

# **GEOPOLITICAL REPOSITIONING IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION:**

A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN INDIA AND VIETNAM.

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the dynamic landscape of global geopolitics, the Indo-Pacific region has become an epicenter of great powers' strategic competition, attracting significant attention and making regional and extra-regional states adjust their strategies to adapt to the new environment. Previous studies have focused overwhelmingly on the role of great and major powers in shaping the regional and global order. However, the role of secondary powers should receive sufficient attention regarding their essential influence on the balance of power. In light of their geopolitical position and growing capabilities in the region, this thesis investigates the geopolitical repositioning of India and Vietnam over the recent years. Both countries have made substantial adjustments in their strategies in dealing with profound geopolitical shifts and pursuing their geopolitical ambitions.

The research aims to elucidate India and Vietnam's geopolitical repositioning by discussing their main characteristics, motivations, and obstacles, as well as identifying and explaining their similarities and differences. To achieve that, the author employs a qualitative neoclassical realist framework, which examines the influences of not only systemic factors but also domestic and individual leaders' factors on the ultimate foreign policy choices. In addition, through foreign policy analysis and comparative foreign policy analysis methods, the author argues that although New Delhi and Hanoi share numerous commonalities, particularly their hedging strategies and emphasis on strategic autonomy, the two countries differentiate themselves remarkably regarding balancing strategy, goals, orientations, and outcomes of their policies. These similarities and distinctions are the products of various factors, including systemic imperatives, domestic politics, strategic culture, and leader's perceptions.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the international order has undergone a significant power shift, with the relative decline of the US's supremacy and the strong rise of China. Given the intensified rivalry between the two global superpowers, the Indo-Pacific has emerged as a focal point in the international geopolitical landscape and is widely seen as the theater of this strategic confrontation (Cannon & Hakata, 2021). Since no single actor can completely dominate the region, numerous countries have to adjust their geopolitical position to deal with strategic geopolitical rivalry, significant instability, and unpredictable changes in the nascent order. Many major powers, within and beyond the region, such as Japan, France, and the European Union (EU)... have recently introduced their approaches to the Indo-Pacific region, affirming the importance of this region in their foreign strategies and global geopolitical chessboard.

It is undeniable that the regional landscape is profoundly impacted by great powers, yet it is also necessary to consider the roles of secondary powers (Kou et al., 2022). Notably, India and Vietnam possess important geopolitical positions in South and Southeast Asia, respectively, which are the two indispensable parts of the broader Indo-Pacific region (Jha & Vo, 2020). India is the dominant power in South Asia, connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans, thereby playing a pivotal role in shaping the regional security structure. Furthermore, India is considered by many important partners, including the United States, as a “natural balancer” in the face of the rise of China, which is critical to the regional balance of power (He & Li, 2020). Meanwhile, Vietnam is located at a strategic junction of Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia, of mainland Southeast Asia and island Southeast Asia, providing the country with economic, security, and strategic importance that gather the interests of numerous major powers (Do L. C., 2020). Moreover, Vietnam is thought to hold the potential to directly or indirectly influence the rise of China (Dar, 2021).

Although India and Vietnam are traditionally associated with their strategic autonomy and non-alignment principle, their geopolitical statuses have attracted burgeoning attention, which could be attributable to their considerably growing capabilities and their strategic roles within the regional order. Being the most impacted neighbors in the background of a more assertive China and also good partners of the US, India and Vietnam are currently tasked with exceedingly complicated challenges to navigate among great power rivalry while maintaining regional peace and stability and pursuing their national interests (Dar, 2021). This context brings substantial opportunities and challenges for the two countries to reposition their geopolitical status. Drastic shifts in their international status might bring about substantial

changes in the Indo-Pacific geopolitical landscape and even contouring the great power strategic competition. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of this topic has the potential to elucidate the dynamics of regional and international relations.

Considering the situation, how can India and Vietnam's geopolitical repositioning in the Indo-Pacific region be explained? Which theoretical framework could effectively explain their recent efforts to realize their geopolitical motivation? India, as an emerging global power, and Vietnam, which has garnered much consideration in its middle-power-status endeavor, could exhibit an interesting comparison. What are the similarities and differences between the geopolitical repositioning of these two countries? In addition, is the traditional quest for strategic autonomy of India and Vietnam still relevant? These questions are the premise for the topic of this thesis: ***“Geopolitical repositioning in the Indo-Pacific region: A comparative study between India and Vietnam.”***

This work will focus on the primary research question: *How can India and Vietnam's geopolitical repositioning in the Indo-Pacific region be explained?* To address this question, the author proposes three secondary questions:

- i. How are India and Vietnam repositioning their geopolitical status?
- ii. What are the main motivations and obstacles for their geopolitical repositioning?
- iii. What are the similarities and differences between the two countries' implementation, and how can they be explained?

To solve these questions, the author adopts a qualitative approach with a neoclassical realist framework, which investigates the independent variable of system stimuli and the intervening variables, including Indian and Vietnamese leaders' perception of the threats and opportunities, the role of domestic politics and strategic culture in shaping their strategic decisions, to reason the dependent variable of foreign policy choices. A comparative analysis is also utilized to determine these phenomena' similarities and differences.

The thesis starts by examining briefly the developments in India's and Vietnam's efforts to reposition their geopolitical status. The year 2017 marks an important milestone in the regional security landscape with Donald Trump's first introduction of the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" concept during his trip to Vietnam and later in official documents such as the National Security Strategy and Strategy Framework for Indo-Pacific. This event signaled potential

significant regional geopolitical shifts and changes in states' foreign policy. Also, during this period, India's Prime Minister Modi brought about a new era of foreign thinking to bring India closer to the center of the global geopolitical arena. Meanwhile, Vietnam began receiving the international community's attention to its transformation into a middle power. A brief look at the historical developments of India and Vietnam's position in the regional geopolitical landscape before 2017 serves as a background for subsequently investigating India and Vietnam's current geopolitical repositioning endeavors.

Next, the literature review chapter examines three main clusters of literature: (i) geopolitical dynamics in the Indo-Pacific region, (ii) India and Vietnam's geopolitical repositioning and comparative studies on this topic, and (iii) neoclassical realist approaches to Indo-Pacific security landscapes and states' geopolitical repositioning. After that, the author suggests the main theoretical framework of the research. This thesis agrees with the idea of Kou et al. (2022) that system factor, specifically strategic competition, is not the sole determinant in the foreign strategy decisions of the middle powers in the region, and other domestic conditions also account for the diverse strategies of these states. Therefore, a neoclassical realist approach is adopted, which can connect the dots of three levels of analysis, including international and national factors and leader's perceptions. Next, the methodological part provides insights into the methodology, resources, and limitations of the researcher. In this research, the author will utilize foreign policy analysis and comparative foreign policy analysis as key methods. The reasons behind these choices are discussed further in the following chapters.

The center of this thesis is its research chapters. First, the author conducts a comprehensive investigation about India's and Vietnam's geopolitical repositioning from 2017 until now (June 2024). In each case, the author would discuss each country's context, focusing on its regional strategic environment, strategic culture, domestic politics, and leaders' perceptions. Afterward, policies in three main pillars (political-diplomatic, economic, and security-defense) will be discussed. By doing so, the author points out the main motivations, obstacles, and characteristics of each country's geopolitical repositioning process. The final research chapter will highlight the similarities and differences between Vietnam's and India's efforts.

In the end, the research concludes with the answer to how effective neoclassical realism helps explain India's and Vietnam's efforts to reposition their geopolitical status, its limitations, and potential further research.

## 2. CONCEPTS AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

### *2.1. Definition of geopolitical repositioning*

Before delving into the concept of “geopolitical repositioning,” it is necessary to understand its components. “Geopolitics” was first coined by Rudolf Kjellen in 1899 to emphasize the role of geography in a state’s foreign, military, or economic policy (Kovac, 2023). This concept is frequently mentioned as a sub-field of international relations that studies how geographical features interplay with the behaviors of actors, particularly states, and the dynamics of international politics (Agnew, 2003; Cohen, 2003; Kelly, 1997). Van der Wusten & Dijkink suggest that geopolitics has three inseparable connotations: “a type of analysis regarding a country’s international position and its geographical attributes, a set of rules applicable in conducting statecraft based on such analyses, and a discourse describing and evaluating a country’s position in the world” (van der Wusten & Dijkink, 2002, p. 20). Likewise, arguing that geopolitics is beyond the pure relations between geography and politics, Nick Bisley proposes the concept of “geopolitics 2.0”, referring a kind of statecraft in which states’ actions are driven by the priorities of “material power and a competitive logic connected to a larger strategic ambition.” In addition, non-military options could be mobilized for the ambition as indirect means (Bisley, 2017, pp. 12–13). This approach focuses mainly on the states, which are still the main actors in international relations today. This thesis agrees with Bisley’s approach because of its comprehensiveness in both the method and purpose of the states’ geopolitics thinking.

Meanwhile, “repositioning” is a term commonly used in the field of economics and trade, with the meaning of “a conscious act undertaken by enterprises as they adapt to a changing commercial environment to change and seek to change its basis of differential advantage” (Turner, 2003, p. 251), “a strategic response in dynamic environments” (Eisenhardt & Brown, 1999) or a strategy aiming to “change how a firm’s product or service is conceived in the marketplace” (Cunningham, 2007, p. 84). Recently, this term has been increasingly employed in international political discourse with nuanced meanings. Richard Bernal (2000, p. 311) defines “Strategic global repositioning” as “a process of repositioning a country in the global economy and world affairs by implementing a strategic medium to long term plan,” [...] involving “changes in both internal and external relations” (Bernal, 2000, p. 311). Overall, the above definitions reflect three main characteristics of “strategic repositioning,” including (i) consciousness and proactivity of actors, (ii) the dynamic/changing environment that actors belong to, and (iii) actors’ status and advantages.



Nevertheless, there is no clear definition of “geopolitical repositioning” in academia. In current literature, geopolitical repositioning is frequently associated with geopolitical dynamics, reconfigurations, or power transitions, international order transitions. This approach only emphasizes the importance of the external strategic environment and fails to sufficiently address actors’ motivation and goals. By putting the three above characteristics of “repositioning” into the geopolitical framework, the author suggests that: *Geopolitical repositioning could be conceptualized as medium to long-term proactive strategic adjustments in a country’s foreign strategy and its international relations made to adapt to a changing international landscape to ensure or enhance its geopolitical status, thus better pursue their national interests.*

## **2.2. The concept of Indo-Pacific**

“Indo-Pacific” has become an indispensable term when discussing the strategic dynamics of Asia in the 21st century. This term was first officially used in international political discourse in 2007 by Gurpreet Khurana (Khurana, 2017). Since then, numerous strategies, foreign policies, and research have been launched and given more salience to this region. However, it was not until Donald Trump announced the concept of a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” in 2017 that the Indo-Pacific officially became an essential topic of discussion in diplomatic, foreign policy, and academic literature worldwide (Harding, 2019).

According to Khurana (2007, p.150), the Indo-Pacific region is a “maritime space comprising the Indian Ocean and the western Pacific” bordered by “the states of Asia, including West Asia/ Middle East, and eastern Africa”. Inspired by the rise of India in the early 21st century, Khurana’s original connotation of Indo-Pacific was an area of Asian countries linked together physically, from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, aiming to ensure global and regional stability through trade cooperation and maritime security (Khurana, 2007, 2017). Over time, this concept has undergone many significant changes.

To date, more than ten regional and extra-regional countries have articulated their vision of the Indo-Pacific. However, no concept has been universally recognized. Typically, the Biden administration’s Indo-Pacific Strategy points out that the Indo-Pacific region stretches “from our Pacific coastline to the Indian Ocean” and includes “Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia, to South Asia and Oceania, including the Pacific Islands” (The White House, 2022). Similarly, the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, although it does not explicitly state, implies that the Indo-Pacific region includes the Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean region (ASEAN, 2019). Canada’s Indo-Pacific strategy explicitly lists 40 countries in this region, not including the US

and Canada (Government of Canada, 2022). To ensure its consistency, this thesis uses the geographical approach in the US's Indo-Pacific Strategy mentioned above.

However, as Rory Medcalf (2021) suggests mental maps, in other words, politically constructed ones (primarily by powerful states with self-centric political purposes) play a critical role in statecraft. Khurana (2017) also acknowledges that the current Indo-Pacific concept is no longer simply a geographical connection but has strategic and geopolitical significance, especially in maritime security.

Currently, the Indo-Pacific is often seen as a code for contingent geopolitical agendas, especially a US-led project to thwart China's rise (Medcalf, 2021). Unveiling its vision, the Trump administration aspired to build a free and open Indo-Pacific region with a rules-based order and international behavioral norms to minimize challenges regionally and globally, where sovereign and independent states can thrive in freedom and peace (Department of State, 2019). However, in its National Security Strategy, the Trump administration stated that China is "a revisionist power" attempting to "erode American security and prosperity" and seeking to "displace the US in the Indo-Pacific region, expanding the reaches of its state-driven economic model, and reorder the region in its favor" (The White House, 2017, p. 2,25). Therefore, "a geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of world order is taking place in the Indo-Pacific region" (The White House, 2017, p. 45). Not surprisingly, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has called this concept "an attention-grabbing idea" that "will dissipate like ocean foam" and has tried to remove the term from the texts of multilateral diplomatic documents (Birtles, 2018). A year later, Wang Yi criticized the Indo-Pacific as a "new NATO" in Asia (Patranobis, 2021). At the same time, China has also tried to convince regional countries of its vision of Asia - the Belt and Road Initiative since 2013 - to replace the Indo-Pacific and QUAD (Khurana, 2023). Meanwhile, other QUAD members (Japan, India, Australia) have proposed their approaches, which do not necessarily overlap with US priorities, particularly regarding the strategic competition, due to differences in perceived security challenges, military capabilities, and strategic priorities of each member.

### ***2.3. Historical background***

#### ***2.3.1. India***

Gaining independence in 1947, India possesses several aspects of a major power in international politics, such as a large population, a long history, and the largest and important geographical position in South Asia, which is the basis for its geopolitical ambitions. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, once envisioned India as "not merely a regional

but also an international power” (Bava, 2007, p. 3). However, with its material weaknesses, India’s strategies were significantly defensive for a long time, with the traditional non-alignment aimed at protecting its sovereignty and security in the context of bipolar competition during the Cold War (Tellis, 2016). Therefore, India’s international standing and political influence in this period were limited, mainly concentrated in South Asia.

Since the end of the Cold War, India implemented important socio-economic reforms and achieved significant developments in the following decades with an outstanding economic growth rate of 7% to 9% per annum (Chitalkar & Malone, 2015, p. 10). It is impossible not to mention India’s growing economic dependence on China in its economic development, reflecting its strategic imbalance and vulnerability. During the first two decades of the 2000s, China became India’s largest trading partner and the major source of imports in sectors such as electronics, chemicals, and pharmaceuticals. India’s trade deficit with China had increased from less than \$1 billion in 2003 to a massive \$63 billion in 2017, approximately 40% of its overall trade deficit in goods (Dhar & KS Rao, 2020). Moreover, China’s investments in India in non-trade areas such as technology and infrastructure have increasingly paved the way for a more important role for China in India’s economic development (KS Rao & Dhar, 2018). Strategically, this economic dependence has presented India with the challenge of safeguarding its interests given strategic tensions with China, including border disputes. Meanwhile, in 2017, India achieved a significant trade surplus with the US, about \$32 billion, helping to improve the country’s trade balance. During this period, the US was India’s crucial trading partner, while India’s role in the US economy was still relatively insignificant (Davydov & Kupriyanov, 2022).

With its growing economic power, India had become more confident in the international and regional security structure, actively participating in economic and political mechanisms to achieve commensurate benefits, and attracting the support of important partners (Mukherjee & Malone, 2011, p. 321). US Central Intelligence Agency assessed that India had the potential to become the most important “swing state” in the international order. Accordingly, India’s participation in any alliances would profoundly affect the international balance of power (Tellis, 2005). However, India still maintained the strategic approach of autonomy and non-alignment, which was thought to offer India “maximum choices in its international relations and for its internal development” (Khilnani et al., 2012, p. 8).

Prime Minister Modi took office in 2014 and set out a greater geopolitical ambition to position India “in a leading role, rather than as just a balancing force, globally” (Tellis, 2016).

This statement signaled a substantial shift in India's foreign strategy. In the same year, Modi upgraded the Look East Policy to Act East Policy, demonstrating India's efforts to strengthen economic, strategic, and security relations between South and Southeast Asia (Iii & Przystup, 2017). He also launched the "Make in India" economic initiative to transform India into an international manufacturing hub, attracting foreign investment and encouraging domestic manufacturing industry (Chaturvedi, 2015). In 2015, Modi first outlined a vision for the future of the Indian Ocean region with its initiative of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR), which reflects New Delhi's attempts for maritime engagement to ensure sovereignty, security, and national interests in the Indian Ocean (Rahul, 2018). *To sum up*, in his first years in office, Modi has brought about numerous substantial changes in foreign policy thinking, affirming its determination to reposition the country's geopolitical status to become a global leading power.

### 2.3.2. Vietnam

After its reunification in 1975, Vietnam focused on rebuilding the country, which was severely damaged after two wars against France and the US. During this period, Vietnam's foreign strategies were deeply ideological, mainly aimed at dealing with adversaries to its independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, and simultaneously seeking support for the Vietnamese government from the international community (Duiker, 1978, pp. 1–3).

Since Renewal Cause [Đổi Mới] in 1986, Vietnam's foreign policy has witnessed significant changes. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, ideology gradually lost its role as a compass in Vietnam's strategic thinking. In particular, the new international landscape was seen by Hanoi as a single system dominated by great powers and their competition instead of two ideological camps as in the past (Duong, 2024; Vuving, 2023). Vietnamese leaders launched a 'multi-directional' foreign policy intending to make "more friends, fewer enemies" and prioritize multilateralism, international integration, and economic development (Thayer, 2016a). It means that not only socialist states and traditional friends but also major capitalist powers and regional states were included in its foreign policy priority. Since then, Vietnam had achieved several significant foreign achievements, including normalizing relations with China in 1991, with the US and joining ASEAN in 1995 (Thayer, 1997). In addition, its economy witnessed significantly rapid growth, rising from one of the poorest countries to a lower middle-income country in 2010 (Baum, 2020). In 2011, the task of "enhancing national position" was first mentioned, signaling the desire to reshape the national posture in the regional geopolitical landscape.

Like India, Vietnam also faced deep economic dependence on its Northern neighbor. Trade cooperation between the two countries developed strongly in the early 2000s thanks to the process of international economic integration of both countries. While Vietnam's GDP grew 5.5 times in about 15 years from 2000, its trade deficit with China increased 171 times, reaching \$32.4 billion in 2015 (VietnamNet, 2017). Vietnam heavily depended on imports from China for raw materials, machinery, and vegetables, which were critical to its manufacturing and agriculture sectors. The substantial and persistent bilateral trade deficit with Beijing was a source of concern in Hanoi, which saw little improvement over this period. However, establishing a regional production network with China allowed Vietnam to significantly increase exports to the US, thereby achieving a more balanced trade account (Oh, 2022). Specifically, in its trade relations with the US, Vietnam had grown from a trade deficit of \$110 million in 1997 to a surplus of more than \$38 billion in 2017, becoming the fifth largest deficit of the US (Martin, 2018).

The year 2014 marked an important milestone in Vietnam's geopolitical calculations with the event of China illegally deploying an oil rig in Vietnam's exclusive economic zone (EEZ), which posed a significant security and sovereignty threat to Vietnam. China's aggressive actions and strategic distrust caused Vietnam to partly step further from China's orbit, signaling a more vital diversification of relations to protect its national interests (Dung & Ho, 2022; Thayer, 2019). At the same time, Obama's administration's introduction of "Pivot to Asia" in 2015 suggested the US's more active engagement in the region. Taking advantage of this opportunity, Vietnam proactively cultivated a broad network of comprehensive/strategic partnerships to intertwine its interests with major powers' ones (Vuving, 2023). Simultaneously, Hanoi has consistently maintained its "Three Nos"<sup>1</sup> defense policy since 1998, indicating its determination for its foreign guidelines of independence and self-reliance, thereby avoiding falling into strategic competition (Chapman, 2017).

With its improving economic strength, Vietnam has gradually become more drastic in its geopolitical decisions under the critical principle of independence and strategic autonomy. However, Vietnam's material capabilities, confidence, and determination of its leadership are still controversial during this period. As Le Thu Huong comments, Vietnam must recalibrate its foreign policy to surpass its economic and diplomatic achievements to accommodate the

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<sup>1</sup> No foreign bases in Vietnam's territory, no military alliances, and no siding with one country against another.

new environment (T. H. Le, 2018). Analyzing Vietnam's foreign policy after 2017 could clarify changes in foreign policy thinking and Vietnam's goals in the new strategic context.

### 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

*Geopolitical dynamics* are by no means novel in the realm of international politics. A decent amount of literature has looked at the Indo-Pacific region, focusing on the nascent regional order, the emergence of regional powers and power dynamics, and the heightening strategic competition between great powers, particularly between the US and China. These transformations directed much attention to the studies of states' geopolitical repositioning.

One prominent publication on the emerging regional order is the book "Navigating Geopolitics at the Dawn of a New Age" by Cannon and Hakata. Under the lens of geopolitics, the concept of the Indo-Pacific is seen as an "emerging geography of strategy" and the "return of geopolitics," characterized by the erosion of the US's supremacy, an assertive rising China, and the unstable multipolar order. The author argues that despite obstacles, Pax Indo-Pacifica would be gradually shaped with a rules-based and principled regionalism (Cannon & Hakata, 2021). Meanwhile, by applying Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver's concept of 'security complexes,' Ball et al. (2019) analyze the potential of three new strategic visions for the regional order, namely "a revised US-led vision of Free and Open Indo-Pacific, a China-centered model based on Belt and Road Initiative and an ASEAN-centric one," arguing that the region will witness a prolonged strategic confrontation because no pan-regional vision enjoys favorites and might prevail in the foreseeable future (Ball et al., 2019, pp. 22–23). Similarly, former National Security Advisor of India Shivashankar Menon (2021, p. 264) also lists three future characteristics of the regional geopolitical order: "a regional order centered on one power, an inclusive multipolar concert of powers or a collective security architecture, and a regional of various powers contending for primacy and influence." He argues that due to the undebatable power shift to and within Asia, which results in the need of emerging powers to enhance "political weight and military protection commensurate to their new economic success", it is complicated to define the roles of players in this transitional period as well as region's future (Menon, 2021).

Unlike Ball et al.'s pessimistic view, S. Jaishankar, Minister of External Affairs of India, points out some positive points, although still acknowledging the ongoing strategic uncertainties. In his book "The India Way," he supposes that there are still several significant stabilizing forces, including profoundly economic interdependence, globalization, and technology. It is not simple to return to "a strongly bipolar world" with the new geopolitical landscape, which has changed irreversibly from the past (Jaishankar, 2020). Also discussing the effects of globalization, Rosemary Foot (2021) argues that economic interdependence is no

longer as effective in promoting regional stability and prosperity as it once was. The Covid-19 pandemic, geopolitical risks, particularly the Russia-Ukraine war, and the trade war between the US and China, have exposed the vulnerability of current supply chains and increased the risk of decoupling between the two largest economies in the world. These challenges may negatively impact Asian economies, which are firmly integrated into the global and regional economic system (Foot, 2021). Inferably, while everyone could agree that the Indo-Pacific regional order is in a fast-changing transition period, the future of this region receives various, even contradictory, assessments. On the one hand, this fact poses strategic challenges for regional secondary powers to navigate the uncertain waters to pursue their interests. On the other hand, it is also a good chance for them to redefine their functions and positions in the new order as well as enhance their bargaining powers in relations with the great powers.

Examining the roles and strategies of regional players, Cannon and Hakata (2021) argue that the Indo-Pacific concept unequivocally inspires states' grand strategies and helps flexibly mobilize resources, not only in foreign and military affairs but also in the economic field. While the roles of the four lynchpin members (the US, Japan, Australia, and India) are important in shaping the regional security architecture, the reactions of regional states, especially middle powers, cannot be ignored. According to the authors, any Indo-Pacific strategies and initiatives cannot succeed without successfully outreaching to third-party states in the region, particularly Southeast Asian countries. Likewise, Kou et al. (2022) explore the regional geopolitical dynamics from the view of the middle powers in their book "Strategic Options of Middle Powers in the Asia Pacific." He argues that middle powers can reshape their roles and functions in the regional structure, which might influence the direction of the great power competition.

In the same vein, Korolev (2019) scrutinizes the changes in the relative weight of systemic and unit-level elements in foreign policies of smaller states in the Asia-Pacific postwar environment. He resorts to Arnold Wolfer's "house on fire" metaphor to assert that overwhelming systemic pressures would profoundly influence the small and middle states' foreign policy rather than unit-level (domestic) factors. This leads to the argument that hedging<sup>2</sup> will not last long due to the high intensification of great power strategic competition (Korolev, 2019). This conclusion, yet, is based on the assumption that smaller states have only two strategic choices, namely bandwagoning/balancing and hedging, which could not fully

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<sup>2</sup> Simply put, hedging could be considered as a third strategic choice for states located within the "balancing-bandwagoning" spectrum. This concept will be discussed further in the next chapters.



reflect the nuanced reality of policy choices. This conclusion contradicts the view of Fels, Kratiuk, and their fellows that hedging, not alliances or other strategies such as balancing, bandwagoning, or buck-passing, is the popular solution for security cooperation for regional states, especially middle powers, in the face of being entrapped by a single hegemon (Fels, 2018; Kratiuk et al., 2023).

Additionally, to better understand states' geopolitical thinking and strategies, it is suggested that geopolitics should be expanded to non-geographical issues such as global governance and international institutions (Cannon & Hakata, 2021). Indeed, one cannot ignore the multilateral system when discussing the Indo-Pacific geopolitical landscape. Kai He argues that the region has witnessed a new wave of multilateralism – “contested multilateralism” after the 2008 global financial crisis. He suggests that the emergence of contested multilateralism is a form of institutional balancing, led by both ASEAN and non-ASEAN countries, to compete for benefits in a period of order transition with high uncertainties and profound economic interdependence. Therefore, the existence of overlapping, even mutually exclusive, multilateral institutions may be a “new normal” in the region due to accelerated institutional balancing among major powers (He, 2018, 2019). Similarly, Bisley (2019) summarizes multilateral arrangements in the region into three broad groups: an ASEAN-centric one, a China-led group that reflects Beijing's desire to reshape the regional order, and a group focusing on the US's primacy and strategic interests in the region. The latter two groups not only lack complementarity and coordination but also overlap and compete in terms of goals and memberships. This argument is in line with Ball et al. and Menon's opinions about the regional vision in the future. Bisley concludes that the Indo-Pacific is the area of clear manifestation of contested multilateralism, an indispensable part of the ongoing order transition period (Bisley, 2019, p. 226).

In investigating power dynamics, Enrico Fels (2018) aims to answer the questions of how to determine and assess the global power shift and its impacts. He posits that evaluating relational power dynamics in the region, in addition to aggregate power as in traditional literature, by focusing on the changes in middle powers' foreign strategies towards great powers could help identify the regional and broader global potential power shifts (Fels, 2018). The aspects of alliances, alignment networks, and strategic rivalries are also investigated in the “Handbook of Indo-Pacific Studies” by Kratiuk and his fellows. According to the authors, the main driving force of the region's current alignment and security dynamics is the strategic rivalry between great powers and the need for economic cooperation (Kratiuk et al., 2023).

While Fels (2017) argues that China gained greater relational power in terms of economics and politics, the US still maintains its primacy in regional political and security affairs. Kratiuk et al. (2023) suggest that the emerging regional multipolarity could be sustained longer due to the complexity of the regional rivalry-partnership relations.

Generally, current literature has quite comprehensively investigated the dynamics of the geopolitical landscape of the Indo-Pacific region, suggesting that the region is in the midst of a power shift. This is a good foundation for this thesis regarding the systemic stimuli for states' foreign policy. However, as Felix Heiduk (2021) observes, mainstream International Relations literature focuses overtly on great powers to explain the changes in the regional political landscape and often reduces smaller states to a "de facto secondary or tributary role," with negligible power in shaping the rules (Heiduk, 2021). Although some publications have emphasized the roles of middle powers and small states in the balance of power in the region, the proactive efforts of this group of countries (including India and Vietnam) in dealing with geopolitical and power shifts and adjusting the geopolitical position have not yet been given due attention. Their strategies are indeed influenced by the great powers' strategic rivalries; however, their aspiration to take advantage of these opportunities to raise their voice in the regional chessboard, as well as their impacts, should not be overlooked.

*India's geopolitical repositioning* is gaining burgeoning scholarly attention, but there are still mixed opinions about its role and strategies. On the one hand, India's role is considered to have been significantly enhanced under Modi's administration, although it is still in the process of transition. Heiduk (2021) asserts that Modi has been moving India from a non-aligned to an aligned state based on issue with an ambition of a global leader. India now no longer shies from building partnerships with diverse partners to achieve specific aims. Similarly, Varghese (2019) argues that India is amidst a major geopolitical repositioning, moving from the non-alignment rhetoric toward a "hard-headed national interests-based policy" with a more robust and broader strategic network. This will result in India's embedded role in the region beyond its immediate neighborhood, which it has never done in post-war history (Varghese, 2019). Based on Mahanian realist principles favoring sea power, Jitendra Uttam (2023) suggests that an inclusive Indo-Pacific region with a focus on maritime security could help India solve its long-standing "twin structural imbalance," which are insufficient attention and capability in maritime defenses, and economic imbalance in comparison with economically dynamic East Asia. By taking the Indian Ocean into the center of its strategies,

enhancing its naval capability through minilateral mechanisms and defense cooperation with QUAD and ASEAN partners while promoting regional economic connectivity with East Asian economies, India wishes to strike a balance between security and prosperity. Thus, a robust role and active engagement in the Indo-Pacific region is of high importance for India, especially in the context that the Sino-India contest is gradually becoming part of the US-China competition (Uttam, 2023).

On the other hand, in many observations, India's role is often overshadowed by the influence of the US and China. Cannon and Hakata (2021) suggest that India's pillar role in the region is a derivative of the mounting US-China strategic rivalry, not a proactive effort of India itself. Although containing China is India's implicit goal in its Indo-Pacific initiatives, its "inclusive" approach to the Indo-Pacific region demonstrates its particular approach of pointed alignment rather than active coalition building. Also, many authors point out that the biggest challenge for India is to secure its interests, maintain and expand its power in such a competitive environment (Kратиuk et al., 2023; Panda, 2016; Rajagopalan, 2017; Yoshimatsu, 2022). Meanwhile, Drysdale and Barnes show a skeptical view of India's rise, arguing that Modi has yet to find an effective way to turn India into the world's top leader. They suggest that if India keeps pursuing its status quo policy, the so-called India's rise is nothing more than a slogan without any substance (Drysdale & Barnes, 2022). Similarly, Menon (2021) asserts that India is in a time of rebalancing among powers, and other states must adapt their strategies to the new realities. However, India is still not sure about the prospect of its role and place in the new global order and a workable grand strategy for India, which are among the urgent tasks it needs to accomplish. These drawbacks are derived from its limited capability and resources and the overriding domestic priority (Menon, 2021).

*Talking about Vietnam*, there is little research regarding its geopolitical repositioning exclusively. A notable one is the book "Changing World and Vietnam Transition" published in 2014. This book focuses mainly on Vietnam's aspiration to change its international profile after the Cold War, reflected through its international economic integration and the establishment of a new diplomatic network. Elliott has extensively investigated not only Vietnam's foreign policies but also its internal changes and leadership perceptions about the world (Elliott, 2014). However, it has been over a decade, and Vietnam and the world order have witnessed significant changes, requiring numerous updates. Focusing on Vietnam's post-war development and reestablished position in the international arena, Le Thu Huong points out Vietnam's dilemma between self-reliance and proactive international integration to deal with

the new challenges in the regional shifting geopolitics and achieving its aspiration beyond diplomatic and economic success. She argues that the strategic thinking of the Communist Party of Vietnam remains constrained, calling for changes to overcome the stagnation in its foreign and defense policy (T. H. Le, 2018). Recently, Tran Bich empirically examines Vietnam's strategic adjustments in its foreign policy, including the changes in its attitude towards China and the US (B. Tran, 2022). Although the aspiration to enhance its international status is also mentioned, Tran and Le do not fully explain the motivations behind it.

In broader literature, Vietnam is often grouped into the middle powers or ASEAN blocs, characterized by relatively vague and passive responses to the great power competition and regional geopolitical transformation. According to Cannon and Hakata (2021), the US-China strategic competition is the most severe security threat that ASEAN has faced. With their limited capacity, ASEAN countries cannot manage the systemic security challenges or shifts in regional structure. What can be done at best is to influence great powers' actions in a beneficial way and strive to manage changes to the status quo while promoting support and participation of great powers in ASEAN initiatives. Most East Asian countries (including Vietnam) are thought to use a hedging strategy to control threats by promoting security cooperation with the US and promoting economic and trade interests with China. However, the space for these states to maneuver is shrinking due to the strategic rivalry (Kou et al., 2022). On the contrary, Kuik argues that hedging is not the optimal choice for any actors in the region, both great powers and smaller states, but the second best for all to avoid polarizing the region. Accordingly, the current ambiguity is more favorable for Southeast Asian states than a clearly defined competition between the great powers (Kuik, 2018).

*Regarding comparative studies of India and Vietnam's foreign policies*, scholars have paid relatively less attention to this duo. One notable recent book is "India, Vietnam and the Indo-Pacific: Expanding Horizons" by Pankaj K Jha and Vo Xuan Vinh (2020). The book examines the impacts of US-China competition and new evolving strategic configurations on India and Vietnam's Indo-Pacific engagement and their bilateral relations. The authors argue that the continuous development of the bilateral relations to new heights, especially in defense and security cooperations, reflects the strategic calculations of both sides in maintaining regional security, keeping an equal distance from both superpowers, and seeking to benefit from better relations with both. Hitherto, the two countries have effectively managed their relationships with major powers to bolster their own strategic interests. In addition, Jha and Vo suggest that the mounting great power competition, in addition to US policies and economic

support in the area, makes the role of “swing states” such as Vietnam and India increasingly important, which will also enhance their bilateral relations in the future (Jha & Vo, 2020). This book provides a panoramic view of Vietnam - India relations in the changing regional landscape, analyzes and compares the strategies and goals of each country and their impacts on the development of bilateral relations. However, this work does not exclusively focus on comparing the strategies of Vietnam and India in the contemporary context but takes it as the foundation for analyzing bilateral relations.

Meanwhile, Dar (2021) presents in his article “India-Vietnam Axis and China: The Allure of Hedging” an exclusive comparative study between the strategies of India and Vietnam in the face of threats from a rising China. He criticizes the ‘balancing–bandwagoning’ dichotomy and points out that it cannot explain the behaviors of regional neighbors towards China. He argues that India and Vietnam consider a rising China the topmost security threat; therefore, they are pursuing both internal and external balancing towards China. At the same time, because neither of the two countries can afford the “wrath of the Chinese dragon,” they are proactively implementing policies to promote economic cooperation, institutional binding, and explicit reassurance with China. Therefore, Dar concludes that hedging best explains India and Vietnam’s strategic decisions in dealing with China.

The two above works point out several common points shared by Vietnam and India, including a strategic culture of strategic autonomy and independence, the distrust of external help, and nearly identical geopolitical interests in the region, which are regional stability and prosperity. They are both facing the same challenges of overwhelming capacity asymmetries and territorial disputes with China while still enjoying substantial economic benefits with China (Dar, 2021; Jha & Vo, 2020). However, the differences between India’s and Vietnam’s strategies, between a worthy peer competitor and a potential challenger for China, respectively, are not thoroughly examined in these works. Furthermore, it would be much more ambitious if Dar could situate the India-Vietnam axis in the US-China great powers competition, which could offer a more nuanced and comprehensive view regarding Vietnam and India’s repositioning strategies.

Regarding *neoclassical realism*, it is relatively novel compared to other traditional theories. Talking about neoclassical realism, one could not get around looking at Ripsman et al.’s works of “Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics” (2016), “Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy” (2009), and Gideon Rose’s “Neoclassical Realism and

Theories of Foreign Policy” (1988). Simply put, neoclassical realism is a middle ground between classical realism and neorealism, emphasizing the impacts of both international and domestic politics on a state’s foreign policy. These documents serve as a good foundation for applying neoclassical realism in analyzing international politics and states’ foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific region.

Admittedly, few publications adopt a neoclassical realist approach to explain the states’ strategies in the Indo-Pacific region, specifically Vietnam and India. Two noticeable recent works could be named as “Navigating Great Power Competition: A Neoclassical Realist View of Hedging” by Hunter S. Marston and “After Hedging: Hard Choices for the Indo-Pacific States Between the US and China” by Kai He and Huiyun Feng. In his text, Marston takes into consideration three levels, including the role of individual perceptions and bureaucracies, international security threats, alliances, and economic benefits, to explain the differences in Southeast Asia’s hedging practices (Marston, 2023). Focusing on Southeast Asia, Marston (2023) argues that the neoclassical realist approach could explain the decisions of these regional states better than structural realism. This argument is in line with Cannon and Hakata’s critique that structural realism focuses too much on system-level factors and ignores the importance of unit-level elements, which fails to explain the different strategic choices faced by different types of great powers (Cannon and Hakata, 2021). Likewise, arguing that realism and power transition theory fail to explain the diversity and dynamic nature of behaviors of states in the Indo-Pacific region during the order transition, He and Feng suggest a “preference-for-change” model employing neoclassical realism. It argues that political leaders’ perceptions regarding costs and benefits from the order transition would shape a state’s foreign strategies, including hedging, balancing, bandwagoning, and buck-passing (He & Feng, 2023). This model possesses great potential to explain and predict the decisions of states in the Indo-Pacific region and broader, especially Vietnam and India, given their aspiration to enhance their international status.

The literature review concludes by pointing out how this thesis could contribute to the existing discussions. Obviously, there are abundant works on Indo-Pacific geopolitics. However, there is not much consensus regarding its characteristics and future. Given its rapid changes and profound strategic uncertainties, keeping track of the regional dynamics and regional states’ foreign strategies is never old-fashioned, which will substantially shape the nascent world order. Furthermore, the aspirations of emerging countries to reach new

geopolitical status within the Indo-Pacific region are relatively new phenomena. Arguably, India and Vietnam, individually and comparatively, should receive more attention due to their potential, opportunities, and capabilities to realize their goal of geopolitical repositioning regionally and internationally although still controversial. Existing literature often focuses on the reactions of India and Vietnam in the US-China strategic competition, emphasizing economic and military aspects and geopolitical considerations while mostly ignoring factors such as history, domestic politics, or leaders' determinations. A neoclassical realist approach could be a solution to this problem. Ambitiously, by conducting a comparative analysis under neoclassical realism, this research desires to fill in the aforementioned research gaps, providing a more comprehensive and updated understanding of Vietnam and India's geopolitical repositioning, thus contributing to the explanation of regional geopolitical dynamics.

#### 4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Neoclassical realism is a theoretical framework that belongs to the realist tradition, besides classical and structural realism, in international relations theory. While classical realism, which finds its roots in the works of Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Hans Morgenthau, argues that the individual perception of people - in a broader sense, domestic politics - is the primary driving force of a state's foreign policy, structural realism argues that states' actions are driven mainly by the international system and their relative material capabilities (James, 2022; Lobell et al., 2009; Sophal, 2016; Vidal, 2022). Seeking a middle ground between its predecessors, neoclassical realism combines systemic and domestic variables in explaining a state's foreign policies (Ripsman et al., 2016).

First coined by Gideon Rose (1998), neoclassical realism was designed to create an analytical framework for foreign policy to overcome the drawbacks of previous realist approaches. He criticizes that pure unit-level explanations cannot account for the differences in foreign policies of states with similar domestic political systems and the similarities among different political regimes. On the contrary, pure system-level analysis is "bound to be inaccurate much of the time," including the end of the Cold War (Rose, 1998, p. 148,152). Explaining this term, Rose wrote:

"The scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy is driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative power capabilities. This is why they are realist. However, the impact of such power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex because systemic pressure must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level. This is why they are neoclassical." (Rose, 1998, p. 146).

As can be inferred, central to neoclassical realism is the neorealist assumption that states' international position within the system and relative power distribution among states and material capabilities would shape their foreign policy actions. Similarly, the common sense of anarchy, security, and the state's survival are shared by neoclassical realism and other realist strands. However, it diverges from neorealism by incorporating domestic variables that mediate states' response to external pressure (Sophal, 2016). Neoclassical realism rejects the idea of "a direct and smoothly functioning transmission belt" between international elements and states' foreign policy (Rose, 1998, p. 154). Instead, it advocates for investigating domestic intervening



factors, such as decision-makers' perceptions and the domestic political system (Ripsman et al., 2016). According to neoclassical realists, the translation of systemic factors is a product of unit-level intervening variables. Furthermore, international anarchy is "murky and difficult to read," emphasizing the need to understand these modifiers (Rose, 1998). As Levy points out, "a greater recognition of the role of domestic factors by political scientists would increase the explanatory power of their theories and provide more useful conceptual frameworks" (Levy, 1988, p. 653). In short, neoclassical realism borrows explanatory power from both its predecessors (Rose, 1998, pp. 145–146).

#### ***4.1. Types of neoclassical realism***

Ripsman et al. (2016) contribute to the theoretical nuance of neoclassical realism by delving deeper into the domestic-international mechanisms and exploring different intervening and dependent variables, then advancing neoclassical realism into a comprehensive research program. Accordingly, Ripsman et al. categorize into three types of neoclassical realism, which will be discussed below.

Type I neoclassical realists, as identified by Gideon Rose, merely look to solve the anomalies that cannot be (fully) explained by structural realism. Some prominent arguments in this category could be named as Randall Scheweller's balance-of-interests, Stephen's Walt's balance-of-threats, and Taliaferro's balance-of-risks (He & Feng, 2023). They form new mechanisms of "an imperfect transmission belt of leader perception and domestic politics" between the international system signals and states' behaviors to fix the shortcomings of structural realism (Ripsman et al., 2016, p. 28).

Type II neoclassical realism is built on the same foundation, with an effort to theorize further its sophisticated theoretical framework in explaining, not limited to structural realism's anomalies, states' foreign policy choice that "states often have a range of policy options to choose from, rather than a clearly optimal policy dictated by international circumstances" (Ripsman et al., 2016, p. 29). Besides states' relative powers and international position, these options are impacted by leaders' perceptions, states' strategic cultures, and domestic politics. Thus, the second type of neoclassical realism is more domestically focused than the first type, employing a set of intervening variables between the systemic pressures (independent variable) and the foreign policy choices and strategic adjustments (dependent variables) (Cheng, 2022; Ripsman et al., 2016). Both types restrict their explanatory scope to states' policy choices.

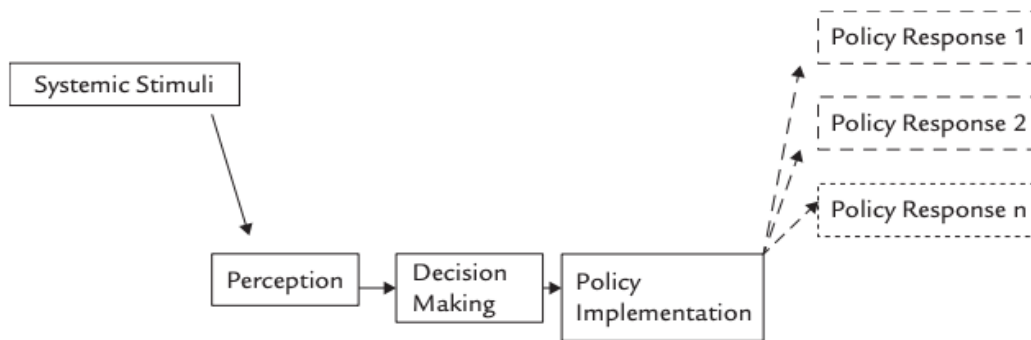


Figure 1: Type I and II Neoclassical Realist Model of Foreign Policy.  
 Reprinted from *Neoclassical realist theory of international politics* (p.32) by Ripsman, N. M., Taliaferro, J. W., & Lobell, S. E. (2016). Oxford University Press.

In their book in 2016, Ripsman and his colleagues develop an ambitious neoclassical realist theory of international politics, which is referred to as type III, transcending the theory’s focus to international politics to discuss the interactions of states’ behaviors and their potential impacts on the international system (see Figure 2). Type III neoclassical realism combines (i) the independent variables of systemic stimuli, (ii) four main groups of intervening variables, including leader images, strategic culture, domestic institutions and state-society relations, (iii) intervening-level processes, including perceptions of the international system, decision-making, resource mobilization or policy implementation, in order to enhance their explanatory power to explain a wide range of (iv) dependent variables, from a short-term crisis decision-making to broader international outcome and long-term structural changes (Ripsman et al., 2016). Overall, Ripsman and his fellows’ type III has projected neoclassical realism to a grand

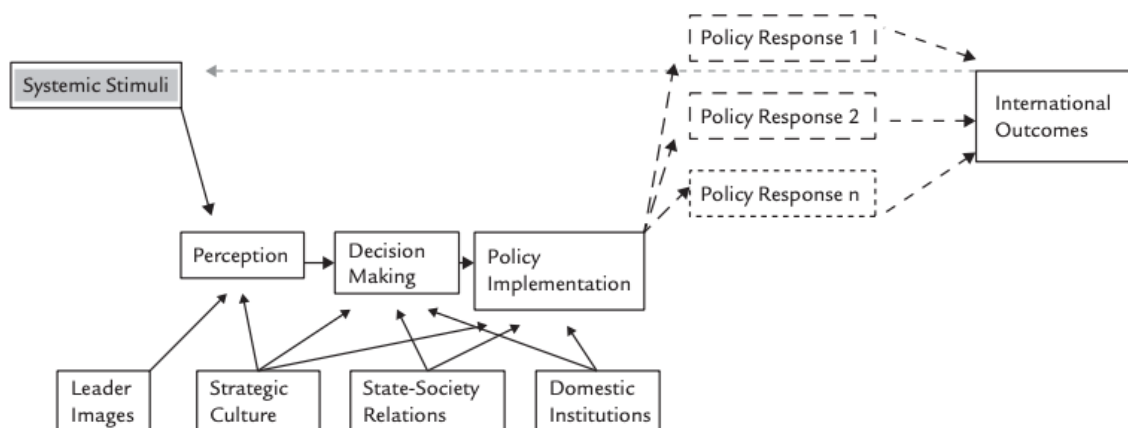


Figure 2: Type III Neoclassical Realist Model.  
 Reprinted from *Neoclassical realist theory of international politics* (p.34) by Ripsman, N. M., Taliaferro, J. W., & Lobell, S. E. (2016). Oxford University Press.

theory of international politics, which is commendable and questionable at the same time regarding the vague causal relationships between states' foreign policies and changes in the international system (He & Feng, 2023; Narizny, 2017; Smith, 2018).

#### 4.2. Preference-for-changes model

Focusing on reasoning states' foreign policies during a power transition period, He and Feng (2023) develop the “preference-for-changes” model built on the neoclassical realism types I and II (see Figure 3). In this model, the changing nature of the international system is the primary concern for states when deciding their foreign policy. The systemic stimuli must go through the intervening variable of leaders' perceptions about potential costs and benefits, which may shape the final foreign policy choices to enhance their security, power, international influence, and status – the dependent variable.

		Perceived benefits	
		High	Low
Perceived costs	High	Hedging	Balancing
	Low	Bandwagoning	Buck-passing

Figure 3: “Preference-for-changes” model of states' policy choices during international order transition. Adapted from *After Hedging: Hard Choices for the Indo-Pacific States Between the US and China* (p.16) by He, K., & Feng, H. (2023). Cambridge University Press.

In their model, He and Feng (2023, pp. 12-15) suggest four types of state policy choices: balancing, bandwagoning, hedging, and buck-passing. They adopt Schweller's definition of balancing and bandwagoning but in a broader sense, not limited only to the military domain. Accordingly, balancing is an alignment strategy to preserve what a state already possesses and avoid or minimize losses. A state can pursue several types of balancing, such as soft balancing, hard balancing, and institutional balancing. Meanwhile, bandwagoning refers to the alignment strategy driven by potential gains to “obtain values coveted” (Schweller, 1994, p. 74). The authors define hedging as an alignment policy to offset or neutralize risks in not only military and security but also economic, political, and other fields to manage perceived gains and losses.

Meanwhile, buck-passing is a strategy to passively avoid possible risks by passing “bucks” or risks to others or intentionally staying away from potential conflicts.

As He and Feng (2023) explained, when both the perceived costs and benefits from the order transition are high, policymakers tend to adopt a *hedging* strategy to offset potential risks. The state in question would befriend the incumbent hegemon and rising powers simultaneously. Reversely, when both are low, policymakers might adopt the *buck-passing* strategy because they do not care about the order transition, or they have different priorities, or there are no profound impacts on their national interests. When policymakers think that potential benefits are low but costs are high from the international order transition, they prefer a *balancing* strategy vis-à-vis the rising power to maintain the status quo and counteract any rising challenges. Vice versa, when the perceived benefits exceed possible costs, the state will support altering the status quo to foster the changes and become a winner after the order transition. This state would *bandwagon* or cooperate with the rising power in this case.

As discussed in previous chapters, the changing dynamic of the order transition period tasks almost all countries with adapting their (grand) strategies to pursue their interests. Therefore, the “preference-for-changes” model, built on neoclassical realism types I and II, to analyze states’s foreign policy choices is a suitable analytical framework for explaining India and Vietnam’s geopolitical repositioning in the current emerging order. Type III of neoclassical realism, which extends to international politics and structural changes, is beyond this thesis’ scope.

### ***4.3. An updated framework***

To enhance He and Feng’s model’s explanatory power, this thesis would add two points, including (i) the concept of balancing and hedging strategies and (ii) intervening variables.

First, while agreeing with the authors’ definitions of bandwagoning and buck-passing, this thesis wants to elaborate more on balancing and hedging strategies. Regarding balancing, states can pursue not only external balancing (three types that He and Feng mentioned) but also internal balancing, in which they would enhance their own (military or non-military) capabilities to balance against others. Although it relates more to domestic issues, internal balancing is worth attention when discussing foreign strategies.

The hedging concept also deserves in-depth understanding due to its complexity. According to Haacke, there are at least four broad conceptualizations of hedging, focusing on different elements such as objects, principal aspects, and necessary conditions (Haacke, 2019). In line with cost-benefit calculations, Cheng-Chwee Kuik (2015, pp. 2-4) defines hedging as

“an insurance-seeking behavior under high uncertainties and high stakes,” characterized by “a multiple-component approach situated between the two ends of the balancing-bandwagoning spectrum” to build up “an image of not siding or against any power.” This strategy could be reflected in all pillars of foreign policy (military, political, and economic) with different, even opposite tactics, including “indirect balancing, dominance denial, economic pragmatism, binding engagement, and limited bandwagoning” (Kuik & Rozman, 2015). This thesis will adopt this definition, which provides a more comprehensive grasp of this strategy.

Second, He and Feng’s model focuses mainly on two intervening variables, including the leaders’ perceptions of the costs and benefits of the international order transition. They acknowledge the impacts of other intervening variables, such as domestic politics, ideology, and leaders’ emotions. They do not deny the importance of these elements but define them as out of the scope of their study. Therefore, none are discussed in their “preference-for-change” model.

Based on the above analysis, the author suggests an updated analytical framework incorporating Ripsman’s intervening variables into the preference-for-change model (*see Figure 4*). In this updated version, the independent and dependent variables, which are, respectively, systemic stimuli and states’ foreign policy choices, remain unchanged. In addition, the author adds two other intervening factors, including strategic culture and domestic politics. Therefore, the policy outcome is under the influence of systemic stimuli, leaders’ perception, strategic culture, and domestic politics.

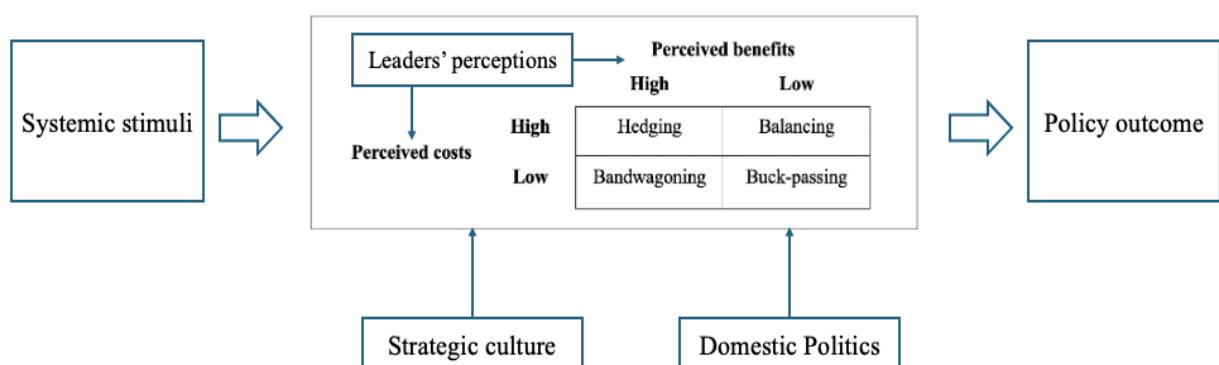


Figure 4: Updated “preference-for-changes” model of states’ foreign policy choices.

## 5. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

### 5.1. *Research methodology*

This thesis is a qualitative analysis with a theory-application and comparative approach. The mission is to combine different external and internal factors to reason and compare India's and Vietnam's geopolitical processes. To achieve that, the author plans to utilize foreign policy analysis and comparative foreign policy analysis as principal methodologies.

Foreign policy analysis (FPA) is defined as “the study of how the states or individuals make foreign policy, execute foreign policy, and react to other states' foreign policy” (Potter, 2010). This method aims to provide insights into the impacts of international and domestic politics on the decision-making process. In this method, several leaders' speeches and government documents, such as foreign policy papers and foreign strategies, as well as meeting minutes, will be critically analyzed. Applying FPA permits the author to understand their foreign strategies and different variables at various levels.

In parallel with FPA, the thesis adopts the comparative foreign policy analysis (CFP). CFP involves comparing two or more states' foreign policies to determine identifiable patterns from similarities and differences across their policies (Beasley et al., 2012, p. 5). Advocates of CFP suggest that a controlled comparison of the domestic factors of external behaviors of various states could result in comprehensive theories of foreign policy behavior (Potter, 2010). By employing a comparative approach, this thesis can determine the similarities and differences between India and Vietnam's foreign strategies. Overall, these two methods are complementary in serving the objectives of this work. While FDA focuses on the depth of foreign policy decisions, CFP looks across states' borders and enhances the breadth of this study.

As proposed in the first chapter, India and Vietnam are selected as two case studies. Although India and Vietnam share several commonalities, such as their long-history adherence to strategic autonomy and non-alignment principle, their facing with threats from a more assertive China and great powers strategic competition, there are stark differences in capabilities, interests, goals, leaders' perceptions, which could lead to different strategies and tactics. By juxtaposing these two cases, the author aims to provide a more comprehensive analysis of the current discourse regarding geopolitical repositioning in each country, underlining the interrelatedness in the broader context.

To successfully compare these cases, the author will apply the previously introduced updated analytical framework (*Figure 4*). The same set of variables will be used to analyze both Vietnam and India's geopolitical repositioning. In particular, the independent variable is

the systemic stimuli; intervening variables are leaders' perceptions, strategic culture, and domestic politics; and the dependent variable is their strategies in geopolitical repositioning.

Regarding systemic stimuli, according to Barry Buzan's regional security complex theory, the Indo-Pacific region can be divided into three complexes<sup>3</sup>, including Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia and South Asia, defined as “a group of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart from one another” (Buzan, 1991, p. 106). Therefore, in this thesis, the regional strategic environments of India and Vietnam refer to South Asia and Southeast Asia complex respectively.

In terms of strategic culture, Ripsman et al.'s definition will be adopted, which is “a set of inter-related beliefs, norms, and assumptions [that] shape the strategic understanding of political leaders, societal elites, and even the general public.” They also include “dominant ideologies” and “degrees of nationalism” as essential components of strategic culture (Ripsman et al., 2016, pp. 66–67).

Meanwhile, each country has its own characteristics of domestic politics, which in turn have positive or negative impacts on foreign policy making. Inspired by the approaches of Vuving and Ripsmans<sup>4</sup>, the author will focus on two key factors of the domestic politics of India and Vietnam, including public opinion and ruling party's legitimation.

Looking into the dependent variables, three main aspects will be investigated, political-diplomatic, economic, and security-defence, to be more specific.

#### *Sources:*

Documentary research is the main source to collect data in this thesis, which is useful in qualitative research generally. This work discusses both primary and secondary sources on India and Vietnam's foreign strategies while carrying out its research mission. These documents should be non-classified and publicly available in libraries, media, and the Internet. In addition to news articles, media releases, Vietnamese and Indian leaders' speeches, government documents regarding foreign strategies, such as policy papers, White Books, or

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<sup>3</sup> Regional security complexes not only require security interdependence among regional member states, but also need the capacity to independently address regional security issues (Buzan et al., 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Vuving (2023) suggests a number of important factors including “policy current”, “domestic institutions, public opinion, and party factions”. Meanwhile, Ripsman et al. (2016) emphasizes two factors “state-society relations” and “domestic institutions”.

high-level meeting minutes, reports are also investigated. These primary documents help the author access the most accurate information, limiting subjective filters that cause misleading information.

However, foreign policy decision-making processes are not always made in a transparent manner. Therefore, a secondary research would be a good complement. In this thesis, scholarly books, journals, and academic political analyses of Vietnam and India's foreign strategies make up the most secondary sources used. By exploring these materials, the author could gather numerous analyses and assessments from different perspectives in the contemporary literature, which could create an overall picture.

## ***5.2. Limitations***

Some constraints in the role of the researcher should be noted. As a practitioner with experience in Vietnam's foreign strategy, the author can provide specific insight into Vietnam's perspective as well as the perspective of the Global South regarding the current evolving international order. However, the author is also aware of the possible inherent biases in his views, influenced by his educational background and social context. To mitigate this, the author is committed to conducting a neutral analysis and considering inclusively Western perspectives to provide a more comprehensive view. On top of that, a comparative approach will possibly limit these biases.

Furthermore, the domestic politics of Vietnam and India have changed complexly recently. In India, Modi and the BJP won the Lok Sabha election but surprisingly lost the parliamentary majority (results announced in June 2024). This outcome may significantly alter Modi's new government approach to foreign policy formulation. Meanwhile, Vietnam has undergone a series of rapid leadership transitions, with three new Presidents since 2023. These unpredictable developments pose substantial challenges for the author while conducting research, requiring him to frequently revise his assessments to accurately reflect the evolving political landscape.

Another limitation is the temporal scope of the research. The research would be more comprehensive and convincing if backed by a deep historical analysis. However, because the historical aspect is not a major focus of this thesis, the author limits the research time frame to recent years, since 2017, which marked the rejuvenation of the concept of Indo-Pacific. The author suggests that 2017-till-now is a suitable timeframe for this study, allowing significant changes in India and Vietnam's foreign policies to be highlighted.



Lastly, due to his limited language capability, the author can only rely on documents in Vietnamese and English, not in any other Indian official languages. This constraint limits the author's reach to some India's primary or secondary literature in Hindu or other languages.

## 6. RESEARCH CHAPTERS

### ***6.1. INDIA'S GEOPOLITICAL REPOSITIONING: A RISING DOUBLE-IDENTITY POWER***

#### *6.1.1. Context*

##### a. Regional strategic environment

South Asia is a vast area consisting of eight countries, of which India is a dominant power, possessing superior economic and military power compared to the rest. Therefore, the geopolitical situation in South Asia mainly revolves around India (Singh & Kaur, 2015). However, the current regional situation is becoming more unstable due to not only conflicts between regional countries but also the deep intervention of major powers and strategic competition between them.

Geopolitically, South Asia is innately linked to the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean has a vital position, connecting East Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Almost all South Asian countries depend directly or indirectly on the Indian Ocean for trade and resources. The long coastline in the Northern Indian Ocean provides countries in the region, especially India, with control over important sea routes, potentially affecting global trade and maritime security (Malhotra, 2023).

Border conflicts are a permanent threat, threatening regional security stability with long-standing disputes between India and its neighbors, especially China and Pakistan. Historically, these countries have been involved in war for their boundary (Singh & Kaur, 2015). The border conflict between India and Pakistan is one of the most prolonged and complex security hotspots. Furthermore, these countries are two nuclear-armed powers in the region. On the one hand, nuclear possession makes both countries aware of nuclear deterrence; on the other hand, the risk of an arms race becomes more worrying (Naidu, 2021). In addition, the border conflict between India and China has recently had complicated developments. Notably, the clash between the Chinese and Indian armies in the Galwan Valley in June 2020 is considered a “watershed moment” in the relations between China and India, a manifestation of the long-term deterioration of the bilateral ties (Pathak & Hazarika, 2022).

South Asia also witnesses intense strategic competition between major powers, specifically between the US-India axis and China. If, before, great power competition focused mainly on East Asia, it is now expanding to South Asia and the Indian Ocean (Kurita, 2023; Naidu, 2021). Over the past decade, China has been increasing its presence, threatening

America's position and challenging India's influence and the regional status quo. Furthermore, given its strategic interests, China is strengthening its relations with Pakistan. In short, competition between India and China expands from border conflicts to competition for influence (L. Tran et al., 2023). Any China's ambitions to increase military capabilities and presence in the Indian Ocean region will inevitably face reactions from the US and India.

Regarding regional connectivity, there are virtually no effective institutions in South Asia. The confrontation between the two largest regional countries - India and Pakistan - has undermined regional cooperation and integration, making South Asia one of the least connected regions in the world (Dutt, 2023). Economically, the intra-regional trade in South Asia makes up merely 5% of its total trade, in comparison with 25% of ASEAN and 60% of EU (Venkkat & Bhat, 2022). Meanwhile, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has played an insignificant role in regional security. In reality, the SAARC summit mechanism has been canceled indefinitely since 2016 because of the India-Pakistan conflict, suggesting that this competition will be the weakness of a compelling future of SAARC (Best & Christiansen, 2019).

#### b. Strategic culture

While some argue that India does not have a clear strategic culture, Indian scholars, notably Shivshankar Menon, assert that a civilization like India cannot do without a strategic culture (Alekseeva-Karnevali, 2022; Menon, 2012). Accordingly, India's strategic culture is considered distinct and more consistent than some contemporary countries due to its significant continuity with "the symbolism of premodern Indian state systems and threads of Hindu or Vedic civilization" (Jones, 2009, p. 1). Notably, Paranjpe (2020) argues that at the heart of India's contemporary strategic culture are (i) strategic autonomy, (ii) a pragmatic and realist approach to international relations, and (iii) the ambition of a great power status.

Since its independence, India has always maintained a strategic culture that prioritizes strategic autonomy. This preference comes from the painful history of British colonial rule, as well as wars with neighboring countries, and can be traced back to premodern traditions (Paranjpe, 2020). Strategic autonomy does not mean separating India from the outside world but retaining autonomy in decision-making, not becoming a secondary role for major powers (Basrur, 2022). This principle was demonstrated in India's leadership in the non-aligned movement (NAM) and its success in enhancing its bargaining power and benefits during the Cold War (Harshe, 1990). Currently, India's non-alignment have evolved into multi-alignment; however, the characteristics of strategic autonomy are still clearly shown in its relations with other powers.

Another outstanding factor is the realistic and pragmatic approach. Realism is evident in India's worldview in texts ranging from ancient texts like the Arthashastra to contemporary policies (Alekseeva-Karnevali, 2022). Indian leaders see interests, power, and violence as critical features of international relations, and that power must include military and economic capabilities (Jones, 2009). This thinking is reflected in India's strong military and development of nuclear weapons. Besides, India has been pragmatic in frequently adopting a dual approach since gaining independence. On the one hand, India has emphasized the principle of non-violence, given that its capacity and influence on the global scale are still limited. Nevertheless, as a regional hegemon, India is willing to use force or coercion on its neighboring countries, as in the case of intervention in Pakistan in 1971 (Basrur, 2022).

How this country views its role in the global political arena is also noteworthy. With its rich civilization - a manifestation of greatness - India's position is considered "a given" that does not need to be earned or demonstrated (Jones, 2009). Accordingly, Prime Minister Nehru's vision affirmed that "India cannot play a secondary role in the world. [...] She will either count for a great deal or not count at all" (Nehru, 1989, p. 56). This is also reflected in India's approach, which Mahalingam calls "wait-and-watch-and-hope-for-the-best" based on a "profound sense of entitlement, superiority, and presumed deeper knowledge about the correlation of forces" (Mahalingam, 2004, p. 20).

### c. Domestic politics

In contrast to domestic policy, which attracts extensive attention from the public mass, foreign policy has been maintained as an "extremely low-salience issue for the public" long after India's independence (Narang & Staniland, 2012, p. 77). However, Indian public opinion still has a certain direct or indirect influence on the country's foreign policy. Historically, government policy decisions have been constrained many times by Indian public opinion, such as the intention to grant fueling facilities to the US-led coalition actions in Iraq (Ganguly, 2024). This fact poses an increasing demand for India's leaders to seriously consider public opinion in their policy-making process.

Foreign policy has now become an important factor in Indian elections. If grand strategies or security policies were hardly mentioned in the past, they are currently a topic that attracts the attention of electorates, especially issues related to territory and sovereignty. This can be explained by socio-economic development after the 1990s reforms, making voters likely to be more educated, which has led to greater salience for foreign policy issues (Kapur, 2009). Regarding foreign relations viewpoints, a survey conducted by Pew Research Center in 2023

indicates that more than 60% of Indians hold negative attitudes towards China. This number is attributable to the conflicts between the two countries at Doklam in 2017 and Galwan Valley in 2020. Meanwhile, hostility and distrust towards Pakistan is always high, in the range of 62-73% in ten consecutive years from 2013 to 2023. In relations with the US, 65% of Indians have a favorable opinion about the US and the Biden administration. In addition, roughly 70% of Indians think India's role and influence have increased recently (Gubbala, 2023). These numbers significantly reflect people's preferences for India's foreign relations and international status, potentially influencing future foreign strategies.

In addition, current Indian domestic politics witnesses the rise of Hindu nationalism under the leadership of the BJP. This Hindu nationalism creates a significant source of legitimacy for the BJP through its promotion of Hindutva, a majoritarian project aimed at shaping India as a Hindu nation and proffering "a narrative of Hindu victimization at the hands of Muslims as an internal other" (Huju, 2022, p. 428). Thereby, the BJP could create a "defensive legitimation" against hostile force, in this case, Muslims, gaining support from India's majority Hindu community (Dung & Ho, 2022). According to Morning Consult survey in 2024, 78% of Indians approve of Modi's leadership, the highest among the 25 countries investigated (McMann & Frisbie, 2024).

Not only does it deeply affect the social structure, but Hindu nationalism also potentially affects India's thinking regarding foreign affairs. Hindu nationalist thinkers often favor a masculinist view of international politics, emphasizing the role of force and hard power capabilities (Vaishnav, 2019). Currently, Modi's Hindu nationalist approach is said to attempt to change India's diplomatic identity, which is primarily influenced by "Nehruvian Indianess premised on transnational solidarity across the global South" (Huju, 2022, p. 428). However, Ian Hall and Manjari Chatterjee Miller, among others, argue that Nehruvian basic tenets of India's foreign doctrines are not fundamentally challenged (Huju, 2022, p. 424). It should be noted that since the 1990s, the Indian government has often faced fractions in the unsteady coalition and the resistance from the opposing parties (Ganguly, 2024). However, during his first two terms, the Modi government enjoyed an overwhelming majority in India's Parliament, making implementing and promoting its policy priorities easier.

#### d. Leaders' perception

Although India does not publish any official document on its foreign strategy, the book "The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World" by current External Affairs Minister (EAM) S. Jaishankar significantly reflects Indian leaders' foreign policy thinking. EAM

Jaishankar affirmed that the goal of India's foreign strategy is to advance "national interests by identifying and exploiting opportunities created by global contradictions," thereby extracting "as much gains from as many ties as possible" (Jaishankar, 2020, p. 9,11). This demonstrates the pragmatic and realist characteristics of India's strategic calculations.

Facing an emerging global order, Indian leaders recognize fundamental and structural changes, with the indisputable growth of China's economic and geopolitical clout and the relative decline in America's ability to maintain or shape the global order. All these rifts have created strategic space for India to potentially assert its new position. Therefore, their likely goal is to promote a world order based on the principle of multipolarity in which India acts as a principal independent pole (Grossman, 2022b; Vaishnav & Mallory, 2024). However, it also realizes that this ambition is not straightforward because "the mix of opportunities and risks presented by a more uncertain and volatile world is not easy to evaluate" (Jaishankar, 2020, p. 11). Therefore, assessing the potential costs and benefits perceived by Indian leaders is necessary to understand its foreign strategy.

A key issue in India's calculations is dealing with the impacts of the burgeoning rivalry between the US and China, which creates a "host of strategic challenges" for India (Jaishankar, 2020). On the one hand, China is not only an important (if not the most) trading partner but has also always been perceived as an assertive and expansionist neighbor (Dar, 2021). Struggling with this economic-security dilemma in relations, Indian leaders do not want to deal with China in a confrontational manner or to be seen as bandwagoning with the Western camp. Meanwhile, the US is considered the partner that appreciates and supports India's influence and can promote a greater status of India regionally and globally (Mishra, 2019). This has been affirmed by the Trump administration in its National Security Strategy 2017 that the US "welcomes India's emergence as a leading global power and stronger strategic and defense partner" (The White House, 2017, p. 46). Therefore, promoting relations with the US is consistent with India's interests, not only in the economic field but also in technology and defense. However, closer ties with the US and its allies may heighten the tensions with China and unintentionally get India caught up in great power competition. Hence, Indian leaders are trying to find ways to manage pressure from both sides to maintain its strategic autonomy (Menon, 2021).

At the same time, India faces serious security threats from the increase in China's footprint in its immediate strategic space. India is confronting China's expanding military presence at its land borders, especially along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) (Tirziu, 2023). In addition, the cooperation between China and Pakistan, notably in disputed areas with India,

puts additional pressure on India to protect its sovereignty. Besides, while India traditionally viewed the Indian Ocean as part of its sphere of influence, the region is now witnessing an increasing Chinese presence (Panda, 2021). The rise of China as an additional, even alternative, security provider in the region poses immense challenges for India in maintaining its influence, ensuring its security, economic interests, and aspiration of a new status. In fact, if India has the potential to act as a balancing power in Southeast Asia against an aggressive China, China has already emerged as a balancing power in the Indian Ocean against India's dominant role (Baruah, 2020). China's build-up of a network of naval bases and port infrastructure in countries neighboring India provides China access to geostrategic seaports and critical maritime routes in the Indian Ocean, threatening India's security and maritime interests (Manson & Nuñez, 2023). The economic prosperity of India and the entire region depends on a stable naval order and open sea lanes (Deshpande, 2023). Thus, the country's leadership has changed its perception of strategic security challenges, expanding from continental threats to the maritime space.

However, great power competition also offers India significant geopolitical opportunities. A deepening, yet under control, competition between the two superpowers would bolden India's more important role thanks to the logic that "the dominant helping the rise of the aspiring" (Jaishankar, 2020, p. 24; Tellis, 2021). With substantial advantages, India has great potential to increase its influence and establish a new geopolitical position. Although this is not a novel project, as it has been pronounced many times by previous Indian prime ministers, Modi's transition from balancing power to leading power demonstrates his determination to inhabit a "geopolitical sweet spot" (Vaishnav & Mallory, 2024). EAM Jaishankar stated: "The world is actually today getting ready for us. It is we who have to make that effort to prepare for a bigger role with a sense of historical and civilizational responsibility" (The Economic Times, 2024). This statement emphasizes that India's proactive rise to its "rightful place" is welcomed by the international community, in contrast to China's worrisome rise. However, Indian leaders also skilfully commented that India's emergence as a "leading power" is still "a goal on the horizon," thereby affirming the country's potential while at the same time avoiding international obligations that a great power needs to undertake (Jaishankar, 2020).

Inferably, Indian leaders' perception of the international geopolitical landscape and potential opportunities and challenges mainly revolve around China and the US and their strategic competition. India perceives potential severe threats from China and geopolitical

challenges arising from strategic rivalry but also sees great(er) opportunities to expand its strategic foreign relations to establish a new international status. However, with its strategic culture, joining a formal alliance seems not to be a choice in the foreseeable future. Considering the suggested framework, India's strategy is likely a pendulum oscillating between hedging and balancing strategies vis-a-vis China. These strategic calculations are consistent with the dual approach of India's identity, a middle power and a rising global power (D. P. Nguyen, 2020). Until its leaders find a feasible, clear-cut path to position itself, India will likely continue this dual approach in its geopolitical repositioning process.

### *6.1.2. Strategies*

#### a. Political-diplomatic dimension

On its path to "global leading power" status, India has implemented numerous political and diplomatic policies to promote national interests and enhance its international standing while maintaining its strategic autonomy. These policies can be encapsulated as "engage America, manage China, cultivate Europe, reassure Russia, bring Japan into play, draw neighbors in, extend the neighborhood, and expand traditional constituencies of support" (Jaishankar, 2020, p. 10). Inferably, New Delhi aims to adeptly coordinate hedging and balancing policies, focusing on handling relations with China to mitigate risks while strengthening and expanding the network of strategic partners, particularly with the US.

On the one hand, India must navigate the complex relationship with its giant neighbor. Obviously, the country cannot currently be ranked in the same league as China or the US. Therefore, New Delhi has approached China cautiously, avoiding making China an apparent adversary, which could negatively impact the peaceful environment for its development. Indian leaders have actively engaged with China diplomatically at non-Western multilateral forums such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), BRICS, and Russia-India-China (RIC) (Panda, 2021). These are important opportunities for India to maintain dialogue with China and prevent conflicts from escalating out of control. Even after the Galwan clash, EAM Jaishankar still participated in the RIC meeting and made a rather subtle statement alluding to China: "Leading voices should act in a distinguished manner by respecting international law and recognizing the interests of partners" (Bhaduri, 2020). It can be seen that India attaches great importance to institutional binding tools in political and diplomatic relations with China.

However, India has also taken some tough steps to counter China's footprint in its area of influence. As for the BRI, New Delhi has not only decided not to join but also highlighted its concerns in numerous forums. Responding to the invitation to the inaugural Belt and Road



Forum in 2017, India's official spokesperson publicly stated that BRI is not transparent, undermines the rule of law, does not follow responsible financing responsibility, and creates debt burdens for communities (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2017). Regarding projects passing through disputed areas, such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), India has been vocal in its opposition, criticizing that these cooperation are "unacceptable" and "egregious" as it violates Indian sovereignty (Gurjar, 2024; Jaishankar, 2020).

On the other hand, India is strengthening and expanding relations with its strategic partners, among which the US has emerged as the most important one. The two sides have established more than 50 dialogue mechanisms in diverse fields. Additionally, India has actively embraced US initiatives in the Indo-Pacific region, notably the Quad Leaders' Summit. The US Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) offers India a critical opportunity to assert its role in the region, strengthen its maritime posture, and promote an international order based on rule (Baruah, 2020; Uttam, 2023). These are indicators of India's balancing strategy vis-à-vis China. However, India is also careful in cooperating with the US to minimize the unwanted perception that India is a camp follower in the US-led anti-China alliances. India has also introduced its vision for the Indo-Pacific region, which distinguishes itself from others' strategies by the elements of inclusiveness and prosperity, thereby diluting the confrontational nature. This vision helps India assert its non-exclusive approach while increasing the ideological value to highlight its influence and receive greater support from the regional states (Panda, 2021; Yoshimatsu, 2022). Besides, Modi has demonstrated his skillfulness in navigating relations with great powers by carefully coordinating high-level meetings with China immediately after meetings with the US and its allies. For example, Modi participated in an informal RIC summit after the US-Japan-India summit in November 2018 or joined BRICS and RIC summit on the same day of JAI summit in 2019 (Yoshimatsu, 2022).

Following the quest for strategic autonomy and priority for partnership in its Indo-Pacific approach, India has also proactively cultivated strategic relations with its other important partners, particularly Australia, Russia, and Japan. Promoting strategic relations in an omnidirectional manner offers India a chance to leverage its role in shaping critical strategic triangles in the region, such as US-China-India and Russia-China-India. Also, India is trying to demonstrate its role as an important pole in the Indo-Pacific, notably Modi's efforts to promote the India-Japan-Russia (IJR) partnership on the sideline of the G20 Osaka summit in 2019 (Yoshimatsu, 2022). Although the IJR framework is unlikely to develop in the immediate

future, it clearly demonstrates India's geopolitical ambitions through minilateral frameworks independent of the US and China.

Notably, faced with the US's criticism of its "somewhat shaky" commitments to sanctions against Russia, Modi tactfully handled through the 2+2 consultation mechanism, ultimately receiving Biden's commitment to promoting this bilateral relationship to become "among the closest we have on the Earth" while making no concessions on condemning Russia or reducing economic transactions with Moscow (Das, 2022; Grossman, 2022b). Although many argue that the Russia-Ukraine war reveals India's marginal role in managing global security flashpoints, the US concession shows that India has effectively taken advantage of the hedging approach and safeguarded its national interests above all.

On the multilateral channel, while South Asian regional organizations appear inefficient, India has been actively taking advantage of global organizations to strengthen its role on par with its ambition. India has made concerted efforts to enhance its position in existing multilateral institutions established by major powers, typically gaining membership in the G20 or claiming the UNSC permanent seat (Basrur, 2017). Although the latter effort has not yet succeeded, it has helped India attract the international community's attention and increase its global voice. A notable feature is that at the G20 or UNSC, India often represents the Global South in demanding a greater, more equal voice, thereby asserting its leadership role in the new context (D. P. Nguyen, 2020).

#### b. Economic dimension

Confronted with structural challenges deriving from a rising China, a looming US-China trade war, and unprecedented economic dynamism in East Asia, the Modi government has deployed several foreign economic policies to sustain its growth. Holistically, Modi has launched "Atmanirbhar Bharat" [Self-reliant India] in 2020 to rejuvenate the Indian economy. Associated with this initiative, a significant shift from "Make in India" to "Make for the World" has been made (The Times of India, 2020). These steps aim to reduce dependence on external imports, making India "become self-reliant to contribute more to the world" by enhancing domestic production capacity, developing infrastructure, and fostering innovation (Nair, 2020). As a result, many significant economic reforms have been implemented to support domestic strategic sectors, enabling India to proactively capture numerous benefits from Western companies' supply chains diverting from China (Rosenberg & Sandrini, 2023). However, the chronic problem of the Indian economy, the trade deficit, has not been entirely resolved. India's trade deficit is always around 3% from 2017 to 2022 (except 2020-2021 due to the COVID-19

pandemic), of which the deficit with China shows signs of becoming more serious (Bhat, 2023; Haidar, 2024). This fact raises questions about the effectiveness of India's economic policy.

India's economic policies towards China demonstrate concerns about its economic autonomy and China's influence in the South Asia region. After the Galwan clash, the Modi government has faced immense political pressure and nationalist calls for regulatory measures to protect India's economic interests. Therefore, New Delhi has tightened its regulatory requirements and scrutiny, especially in critical areas such as high technology and infrastructure projects (Rekhi, 2024). Notably, India banned over 400 Chinese applications from 2021 to 2023, an unprecedented number, and it is incomparable to bans imposed by any other country (Narayan, 2024). However, it should be noted that with its limited capability and marginal global influence, the possibility for India to establish its own trade and investment networks and completely decouple from China is unrealistic (Doyle & Rumley, 2019). In fact, with efforts to increase its manufacturing industry, if India can grow its share of manufacturing to 25% of GDP from the current 18% within the next ten years, India would still be much dependent on Chinese products (Malik & Madan, 2023). Therefore, the wise choice is to continue to maximize its economic benefits with China. Remarkably, in 2022, despite regulatory challenges and border conflicts, India still approved 80 Chinese FDI projects, showing that the country does not inherently reject investments from China (Rekhi, 2024).

Regarding China's BRI, the Modi government has not only shown political opposition but also actively promoted international cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region to counterbalance. Bilaterally, India affirms its dominant power role by offering financial support to countries in the South Asian region to limit China's negative influences. For instance, Modi announced financial assistance of up to \$1.4 billion for the Maldives or a line of credit of \$400 million for infrastructure projects for Sri Lanka (Bhattacharjee, 2019; Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2018). On multilateral channels, India has proactively taken the lead in collaborating with like-minded states to promote regional infrastructure connectivity. In the Indian Ocean Region, efforts have been made to renew the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) (of which India is the dominant economy). Although not as global in scale as BRI, BIMSTEC can serve as an alternative, focusing on building infrastructure, supporting economic growth, and sustainable development (Register, 2024). Beyond, India, along with Australia and Japan, have introduced some infrastructure-and-supply-chain-driven initiatives, such as the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor in 2017 and the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative in 2021 (Yoshimatsu, 2022). While

the effectiveness of these initiatives will take time, these efforts confirm India's need for regional cooperation to counter Chinese influence and assert its leadership role. Notably, India rejected both China's BRI and the US's Blue Dot Network (both focusing on infrastructure connectivity), emphasizing its priority of maintaining its strategic autonomy and pursuing an independent role.

A prominent feature of India's foreign economic policy is the skeptical and defensive attitude toward market opening or commitment to free trade regionally and multilaterally (Narlikar, 2022). India's U-turn towards the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in 2019 is the most concrete evidence of this skepticism. This can be attributed to India's concerns about further economic dependence on China, which could negatively affect its economic interests and strategic autonomy (Goyal, 2019). However, India's withdrawal has turned RCEP into a game mainly between ASEAN and China, allowing China to penetrate these countries' markets and further isolate India from this world's most dynamic economic region (Malik & Madan, 2023).

In addition, India's stance in negotiations at the WTO, typically the request to maintain Special and Differential Treatment (SDT), further emphasizes the above point. The Modi government has used a strong poverty narrative to demand that this status be maintained for India, arguing that this is a "non-negotiable right for all developing members regardless of their GDP or trade volume" (Permanent Mission of India in Geneva, 2019). This viewpoint was much criticized when India joined BRICS, and countries like Brazil and South Korea were ready to give up SDT (Narlikar, 2022). Once again, India has used a dual approach, acting as a dominant regional economy and a representative of the Global South, to maximize its economic interests.

### c. Security-defense dimension

To adapt to the new geopolitical context, the Modi government has substantially adjusted its national security and defense strategy. These modifications are not only to protect national sovereignty and maintain regional peace and stability but also to strengthen India's role as a key security provider. The focus on the Indo-Pacific region reflects an essential change in the perception of Indian elites about the role of maritime security in its great power aspiration.

First, New Delhi must handle border conflicts with neighboring countries, specifically China and Pakistan. However, contrary to inferences that Modi would adopt a tougher or "muscular" stance under the influence of Hindutva, his administration has handled these

conflicts flexibly and tactfully (Kirk & Yadav, 2023). Responding to the Pulwama attack of Jaish-e-Mohammad<sup>5</sup> in 2019, despite stating his determination to react strongly, Modi carried out a measured aerial surgical strike called “a non-military preemptive action” (Rossow, 2019). This action has proven effective as there have been no significant attacks related to the Pakistan-based terrorist group since then, and received support from the international community (Grossman, 2022a). Regarding China, India has had a more cautious approach since the Galwan clash, maintaining dialogue and carrying out more than 17 rounds of negotiations. Although the conflict has not been resolved, these efforts have succeeded in preventing escalation (Lalwani, 2022). The ways of handling border conflicts reflect India’s pragmatic, issue-by-issue approach towards different actors.

Alongside its economic development, India is modernizing its military capabilities to enhance its strategic weight in the regional geopolitical landscape. India has consistently increased its military spending and arms imports, becoming the largest arms importer since 2017, accounting for 11% of global arms imports from 2018-2022. However, 85% of current Indian military hardware is from Russia, placing India in a dangerously overreliant position, especially after the Russia-Ukraine war (Grossman, 2022b). Realizing this, New Delhi has put efforts into indigenizing arms production, making this goal a key component of its “Atmanirbhar Bharat.” Over 500 highly complex weapons systems, ammunition, sensors, and so on have been listed as being procured exclusively from indigenous sources (Matamis, 2024). To fulfill this ambition, India also seeks for the support of strategic partners, especially the US, in transferring critical technology to improve defense production capabilities. Notably, the two sides decided to establish the India-US Defense Acceleration Ecosystem (INDUS-X) in 2023, an important agreement to promote bilateral defense industry cooperation (Matamis, 2024). This collaboration obviously helps India become less dependent on a single partner, Russia, and increase its production capacity instead of simply importing weapons.

Regional geopolitical shifts have prompted a change in India’s security thinking, with a shift in focus from continental to maritime security (Scott, 2019; Uttam, 2023). Since 2017, the Indian Navy has deployed Mission Based Deployments in the Indian Ocean Region to increase its presence. In addition, New Delhi also promotes bilateral maritime security cooperation with neighboring countries such as Singapore, Indonesia, and Maldives to promote

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<sup>5</sup> A Pakistan-based terrorist group.

information sharing, enhance accessibility, and better handle threats. Within its army, naval capacity and resources have received greater attention. The budget for the navy has increased from 14% in 2022 to 20% in 2023, affirming the determination to address its structural challenge of insufficient capability in the maritime domain (Baruah, 2020; Jochheim & Lobo, 2023). However, India also faces significant challenges from China's footprint and logistical difficulties due to not owning foreign military bases (Baruah, 2020).

Therefore, Modi's government has overcome hesitations to promote partnerships with the US and its allies to improve its defense capabilities, especially maritime ones. New Delhi has deepened its defense and security relationship with the US to a new level, with the characteristics of an alliance but without a commitment to mutual defense (Menon, 2021). Only from 2018 to 2020, the two sides signed three important defense agreements, including Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA), Industrial Security Annex (ISA), and Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) (Nguyen D. P., 2021). These agreements and INDUS-X create the basis for India to acquire advanced weapons and communications systems from the US. Recently, the Biden administration has agreed to provide India with "state-of-the-art capabilities," including the F-21 Fighting Falcon and F-15EX Eagle II combat aircraft (Kronstadt, 2024). In addition, India participates in various Indo-Pacific security frameworks, such as RIMPAC and Malabar, to enhance its maritime capabilities. Right after the Galwan clash, New Delhi invited Australia to participate in the 24th Malabar, making this mechanism de facto QUAD members gathering (Soami, 2020). The invitation demonstrates the proactive balancing element in India's security policy, which India has long rejected.

However, India maintains some steps to avoid being misunderstood as openly confronting China. Despite participating in QUAD's security mechanisms, India is seen as the weakest link due to its reluctance to deepen defense cooperation in the traditional security domain (mainly focusing on Chinese threats). However, the current form of QUAD is consistent with India's security interests, prioritizing non-traditional security issues (Ali, 2023). Speaking at Raisina Dialogue 2023, EAM Jaishankar asserted that QUAD is not "standing against something or somebody" but standing "for something" (The Times of India, 2023). Thus, New Delhi does not want to provoke Beijing to maintain regional peace while also seeking to maintain potential security cooperation opportunities within QUAD frameworks.

In Southeast Asia, India holds membership in several important ASEAN-led security mechanisms such as the Asia Regional Forum (ARF) and East Asia Summit (EAS),

emphasizing ASEAN's centrality in the regional order as part of its Indo-Pacific vision (Uttam, 2023). This is an effective tactic to encourage its members to lead regional security affairs, limit China's influence, and avoid dependence on the US's confrontational strategy. Nevertheless, the potential for India to expand its presence in the region beyond diplomatic statements or commercial ties is quite limited, especially given the formidable threats from China right in its traditional sphere of influence (Baruah, 2020).

### *6.1.3. Evaluation*

Modi's government's foreign policies display its greater confidence in handling multiple orthogonal relations and pragmatic approach in its geopolitical repositioning. As former National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon observes, "Rising powers should "keep their heads down while building their strength, rather than inviting resistance to their rise to great power status by proclaiming their power and its uses" (Menon, 2021, p. 342). Combining balancing and hedging strategies is consistent with its strategic culture and Indian leadership's perceptions of the opportunities and difficulties arising from the evolving regional security landscape. Notably, its quest for strategic autonomy significantly influences foreign policy decision-making as a crucial goal of its geopolitical repositioning process. Meanwhile, the impact of Hindutva on Modi's foreign policy is unclear, in contrast to its influence on domestic affairs. Despite showing a degree of toughness in Modi's security policy in some cases, there is no evident tendency for interventionism or the use of force arising from Hindutva (Basrur, 2017). Overall, New Delhi has implemented effective strategies, especially in political-diplomacy and security-defense fields, to maximize benefits from the strategic uncertainties and offset potential threats while advancing its aspiration of the new geopolitical position.

Noteworthy, India has not actively taken on the responsibilities of an emerging great power, as shown by its marginal role in dealing with global issues or international conflicts. This can be explained by India's pragmatic approach and double identity, which gives it flexibility in shaping its approach and level of contribution. With these strategic calculations, the Indian Ocean region will remain India's top priority in the immediate future, although the broader Indo-Pacific region would offer essential opportunities for India's great power ambition. Ensuring a solid role for India in the Indian Ocean is a necessary foundation for India before reaching further, especially in the context that this region is gradually being incorporated into the US-China strategic competition.

## **6.2. VIETNAM'S GEOPOLITICAL REPOSITIONING: A PRUDENT RISING MIDDLE POWER**

### *6.2.1. Context*

#### a. Regional strategic environment

Southeast Asia is a region of 11 states, which are diverse in language, religion, political regimes and deeply stratified in development levels. This region possesses an important geographical position in global trade and maritime security, being the intersection of two of the world's busiest maritime routes, connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans, as well as Northeast Asia with Australia and New Zealand. Nearly one-third of global trade goods pass through the South China Sea, of which the Strait of Malacca is an essential artery in the trade of the US, Japan, and China (Cordesman et al., 2019).

In addition, this region is a critical intersection of security and military strategies of many major powers, notably China and the US. Here, China plays a central role in regional geopolitics, with direct security interests. Any fluctuations in Southeast Asia can affect China's southern security. Therefore, maintaining a peaceful and secure environment in Southeast Asia is consistent with China's security interests (Lina & Kun, 2016). This region is also a crucial link in China's Maritime Silk Road, connecting sea routes across East Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa (McBride et al., 2023). Meanwhile, Southeast Asia is also considered central to the regional architecture by the US's IPS and a part of the collective capacity that the US wants to build in the Indo-Pacific (The White House, 2017, 2022). Both strategies have decisive significance in these two countries' strategic posture, power, and influence in the global and regional order. Therefore, Southeast Asia has become a fierce dispute between the two global powers.

The biggest security threat to Southeast Asia is the territorial dispute in the South China Sea, which is considered one of four complex hot spots in the Indo-Pacific region that would potentially develop into a full-scale war (Taylor, 2018). With its overwhelming strength compared to Southeast Asian claimants, China is acting more aggressively in the South China Sea, further stressing the regional security situation, maritime security, and concerns about the possibility of military conflict.

It is impossible not to mention the centrality of ASEAN in the security architecture of Southeast Asia. Through the mechanisms it leads, ASEAN has enlisted significant support from major powers for its centrality and efforts to promote cooperation and strengthen regional connectivity, as well as resolve common regional security issues. In addition, ASEAN has



successfully promoted its role in restraining the major powers' behaviors (Acharya, 2023; Dang, 2021). However, ASEAN's credibility in effectively solving intra-bloc and regional security challenges, typically the political crisis in Myanmar since 2021, has been questioned. Witnessing diversity in state members' interests and tremendous pressure from the US and China, ASEAN is facing the risk of lacking internal solidarity and even losing its central role. Some suppose that the QUAD security dialogue mechanism could play a leading role in the region's security structure, replacing the ASEAN-led mechanisms, notably the EAS and ARF (Rajagopalan, 2017).

#### b. Strategic culture

Vietnam has a long history of independence, protection, and unification struggles. With more than 1,000 years of resistance to its Northern neighbor's expansionism, its complicated relationship with China has affected its strategic culture more than any other factor (Butterfield, 1996, p. 21). This history is related to Vietnam's "geographical curse" of being a small country next to a big power, resulting in Vietnam's constant sense of strategic vulnerability towards China (Colberg, n.d.). With its geography, Vietnam must simultaneously handle two demands: on the one hand, seeking cooperation and support from China, especially in economic and ideological factors; on the other hand, finding ways to counter Chinese influence or domination (Butterfield, 1996, p. 18).

Besides China, Vietnam also had to confront most of the world's major powers in its history, notably France, Japan, and most recently the US. Experiences in engaging in relations with great powers have formed a deep-seated nationalism characterized by profound elements of independence and self-reliance in Vietnam's strategic culture (T. P. Nguyen, 2022). These elements are epitomized in Ho Chi Minh's ideology - the foundation of Vietnam's strategic thinking. One of the most influential ideas in Ho Chi Minh's diplomatic thought is: "Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom." President Ho Chi Minh elaborated, "Independence means we control all our activities by ourselves, without any external interventions" (Huynh, 2020). In fact, brutal historical lessons in handling relations with major countries during the Cold War, particularly the 1979 China-Vietnam War, emphasize Vietnam's need to balance its foreign relations, placing no dependence on any country (T. H. Do, 2021). The policy of multilateralization and diversification of relations since 1991 is an evident demonstration of this strategic thinking.

Similar to India, with its limited resources, Vietnam has also adopted a realistic and pragmatic approach to international relations, as indicated by its flexibility in its history of wars

to protect its fatherland and in the post-Cold War period (Butterfield, 1996). Instead of identifying friends and opponents, after the Cold War, Vietnam has switched to the approach of “partners of cooperation” and “objects of struggle,” emphasizing that “in each object of struggle, there can be areas where it can cooperate, and in each partner of cooperation, there may be areas which conflict with its national interests” (Thayer, 2016b). With this thinking, Vietnam can implement Ho Chi Minh’s principle of “Firm in objectives, flexible in strategies and tactics” [Đĩ bất biến, ứng vạn biến], in which the unchanged objectives are national interests, first of all, independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity (B. M. Pham, 2021).

### c. Domestic politics

Although Vietnam is a single-party authoritarian state, public opinion is gradually increasing its role in foreign policy decision-making. The influence of public opinion can be exemplified most in the Vietnam-China bilateral relations. While the Vietnamese government clearly recognizes the asymmetry in power between Vietnam and China and the need to maintain a stable bilateral relationship, distrust toward China among the Vietnamese people is gradually solidifying (Thayer, 2017). According to a survey by ISEAS, from 2020 to 2023, 64% to 78% of Vietnamese people have negative attitudes towards China, far outweighing concerns about the US (26% at maximum) (Seah & Aridati, 2023). This growing distrust is partly due to two main reasons: (i) China’s recent actions to assert its sovereignty claims in the South China Sea, amplified by Vietnam’s long, painful history with China, and (ii) significant changes in state-society relations brought about by the Renewal Cause, in which the domination of the state on the society was partly relaxed, allowing some community-based organizations to operate semi-independently and have a voice on several issues, including Vietnam-China bilateral affairs (Jaszczyk, 2021; Thayer, 2017).

In reality, the Vietnamese nationalist public has repeatedly taken action to influence the Vietnamese government’s policy decisions. For example, there were two waves of protests calling for Vietnam to take international legal actions against China’s illegal deployment of the HD-981 oil rig near the Paracels in 2014 and to prevent the passage of the Special Zone Act in 2018 with concerns that China would potentially control Vietnamese land in strategic locations (Jaszczyk, 2021). Although the former failed, the latter succeeded in indefinitely halting the law’s passage. Thus, public opinion can influence the foreign policy of the Vietnamese government to some extent (although still limited).

Renewal Cause also brought about a significant change in the composition of the party’s legitimacy. If before, the Communist Party of Vietnam’s (CPV) legitimacy mainly derived from

nationalism and the success in defending Vietnam from foreign interventions, CPV has been switching to focusing on performance legitimacy, which is defined as the “effective use of power to promote the collective interest of the community” (Alagappa, 1995, p. 21; Thayer, 2010). More specifically, CPV’s mission of performance legitimacy is to ensure socio-economic development and stability (Dung & Ho, 2022). The current great support for the CPV is primarily based on the tremendous socio-economic achievements provided to Vietnamese citizens after the Renewal Cause. This success creates a great deal of political trust for the leadership of the CPV. Vietnam’s former Deputy Prime Minister Vu Khoan once stated: “[D]evelopmental backwardness will reduce the people’s trust, cause social problems, and inevitably lead to threats to security, and even regime survival” (T. H. Do, 2017, p. 72). Thus, the Vietnamese government clearly recognizes the role of good socio-economic performance in maintaining its legitimacy.

An essential feature of CPV’s performance is its collective leadership, in which no individual leader, neither the President nor the Prime Minister, can decide the state’s vital affairs. Instead, the 18-member Politburo is the ultimate decision-maker, including on foreign policy. This creates stability in Vietnam’s foreign policy. In fact, despite recent leadership changes at the highest levels, Vietnam’s foreign policy has not witnessed any significant change in the last two decades, especially in relations with major powers (Vu, 2023).

#### d. Leaders’ perception

With its strategic culture, Vietnam’s perception of the international landscape and its interests have been consistent since the Cold War. Vietnamese leaders’ views are officially expressed through the Documents of the CPV’s Congresses. The Document of the 13th National Congress in 2021 comments that:

The international landscape continues to change towards multipolarity, and major powers still cooperate and compromise but compete and restrain each other more fiercely. The Asia-Pacific region, in which Southeast Asia has an increasingly important strategic position, is an area of fierce competition between great powers, fraught with potential instabilities. Peace, stability, freedom, security, maritime and aviation safety in the South China Sea face great challenges, with potential risks of conflict. [...] The international and domestic situation provide advantages and opportunities mixed with difficulties and challenges (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021, pp. 30–31).

It can be seen that Vietnamese leaders are fully aware of strategic instability in the external environment, especially the dynamics of world order and great power competition. However,

these uncertainties are seen in a two-sided way. On the one hand, strategic competition between major powers increases risks to the economic, political, and international security environment while narrowing Vietnam's security and strategic space, challenging its effort to balance relations with major powers. On the other hand, this could also potentially raise the strategic position of Vietnam and the region in the strategic calculations of major powers, thereby enhancing its bargaining power (D. L. Nguyen, 2022). This perception aligns with Vietnam's strategic culture of pragmatic and realist approach toward international politics.

Vietnam's perspective on its relations with the US and China clearly shows the mindset of "partner of cooperation" and "object of struggle." The US is the only one with sufficient capability to check and prevent China's hegemony and its aggressive actions in the South China Sea, which directly impacts Vietnam's security interests (T. H. Do, 2017, p. x). At the same time, Vietnam has common interests in maintaining peace, stability, and prosperity according to the US's IPS, although not publicly affirming its support (Thuong & Oanh, 2021). However, Vietnam is also wary of the danger from America's emphasis on "democratic institutions" and "democratic governance," which is publicly articulated to be one of four fundamental risks to the CPV (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021; Trinh & Ho, 2024). This is a significant barrier to Vietnam's leaders' perception of opportunities for cooperation with the US. Furthermore, some opinions point out the fraction within CPV's collective leadership: a reformist group that supports increased cooperation with the US versus a conservative group that emphasizes cooperation with China (K. G. Nguyen & Nguyen, 2022; Vuving, 2023). This makes policy decisions in relations with the US more sensitive and complicated, hindering rapid development in the bilateral ties.

Meanwhile, China is not only a giant neighbor, a comrade, and a critical economic partner but also a security threat to Vietnam. Recognizing the importance of China in its foreign policy, Vietnam has promoted building a partnership with China based on the spirit of "4 goods" - "good neighbor, good friend, good comrade, good partner," and 16 golden words - "friendly neighbor, comprehensive cooperation, long-term stability, and looking forward to the future" (Song, 2023). China is the only country that converges all three priorities in Vietnam's foreign policy: a major power, a border-sharing neighbor, and a shared-ideology holder. China could affect not only Vietnam's foreign relations but also its security, economy, and social stability. The Communist Party of China's success in socio-economic development is a valuable source of experience for the CPV to consult, thereby enhancing its legitimacy (T. H. Do, 2021, p. 168). Therefore, maintaining a good "overall picture" for bilateral relations is

critical for Vietnam. However, China is perceived as posing security threats to Vietnam in two aspects: sovereignty and territorial integrity in the South China Sea and economic security, given Vietnam's economy's overreliance on China. Furthermore, Vietnamese leaders and the public are highly concerned about the risk of debt traps in China's "Belt and Road" project, which might lead to Vietnam's loss of economic autonomy (Jaszczyk, 2021). Nevertheless, historical lessons have solidified Vietnamese leaders' perception that it is impossible to choose a confrontational foreign policy or participate in forces to publicly and directly counter China (Pham Q. T., 2022).

Regarding Vietnam's position, General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong stated: "Vietnam has never enjoyed such fortune, potential, international prestige and posture as it does today" (Vietnam Television News, 2021). Furthermore, the CPV's 13th Party Congress set out the vision for Vietnam to become "a developing country with modern industry at the upper middle-income level by 2030" and "a developed country with high income by 2045" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021, p. 121). These are signs of Vietnam's aspiration to achieve new economic development, increasing confidence in its foreign strategies, and readiness for a new international position.

*In short*, facing an evolving international and regional order, Vietnamese leaders have approached it cautiously. The high uncertainties, coupled with strategic competition among major powers, make Vietnam's strategic calculations of benefits and costs ambiguous. Vietnamese leaders expect both opportunities and challenges to be high. Looking at the analytical framework proposed above, Vietnam will likely adopt a hedging strategy to reposition its geopolitical status. In fact, Vietnam has demonstrated clear signs of a hedging approach in international relations by introducing its "Vietnamese bamboo" diplomatic school - "solid roots, sturdy trunk, flexible branches, and leaves." Simply put, Vietnam's policy is expected to be flexible, creative, steadfast, and determined to ensure the nation's interests (Nguyen V. K., 2024). The following section will investigate Vietnam's main strategies.

### 6.2.2. *Strategies*

#### a. Political-diplomatic dimension

As determined in the 12th and 13th CPV Congresses, Vietnam has continued to consistently implement the "foreign policy guidelines of independence, self-reliance, multilateralization, diversification, and proactive international integration" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021, pp. 161–162). This policy demonstrates Vietnam's determination to maintain its strategic autonomy by expanding and deepening the network of diplomatic relations while

enhancing its credibility through actively participating in appropriate multilateral forums, thereby maintaining an environment of peace and stability, protecting and promoting its national interests.

Regarding the bilateral channel, Vietnam has made significant progress in diversifying its diplomatic partnerships. If before, Vietnam only held comprehensive strategic partnerships<sup>6</sup> with traditional friends (China, Russia, and India), now it has expanded this circle to the US and its regional allies (South Korea, Japan, Australia), along with ten other strategic partners (VietnamNet, 2024). This proves Vietnam's intention to intertwine its interests with those of major powers, thereby increasing Vietnam's strategic position in geopolitical calculations in the region.

Notably, Vietnam - US relations witnessed an unprecedented double-step upgrade in 2023, making the US the only Western country to own this title. This historic enhancement indicates that the shadow of the Vietnam-US war on Vietnam's foreign policy seems to have faded. If in the US-Vietnam Joint Statement in 2015, the two sides affirmed to "rise above the past, overcome differences, and promote shared interests looking toward the future," then in 2023, the Joint Statement affirmed to "bring the partnership to new heights, [...] realize the aspirations for a bright and dynamic future that contributes to the maintenance of peace, stability, cooperation, and development across a crucial region and the world at large" (*Joint Leaders' Statement, 2023; Join Vision Statement, 2015*). Thus, the "past" factor has been replaced by the strategic determination and shared vision of the two countries on regional and international security and development, signaling better Vietnam-US cooperative partnership in the future.

However, Vietnamese leaders also took skillful steps to stabilize the relationship with China, avoiding misunderstandings that Vietnam is participating in an alliance against China. First, Vietnamese leaders often make public statements to show respect and deference towards its Northern neighbor. Not long after upgrading relations with the US, Vietnam received Chinese President Xi Jinping, issuing a joint statement affirming that the two sides "continue to deepen and further elevate the Vietnam-China Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership, [...] agree to build a Vietnam-China Community with a Shared Future with strategic significance" (*Vietnam - China Joint Statement, 2023*). The joint statement also

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<sup>6</sup> The highest diplomatic framework of Vietnam.

affirms the important role of party-to-party relations, a distinctive feature in the relations between the two communist comrades. Accordingly, “both sides agree to bring into full play the special role of the Party channel, further enhance the direction and coordination of the high-level meeting mechanism of the two Parties” (*Vietnam - China Joint Statement*, 2023). Thus, although it no longer plays a dominant role, the ideological factor still holds a strategically guiding role for Vietnam in its relations with China, a crucial tool to enhance mutual political trust. Furthermore, General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong affirmed that “developing relations with China is a strategic choice and a top priority in Vietnam’s foreign policy” (BaoChinhPhu, 2023a). These steps show China that Vietnam is supporting or at least not opposing China, whether through substantive actions or lip service (Vuving, 2023).

Second, to the US and its allies, Vietnam often inserts “pacifying” terms in naming its diplomatic frameworks with these countries, such as the comprehensive strategic partnership “for peace and prosperity” or “for peace, cooperation, and sustainable development.” Besides, its leaders also avoid publicly supporting US actions, which is considered as direct actions to challenge China. Vietnam’s approach to the US’s IPS is a typical example. It seems that Vietnam would support IPS because IPS shares the vision of a rules-based order in the region and supports Vietnam’s sovereignty and territorial integrity in the South China Sea. Nevertheless, its leaders have been prudent in showing support for this strategy. There has not been an official statement by Vietnamese leaders mentioning the Indo-Pacific concept since 2017, although Vietnam has endorsed the ASEAN Indo-Pacific Vision (AOIP) (Trinh & Ho, 2024). In 2018, President Tran Dai Quang introduced the concept of “Indian Ocean - Asia - Pacific Ocean,” once again affirming the will to be independent in its diplomatic thinking (Oanh & Nguyen, 2021). However, this concept is not widely used today in Vietnamese academic and policy circles. Instead, the concept of the Asia-Pacific, which seems outdated, is more commonly used. Vietnam’s apprehension stems from its concern about China’s thinking that this IPS is a US-led strategy to contain China.

On the multilateral diplomatic channel, CPV has put forth a strategy to enhance Vietnam’s multilateral diplomacy by 2030, identifying the country as “a responsible member of the international community” and “striving to take on a pivotal, leading, or mediating role in multilateral forums and organizations of strategic importance, in accordance with Vietnam’s specific capabilities and conditions” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2018). Strategically, multilateral diplomacy, especially at ASEAN and the United Nations, is identified as the forefront of efforts to protect its national sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as

maintain a peaceful and stable environment for the country's development (Le H. T., 2019). In the region, Vietnam underscores ASEAN's centrality, aiming to uphold ASEAN's role amidst pressure from major powers and to encourage these powers' involvement to effectively manage competition in the region. This is a form of binding major powers to the rules set by ASEAN. AOIP is a typical attempt to manage new, competitive strategies between major powers. On a global scale, Vietnam has begun to promote its niche diplomacy in areas where the country has interests and strengths, such as peacekeeping or climate change, and has achieved many significant results (T. T. Do, 2022). As Parameswaran commented, successfully performing double positions at ASEAN and UNSC in 2020 would affirm Vietnam's role as "a middle power in its own right" (Parameswaran, 2019).

#### b. Economic dimension

Economic development is a strategic priority for the CPV in maintaining social stability and political autonomy, thereby enhancing its political legitimacy. Similarly, in the political-diplomatic field, China and the US are Vietnam's two most important economic and trade partners, vitally contributing to the well-being of its economy. However, the burgeoning competition between the two economic powers, culminating in the trade war since 2018 and dangerous signs of decoupling in the long term, poses profound challenges for Vietnam's leadership.

On the one hand, Vietnam chooses to continue its close economic relationships with both China and the US to reap significant economic benefits, especially from production chains anchored in China (Oh, 2022). Currently, China is Vietnam's most important trading partner, the largest import partner, and one of the largest investors in Vietnam. Meanwhile, the US is the largest importer of Vietnamese goods (H. H. Le, 2020). These cooperations have helped Vietnam achieve significant progress in socio-economic development. Since 2016, Vietnam's economy has witnessed significant growth of 160% despite the difficulties of the Covid-19 pandemic and is expected to be in the top 25 largest economies in the world before 2038 (CEBR, 2023; General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2016, 2023). Thanks to diverse economic links and geographic proximity to China, Vietnam is identified as one of the winners of the US-China trade war, substantially benefiting from supply chain re-routing from China. Vietnam has been evaluated by US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen as a key partner for its businesses in the "friend-shoring" strategy, which means shifting production chains to economies with good political relations (Rosenberg & Sandrini, 2023; Shalal, 2023).



However, economic overdependence on China is a chronic problem in Vietnam's economy and a source of severe domestic concern. Although Vietnam is not the only country dependent on China, its level of dependency tends to be more acute (Minh, 2021). In recent years, Vietnam has consistently had the highest trade deficit with China in Southeast Asia. 80% of raw material inputs for manufacturing and processing businesses in Vietnam come from China (K. H. Tran et al., 2024). Therefore, Vietnam is highly vulnerable to economic sanctions similar to those imposed by China on Japan or Australia. The supply chain disruption caused by COVID-19 has further emphasized the need to reduce this reliance. In addition, Vietnam is the first Southeast Asian country to refuse to use Huawei's 5G infrastructure, expressing its concerns about China's influence on Vietnam's security and economic autonomy (although publicly stated as unrelated to geopolitical considerations) (Onishi, 2020).

Promoting economic cooperation with the US has critically improved Vietnam's trade balance, mitigating the economy's vulnerability. However, it is not without difficulties. In 2019, President Trump harshly criticized Vietnam as "the single worst abuser on trade with the US, worse even than China" (Shelton, 2019). In response, Vietnam has proactively acted to appease and eliminate misunderstandings to avoid financial punishment and maintain good economic cooperation with the US. Vietnam has agreed to a series of contracts to buy more US goods to alleviate its trade surplus (H. H. Le, 2020). The decision to participate as a founding member of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), an unclear-so-far US-led economic initiative, has demonstrated Vietnam's above intention. However, like with IPS, Vietnam takes a "wait-and-see" approach to avoid missing out on potential opportunities while affirming its role as a prominent regional economy (Wu & Velasco, 2024).

Simultaneously, Vietnam has actively diversified its economic cooperation with numerous partners. Vietnam is currently ranked the fifth most open economy in Asia and 20th globally, possessing 16 bilateral and multilateral FTAs with most economies in the world, such as the US, Japan, China, EU, Korea, UK..., which accounts for nearly 90% of global GDP (BaoChinhPhu, 2023b; Quang, 2022). These are evidence of Vietnam's commitment to free and open trade, as well as efforts to "diversify international economic relations, avoid dependence on a single market or partner [...] and improve the economy's resilience to negative impacts from external fluctuations" (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021, p. 145).

In addition, Vietnam also demonstrated an active role in promoting regional economic integration. Holding the chairmanship of ASEAN in 2020, Vietnam successfully facilitated the conclusion of RCEP agreement negotiations, officially signing the world's largest free trade

agreement in November 2020 in Hanoi. Besides, Vietnam is among the few countries worldwide to hold membership (even founding membership) in the Indo-Pacific region's three most extensive free trade agreements, including CPTPP, RCEP, and IPEF (T. T. Do, 2022). These FTAs do not simply cut tariffs but also include provisions on environment standards and labor rights, proving a degree of compromise by Vietnamese communist leaders to prioritize economic development (Vuving, 2023).

### c. Security – defence dimension

Strategically, Vietnam continues its independent and self-reliant defense strategy. For two decades, Vietnam consistently maintained the “Three Nos” defense policy. It is a product of the national value of independence and the bitter history of over-reliance on the USSR and is also a tool for managing relations with China after the Cold War. Some believe this policy should be eliminated because it is obsolete and no longer appropriate in the new geopolitical context. They suggest that Vietnam should participate in military alignments, even an alliance, to counter China (H. H. Le, 2020; T. H. Le, 2018). However, not only opposing this opinion, in the 2019 Vietnam National Defense White Paper, Vietnam officially upgraded from the “Three Nos” to “Four Nos” policy, adding: “no use of force or threat to use force in international relations” (Ministry of Defence, 2019, p. 25). At the same time, Vietnam’s military elite has inserted a “quite yes” to “consider developing necessary defense and military relationships at an appropriate level under specific conditions” (Grossman & Huynh, 2019). This policy demonstrates Vietnam’s proactive but highly cautious approach to great power politics, something that few other countries understand better than Vietnam, and confidence in its ability to handle international pressure. This upgrade signals that Vietnam will resolutely maintain its strategic autonomy and is ready for defense cooperation to improve its capacity for self-defense purposes.

Identifying internal strength as the most crucial factor, Vietnam is gradually modernizing its military. The CPV’s 13th Congress set the task of building the Vietnamese army “to be gradually modernized, with some military branches, arms, and forces moving straight to modernity, [...] to meet the requirements of tasks in any situation” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2021, p. 98). Clarifying this viewpoint, Vietnam’s Defense Minister Phan Van Giang stated that priority will be given to the modernization of the navy, air defense, communications, and coast guard forces to promptly meet the assigned tasks (Bao QuanDoiNhanDan, 2021). It can be inferred from the nature of the above forces that Vietnam

leaders perceive the threats in the South China Sea as the most urgent threat, necessitating the improvement of capabilities in the face of its Northern superpower.

To achieve the above goal, Vietnam has actively invested in defense equipment. Vietnam has been in the world's top 20 largest arms importers, with its defense budget increasing by an average of 8.78% annually from 2018 to 2020 (International Trade Administration, 2024). However, like India, Vietnam depends heavily on weapons from Russia, with about 90% of weapons imported from this country in the period 1995-2014 (H. H. Le, 2022). This can be explained by the trust of Vietnamese leaders in military cooperation with Russia, the only major power that did not invade Vietnam. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the Russia-Ukraine war in 2021 have made Vietnam aware of the vulnerability of excessive dependence, leading to its decision to diversify its weapons import sources. As a result, the figure for weapon imports from Russia decreased to less than 70% in 2021 (H. H. Le, 2022). However, this is not an easy process and takes at least another one or two decades because of Vietnam's strategic trust issues with other partners and the need to maintain existing weapons (Storey, 2024). In addition, Vietnam actively supports the development of its indigenous defense industry to alleviate its dependence and enhance its strategic autonomy. Vietnam's National Defense White Paper 2019 sets the goal: "The defense industry strives to be internationally competitive, deeply participating in the global value chain by 2030" (Ministry of Defence, 2019, p. 100). Nonetheless, accomplishing this mission is not feasible without substantial supports and technology transfers from military great powers.

In the South China Sea, Vietnam continues to increase its military presence, solidify its legal stance to affirm assertiveness in its maritime claims, and send a limited retaliatory signal to its adversaries (Putra, 2024). Maritime security cooperation and increasingly improved capabilities help Vietnam become more confident in these tactics. For the first time, Vietnam identified itself as a "maritime nation" in the 2019 White Paper, affirming its priority to safeguard its security, independence, sovereignty, and maritime interests in the South China Sea. Thereby, Vietnam has increased maritime security cooperation with other maritime nations such as India, Japan, Australia, and the US. Typically, Vietnam has agreed to buy six coastguard patrol boats from Tokyo and received 18 new Metal Shark patrol boats from the US (US Department of Defense, 2019; Vu, 2020). In addition, the country also minimizes the risk of escalating tensions by maintaining dialogue and confidence-building measures, especially on the party-to-party channel with China (T. H. Do, 2021). More than anyone else, Vietnam's leaders understand that strengthening defense cooperation, especially with the US, can provoke

confrontational attitudes and retaliatory actions from China. Therefore, actions to reassure China have been taken, such as refusing the invitation to participate in the RIMPAC 2020 exercise or making public statements affirming that these defense cooperations do not intentionally target any specific country (Olson, 2020; Wu & Velasco, 2024). Besides, Vietnam allocates much effort to multilateral defense diplomacy, especially ASEAN-led security forums such as ARF or ADMM, ADMM+ (with the participation of the US and other important partners). Thereby, Vietnam has the opportunity to promote security cooperation with these partners in line with its interests while avoiding directly provoking China (Grossman & Sharman, 2019).

### *6.2.3. Evaluation*

Through the above analysis, Vietnam's prudent hedging approach is reasonable, given the profound geopolitical dynamics. As a secondary power, Vietnam can, at best, adapt quickly and flexibly to the changes (Pham Q. T., 2022). Looking more broadly, not only Vietnam but also numerous countries in the region advocate hedging. He and Feng observe that "A hedging strategy is a rational and relatively easy choice for small and middle powers to make if the US and China can keep their strategic competition and rivalry on an even keel" (He & Feng, 2023, p. 23). Like other countries, Vietnam's hedging strategy mainly stems from systemic stimuli, specifically strategic competition between the US and China, and its leaders' strategic calculations on possible advantages and disadvantages. Factors such as strategic culture and domestic politics play a role in reinforcing the appropriateness of this strategy and highlight Vietnam's cautious approach. Vietnam's leaders have effectively combined hedging elements in all military, political, and economic fields, achieving several significant accomplishments, contributing to national security and economic development, and gradually asserting its position as a middle power while maintaining its strategic autonomy.

Multilateralization and diversification of relations are part of Hanoi's master plan to increase its strategic autonomy, striving to keep equidistant to the two great powers rather than establishing any formal alliance or choosing sides. This strategy differs from the recent move closer to China's orbit of some weaker regional countries (T. T. Do, 2022). This decision also received substantial support from Vietnamese people as anti-China sentiment is increasing. However, Vietnam's strategic autonomy depends mainly on the prospect of the balance of power between the US and China. If conflicts, whether direct or indirect, occur between these powers, Vietnam may be placed into a difficult position and forced to choose sides. This is something Vietnamese leaders do not want. A situation in which great power competition does

not lead to confrontation or compromise is the best scenario for Vietnam because it would be one of the countries most affected by any changes in the state of US-China relations (Pham Q. T., 2022). Thus, Vietnam must prepare for other options that its leadership seems unable to unify on so far. However, one thing is sure: China's actions (especially in the South China Sea) will significantly affect Vietnam's perception and decisions regarding US-China competition.

### **6.3. COMPARISON**

#### *6.3.1. Similarities*

Overall, India and Vietnam's geopolitical repositioning processes share many commonalities regarding goals and policy tools. Concerning goals, besides addressing the arising strategic uncertainties, the two countries identify the goal of establishing a new geopolitical status in the Indo-Pacific region. These ambitions stem from the advancement in the economic capabilities of the two countries and their geostrategic location. In terms of tools, India and Vietnam use most of the hedging behaviors in their overall strategies, which are reflected in all areas of their foreign policies. This choice is consistent with the strategic calculations of the leaders of these countries regarding the emerging world order. In reality, India and Vietnam are still secondary powers in the US-China strategic competition, which means these countries cannot manage international affairs with their own will. These policies, on the one hand, aim to maintain a peaceful and stable environment for economic development and maximize opportunities and, on the other hand, offset potential threats from strategic uncertainties.

Remarkably, New Delhi and Hanoi greatly emphasize the principle of strategic autonomy in their foreign policy. The leaders of both states have made public diplomatic statements not to participate in regional formal alliances nor to join one side to oppose the other. This priority comes from the strategic culture formed by the geographical location of these two countries and their painful history in relations with major powers. Locating next to an aggressive giant neighbor underlines the need to maintain a balance between great powers, avoiding dependence on any single country. Therefore, both have been actively diversifying their political network of strategic partnerships to intertwine the interests of major powers into the region and cultivate a regional balance of political power. Regional and international multilateral platforms have also been utilized by India and Vietnam to increase engagements with major powers and manage their actions appropriately.

Besides, Vietnam and India face the same security-economic dilemma as China. The manufacturing industries of the two economies critically depend on raw materials from China and are unlikely to improve in the short term. This reality has prompted similar economic policies of the two countries to combine economic pragmatism and diversification policy to gradually mitigate their strategic economic vulnerability while exploiting potential benefits from other partners. These policies are suitable for New Delhi and Hanoi's focus on economic

development to enhance national internal strength, thereby attracting domestic support for the performance legitimacy of the ruling parties.

In the security field, Indian and Vietnamese leaders have made significant adjustments in their strategic thinking, expanding from continental to maritime security and identifying it as an essential part of national security and prosperity. This can be explained by external stimuli and awareness of external threats, specifically China's increased influence and aggressive actions in regional seas, which threaten regional security and freedom of navigation on critical maritime routes. Furthermore, both countries have complex sovereignty and territorial disputes with China. Therefore, promoting defense partnerships, especially with the US and its allies, to improve maritime capacity has been a focus, contributing to bolstering national capabilities to restrain expansionist actions. Their efforts increase potential costs and make China's decision-making more difficult. However, with growing power asymmetries compared to China, India and Vietnam share a common perception that one should not choose one great power at the expense of another. Therefore, in addition to balancing acts, both have taken steps to reassure China, affirming that they will not participate in military alliances. In addition, promoting cooperation with the US and its allies also helps these two countries reduce their dangerously high dependence on weapons from Russia.

### *6.3.2. Differences*

Despite having several similarities, New Delhi and Hanoi's geopolitical repositioning have significant differences in goals, orientation, and effectiveness. In terms of goals, while India aims to establish its position as a global great power, Vietnam has a more modest approach with the goal of attracting international recognition for its middle power status. With its long-standing vision of "a great role" in the international arena, accompanied by its economic clout, cultural advantages, and status as a dominant power in South Asia, India has been prepared for this position for decades. Meanwhile, Vietnam has only gained independence since 1975 and has begun to develop within the past two decades. Therefore, India's policies are clearly more confident and bolder than Vietnam's.

The orientations of New Delhi and Hanoi's strategies also have particular differences. With the vision of a global power, India's leaders want to expand its influence beyond South Asia and the Indian Ocean, reaching the entire Indo-Pacific region or beyond. Accordingly, India is contributing to shaping the vision of the Indo-Pacific region. Although not comparable to those of the US or China, these efforts significantly impact the regional security architecture and the strategic calculations of major powers. However, despite the introduction of the Act

East Policy strategy or efforts to participate in regional multilateral security mechanisms such as QUAD, India's primary priorities and investments in the immediate future will focus on the South Asia and Indian Ocean region due to fierce competition from China (Baruah, 2020). Meanwhile, Vietnam's top priority is ensuring territorial sovereignty and national interests, maintaining peace and stability, and enhancing its voice and role in its regional strategic environment, given that Southeast Asia has become the focal point of competition between the US and China. Therefore, Vietnam's efforts to shape regional security structure are relatively limited, mainly through ASEAN's actions, participating in or promoting appropriate multilateral mechanisms led by major powers.

Although both countries pursue strategic autonomy, the motivations behind their quests are not the same. For Vietnam, maintaining strategic autonomy is necessary to minimize the potential costs and risks for a secondary power amidst the US-China heightening strategic rivalry. Vietnam's strategic autonomy is expressed mainly through cautious actions and emphasis on ASEAN's centrality in regional security. Meanwhile, India proactively uses autonomy as a tool to maintain its strategic maneuverability, as well as create a springboard for its emerging great power position. Any compromise on India's strategic autonomy means compromising its great power status (Basrur, 2022; Dar, 2021). Modi's government is willing to reject or publicly criticize the initiatives of China or the US, or offer independent third options to display its leadership, demonstrating a clear distinction between Vietnam and India's strategic autonomy.

Regarding the overarching strategy, while Vietnam is a "typical hedger," the balancing vis-à-vis China factor is employed by Indian leaders in a very proactive and precise manner, in addition to its hedging behaviors. This difference comes from the disparity in economic and military power between India and Vietnam, as well as support from the US for the new role of these countries. India has much greater bargaining power than Vietnam and plays a critical role in the US's Indo-Pacific strategy. The Biden administration's ignorance of India's economic and military cooperation with Russia could perfectly exemplify this point. They are the foundation for India's confidence in balancing against China in some appropriate cases, thereby preventing China's influence in its immediate neighborhood and establishing its new position in the Indo-Pacific region. Meanwhile, with limited capabilities, along with a history of hostility towards the US, Vietnamese leaders cannot be as comfortable as their Indian counterparts in cooperating with the US to balance vis-à-vis China.

India and Vietnam have accomplished different achievements in their foreign policies, notably in the fields of economic and security-defense. Based on the above analysis, the



economic hedge is arguably the most effective tool in Vietnam's geopolitical repositioning. Vietnam has achieved remarkable economic development by implementing economic pragmatism and diversification tactics. In the context of fierce competition and the need to reduce dependence on one or two main markets, the latter tactic seems to be more prioritized by Vietnamese leaders. Simultaneously, Vietnam has appropriately promoted its economic leadership in advancing regional economic integration, reducing risks stemming from geopolitical instability. Hanoi has strengthened its international economic integration by participating in major regional and global free trade agreements such as CPTPP, RCEP, or IPEF to promote exports and attract foreign investment. Meanwhile, India's economic prong seems less effective than expected. India has implemented pragmatic policies to maximize its economic benefits and promote domestic production, aiming to become a \$5-trillion economy. However, this target has been postponed several times under Modi's administration. The goal of diversifying economic relations to limit dependence on China and mitigate its strategic vulnerability has not yet achieved remarkable results either. In addition, its skeptical approach to international trade, coupled with limitations in Indian economic openness and economic capacity, are significant barriers, posing challenges to exerting this leadership role.

On the contrary, India is effectively implementing its security and defense policies. Modi's bold steps to promote military-defense partnerships with the US and other like-minded states have helped India strengthen its defense and deterrence capabilities, especially maritime ones, against China's assertive actions in India's immediate neighborhood, making this pillar the most effective in India's strategy. Despite deepening defense cooperation with the US, Modi has been skillful in playing its strategic autonomy card. In addition, like in the political-diplomatic field, New Delhi still integrates hedging elements to offset the potential risks of evoking its giant neighbor. Meanwhile, Vietnam's military hedge seems to be the least powerful compared to other fields. Vietnam's leaders are very cautious in their defense and security policies. This limitation comes from the Chinese factor in all intervening variables in Vietnam's decision-making process, especially in its strategic culture and leaders' perception. However, this is also an expected result. Identifying defense cooperation as a sensitive area that can cause strategic misunderstandings, CPV leaders often adopt a low-profile approach to avoid falling under China's radar of hostility and/or the US's radar of over-expectation.

## 7. CONCLUSION

In recent years, the Indo-Pacific has emerged as the focal point of global strategic competition, witnessing profound geopolitical shifts. Both regional and extra-regional countries thus have made significant adjustments in their strategies to secure their positions and maximize the benefits in the region. Especially, numerous major powers have introduced their approach toward this region. However, besides major powers, secondary regional actors also deserve considerable attention because of their crucial role in contouring the emerging order and the outcomes of great power rivalries. Therefore, this thesis investigates India and Vietnam's geopolitical repositioning in the Indo-Pacific region in recent years. Possessing important positions not only geographically but also in the grand strategies of great powers, India and Vietnam have taken substantial strategic steps to deal with strategic instabilities as well as establish new geopolitical status. Through a comparative approach, this research aims to provide an overall picture and compare the two countries' strategies in their geopolitical repositioning, as well as explain their similarities and differences.

With its double identity as a middle power, a dominant power in South Asia, and simultaneously a rising global power, India enjoys an increasingly important role in the regional and global balance of power. Recently, Prime Minister Modi has exhibited pronounced confidence through skillful employment of hedging and balancing vis-à-vis China in India's geopolitical repositioning. On the one hand, India continues to maintain political and economic cooperation with China to leverage economic benefits while simultaneously promoting cooperation with the US and allies to counter China's footprint in its immediate neighborhood and beyond. New Delhi has taken drastic steps to improve relations with the US, especially in security and defense cooperation, pushing this partnership to an unprecedentedly high level despite not forming an alliance. In spite of its close relations with the US, India still openly maintains its strategic autonomy, continuing to expand its cooperation with various other partners. Another prominent feature of India's geopolitical repositioning is the expansion of its focus from mainly continental threats to maritime issues. The introduction of the Indo-Pacific vision, which emphasizes inclusivity and prosperity, reveals this shift in the Modi administration's thinking. However, with its dual approach and relatively limited capacity, India would still flexibly invest in the appropriate and immediate "market," which is South Asia and the Indian Ocean, before reaching the broader Indo-Pacific region.

Meanwhile, Vietnam has been quite cautious in its strategic maneuvers. Although receiving significant support from the US and its allies, Vietnam primarily relies on a prudent

hedging approach in the repositioning process with the utmost goal of safeguarding national sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity. CPV leaders emphasize maintaining strategic autonomy in all policies, continuing to diversify its strategic partnership network, and upholding and upgrading its “Three Nos” to “Four Nos” policy to avoid strategic misunderstandings or falling into a situation of having to choose sides. In general, these policies have effectively helped to expand its partnerships in various fields without limiting its options. Regarding regional security issues, with the capacity of a rising middle power, Vietnam prioritizes collective efforts through ASEAN and other multilateral organizations to amplify its voices. In particular, tactful political and economic cooperation has enabled Vietnam to gain significant achievements, leveraging its strategic position in the regional chessboard while capitalizing on the opportunities from US-China strategic competition. Defense cooperation efforts also help to improve Vietnam’s capabilities. However, it is less effective than other areas, given China’s increasingly assertive actions in the South China Sea.

Ostensibly, India and Vietnam have adopted quite similar approaches, using hedging strategies to maintain their strategic autonomy and expand their strategic space to avoid entanglement in great powers’ strategic competition. These policies are consistent with their goal of maintaining peace and stability for economic development. However, the geopolitical repositioning of the two countries also exhibits certain differences, notably in the role of balancing strategy vis-à-vis China, the goals, orientations, and outcomes of their policies, as discussed in Chapter 6. Through the theoretical framework of neoclassical realism, the author has highlighted that the similarities and differences between India and Vietnam’s geopolitical repositioning result from various factors, including domestic politics, strategic culture, and leaders’ perceptions, while still recognizing the significant role of systemic stimuli.

Both countries share geographical proximity to China and suffer bitter historical lessons in their relations with major powers, molding the spirit of independence, self-reliance, and autonomy in their foreign policies. The public opinion factor has also strengthened and promoted India and Vietnam’s policies of diversifying relations instead of participating in formal alliances. The distinctions in their strategies can be explained through the strategic calculations of their leaders, as well as the different strategic cultures of each country. With the age-long vision of a great power, India proactively collaborates with other major powers to directly shape the vision of the Indo-Pacific region. Meanwhile, with its aspiration to rise after more than three decades of complete independence, Vietnam still prioritizes maintaining national security and peace in its strategic environment – the South China Sea. Notably,

although both emphasize the principle of strategic autonomy in their geopolitical repositioning, Vietnam's objective is to offset potential risks to a secondary power, while India identifies it as a tool to expand its strategic maneuverability and lay the foundation for its global power status.

Although this thesis endeavors to explain India and Vietnam's geopolitical repositioning in-depth, there is still substantial potential for further research. A more comprehensive historical study of the characteristics of strategic cultures and domestic politics in relation to the foreign policies of India and Vietnam would strengthen this study's foundation. Regarding theoretical framework, this thesis serves as a springboard for further research in applying neoclassical realism type III, created by Ripsman et al., to examine the dependent variable of international politics. Further efforts could offer a broader view of the impact of the geopolitical repositioning of India and Vietnam on the international system.

Lastly, the qualitative theoretical framework in this thesis is effective in examining the influence of different factors; however, it fails to explain to what extent these factors impact the policy outcome. An integrated approach combining quantitative and qualitative research, incorporating extensive data from different sources to determine each factor's role, would be helpful to provide a more accurate answer to this issue.

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