



Vietnam's Perception and Response to the Emerging Indo-Pacific Regional Security Architecture

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ABSTRACT: With the rising of the two emerging great power - China and India, the "Indo-Pacific" has already possessed the fundamental conditions of the regional security complex, while the United States as the hegemonic state intervenes in security affairs which takes advantage of characteristics of the identity structure and power structure of regional security complexes by penetration mechanism. Buzan's theory has shown us the contour of the emerging security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region. After applying the regional security complex theory to analyze the security of the region, this article analyzes Vietnam's perception and response to the emerging Indo-Pacific security architecture. The article points out that the perception of regional security structure expressed through foreign policy adjustment can be basically divided into two layers: regional and extra-regional. In which the regional layer with the focus on ASEAN; and the extra-regional is ASEAN-centered multilateral groups. Since then, Vietnam has tried to incorporate its foreign policy calculations into the multilateral and multi-dimensional Indo-Pacific agenda. Vietnam's response manifests itself mainly in strengthening economic and trade cooperation with China, deepening security cooperation with the US and its network of allies, and with the help of the power of ASEAN to restrain the US and China. In addition, with its favorable geographical position and strong rise in recent years, Vietnam expects India to become an indispensable "security supplier" and an indispensable "balancing force" in Indo-Pacific regional security architecture.

Keywords: Vietnam, Indo-Pacific, regional security architecture, perception, response.



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INTRODUCTION

According to Buzan's regional security complex theory, with the rising of the two emerging great power - China and India, the "Indo-Pacific" has already possessed the fundamental conditions of the regional security complex. With the shifting of world power and economic gravity from west to east, Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, has increasingly become a theatre for competition among powers. Due to the emergence of the Indo-Pacific regional security structure, Vietnam is facing more regional dynamics in the region. Vietnam has geostrategic and geopolitical influence in the Indo-Pacific region. This paper discusses three issues: First, discuss the security complex of the emerging Indo-Pacific region within the framework of Buzan's regional security complex theory; second, how does Vietnam perceive the emerging Indo-Pacific security architecture; third, based on that perception, how does Vietnam respond to it ([Buzan & Wæver, 2019](#)).

METHOD

Buzan's regional security complex theory (RSCT) advocates the regional hierarchy as an appropriate level for a large number of applicable security analysis, and aims to provide a simplified analysis framework for predicting and interpreting regional development. The so-called regional security complex (RSC) refers to such a regional level—states or other units are closely linked to each other so that their security cannot be separated from each other for consideration. Geographical boundaries, anarchic structure, polarity (physical structure), and amity and enmity model (social structure) are the four major variables that define the structure of the regional security complex. As a concept that is relatively distinguishable, operable, more inclusive and abstract, the regional security complex provides 'a framework that is sufficiently open and abstract'. As Buzan and Wæver said, 'it allows for far-reaching differentiation to develop among regions, while maintaining a general set of categories with which to describe this ([Buzan & Wæver, 2019](#))'. This just provides us with a convenient analysis framework for analyzing the security structure in the Indo-Pacific region. What's interesting is that it was in the work of Buzan and Wæver proposed the theory of regional security complex in 2003 that they proposed an "Asian supercomplex" that encompasses East Asia, South Asia, and Australia. A certain foresight of the "Indo-Pacific" geopolitical region.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Emerging Indo-Pacific Regional Security Architecture

In the international political arena, the "Indo-Pacific" is more of a top-down shaping of the region, rather than a bottom-up development process from economic to political security in the region. It has become the primary arena where all major powers pursue their vital interests ([Kapur, 2019](#)). Buzan defined a security complex as 'a set of units whose major processes of securitisation, desecuritisation, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analysed or resolved apart from one another' ([Buzan & Wæver, 2019](#)). He believes that a major power security complex or supercomplex is very likely to appear in Asia. If the "Indo-Pacific" is an independent security complex, the following conditions should be met: First, the security interaction and security posture between the two security complexes of East Asia and South Asia are sufficient to influence or even influence the security posture within the region. Second, countries in South Asia or East Asia are subject to increased security pressures

from the other regions or major countries in the region due to geographical proximity, and such security pressures are often clearly perceived within the complex. Third, the security posture of the Indo-Pacific super complex and the security complex in the surrounding area will be more distinct, which means that the security posture of the security complex is relatively independent (Buzan & Wæver, 2019).

The emerging "Indo-Pacific" already has the initial conditions for encompassing the East and South Asian supercomponents: enhanced security interaction between East and South Asia. This enhancing security connection originated within the "Indo-Pacific region" rather than being driven by external powers. In this process, the original impetus for the emergence of "Indo-Pacific" as a security complex came from the promotion of the power of China and India in the international system.

First, the enhancement of security interaction between India and China as the two major actors is a fundamental condition for the formation of the security complex in the Indo-Pacific. The power and security relationships between China and India will directly determine the characteristics of the emerging complex. Second, the participation of China and India in the internal affairs of the security complex in each other's regions has strengthened the close security ties between the two regional security complexes. Third, in addition to the strengthening of security relations between China and India, the depth and intensity of security exchanges between other countries within the two regional complexes are gradually increasing. The security cooperation between Japan, India and Vietnam has promoted the integration of the two regional security complexes to a certain extent.

From the logic of the formation of the regional security complex, the initial shape of the "Indo-Pacific" as an Asian super complex has begun to see the outline, and the driving force for its growth comes from the rise of the power of the two major powers of China and India and the resulting changes in the regional power structure, which is also the endogenous logic of the growth of the Indo-Pacific region.

In addition, in Buzan's theory, the influence of superpowers on regional complexes is divided into penetration and overlay. The emerging Indo-Pacific regional security complex provides favorable conditions for superpowers to intervene in the complex's internal affairs: a multi-polar power structure, identity structure, the enmity of national security awareness in the region, and regional security relations are complicated. This is an important prerequisite for the United States to be able to shape the security complex in the Indo-Pacific region. On the one hand, the "Indo-Pacific" region has many powerful countries, including emerging powers representing China and India, as well as important regional powers such as Japan and Australia. Compared with unipolar or bipolar regional systems, the United States is more likely to play a role in shaping the regional security complex because of its multi-polar power structure and the strong strength of the United States relative to countries in the region. On the other hand, an important prerequisite for the superpower to perform its infiltration function is that the countries within the complex exhibit negative security relations, that is, the rise of China as a new power and its aggressive behavior in the "Indo-Pacific" region.

Buzan's theory of the regional security complex has shown us the contour of the emerging security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region. And the question is how does Vietnam perceive and respond to this architecture?

Vietnam's Perception

Traditionally, in Vietnamese perception, there have been several security systems in Asia. The first is the security system led by the United States, evolving from a hub-and-spoke alliance model to a network-based model. After the beginning of the Cold War, the United States led the construction of a "hub-and-spoke" Asia-Pacific security system, with the United States as the hub and Asian allies as the spoke. This basic security relationship was consolidated and expanded after the Cold War. At the beginning of the 21st century, the United States proposed "Asia-Pacific Rebalance" and followed the Indo-Pacific strategy, trying to update this hub-and-spoke security system into a U.S.-led network-based security system, based on U.S.-Japan-Australia cooperation, the United States and its allies together constitute a number of small multilateral mechanisms is its main state.

The second is the regional security structure that has gradually formed after the Cold War with ASEAN as the center and "ASEAN+" as the model. Focusing on the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Enlarged Meeting, the ASEAN has built a multilateral security dialogue mechanism that encompasses major powers in the region, and security mechanisms such as ASEAN and China, ASEAN and China, Japan and South Korea, and East Asia Summit are gradually developing.

The third is a bilateral and multilateral regional security cooperation mechanism based on the Panchsheel or Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence jointly advocated by Asian developing countries, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building, strategic partnerships and the Consultations on the Code of Conduct in the South China Sea and so on.

However, it needs to be pointed out that out of natural concerns about the power of great powers, small and medium-sized countries tend to adopt a balanced foreign strategy of great powers, avoiding the one-sided joining of a security order dominated by a great power. This international political reality has made the ASEAN-led regional security structure more popular in the Indo-Pacific region. Although "Indo-Pacific" is not a naive or neutral description, it is a manufactured super-region designed to hedge against a regional order regarded as Sino-centric (Pan, 2014). Major countries in the region such as India, China, Japan, and South Korea, as well as the United States, have also joined it. As a result, ASEAN has become the central role in the construction of the Indo-Pacific security structure after the Cold War.

Based on that assessment, Vietnam's perception of the emerging Indo-Pacific regional security architecture is shown in the following layers.

The Regional Layer: Under the "Willing to be friends with the countries of the international community" approach, regardless of economic and political differences, Viet Nam has always pursued a foreign policy of independent, open, diversified, and multilateralization of international relations, and has actively participated in regional and world affairs. Accession to ASEAN has a crucial social, political, economic and security impact on Viet Nam. Viet Nam joined the organization to integrate its security with the entire South-East Asian region and to create an enabling environment for economic development. As a member of ASEAN, Vietnam has been working hard to ensure peace and reconciliation among Southeast Asian countries, which were severely divided by war. Vietnam is the first Indochina country to join ASEAN, and

its move will help end the confrontation between the three Indochina Peninsula countries and ASEAN. Vietnam has also led efforts within ASEAN to ensure regional security. Soon after becoming a member of ASEAN, Vietnam signed The Treaty of Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ Treaty) and is one of the founding members of the ASEAN Regional Forum.

Currently, in the context of regional security and strategic chessboard among great powers, Vietnam's position has gradually become more critical in the region. Firstly, the disputes over sovereignty on islands and reefs in the South China Sea is a thorn in regional unity and stability, which has aroused different interests of different actors. Vietnam is one of the most active claimants. Nevertheless, it is also a supporter of peaceful and rule-based dispute resolution and has consistently emphasized the central role of ASEAN in promoting regional dispute management. In addition, although Southeast Asia has experienced a wave of relatively turbulent political development in recent years, countries such as Myanmar, Thailand, and Malaysia are facing domestic political crises. The centrality and its community-building aspirations pose a major challenge. From a comparative perspective, Vietnam's stable political pattern keeps it consistent in terms of regional prospects. Therefore, as a latecomer, Vietnam not only quickly integrated into Southeast Asian society, but also proved its ability to play a more important role in the alliance. For example, with the rapid economic development, Vietnam is in a favorable position to become a bridge between the "first-level" member states of ASEAN (the original founding member) and the "second-level" countries and the "CLM" (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar).

In addition, ASEAN's role in the regional structure is deeply affected by the security relations among major powers. Although unlike the alliance network of the United States and the partnership network built by China and Russia, ASEAN has successfully brought relevant countries in the region together to carry out continuous dialogue and negotiations on very complex and difficult problems, and try its best not to choose sides and promote the achievement of results satisfactory to all parties. As a member of ASEAN, Vietnam is aware of taking advantage of the aforementioned role of ASEAN to enhance its national status, thereby promoting the protection of national security and interests. Vietnam's successful hosting of the second US-North Korea Summit in February 2019 is a prime example of this worldview.

The extra-regional layer: ASEAN provides a perfect place for Vietnam to integrate Vietnam into the international community and re-emerge from the isolation it fell into in the late 1970s. Against the background of competition among major powers and its devastating impact on ASEAN's unity and centrality, Vietnam's position has become more important. But Hanoi also acknowledged that Southeast Asia has become an arena for power competition, which endangers multilateralism in Southeast Asia. It is also aware of its limitations in ASEAN, because its cross-border security issues have prompted Vietnamese policy makers to participate in other possible regional institutional mechanisms. More importantly, under the pressure of major powers' security concerns, Hanoi not only appreciates the potential of ASEAN, but also appreciates the "ASEAN Plus Partnership" network. After all, ADMM Plus was established in 2010 under the auspices of Vietnam.

In addition, the evolution of the region's security architecture is also reflected in the formation of various formal and informal political-security mechanisms in the region. Japan, Australia, India,

and other countries have established various bilateral mechanisms with the United States such as "2+2" talks, logistical material exchange agreements, joint exercises, and training, etc. They have also actively expanded their bilateral mechanisms to three or even four sides plus, expand to form a variety of exclusive mini-multilateral security mechanisms. A Mini-multilateral mechanism with the US-Japan relationship as the core and the "US-Japan+" model has been widely constructed, and the QUAD mechanism has been continuously promoted. Countries such as Japan, Australia, and India have tried to advance the strategy of the alliance of middle-class countries to a certain extent, and they have formed multiple "quasi-alliance relations" agreements and mechanisms with each other.

From the perspective of Vietnam, the vast Indo-Pacific region is very important to Vietnam, because most of Vietnam's largest strategic and economic partners are located in this region, the challenge to peace, security, and development in the region is also a challenge to Vietnam. Therefore, Vietnam proactively seizes regional strategic integration and strengthens its relations with major powers in the Indo-Pacific region. This shows that Hanoi welcomes more contacts with the United States, India, and Japan today. In April 2020, Vietnam joined an informal organization called Quad Plus led by the United States, which included Washington's closest friends in the Indo-Pacific region and discussed global supply reorganization of the chain and other issues.

Nevertheless, Vietnam also understands that Beijing has opposed the U.S. alliance system in Asia and sought to drive a wedge between the U.S. and its Asian allies, including Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea (Liff, 2018). Therefore, becoming too close in relations with the US will bring many consequences to the relationship between Vietnam and China.

In the extra-regional layer, interest relationships become intertwined. Therefore, the 2019 national defense white paper stated that Vietnam "is willing to participate in security and defense cooperation mechanisms that suit its capabilities and interests, including security and defense mechanisms in the Indo-Pacific region" (Vietnam Ministry of National Defence, 2019). The 2019 defense white paper represents Vietnam's clearly warning yet to China that Vietnam might have to strengthen defense ties with the United States if Beijing's aggressive and bullying behavior persists in the South China Sea. But it also emphasized the "four nos" policy as a pledge to China not to join any coalition against it.

Vietnam's Response

The Vietnamese government takes a positive attitude towards the concept of "Indian Ocean-Pacific". In the past, Vietnam used the term "India-Asian-Pacific" instead of "Indo-Pacific", but the Vietnamese Defense White Paper released in 2019 officially used the term "Indo-Pacific" (Thuong & Oanh, 2021). This reflects the shift in Vietnam's political attitude toward diplomatic and security affairs, but this does not mean that Vietnam will actively participate in the construction of a regional security framework led by the United States and its allies. Vietnam, on the other side, has promoted its own regional security architecture through its famous foreign policy of multilateralisation and diversification of external relations, clearly inherits and continues the policy of "partners of cooperation" and "objects of struggle", and the "four-nos and one-depend" approach.

And most recently, the political Report at the 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam (January 2021) commented: "The world is undergoing great changes, which are very rapid, complex, and unpredictable. Peace, cooperation, and development are still the general trend, but they face many obstacles and difficulties; Strategic competition and local conflicts among major powers continue to take place in a more complex and intense form, increasing the risks of the economic, political, and international security environment. Globalization and international integration continue to make progress but are challenged by competition for influence among major powers and the rise of extreme nationalism. International law and global multilateral institutions face enormous challenges." (Dangcongsan.vn, 2021).

Vietnam always strives to implement the delicate balancing strategy between China and the US. Therefore, Vietnam's response manifests itself mainly in strengthening economic and trade cooperation with China, deepening security cooperation with the US and its network of allies, and with the help of the power of ASEAN to restrain the US and China. In addition, with its favorable geographical position and strong rise in recent years, Vietnam expects India to become an indispensable "security supplier" and an indispensable "balancing force" in Indo-Pacific regional security architecture.

To China: continue to deepen economic and trade cooperation to promote economic progress, emphasize the similarity in political ideals and system. In the economic sector, China has been the largest trading partner of Vietnam, worth about the US \$106.7 billion, accounting for a little more than 22% of Vietnam's total trade volume ([Grossman & Orner, 2021](#)). The trade exchanges between the two sides are huge, and trade with China is vital to Vietnam's economic development. Economic and trade cooperation with China can bring immeasurable economic benefits to Vietnam, but it also aggravates Vietnam's doubts about China. Vietnam believes that its excessive economic dependence on China may weaken its bargaining capability in the South China Sea, and it is worried that China will use its economic power to affect regional disputes.

In order to ensure the maximization of economic benefits, Vietnam has also consciously differentiated its economic dependence on China last few years. For example, the CPTPP was formally signed in 2018; on June 30, 2019, Free Trade Agreement and Investment Protection Agreement were signed with the European Union (EVFTA), which further promoted the diversification of economic partners and the diversification of trade routes.

In addition, emphasizing the similarity in political ideals and system, cooperation, and stable bilateral relations will not only help Vietnam continue to use China's rise to achieve economic development and ensure domestic political stability but also restrain the possibility of China's use of economic sanctions and military actions to threaten Vietnam's security, especially the possibility of compelling Vietnam to make concessions territorial disputes in the South China Sea ([Thayer, 2017](#)).

To the United States and its alliances's network: Strengthen security cooperation to counteract security threats. A country with sufficient material resources may convert its economic power into increasing military expenditures, gaining defensive or offensive capabilities to increase deterrence, thereby preventing a threatening country from taking wrong, coercive or risky behaviors. Since the reform and opening up at the end of the 1980s, Vietnam's economic development has continuously made breakthroughs, and the strengthening of the country's economic strength has also accelerated the development of the national defense. From 2011 to 2015, Vietnam's arms

imports increased by 699% from 2006 to 2010, becoming the world's eighth-largest arms importer in the same period ([Wezeman et al., 2021](#)).

In essence, Vietnam indirectly supports the U.S. FOIP strategy and US-led groupings such as the QUAD, AUKUS, but it has expressed direct support for FOIP principles, such as the importance of maintaining freedom of navigation and resolving disputes peacefully and in accordance with international law, and has also sought to improve relations and defence cooperation with individual Quad members. This is due to the changes in the balance of power in Asia caused by the rise of China and the shift of the U.S. to Asia, the convergence and divergence of perceptions of national interests and threats in China's policies and South China Sea disputes, as well as the accumulation of historical lessons ([Tuan & Thuy, 2016](#)).

Under the Obama administration's Rebalance to Asia, Vietnam gradually gained importance in U.S. foreign policy as the two countries formed a “comprehensive partnership” in 2013. Despite the Trump administration's America First policy, the United States prioritizes its partnerships with Vietnam in its Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy ([Tran, 2019](#)). During the Obama era, U.S.-Vietnam security cooperation achieved a major breakthrough. In 2011, the U.S. and Vietnam signed the "Memorandum of Understanding on Advancing Bilateral Defense Cooperation", and in 2015, they signed the "Joint Vision Statement on Defense Relations", which laid an important foundation for the security cooperation between the two countries. In 2016, the United States lifted the arms embargo on Vietnam, clearing the way for the transfer of arms and equipment to Vietnam. On March 5, 2020, the US aircraft carrier Roosevelt and the missile cruiser Bunker Hill visited Da Nang, Vietnam. This was after the Carl Vinson aircraft carrier visited Vietnam in 2018. The US Navy dispatched aircraft carriers to Vietnam for the second time. This shows that the US Vietnam security cooperation is showing a stable and progressive attitude. During the Trump administration, U.S.-Vietnam relations have matured, because deepening political, economic, and security cooperation is in the common interests of the two states ([Siracusa & Nguyen, 2019](#)). However, in fact, the security cooperation between Vietnam and the United States is far from reaching the degree of the alliance, and the United States and Vietnam cannot form an alliance. However, according to the performance of the deepening US Vietnam security cooperation from the Obama to the Trump and Biden administration ([Thu, 2021](#)), the military exchange between the United States and Vietnam is different from the normal military-diplomatic behavior. It is typical behavior of hedging China's regional security threat with the help of US power.

On the contrary, on the US side, after the Trump era with "America First", comes the Biden era with "America is Back". Although the Biden administration also identifies China as "the biggest challenge", the US cannot deal with it alone but must gather allies and partners, as in the Quad (including Japan, India, and Australia), and within ASEAN (including Singapore, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia). In order to have a sustainable ally and partner, the US needs to build trust and sufficient military power "integrated deterrence" in the regional security mechanism, including relations with Vietnam. In addition, Washington should adopt a more diversified strategy, including security cooperation, diplomacy, and economics, which will provide hedging and balance for Southeast Asian countries, including Vietnam, in their relations with China ([Grossman, 2020](#)).

To India: non-allied and powerful third party, affirming status quo principles releases fence-sitters, like Vietnam, from that binary choice. The Vietnamese-Chinese bilateral relationship is a unique one. Although Vietnam and China claim they are "good neighbors and good comrades", but in reality, this relationship was "willing speech, unwilling heart". Meanwhile, the Vietnamese-U.S. relationship is one of the most delicate and most subtle in the world, making veiled "They fell in love within, kept reserved without"¹. China officially does not oppose positive developments in U.S.-Vietnam relations, but it reminds Hanoi that "there is no fundamental conflict between China and Vietnam apart from the South China Sea issue" ([Jiangang, 2020](#)). This puts Vietnam in a position of "swinging" between the two superpowers.

The fact that should be pointed out is that the acceptance of the logic of the Indo-Pacific in all politics narratives today, despite China's strong disapproval, would not have happened without India's enthusiastic response to it. In this context, India clearly declares that it is a multi-aligned country, not part of the Western group, defending the maritime Commons and rule-based order. India offers Vietnam a licensing structure to adjust its position on the core issues of the international order, not because it is driven by the United States, but it is precisely driven by influential like-minded countries outside the American alliance system. Vietnam-India relationship is seen by Vietnam as an anchor to help it maintain a balance. The two countries established a strategic partnership in 2007. In September 2016, the bilateral relationship was upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership, reflecting the in-depth and effective development of the relationship between Vietnam and India. The comprehensive strategic partnership is premised on the common Vietnamese and Indian approach to the Indo-Pacific ([Pulipaka & Garg, 2021](#)). Over decades of close relations with Vietnam, India has accrued trust both China and the United States cannot match. In addition, India and Vietnam have expanded and deepened the defense and strategic ties between the two countries on the basis of traditionally strong relations, in which maritime cooperation between India and Vietnam has been the most significant factor, and the two sides have found mutual convergences on cooperation in the South China Sea and the Indo-Pacific region ([Solanki, 2021](#)). This is reflected in the joint training, military exercises, and defense credit lines provided by India ([Mishra, 2021](#)).

In the regional and multilateral cooperation strategy, Vietnam has always been a key pillar of India's Act East Policy and an important partner in the Indo-Pacific Vision ([Pranay Verma, 2020](#)). In addition, India is guided to seek opportunities to confront China in its periphery, and Vietnam, which is distressed due to China's dominant position in the South China Sea, is a suitable ally ([Aswani et al., 2021](#)). If Vietnam can make proper use of its own advantages, it will play a much higher role in the emerging geopolitical and geo-economic equations in the Indo-Pacific. That will also help to further strengthen the partnership with India ([Naidu, 2021](#)).

Furthermore, according to many scholars ([Long & Yen, 2021](#); [Mishra, 2021](#); [Sarma, 2020](#)) it is really difficult for countries to want to bring Vietnam to join the coalition of democratic countries like QUAD because of Vietnam's political institutions, so India with a policy of multi-alignment, high strategic autonomy, as well as the warm and deep strategic and defense relationship with Vietnam, and similar views and interests in terms of a multipolar Indo-Pacific regional security architecture, which will be a suitable answer for the current position of Vietnam.

Based on ASEAN: Institutionalized guidance and regulation of China and the United States. As a whole composed of small and medium-sized countries in the region, ASEAN has been growing since its establishment and has become the most important force in Southeast Asia. The establishment of multilateral institutional platforms such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, the East Asia Summit, and the ADMM+ has provided ASEAN with institutional cohesion to unite Southeast Asian countries and formed the institutional foundation for the "ASEAN-Centric Position".

There is no doubt that ASEAN has provided a platform for Vietnam to carry out diplomatic activities, integrate into the international community, and get rid of diplomatic isolation after The Indochina Wars ([Emmers & Le Thu, 2021](#)), and it is also ASEAN that has provided a valuable platform for Vietnam to express its voice despite the prospect of ASEAN's unified response to territorial disputes in the South China Sea is still unlikely ([York, 2015](#)). There is no doubt that the South China Sea dispute has become the primary issue in Vietnam's security field. Incorporating China and the United States into the ASEAN platform, emphasizing the central position of ASEAN in the region, giving full play to ASEAN's "mediator role" between China and the United States, drawing on the strength of ASEAN as a whole, unanimously with the outside world, and trying to form an overall action against China and the U.S. in the South China Sea institutional and normative constraints, to contain China and the U.S. with the overall strength of ASEAN.

As ASEAN's rotating presidency in 2020, Vietnam takes advantage of its hosting of the ADMM Retreat, AMIM-17, and AMOM as an opportunity to set up related regional issues, trying to use the overall strength of ASEAN to seek their own interests. Especially with regard to the South China Sea issue, Vietnam leaders took full advantage of the status of the rotating presidency to actively speak out for the country. At the 53rd ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting, Vietnam's Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh highlighted Vietnam's position in the South China Sea and emphasized to ASEAN countries the importance of maintaining peace, stability, security in the South China Sea, and the safety and freedom of navigation and overflight operations ([Chinhphu.vn, 2020](#)). At the same time, Vietnam expects the United States to play a central role in supporting the establishment of the ASEAN Community by ASEAN and in maintaining and promoting peace, stability, security, and safety, and freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea ([Asean.org, 2020](#)).

Within the ASEAN framework, progress has been made in the settlement of disputes in the South China Sea. In 2002, ASEAN and China reached the "Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea". In November 2017, at the 20th China-ASEAN Leaders' Summit, the "Code of Conduct in the South China Sea" was officially launched. The "Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea" covers the freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea, peaceful settlement of disputes, and non-recourse to force. The trilateral relationship between China, the United States, and Vietnam is an asymmetrical triangle, and Vietnam cannot gain the status of negotiating with major powers on its own. But ASEAN provides Vietnam with a non-exclusive platform for dialogue between major powers. By promoting multilateral dialogues covering major powers, taking on the role of vanguard states in ASEAN's response to China's policy in the South China Sea, Vietnam can have more opportunities to express its aspirations and improve its status in international diplomacy, further defending its interests in the South China Sea ([Southgate & Khoo, 2016](#)).

CONCLUSION

The Indo-Pacific region as an international system is becoming a geostrategic region of great power competition. Changes in the regional structure and system are assessed to have an impact on the world, including Vietnam.

The current status and dynamics of the Indo-Pacific system - structure is said to represent the competition between the US and China in all three security structures - political, economic, and non-material with the common goal of competing for structural power within the system - the overall regional structure. This competition increases instability in the region. In the coming years, the level of competition depends on the policy choices of the US and China, as well as the rising, perception, and choices of India and other middle powers such as Vietnam - the state is seen as defining the future of the region ([Moriyasu, 2021](#)).

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