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Why Vietnam is not Balancing China: Vietnamese Security Priorities and the Dynamics in Sino-Vietnam Relations

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Abstract

It is often asserted that Vietnam is balancing against China, or that it will or should. But does this assertion align with the empirical foreign policy behaviors of Vietnam? Indeed, Vietnam represents a case of a country that should be particularly cautious about China. To be sure it is a fraternal communist brother, but it is also economically entangled—with the down- and upsides of leverage—and geographically close with a history of disputes and outright war. This article argues that existing literature often neglects the ample information that China and Vietnam have about each. Years of engagement have enabled Vietnam and China to reach a *modus vivendi* that can settle disputes and permit a muted military response to Chinese risks. The lack of existential threat further dissuades Vietnamese leaders from moving closer to extra-regional powers such as the United States. That a key member of the potential balancing coalition against China doesn't engage in balancing behavior, calls into question US Indo-Pacific strategies premised on the assumption that countries will “soft align” or openly join with the US to contain China.

Keywords: East Asian security; balancing; Vietnam; China

Every Vietnamese leader must be able to stand up to China and get along with China and if anyone thinks this cannot be done at the same time, he does not deserve to be a leader.

Senior Vietnamese official, 2016

Introduction and puzzle

Is Vietnam balancing against China? Does Vietnam seek closer security ties with the United States because it fears Chinese power? For more than two decades, scholars have been arguing that Vietnam is balancing against China (or that it will or should

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be doing so) and seeking closer security ties with the United States. Some scholars claim that Vietnam is already balancing China. For instance, as early as 2006, Robert Ross (2006, 358) noted that “East Asia reinforce(s) the traditional realist and neorealist arguments that secondary states respond to great power capabilities ... In this respect, balance-of-power realism explains alignment behavior of East Asian states as much as it does that of European states.” Liff asserts that “U.S.–Vietnam military ties are deepening rapidly ... and Vietnam is also reaching out to U.S. allies” (Liff and Ikenberry 2014, 81) and that “China’s rise is eliciting from key neighbors significant and accelerating balancing behavior” (Liff 2016, 438). Darren Lim and Zack Cooper (2015, 700) argue that East Asian secondary states’ security alignment behaviors amid China’s rise “closely resemble traditional balancing behavior” and are “increasingly willing to trade off policy autonomy in return for the security benefits of closer alignment with the United States.” More recently, Vuving (2023, 28) argues that China’s intrusion with an oil rig on the Vietnamese side of the median line between the Vietnamese and Hainan coasts in 2014 was a “game changer ... it destroyed the last remnants of Vietnam’s trust in China and removed the last obstacles between Vietnam and the United States.” Michael Beckley (2022, 69) also writes, “China’s neighbors are arming themselves and aligning with outside powers to secure their territory and sea-lanes. Many of the world’s largest economies are collectively developing new trade, investment, and technology standards that implicitly discriminate against China.”

Others, to a lesser degree, predict that Vietnam *will* balance against China. For instance, John Mearsheimer (2005, 47) predicted that “China cannot rise peacefully...Most of China’s neighbors, including India, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Russia, and Vietnam, will likely join with the United States to contain China’s power.” Yahri-Milo and her co-authors write that “China’s rapid military modernization and increasingly assertive behavior will likely fuel the perception that the United States and many regional states have common security interests ... Vietnam could become a major security partner of the United States” (Yahri-Milo, Lanoszka, and Cooper 2016, 138). Barry Posen (2013, 123) argues that “Although China may ultimately try to assume the mantle of Eurasian hegemon, this outcome is neither imminent nor inevitable ... [there is a] coalition of states that could balance against China ... The United States should maintain the capability to assist them if need be.”

Those claiming that Vietnam *should* contain China include Rush Doshi, who argues that the United States should arm countries around China with the capabilities to contain China, writing that “these efforts might focus on Taiwan, Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and India” as members of this balancing coalition against China (Doshi 2021, 318). Elbridge Colby writes, “states such as Japan, India, Australia, Vietnam, South Korea, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand could join an anti-hegemonic coalition with the United States” (Colby 2021, 112).

The theoretical basis for predicting East Asian balancing comes mainly from realist assumptions about the unlimited ambitions of powerful states and their crucial variable of relative capabilities. For example, Joshua Shiffrinson reflects the mainstream approach when he argues that “there are both theoretical and contextual reasons to believe China’s intentions may be less knowable and more subject to change—especially as

power shifts” (Shifrinson 2020, 1184–1185). In 1993, Richard Betts (1993, 55) asked, “Should we want China to get rich or not? For realists, the answer should be no, since a rich China would overturn any balance of power.” Also in 1993, Aaron Friedberg (1993, 7) argued that “While civil wars and ethnic strife will continue for some time to smolder along Europe’s peripheries, in the long run it is Asia that seems far more likely to be the cockpit of great power conflict ... for better and for worse, Europe’s past could be Asia’s future.”

The extensive literature cited above implies that the balancing behavior is not only plausible but also desirable, and that the whole US Indo-Pacific strategy rests on it, with the assumption that countries will “soft align” with the US or openly join a containment coalition against China. But does such description, prediction, and prescription fit with Vietnamese foreign policy behaviors empirically? Indeed, Vietnam represents a case of a country that should be particularly cautious about China. To be sure it is a fraternal communist brother. But it is also geographically close and has a history of not only disputes but outright war; it is economically entangled—with the downs as well as upsides of leverage.

We challenge the conventional wisdom about Vietnam through a granular analysis of Vietnam’s relationship with China. Contra the assertions cited above, we find that Vietnam faces no existential threat from China, and therefore Vietnam is not acting as if it did. China and Vietnam have reached a *modus vivendi* that permits significant engagement, that can settle disputes, and that permits a muted military response to Chinese risks. Moreover, they appear to have ample information about each other. Vietnam has extensive and growing relations with China economically, socially, and diplomatically. Vietnam also retains considerable skepticism about US intentions, especially when American policymakers and scholars frame their analyses as “democracy versus authoritarianism.”

We arrive at this conclusion by examining three aspects of evidence concerning Sino-Vietnam relations. First, we look at issues that have been resolved in Sino-Vietnam relations since the normalization of bilateral diplomatic ties in 1991. By looking at what has been successfully settled, we provide a baseline reference for the complexity and severity of the remaining dispute over maritime claims in the South China Sea in contemporary settings. Second, we look at Vietnam’s defense effort over the same time. Indeed, by most measures, Vietnam is engaged in a steady, or even reduced, defense effort.

Third, to further get an accurate account of Vietnamese strategic preferences, we use a key metric—high-level political visits—and compile an original dataset on Vietnamese high-level exchanges from 2009 to 2020 to examine the trend of Vietnamese priorities in their foreign relations over time. In particular, we examine who initiates invitations to Vietnamese leaders and where Vietnamese leaders choose to travel to shed insights on relationship building. The original dataset reveals that Vietnam has by far the most high-level visits with China. Furthermore, the United States has relatively less priority over time, dropping from fifth in the number of visits in 2009–2016 to eighth in 2016–2020. In addition, the US has paid more outgoing visits to Vietnam rather than the way around. Moreover, Vietnam almost always has a high-level visit with China either right before or after any Vietnam–US interaction. This shows that instead of seeking support from extra-regional powers,

especially the United States, Vietnamese leaders retain considerable skepticism about US intentions, and the direction of pursuit is from the United States rather than the way around.

We argue that the explanation for why there is no emerging Vietnamese balancing against China is straightforward: Vietnam does not see China as a threat to its survival, so it is not reacting as if it were. The historical records between China and Vietnam show us that the remaining maritime disputes over the South China Sea are not necessarily more complicated than those border issues previously resolved. And they do not threaten Vietnamese national survival. Moreover, years of engagement have enabled Vietnam and China to reach a *modus vivendi* that can settle disputes, and that permits a muted military response to Chinese risks. The lack of existential threat further dissuades Vietnamese leaders from moving closer to extra-regional powers such as the United States.

So what? The scholarly and policy debate in the United States about how the US should deal with China should begin with a careful examination of how the region is interacting with China. A key element of almost every policy and scholarly discussion about East Asian security and China's rise includes a claim that East Asian states already are, or inevitably will, contain China. But this one claim needs to be carefully adjudicated, not simply asserted. If there is a debate in the US about how to deal with China, it must directly deal with the fact that Vietnam, a key member of any potential balancing coalition, is not balancing China, and that a coalition of anti-Chinese states is not yet emerging in East Asia. Any US policies crafted must begin with this empirical reality, not simply ignore it and predict that "just wait," assuming that eventually, East Asian states will contain China.

Motivations for balancing and types of states

The theoretical rationale underlying most claims of East Asian balancing comes mainly out of the realist tradition. In this view, intentions flow directly from capabilities. Although there are an almost infinite variety of "realisms," they tend to coalesce around a core argument that power is threatening (if not today, then potentially in the future), and that secondary states will group together against to balance the power of the most powerful state (Waltz 1979). As Kenneth Waltz writes, "overwhelming power repels and leads others to balance against it" (Waltz 1997, 916). That is, generally, smaller states will arm themselves—"balance"—or search for allies with which to confront a dominant power.

Even scholars who do not self-identify as realists regularly use key realist variables in their analysis. Although not all authors cited at the beginning of this essay identify themselves as realists, they all prioritize relative power in explaining why they believe a containment of China will happen. For example, although not claiming allegiance to the realist intellectual tradition, Rush Doshi's two key variables are the "perceived relative power gap" that drives a rising power's behavior, and that rising power's perceived threat from the hegemon (Doshi 2021, 22). Both of these fit comfortably within the realist paradigm. Similarly, Deudney and Ikenberry asserted without evidence the "undeniable reality of China's expansion and hegemonic aspirations" (Deudney and Ikenberry 2021, 10). The "just-wait-for-balancing" idea has been an

enduring feature of Western analyses of East Asian security. In 2014, Adam Liff and John Ikenberry confidently claimed that “there is already some evidence of security dilemma-driven military competition in the Asia Pacific, which could worsen significantly in the near future ... security dilemma dynamics appear to be important drivers of states enhancing military capabilities in the increasingly volatile Asia Pacific region” (Liff and Ikenberry 2014, 54, 86).

Traditionally, the standard and most widely accepted definition of balancing is investments by states to “turn latent power (i.e., economic, technological, social, and natural resources) into military capabilities” (Lieber and Alexander 2005, 119). Balancing can be internal (military preparations and arms buildups directed at an obvious threat) or external (forging countervailing military alliances with other states against the threat) (Morrow 1993, 207–253). Overwhelmingly, balancing behavior is measured by military spending as a percentage of GDP (Lanoszka 2015, 143). William Wohlforth used military spending by great powers as a percentage of GDP to assess if there exists balancing globally over the past two decades (Wohlforth 2012, 220). The literature on alliances, similarly, “overwhelmingly uses defense budgets as a share of GDP as the main indicator for burden-sharing or free-riding” (Jakobsen 2018, 490). As Becker notes, “Defense spending as a share of GDP is the ‘original’ measure of burden sharing in the collective action literature, and is also the primary metric NATO allies have chosen as a burden-sharing guideline, agreed publicly at the 2014 Wales Summit” (Becker 2017, 133).

The share of the economy devoted to the military is the most widely used indicator of balancing because it most accurately reflects a country’s fiscal priorities. Every year, countries must decide how to allocate their resources. Agencies compete for a limited set of finances—more money devoted to national security means less money for domestic social or economic priorities. Thus, enduring trends in the allocation of resources to national defense are considered the most accurate indicator of a country’s security priorities.

However, there are just as sound theoretical reasons to believe states can have limited aims and good knowledge of each other. Although many of our theories are built on assumptions that countries have unlimited and increasing ambitions, and that countries have poor knowledge of each other and therefore believe and act upon worst-case possibilities, in reality, most countries have limited aims and know each other quite well. Rarely do countries make continual and increasing demands on other states. Furthermore, many countries have long existed next to each other and have deep knowledge of each other’s aims and ambitions. As Schultz and Goemans point out, “historically states bargain within far more limited confines defined by well-bounded claims ... the size of claims is weakly related to the relative power of disputants and unaffected by dramatic changes in power, and smaller claims are associated with a higher probability that the challenger will receive any concession” (Schultz and Goemans 2019, 345).

That different countries can have different interests which will pose different risks or opportunities is now conventional wisdom: Glaser (1997, 191) argues that “the security dilemma is driven by the adversary’s uncertainty about whether the state is in fact motivated purely by security concerns. If the adversary were certain that it faced a pure security seeker, then the state would face a greatly reduced security

dilemma.” Powell (2006, 175), emphasizing different types of states, writes that “Britain and Germany appear to have been ‘types’—to the use the language of game theory—that would have fought each other even if there was no uncertainty.” Schweller (quoted in Glaser 1997, 191) argues that differentiating states by their goals or types is important “because they can lead states to choose different policies: a security seeker will sometimes choose cooperation when, under the same conditions, a greedy state will choose competition.”

Each of these arguments explicitly accepts that countries vary by “type,” and that security-seeking states will cause less fear and reaction than one that is greedy. Actually, most countries have deep knowledge of each other and have known each other a long time, and have fairly good information about each other. Indeed, most countries are not coming into existence for the first time in a primordial state of nature where they have no idea about each other’s goals and identities.

The above literature then points out two competing possibilities for small powers in their foreign behavior. If the small power believes and acts upon worst-case possibilities rooted in insatiable ambitions, then it may engage in balancing against a rising power. However, if it is well informed of the rising power’s ambition based on institutionalized interactions and believes such ambition is limited, then the small power will not engage in balancing.

One way to adjudicate between these two general possibilities is to empirically assess the relations between two specific countries. Regarding East Asia, Vietnam–China relations should be a critical case. After all, given the emerging conventional pessimistic wisdom cited at the beginning of this article about East Asian states, Vietnam is surely one of the most likely to fear China and balance against it. If Vietnam is behaving with less threat perception than suggested above, then it is also likely that other countries are, as well. In this case, Vietnam could be considered an “easy test” for balancing.

The historical record: Resolved issues between Vietnam and China

Vietnam and China normalized diplomatic relations in 1991, and since then, the two sides have resolved a number of issues, as well as rapidly increasing diplomatic, economic, and social ties. Although Vietnam does have maritime disputes with China, both sides have been careful to contain the issue. These maritime disputes are also not increasing, and there is no indication that either side plans to use force to resolve them. Indeed, viewed over the past 30 years, China has actually resolved most of its disputes with Vietnam, and has not introduced new or increased demands. This has occurred even as China has grown far more powerful than Vietnam.

When the two parties normalized their relationship, there existed three remaining issues centering on territorial and maritime disputes: the overlapping claims to the Parcel and Spratly archipelagos, those to water and continental shelf areas in the Gulf of Tonkin, and those along the land border. To solve these issues, the two sides have implemented continued dialogue at both expert and government levels. The first bilateral negotiation was initiated in October 1992. A series of talks between government levels was initiated in August 1993, resulting in the signing of an agreement on the principles for handling the land border and Gulf of Tonkin disputes in October

1993. Joint working groups were organized specifically to discuss land border issues, and 16 rounds of talks were held between 1994 to 1999. This ultimately led to the signing of the bilateral Land Border Treaty (陆地边界条约) in 1999, in which Vietnam and China agreed on an exact 50–50 split on their disputed land border (Fravel 2005, 57). A joint committee for the demarcation of the land border was established in 2000 (Kang 2020, 147). By 2008, the official demarcation process was concluded, which signifies the settlement of all land border issues between the two countries.

A separate working group on the Gulf of Tonkin met 17 times beginning in March 1994, and settled the Gulf of Tonkin disputes by 2000 with the signing of the Agreement on the Demarcation of Waters, Exclusive Economic Zones and Continental Shelves in the Gulf of Tonkin (中越关于两国在北部湾领海、专属经济区和大陆架的划界协定), ratified by both parties in 2004. Under this agreement, the two sides honor a delimitation line with 21 points with Vietnam enjoying 53.23 percent of the Gulf and China 46.77 percent (VietnamPlus 2021b).

When it comes to the South China Sea, a working group on the “sea issues” was initiated in 1995 and held 11 talks up to July 2006. In 2011, the two parties signed the Agreement on Basic Principles Guiding the Settlement of Sea-Related Issues (关于指导解决中越海上问题基本原则协议). This agreement again emphasized that the two parties would maintain regular communication and dialogue on the South China Sea issues (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2019). In February 2012, the two sides set up two working groups to specifically negotiate maritime disputes: one on the sea area beyond the mouth of the Gulf of Tonkin (中越北部湾湾口外海域工作组), and one on the maritime cooperation in the low-sensitive areas (中越海上低敏感领域合作专家工作组). In May 2012, the two working groups held the first round of consultations respectively. The working group on the Gulf of Tonkin held its most recent consultation (fifteenth round) in December 2021 (VietnamPlus 2021a), while the working group on the maritime cooperation in the low-sensitive areas held its fifteenth round of consultation in June 2022 (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2022). During the visit to Vietnam by China’s Prime Minister Li Keqiang, in 2013, the two countries established another joint working group on sea development cooperation (中越海上共同开发磋商工作组) and held 12 rounds of negotiation lasting until 2021 (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2021).

It is important to note that neither the disputed land border nor the Gulf of Tonkin was easier to solve than the current South China Sea. The disputed land border encompassed both mountainous terrain that is not easily accessible and the activities carried by the local population and authorities that impinged on the borderline, which was further complicated by the 1979 invasion along the border lines between the Guangxi and Lang Son provinces. The Gulf of Tonkin negotiations were perhaps even more complex, involving problems such as how to define the nature of islands under UNCLOS, how to honor the Sino-French Agreement of 1887 that established administrative control over the islands in the Gulf, and whether the waters in the Gulf of Tonkin are historic waters. The Gulf of Tonkin itself covers a total surface area of 126,250 square kilometers with rich natural resources. According to the China National Offshore Petroleum Company, the Gulf area is one of the biggest oil and gas concentrations in the world, having an oil deposit of about 2.29 billion tons and natural gas deposits of about 1,444 billion cubic meters. The South China Sea

Offshore Oil Company was also reported to pump 14.2 million tons of crude oil in 1997, up nearly 10 percent to rank first among China's offshore oil producers. (Zou 2013, 71–72) Under UNCLOS, the Gulf area is an overlapping area of sea territory, exclusive economic zones, and continental shelf. Nevertheless, despite the complexity, the two parties managed to settle the disputes, which provide important references for solving the issues in the South China Sea (Kang 2020, 147–148).

In the past few years, China has clearly increased its activities and pressure in the South China Sea. Such incursions and harassment from China's "grey zone" actors have caused a backlash among many regional states. Also, probably due to the complexity of claims that are difficult to interpret within a complex body of international laws, it is no surprise for followers of South China Sea issues to encounter rhetoric such as "the South China Sea is the most dangerous area in the world" (Gershanek and Fannell 2019), or concerned parties "don't have a strategic endgame, short of war" (Valencia 2018). However, what has been largely overlooked, especially when it comes to the bilateral disputes between China and Vietnam, is that the actual disputed areas are more limited than what observers often assumed. It can be convenient to generalize the South China Sea disputes with China's infamous claim of the nine-dash line that encircles as much as 90 percent of the South China Sea. However, the maximum area of the South China Sea that is legally in dispute is far smaller than often realized, and understanding this is "key to finding a workable means of managing the South China Sea disputes" (Poling 2013, 5, IX–X). As Gregory Poling argues, "Vietnam's claims in the South China Sea have been the most overstated of those among the Southeast Asian claimants" (Poling 2013, 13). Specifically, the 2003 treaty between Vietnam and Indonesia, Vietnamese submissions to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) in 2009, and the Law of the Sea of Vietnam passed in 2012 all confirmed that Vietnam no longer makes the vast claim shown on the textbook map (Poling 2013, 13).

To reiterate, we have no intention to take sides in the disputes in the South China Sea. What we emphasize is that the approach adopted by China and Vietnam in solving past land border and maritime disputes indicates that the two sides have well-institutionalized mechanisms to communicate each other's preferences. Though it doesn't mean that the two sides are willing to accept each other's positions any time soon, these mechanisms do alleviate Vietnam's fear that China has unlimited ambition, and that China poses existential threats to Vietnam. As Amer points out, "If a resolution of the territorial disputes had been a precondition for full normalization of bilateral relations then the latter would not have been possible back in 1991. Thus, to put the territorial disputes aside and aim for a resolution in the longer-term perspective made full normalization a reality in early November 1991" (Amer 2009).

This principle has continued since then. Chinese and Vietnamese navy chiefs agreed in June 2021 to set up a hotline in a move seen as part of efforts to manage their relations. This is in addition to a direct line between the countries' defense ministries that was set up at the end of 2015 (Zhou 2021). As of November 2021, Vietnam and China had conducted 22 joint naval patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin (Yan 2021). In April 2022, a Vietnamese colonel on active duty told us, "I've spent a dozen years in the South China Seas. From our island, I can see the Chinese. I'm convinced that we can live with China on land. And, I'm convinced we can live with China at sea" (Anonymous, 2022b).

Table 1. Vietnam and China, Defense Budget, 2000–2020 (% of GDP)

	2000	2010	2020
Vietnam	3.22	2.3	1.67
China	1.8	1.3	1.27

Source: IISS, *The Military Balance (various years)*.

In other words, China and Vietnam have been actively engaging in institutionalized bilateral negotiations that resulted in the successful settlement of some prominent land border and maritime disputes. These institutionalized channels with formal negotiations have strengthened, rather than weakened, the bilateral relationship, and will continue to create favorable conditions for informing each other regarding their preferences and stabilizing the tension in the South China Sea.

Joint statements issued between China and Vietnam also generally are more substantive in nature and often include cooperative projects. In the realm of military and security cooperation alone, the 2013 joint statement highlights the importance of maintaining high-level contacts between the two armies, especially the usage of the direct telephone line between the two defense ministries. The statement also led to more joint land, sea, and naval patrols, based on the principles of easy things first and step-by-step, especially in the Tonkin Gulf. In the joint statement issued during Xi's visit in 2015, the two sides spoke of the continued high-level exchanges between the two armies and emphasized again the usage of the direct hotline between two defense ministries to manage and control crises at sea. They also expanded cooperation between the two armies to realms including Party and political affairs in the army, personnel training, joint patrols, visits by naval ships, as well as law enforcement at sea between the two countries' maritime police. Following these statements, the coast guards of Vietnam and China conducted two joint patrol missions in April and November 2016, and conducted 12 joint law enforcement exercises in the common fishing zone between 2006 and November 2016 (PRC State Council Information Office 2016). By June 2022, the two naval forces have successfully completed the 32 joint patrol missions in the Gulf of Tonkin (Zhang and Li 2022).

Stable Vietnamese defense effort

By the most commonly accepted measure of balancing—military expenditures as a proportion of GDP, Vietnam has steadily decreased its defense effort over the past three decades—a direct contradiction of realist predictions of balancing—and *prima facie* evidence that the Vietnamese top leadership feels it can make tradeoffs that favor priorities other than defense spending. During the 1980s, the country devoted between four and nine percent of its GDP to defense (SIPRI 2022). With the normalization of relations with China, the defense effort declined quite quickly. In 2000, Vietnam devoted 3.2 percent of its GDP to defense; in 2010, Vietnam devoted 2.3 percent of its GDP to the military, and by 2020 that proportion was well below two percent (Table 1). That Vietnam today is spending one-quarter of what it used to on defense is an indicator of its priorities.

Table 2. Vietnam's Force Levels, 1990–2020

	Army	Naval personnel
2020	412,000	13,000*
2006	412,000	13,000
1990	900,000	13,000

*Excluding naval infantry.

Source: IISS, *The Military Balance (various years)*.

Military force levels and weapons procurement have also been reduced from wartime to peacetime levels (Table 2). In 1990, Vietnam had 900,000 soldiers in uniform. Today, it has less than half that. Despite the ostensible naval challenge from China, Vietnam's naval personnel has not increased since 1990.

Vietnam's naval procurements reflect a similar pattern. In the 1990s, Vietnam had six principal surface combatants, which were retired in the early 2000s. Since then, Vietnam has purchased four Russian-built *Gerphard* frigates completed in the past decade, although the IISS *Military Balance* classifies the frigates as patrol and coastal combatants, not principal surface combatants. By comparison, China has 80 principal surface combatants. Vietnam has also purchased six Russian-built SSK-class submarines, although "it is doubtful that [Vietnam] could maintain more than 2 submarines ready for operations at any given time" (Beckely 2017, 101).

In short, while Vietnam is modernizing and improving its navy, the rate and scale at which this is occurring are relatively small (Tables 3 and 4). As Derek Grossman (2018, 118, 121) concludes, "Vietnam seeks to develop a more modest array of offsetting and retaliatory capabilities to deter Beijing from seizing disputed territory in the South China Sea...in the tradition of guerrilla military doctrine, they [paramilitary maritime forces] are only lightly armed, and seek to establish defensive positions without escalating the conflict further."

To put Vietnamese capacity in context, Peru has seven principal surface combatants armed with Otomat Mk2 anti-ship missiles that can strike over the horizon up to 180 km; like Vietnam, Peru has six SSK-class diesel attack submarines as well. Brazil has five SSK-class diesel attack submarines and eight principal surface combatants armed with anti-ship missiles. As Grossman (2018, 130) observes, "Vietnam does not currently possess, nor has it ever sought, a weapons system that could be

Table 3. Principal Surface Combatants, 2000–2020

	Vietnam	China
2000	6	60
2010	0	80
2015	2	72
2020	0*	80

*4 Russian-built *Gephard* class frigates classified as coastal combatants.

Source: IISS, *The Military Balance (various years)*.

Table 4. Conventional Submarines, 2000–2020

	Vietnam	China
2000	2	65
2005	2	69
2010	2	65
2015	4	70
2020	6	59

Source: *The Military Balance*, 2021.

considered an attempt to unilaterally raise the stakes vis-à-vis China in the South China Sea.”

In absolute terms, Vietnamese defense spending has increased as the country has grown richer. In 2010, Vietnam spent \$3.5 billion in constant 2019 US\$ on defense; by 2018, that had grown sixty percent, to \$5.6 billion, the latest year available with data on Vietnam (Table 5). This compares to an estimated \$244 billion in defense spending by China in 2019. Indonesia increased its spending more over that same time period, while Singapore, Malaysia, and Taiwan also increased their absolute spending less. There is no clear trend in East Asia. In absolute terms, Singapore and Indonesia spent more than Vietnam on defense in 2018.

Comparatively, Vietnam’s defense effort is in line with regional efforts, and indeed very similar to global trends. Figure 1 shows East Asian defense spending as a proportion of GDP compared to that of Latin America. From a Cold War level where East Asia had far higher defense efforts than Latin America, both regions have reduced their defense efforts over the past thirty years, and both regions now devote well under two percent of their GDP to defense. Indeed, East Asia spends on average slightly less than that of Latin America (1.7% to 1.6%).

Table 5. Absolute Military Expenditures, 2010–2018 (Constant 2019 USD Billion)

Country	2010	2018	% increase, 2010–2018
Indonesia	4.5	7.8	73.0
Vietnam	3.5	5.6	60.0
Thailand	5.6	7.1	26.8
Korea	32.6	40.8	25.2
Singapore	9.2	10.5	14.13
Philippines	2.7	2.9	7.4
Japan	46.4	47.4	2.2
Taiwan	10.2	10.3	0.98
Malaysia	3.6	3.3	–8.33

Source: SIPRI 2021.

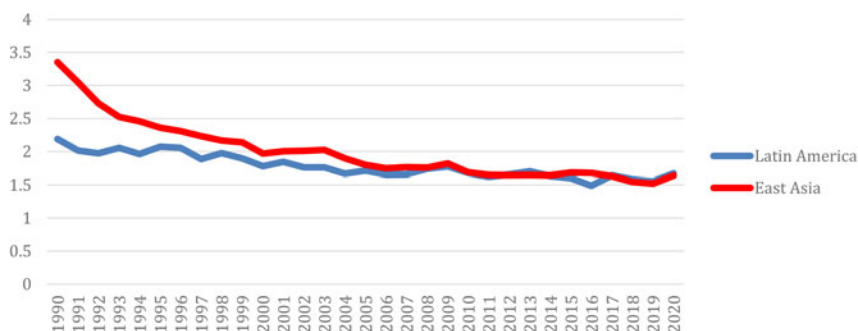


Figure 1. Latin American and East Asian Military Expenditures, Percent of GDP (1990–2020).

Countries: China, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Australia.

Latin America: Mexico, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, Venezuela.

Source: SIPRI 2021.

Though the overall trend of Vietnamese military spending indicates an absence of outright balancing, some scholars have argued that it could be “hedging.” The most influential definitions of hedging emphasize actions below outright alliances and outright balancing. For example, Kei Koga (2018, 635) argues that “the concept of ‘hedging’ should be understood in the context of the ‘balancing–bandwagoning’ spectrum within the ‘balance of power’ theory, in which hedging is located between balancing and bandwagoning as the state’s third strategic choice.” In terms of measuring hedging, Lim and Cooper (2015, 704) argue that “weak” hedging includes statements of support for security policies, criticism of rivals, and arms sales and military aid, while “a stronger signal is sent by joint training, exercises, or combat operations” (Lim and Cooper 2015, 705).

A comprehensive assessment of Vietnam’s defense efforts and diplomacy reveals that Vietnam adopted almost none of the actions described by Lim and Cooper. Vietnam has not resolved its maritime dispute with China, and it is a concern. Yet, Vietnam is not supporting US security policies. The US partially lifted a ban on arms sales to Vietnam in 2016, but Vietnam has engaged in only the most modest purchases of US arms. The US gave Vietnam coast guard patrol boats in 2018, and Vietnam made some scattered purchases of other equipment, such as Beechcraft trainer planes. However, there has been no active move to diversify its arms purchases to the US beyond these token gestures. Furthermore, Vietnam is not actively pursuing the US for joint military exercises. In fact, in October 2018, Vietnam canceled 15 defense engagement activities it had scheduled with the US for 2019 (Hiep 2018). Furthermore, rather than welcoming the US, Vietnam clearly and repeatedly claims that it will not engage in alliances with any country.

The visit of the aircraft carrier USS *Carl Vinson* (CVN-70) to Danang, Vietnam, in March 2018, the first-ever port call by a US aircraft carrier since the Vietnam War, is another powerful example that shows Vietnam’s hesitation in embracing the US. During the carrier’s visit, the US purposefully de-emphasized the carrier’s power-projection capabilities and instead focused on activities such as exchanging

firefighting techniques with members of the Danang fire department and preparing Vietnamese food. To avoid triggering internal Vietnamese pressure to resist being perceived as balancing in great power competition, no Navy ships visited Vietnam for six months prior to the carrier's visit. On one night during the visit, strong winds stranded about 1,300 exhausted US sailors at the pier. The sailors had to spend their whole night at the pier, as Vietnamese law prevented sailors from lodging at local hotels or departing the pier area. As Sharman noted, "Senior diplomatic engagement, creative proposals, and frank discussions were not enough to get Vietnam to make an exception" (Sharman 2020).

It is hard to distinguish when a country has cordial relations with a number of countries and when it has moved to hedging by sending ambiguous signals about possible realignment. However, one clear thing is that the signals sent out by Vietnam, especially concerning the US, are not ambiguous. That is, Vietnam has been noticeably and explicitly cautious about embracing the US too much and too quickly. The most recent example of this came on August 25, 2021, when US Vice President Kamala Harris made the first-ever official visit to Vietnam. What is typical with Vietnam–US high-level visits is that Vietnam often welcomes high-level Chinese diplomats either right before or right after the Americans. In this case, Vietnam hosted a Chinese diplomat of lower status than Vice President Harris with an equally high stature visit with the Vietnamese Prime Minister. On August 24, Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh held a meeting with Chinese Ambassador Xiong Bo. In what appeared to be a message directed at the United States, Prime Minister Chinh "affirmed that Vietnam adheres to an independent, self-reliant, multilateral, and diverse foreign policy and is a responsible member of the international community. Vietnam does not align itself with one country against another" (Pearson and Bose 2021). The remark could be interpreted as a reassurance to the Chinese, and a caution to the United States, that Vietnam would not be openly joining the United States at any point in the near future.

Significantly, it was Kamala Harris who brought up the possibility of upgrading their security cooperation, saying in prepared remarks, "I would also ask that, while we are here, that we consider doing what we can to upgrade our relationship as a strategic partnership" (White House 2021). Vietnam now maintains three relationships at the highest level of cooperation: "comprehensive strategic partnership": Russia (2001), India (2007), and China (2008). The United States (two levels down, described as a "comprehensive partner" in 2013) has pushed to be included in that group, but as yet, Vietnam has not upgraded the US to that level and shows no indication of even responding to US entreaties to do so. Indeed, the Vietnamese did not even acknowledge Kamala Harris' request in their formal statement after the visit. A Vietnamese analyst (Anonymous 2022a) pointed out that "given escalating US–China tensions, I believe the opportunity to elevate US–Vietnam ties into a 'comprehensive strategic partnership' (the highest level of diplomatic relations) has already passed, given Chinese sensitivity to such a move."

Vietnam is not purchasing arms nor receiving military aid from the US, nor is it supporting US-led containment efforts through its rhetoric. Indeed, perhaps the best evidence of Vietnam's stance towards China was its rapid distancing from US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022. Some US analysts cheered the

move (Twining 2022). By contrast, Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Le Thi Thu Hang said, "Vietnam persists in implementing the 'One China' principle and hopes relevant parties exercise restraint, refrain from escalating the situation in the Taiwan Strait and actively contribute to the maintenance of peace and stability of the region and world" (The Star 2022). It is fairly clear that Vietnam is not eagerly supporting US moves to challenge China through Taiwan, especially if it is viewed that a change in the current status quo was provoked by the United States.

Vietnam's open embrace of Russia in 2022 was another clear indicator that Vietnam has different foreign policy priorities than those of the United States. Vietnam did not join in economic sanctions against Russia and indeed performed joint military exercises with Russia in June 2022. As a Vietnamese analyst (Anonymous 2022a) with contacts across government and business remarked in 2022, "Security leaders and personnel remain quite high on alert with regards to potential US-led regime change. They regularly publish quite anti-US editorials that get too little attention in foreign publications and news coverage about Vietnam today. And, the profound support for Russia in Ukraine is also one strong proxy of lingering anti-Americanism."

Indeed, in an interview published on the one year anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Senior Lieutenant General Nguyễn Chí Vịnh (VTC Now 2023) said:

Both Russia and Ukraine are friends with Vietnam, they are members of the former Soviet Union in the frontline that helped us win in the war for our independence. This is why this war [between them] makes us very sad, and our wish is to try and contribute in any way that can reduce the loss of life in war ...

Even if we were to support Ukraine right now, it cannot be done because Ukraine follows a pro-American ideology ... if that is now the case, it's obvious that we must also think of other relationships that in the future we cannot let this happen to—we must always cherish the relationship we have with our neighbors. We must keep a relationship of solidarity, friendship, independence.

General Nguyễn reiterated a consistent Vietnamese policy position that it would not align with the US, saying "if other neighboring countries have policies that don't align with us, we will not fight them. We should never do such things, and should instead obey international law. And like I said, don't choose sides, don't rely on one country to fight the other, that is the secret to protecting our homeland and maintaining good relations with our neighbors."

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) tends to present Vietnam as a US-friendly partner. Yet, of course, Vietnamese MoFA must go through the Politburo, and MoFA is only one bureaucratic aspect of Vietnam's overall relations with the United States. The military and security agencies are far more skeptical of the United States, as is much of the Politburo and higher political leadership.

In the spring of 2022, the Central Steering Committee of Anti-Corruption targeted the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in a major anti-corruption probe. A deputy foreign minister was detained—the highest level of arrest ever of a MoFA official. The cases of corruption all happened under the leadership of the former foreign minister Pham Binh Minh, who was often portrayed as US-friendly. Interestingly, his father,

former foreign minister Nguyen Co Thach, was deposed from his ministerial post in 1991, partly due to Chinese pressure. As a Vietnamese analyst noted this year, “Similar to China, when engaging with foreign audiences, Vietnam currently likes to downplay the role of ideology (esp. anti-imperialist legacy) and historical consciousness. But it does not do so with its domestic audience.”

This can be seen in various media outlets in Vietnam. A few examples are instructive. In 2021, on the date of Ho Chi Minh’s 130th birthday, General Secretary Nguyễn Phú Trọng (2021) wrote a column that promotes the socialist path as the most democratic and righteous path for Vietnam and its development, and laments the economic contradictions of Western capitalism. It was highly anti-West, and arguably anti-American. Nguyễn wrote:

The fact that democratic institutions follow the “liberal democracy” formula that the West tries to promote and impose on the whole world does not guarantee that real power belongs to the people, by the people and for the sake of the people. That system of power remains largely in the hands of a wealthy minority and serves the interests of large capitalist corporations... Therefore, in the developed capitalist countries, the so-called “free” and “democratic” elections, although they can change the government, cannot change the dominant forces; behind the multi-party system is in fact still the tyranny of the capitalist corporations.

In a 2021 article titled “Relations of Former Enemies: Việt Nam Still Suspects the US is Promoting a ‘peaceful evolution,’” Hà Hoàng Hợp (Voice of America in Vietnamese 2021), said “In reality (Communist Party leaders) are still wary of activities that criticize them, criticize their policies as well as contrast the political system of this totalitarian regime with more open, democratic political systems.” In 2016, the General Department of Politics of the Vietnam People’s Army created “Force 47,” a cyber-fighting force established dedicated to combating any “wrong views” that emerge on the internet that could potentially lead to conspiracy or “peaceful development” activities in the public. An article in the *Daily People’s Army Newspaper* argues that that “it is crucial for Force 47 to block any opposing views related to ‘peaceful development’” (Tran 2017).

The Vietnamese 2019 Defense White Paper, the first in a decade, explicitly mentioned three initiatives that great powers are using to try to dominate East Asia: the US Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy, China’s Belt and Road Initiative, and India’s Act East policy. As Huong Le Thu (2019) put it, “many long-term doctrines are reasserted in the white paper, including the much-quoted ‘three no’s,’” namely, no military alliances, no aligning with one country against another, and no foreign military bases on Vietnamese soil. The defense white paper also added a “fourth no and one depend” as some analysts are calling it: Vietnam will not use force or threaten to use force in international relations, and “depending on circumstances and specific conditions, Vietnam will consider developing necessary, appropriate defense and military relations with other countries.” But the “depend” is very cautious—in 2021, Vietnamese Prime Minister Phạm Minh Chính said that “Vietnam does not pick sides, it picks what is just. Vietnam’s foreign policy should be like Vietnamese bamboo, resolute but flexible” (Pearson and Bose 2021). As Nguyen The Phuong (2019)

observes, “given the inherently cautious and indecisive characteristics of Vietnamese military circles, however, it is unclear how the ‘one-depend’ will ultimately be utilized ... skeptics will say, there is no guarantee that the United States will come to Vietnam’s aid when the situation in the South China Sea goes sour.”

High-level visits as indicators of priorities

We now turn to high-level diplomatic visits, a costly scarce resource, to illustrate Vietnam’s diplomatic priorities. High-level exchanges have been used as important indicators to gauge salient issues of international security, as a high-level exchange often requires tradeoffs of prioritizing certain destinations over others, the high opportunity cost of leaders’ absence from their normal duties, and the mobilization and commitment of a significant level of scarce diplomatic resources (Cha and Lim 2017; Kastner and Saunders 2012, 165). Lebovic and Saunders (2016) systematically assess explanations for the distribution of high-level diplomatic visits.

Following the literature, we define “high-level exchange” as an exchange between officials of at least two countries at the ministerial level or above, and use exchanges as a measure of the importance a country places on its relations with another country. We constructed an original dyadic dataset on high-level exchanges of Vietnam from January 1, 2009, to March 15, 2020. For each visit, we coded the date, the locale, the host country, visiting country, the positions and names of the Vietnamese leaders, the positions and names of the foreign leaders, and brief remarks that outline the nature or the major theme of that visit. The clearest finding is that Vietnam prioritizes China over all other countries, with more high-level visits to China than any other country. Furthermore, the United States was never prioritized as much as China, and over time is becoming less emphasized, not more.

Online Appendix I lists data sources, coding schemes, and all the specific ministries of the government and departments under the Central Committee of the Communist Party in relevant countries that are included in our dataset. Online Appendix II specifies potential limitations and additional robustness tests that we employed to address the potential limitations of this data. Altogether, this original data allows us a sufficiently long time frame to explore patterns and changes in the relationship within the larger strategic situation of East Asian security. Because of space constraints, we have put a number of qualitative case studies in online Appendix III. These case studies show both the content and timing of visits in great detail.

Findings from high-level exchanges: 2009–2016

We divided the visits into two periods: January 1, 2009–June 30, 2016, and July 1, 2016–March 15, 2020. We did so to look at different time periods: 2009 is when the ostensible disputes in the South China Seas began to flare up; and 2016 marked the end of the Obama administration and the beginning of the Trump administration in the United States. [Figure 2](#) shows the top 10 countries that have the most high-level exchanges with Vietnam (incoming and outgoing combined) over the years from 2009 through 2016.

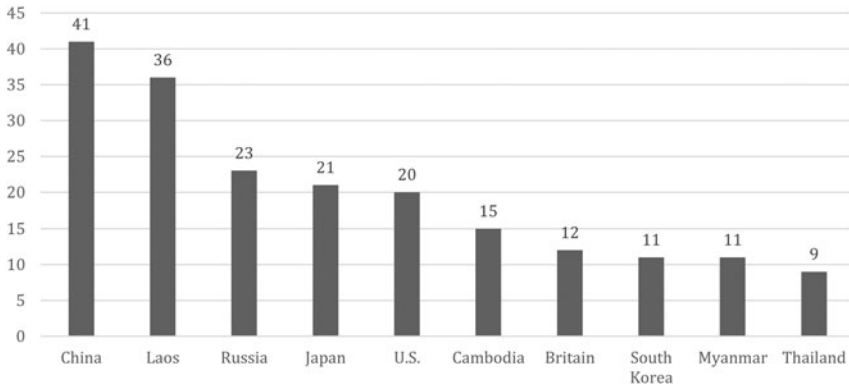


Figure 2. Overall Frequency of High-level Exchanges (1.1.2009–6.30.2016).

Two observations against conventional wisdom immediately stand out. First, despite the tension assumed between China and Vietnam, the overall frequency of high-level exchanges between these two countries is higher than other countries. Indeed, Vietnam and China had twice as many high-level visits (41) compared to US–Vietnam visits (20). Second, the country that interacts second-most frequently with Vietnam is not a large power such as Russia or the US, but a small power that sits next to Vietnam on the Southeast Asian mainland—Laos. A closer examination of these exchanges reveals that they are not only frequent, but also very high-profile. For instance, after he came to office in April 2016, the first-ever foreign activity made by Vietnamese President Tran Dai Quang as the State President was his visit to Laos in June 2016 (Voice of Vietnam 2016a). Three months later, the Vietnamese Prime Minister met again with Lao Party General Secretary and President on the sidelines of the ASEAN Summit, observed that “Vietnam always gives the top priority to the special solidarity with Laos,” and pledged that he would instruct ministries, agencies and localities to continue realizing high-level agreements between the two countries (Voice of Vietnam 2016b).

The breakdown of the high-level exchanges (Figure 3) further demonstrates the direction of the pursuit. Among the three traditionally defined large powers in the above top 10 countries, the US has initiated more than twice as many visits to Vietnam than the other way around, lending support to the observation that Vietnam is actually being pursued by the US. China–Vietnam visits are essentially even in outgoing and incoming visits. For instance, in 2010 alone, the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Hanoi twice in July and October, respectively, reiterating the Obama Administration’s commitment “to broad, deep, and sustained engagement in Asia” (US Department of State 2010). In addition to her visits, the US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates also visited Hanoi in October 2010, with the aim to “advance the defense ties ... and to establish a broader set of more practical cooperation activities with the Vietnamese military and defense establishment” (US Department of Defense 2010). The allocation of three high-level visits to Vietnam within such a short period of time clearly shows the desire of the US to have a closer and more comprehensive relationship with Vietnam, a country that is, according to

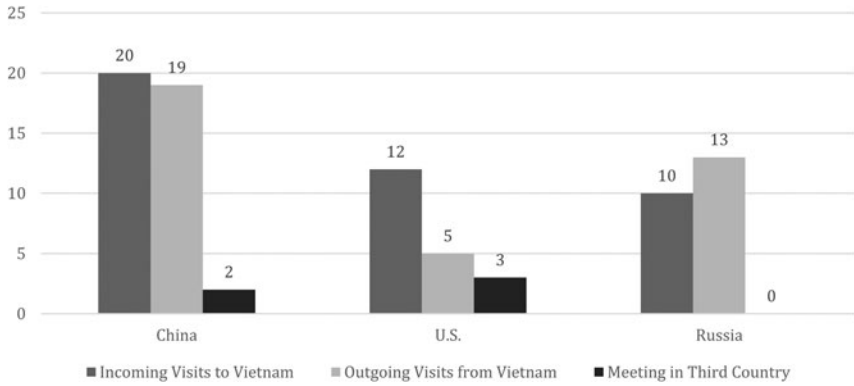


Figure 3. Incoming versus Outgoing High-level Exchanges between Vietnam and Large Powers (1.1.2009–6.30.2016).

Pentagon Press Secretary Geoff Morrell, “a close and leading US partner in Southeast Asia” (Pession 2010). Online Appendix III provides case studies comparing the US and Chinese visits with Vietnam.

Findings from high-level exchanges: July 1, 2016–March 31, 2020

When we examine July 1, 2016, to March 31, 2020, not only do the trends remain roughly the same, but most significantly, the United States is now relatively less frequently involved in high-level exchanges than it was between 2009 and 2016. In the earlier period, the US had the fifth most high-level exchanges with Vietnam. Between July 1, 2016, and March 31, 2020, the US dropped to eighth most exchanges (Figure 4). While in the earlier period, China had twice as many high-level visits with Vietnam as the US, in the later period China had more than three times as many high-level visits as the US (38 to 11). Most tellingly, China remains the most active in high-level exchanges with Vietnam.

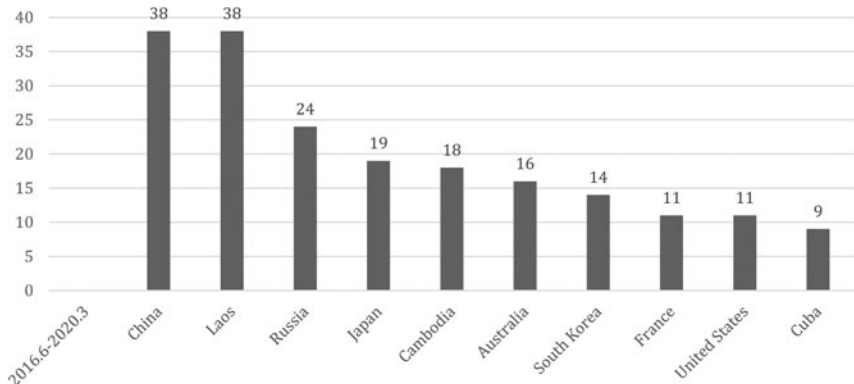


Figure 4. Vietnam’s High-level Exchanges (7.1.2016–3.31.2020).

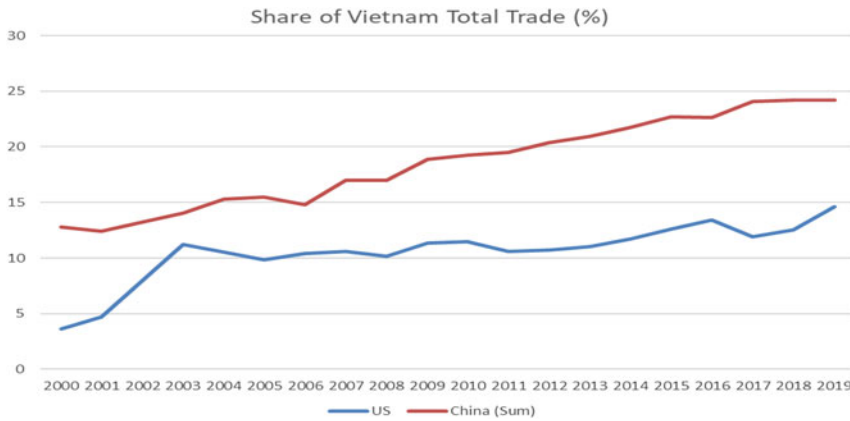


Figure 5. Vietnamese Trade with China and the U.S., 2000–2019 (% of Total Trade).
 Source: WITS

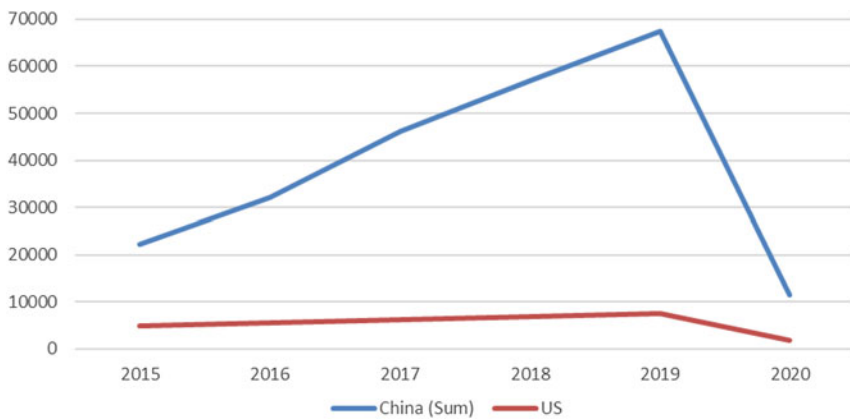


Figure 6. Foreign Arrivals in Vietnam, 2015–2020.
 Source: Statistical year book of Vietnam

Furthermore, an examination of the timing of high-level exchanges between the US and Vietnam, and China and Vietnam, reveals another key point: out of 11 US high-level visits with Vietnam, 9 were accompanied by a high-level Chinese exchange within a week either before or after the US exchange. In other words, high-level US visits to Vietnam have followed a typical pattern: the US pushes for closer ties, the Vietnamese reiterate they will not choose sides, and Vietnam–China hold a high-level visit at the same time. This shows that exchanges between Vietnam and large powers, especially the US, are asymmetric, with more active pursuit from the extra-regional powers, especially when it comes to security and defense exchanges led by military and security officials. Compared to the relationship between Vietnam and the US, the interaction between Vietnam and China is more frequent and balanced, with a mutual understanding on the importance of direct dialogue through regular high-level exchanges on key issues.

Regarding economic relations, Vietnam is tightly intertwined with China, and there are no signs of any reverse. The World Bank has data only from 2000–2019, but the trend is clear: although the US is a major trade partner with Vietnam, China is even more significant. “greater China” (including Macao and Hong Kong)–Vietnam trade comprised 24 percent of total Vietnamese trade in 2019, compared to 15 percent for the US (Figure 5). As of December 2019, China was the third largest investor in Vietnam, with US\$15.8 billion invested, behind South Korea (\$66 billion) and Japan (\$59 billion) (Son and Le 2019). As for societal ties, up until the pandemic Chinese tourists to Vietnam dwarfed those from the United States (Figure 6).

Conclusion

A granular examination of Vietnam’s recent relations with both China and the region and the US leads to the conclusion that even small powers sharing borders with China are exhibiting few signs of fear or external threat. Vietnam is not showing any signs that it could dramatically shift its foreign policy and openly balance against China. There are also almost no signs that Vietnam is hedging, and considering other options, either. Vietnam serves as a bellwether, or a canary in the coal mine. If Vietnam is not particularly eager to contain China, it is unlikely that other East Asian countries with far less vulnerability will be, either. And if this is the case, then large swaths of our scholarly literature on East Asian security need to be modified.

Indeed, despite decades of Western predictions to the contrary, East Asian states are not forming a balancing coalition against China out of fear of its rise. As Alexander Vuving (2023, 35) concluded in 2021, “More than four years after the latest turning point in Vietnamese foreign policy, [Vietnam’s policymakers] still do not seem to feel the urgency of having a new national security strategy ... such a sense of urgency may have to wait until the next big change in Vietnam’s strategic environment.” Indeed, this sentiment appears to be similar around Southeast Asia. As Evelyn Goh points out, “Southeast Asian complicity with US hegemonic reassertion in the SCS has clearer limits than that of US allies in Northeast Asia. The desire for US strategic support aims to harness its superior coercive authority to pressure China into negotiating and abiding by binding conflict-avoidance norms with ASEAN, not to boost US hegemony per se” (Goh 2013, 112).

The theoretical explanation for Vietnam’s under-reaction to China’s growing power is straightforward—Years of engagement have enabled Vietnam and China to reach a *modus vivendi* that can settle disputes, and that permits a muted military response to Chinese risks. The lack of existential threat further dissuades Vietnamese leaders from moving closer to extra-regional powers such as the United States.

The case of Vietnam can be generalized across the East Asian region and leads to the probative conclusion that East Asian security is more stable than popularly believed. As Robert Jervis observed in 2019, “many observers thought that China’s rise would call up a local counter-balancing coalition. These predictions did not come true, leading scholars to wonder whether balance of power theory was obsolete—or even wrong” (Jervis 2019, 2). Indeed, most countries do not plan based on

worst-case, what if assumptions. Bolivia is not preparing for a surprise attack from Chile “just in case,” while England and Germany are not arming based on worst-case possibilities of a third European war. Theories based on worst case assumptions and just-in-case expectations lead to fears of East Asian instability; but a closer look at the countries actually in the region leads to a different conclusion. A key member of the potential balancing coalition against China does not engage in balancing calls into question US Indo-Pacific strategies that are premised on the assumption that countries will “soft align” or openly join with the US to contain China.

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