the South China Sea, a critical point of transit for almost 90% of India's international trade.⁹⁰ It is evidently in New Delhi's interest to further strengthen economic ties with Hanoi. Vietnam possesses valuable hydrocarbon deposits which would well serve India's growing energy sector. Indian state-owned company ONGC Videsh Limited has actively engaged in energy exploration projects in Vietnam in recent years.⁹¹ Both countries biggest strategic convergence, however, is undoubtedly their anxieties about Chinese expansionism.

While the Sino-Indian rivalry is evidently the more public and precarious of the two, Vietnam's anxieties regarding China's increasingly assertive foreign strategy are well understood in New Delhi. Both countries consider certain interests of Beijing to directly contradict their own. This is one of the reasons why India has begun to engage Vietnam in direct security and defence cooperation, even becoming one of its most significant arms suppliers.⁹² Hanoi hopes New Delhi will both help it diversify its sources of arms imports and solidify its defence strategy in the South China Sea. Despite this, Hanoi will inevitably be wary of engaging India in any official allied partnership due to its foreign policy constraints. This would seemingly rule out a possible partnership akin to the Sino-Pakistani alliance, which is constantly employed by Beijing as a thorn in New Delhi's side. Even if Vietnam and Pakistan are relatively on par when considering several major macroeconomic indicators, they do not possess similar defence capabilities, as Pakistan boasts a modern nuclear arsenal to deter foreign aggression. On the other hand, Vietnam enjoys a more robust and stable political system, more willing to bide its time rather than engage in risky partnerships. It is therefore unlikely that the Indo-Vietnamese partnership will develop any further, or at least not directly to China's detriment.

⁸⁹ Like all civilizations of the Indochinese peninsula, early Vietnamese predecessor states, such as the Champa Kingdom, were heavily influenced by Indian civilization and Mahayana Buddhism.

⁹⁰ Hunga Vo Minh et al., "The India-Vietnam-China Geopolitical Triangle and Vietnam's Measures to Navigate This Relationship from a Two-Level Game Theory Perspective," Malque Publishing, October 26, 2024, <https://malque.pub/ojs/index.php/mr/article/view/5411>.

⁹¹ PTI, "ONGC Videsh Secures Contract Extension for Vietnam Oil Blocks," The Economic Times (Economic Times, August 19, 2024), <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/energy/oil-gas/ovl-secures-contract-extension-for-vietnam-oil-blocks/articleshow/112626501.cms?from=mdr>.

⁹² Francesco Guarascio, "Vietnam Arms Imports Drop to a Trickle despite Regional Tensions," Reuters, March 14, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/vietnam-arms-imports-drop-trickle-despite-regional-tensions-2024-03-14/>.

When discussing the possibility of strengthening the U.S.-Vietnamese relations, it is inevitable to ponder whether Vietnam will pursue integration in the United States' extended patchwork of regional associations, like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD). The answer is adamantly no. Even when supposing a scenario where Hanoi seeks significant security guarantees from Washington, whether they be conventional or nuclear, it is important to reiterate Vietnam's commitment to its foreign policy. It would already strain its guiding principles to accept a security guarantee from a country who once sought to invade and purge it of communism—it is unacceptable to further integrate the country into the web of regional alliances crafted by the United States' post-war order. Hanoi is likely to see these alliances as unnecessary provocateurs, minor powers who denounce Beijing whilst hiding behind Washington's thinly-stretched back. Vietnam seeks protection, or a fail-safe in the case of conflict, not formal alliance commitments.

CONCLUSION

The most important takeaway from this analysis should be Vietnam's ability to adapt—both its government and its people. Centuries of foreign domination have moulded both into resilient and fiercely independent collectives with a desire to forge their own paths. Amidst the modern panorama of twenty-first century geopolitics, this is no different. Vietnam's geographical positioning has left the country vulnerable to the ills of geopolitical competition, but it is also a provision of ample opportunity. While the tone of this report may emphasize risks, threats, and disputes between Vietnam and its geopolitical environment, it is important to remember these risks only exist due to Vietnam's importance among the international community; in comparison, its neighbors, Laos and Cambodia, have not been granted the same geopolitical value, at least when taking a perspective of environmental determinism. This is a good hypothesis for why both countries have so easily fallen into the auspices of Beijing, while Hanoi remains reluctant and staunchly independent.

The United States, while still grappling with its legacy of war and occupation in the Indochinese Peninsula, and undergoing a full-blown crisis of leadership and legitimacy amidst the decline of the post-Cold War consensus, ironically remains Vietnam's most valuable option to help safeguard its national security interests. While understandably a seemingly sardonic conclusion, that Washington may represent Hanoi's most helpful partnership after having meticulously planned for its annihilation for decades is a testament to Vietnam's ability to adapt, and view global affairs via a pragmatic lens, having already experienced the shortcomings of raw ideological foreign policies.

It will ultimately fall to Vietnam to make the most out of its geopolitical surroundings. It is not useful for the regime to align with one great power to counteract the next if its own geopolitical neighborhood will continue to undergo divisions. Whether Hanoi will be capable of making the most out of a politically fractured ASEAN will define its reputation as a possible leader of emerging nations and mediator of conflicts. It will also serve as a measuring stick for the CPV's ability to survive the chaotic paradigm of twenty-first century geopolitics.

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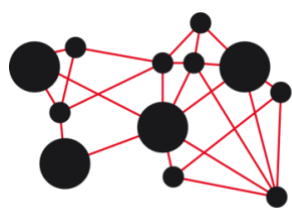
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